Chapter 1

Deciphering Denise Levertov and Emily Dickinson:

The Poets in Place

Denise Levertov (1923-1997) was the English-born daughter of a Welsh mother and an Anglo-Russian father, who married the American novelist Mitchell Goodman and later came to stand for so much that is American. She is one of America’s most respected and prolific poets, recognized as an important activist-writer who has helped stir the nation’s conscience as she voiced the hopes and fears of the twentieth century. Her humanitarian concerns, her sense of social responsibility and her engagement with public concerns resonate through her art. A poet of great skill and craft with a career spanning five decades, she has achieved a double reputation, difficult to maintain in the post-Christian times of the western world, as a respected mainstream poet and a religious poet as well.

In contrast, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) lived an obscure and isolated life in Amherst, a New England community. She had her roots in the Puritanic doctrines and was influenced by Emerson’s Transcendentalism and Calvinism’s grim dogmas. She lived through a revolutionary period, a time of spiritual unrest, when unbelief had for the first time in history become a lively possibility due to the great transformations in nineteenth-century thought. Her poetry, written over a period of about twenty-five years, is therefore, in large measure about
belief. Dickinson is unique among the major figures of modern culture for the fame she achieved posthumously. From our vantage point more than a century later, she stands as one of the major religious thinkers of her age who created a work of large scale in a language of assertiveness and strength no woman before her had ever used and few women since her have matched.

In spite of their disparate religious legacy and cultural heritage, numerous parallels may be drawn between Levertov and Dickinson. Just as belief is central to Levertov’s work, the problem of belief looms large in Dickinson’s poetry. They both believed in the power of poetry and this grew directly out of their personal experiences. Other themes that are common to both and closely related to that of belief are the exploration of experience and a fascination for mystery. Levertov explores the mystery of experience and finds the spiritual to be an intensification of the daily event. Her poems press forward on a spiritual journey in order to uncover the nature of self and its destiny. Dickinson analyzed daily experience and turned out lyrics of self-exploration. She also endeavoured to understand the essence of an object and sought the essential moral truths veiled behind material experiences. We find, therefore, that they are both religiously oriented and mystically inclined and their voluminous works are intimate spiritual biographies wherein their inner souls are exposed, a fact that brings them together in the present study.
The primary sources include all the volumes of poetry by Denise Levertov from her first book *The Double Image* through the posthumous collection *This Great Unknowing*, and Thomas H. Johnson’s *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. The remarkable legacy with which Emily Dickinson has endowed us consists in addition to her poetry, her letters, which have been used here as a background to her poems. The study also relies heavily on *New and Selected Essays* by Levertov and *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, a collection of interviews with Levertov edited by Jewel Spears Brooker.

The present introductory chapter entitled “Deciphering Denise Levertov and Emily Dickinson: The Poets in Place” has two sections wherein the poets are considered in relation to their background, and their poems as the consummate expression of a region and a period. Part A – “‘Illustrious Ancestors’: Familial, Literary and Cultural” – delineates the richness of Levertov’s legacy: her mixed heritage, European origins, dual religious legacy and unusual upbringing in an unconventional religious atmosphere. This section also traces the formative influences that determined her life as a poet and shaped her vision of the poet as a politically engaged being, playing the role of a prophet and priest. Part B – “‘Vesuvius at Home’: Locale, Life and Legacy” – briefly maps out Dickinson’s upbringing, education and religious heritage, the cultural and social milieu and the intellectual and literary influences that shaped her
mind. Her intense relationships, love crises, and choice of a life of seclusion are also touched upon.

Chapter 2 – “Levertov: ‘Testimonies of Lived Life’” – traces her movement from agnosticism to faith as reflected in her poetry. Though her movement to faith was a gradual progression through almost as many stages as there are collections of her poetry, each collection reflecting a particular stage, for the sake of convenience and ease, the present study considers three significant stages – the periods of agnosticism, transition, and belief.

Chapter 3 – “Dickinson: ‘Nimble Believing’” – attempts to look for some pattern in the religious references in Dickinson’s poems. The study considers three divisions of her life and works based on poetic productivity – the poetry of her early years, then the middle period of greatest productivity concentrated in a few years, and finally the last stage of continued creative work that spanned two decades.

Chapter 4 titled “Levertov and Dickinson: The Dialectics of Faith” endeavours to make a coherent pattern out of the poems of Levertov and Dickinson and to define their exact religious position. It examines the dialectic of faith and doubt that they enact in their poetry and examines their poetry in the light of the premise that the notion of faith is a key mover in their thought and work. The analysis has been done on three levels – etymological, theological and philosophical.
The final chapter collates the conclusions drawn from this comparative study of the drama of faith and doubt that unfolds in the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson, in which the pattern of resolution and irresolution emerges in their respective works.

A. “Illustrious Ancestors”: Familial, Literary and Cultural

Well, I would like to make,
thinking some line still taut between me and them,
poems… (Denise Levertov, CEP 78).

Denise Levertov was equipped by birth and political destiny to voice the hopes and fears of the twentieth century. In writing about Levertov’s significance among contemporary poets, and mapping out the particular cultural ancestry she perpetuates, Virginia M. Kouidis observes:

If [. . .] Levertov is unusual among contemporaries for the richness of her familial and literary legacy, she is even more exceptional for the loving and graceful assimilation of that legacy into a poetics of connection. Love expresses itself in her generous and fearless exploration of the resources of the past; grace in her seamless transformation of the past’s moral and aesthetic lessons into present relevance. [. . .] Levertov’s version of the literary lineage that runs, erratically, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to William Carlos Williams continues to offer our poetry and culture “the long
stem of connection” it so badly needs. (Wagner-Martin 254-255)

Levertov valued no other legacy so much as that bequeathed by her family. In an autobiographical essay written for Contemporary Authors, she acknowledges, “[. . .] virtually all the elements which determined my life as a poet were there in the character and circumstances of my childhood ” (Vol. 178, 320). Her parents, Paul and Beatrice Levertoff, were themselves writers. Her father was a scholarly Russian Jew, who had read the New Testament while preparing for the life of a rabbi at Konigsberg, and had become a Christian as a result, and later, an Anglican priest. From the age of eighteen, he devoted his life toward the unification of Judaism and Christianity. Her mother was a Welsh woman with a “strong sense of history” and a keen appreciation of life (NSE 260). She was teaching in a girls’ secondary school run by the Scottish church in Constantinople when she met and married Paul Levertoff. They settled in England where Denise was born on October 24, 1923, in Ilford, Essex.

Rabbi Schneour Zalman, one of Levertov’s paternal ancestors, was a noted Hasid. His tales were told to the family by her father and also recorded by Martin Buber in his Tales of the Hasidism: The Early Masters. Angel Jones of Mold, a mystic tailor and preacher, is another ancestor in her mother’s line. Because of this multicultural background, the visionary and the mystical are important elements in Levertov’s heritage. The poet herself speaks of the significant influence of “inherited tendencies” and
the “cultural milieu” of her family that were very strong factors in her development:

My father’s Hasidic ancestry, his being steeped in Jewish and Christian scholarship and mysticism, his fervor and eloquence as a preacher, were factors built into my cells [. . .]. Similarly, my mother’s Welsh intensity and lyric feeling for nature were not just the air I breathed but, surely, were in the body I breathed with. (NSE 258)

Levertov did lessons at home and so had a great deal of time to read and play, and a freedom to wander the neighbourhood. To use her own words, she “grew up in an environment which nurtured the imaginative, language-oriented potential” that was “an inherited gift” (NSE 261). Her mother, who was her principal tutor in all things, passed the visionary heritage to Denise. She took her to parks, and as a poem records, “It was she / who taught me to look” (LF 24). It was in this cherished childhood landscape that Levertov learned to attend to nature’s large and small splendours. This landscape echoed with immediate family history and a fabled ancestral past and continued to offer her a sustaining connection to all new landscapes:

[. . .] an old map

made long before I was born shows ancient

rights of way where I walked when I was ten burning with desire
for the world’s great splendors, a child who traced voyages
indelibly all over the atlas, who now in a far country
remembers the first river, the first
field, bricks and lumber dumped in it ready for building,
that new smell, and remembers
the walls of the garden, the first light. (JL 22)

Formative, too, was the quantity of books in her house and the fact
that everyone read constantly and wrote as well. Her mother and her
sister Olga would read to her. The rhythms of the King James Bible and
the Book of Common Prayer were a presence in her life. It was thanks to her
sister that Denise began reading innovative poets like Auden, MacNeice,
Day Lewis and Eliot by the time she was twelve. All of this served to help
her discover her poetic vocation quite early and she began writing poems
at four or five, dictating them to Olga before she learned to write. She
even sent some poems to Eliot when she was twelve, to which he replied
with a letter of advice. Looking at art – particularly paintings – hearing
good music and formal ballet lessons were other formative influences that
had an effect on her writing. Levertov acknowledges her indebtedness to
her family thus:

The basic, primary love of looking comes to me from my
mother [. . .]. From my father I think I got a meditative and
intellectual bent [. . .] My sister conveyed to me a sense of
exciting contemporary ideas and experiments [. . .]. From all
three I got a sense of commitment to righteous causes – to issues of peace and justice [. . .] and [. . .] a strong religious impulse together with a powerful impression of the inviolable sincerity of their convictions – and thus of the serious nature of religious faith and practice, which I always hated to see mocked or sneered at even in my most doubting periods. (Contemporary Authors 322)

We see here the influences she absorbed that were to shape her poetry as well as her vision of the poet as a politically engaged being. It is thus easy to understand the course taken by her poetic career and the themes Levertov chose to write on – nature, love, politics, war and peace, solitude, community, ecology, and religion. She brought a lot of passion and energy to her poetry, for she was passionate about life and living. She thought of poetry as a power or force beyond the poet, of which the poet is a servant, and sometimes used the altar image in her work for she saw the poet as playing the role of a prophet and priest. So too, the terminology of religion and myth was very natural to her. Her mixed heritage, European origins, dual religious legacy and unusual upbringing in quite a religious though unconventional atmosphere, accounts for the amount of religious imagery that comes up in her poems.

Humanitarian politics too came into her life early. It came, she says, in her essay titled “Autobiographical Sketch,” from “seeing my father on a soapbox protesting Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia; my
father and sister both on soap-boxes protesting Britain’s lack of support for Spain; my mother canvassing long before those events for the League of Nations Union” (NSE 262). During World War II, Levertov pursued nurse’s training and spent three years as a civilian nurse at several hospitals in the London area, during which time she continued to write poetry. Her early verse is often described as neo-romantic, having been influenced by the romanticism prevalent in Britain during the War. Her first book of poems, *The Double Image*, published just after the war in 1946, “showed indications of the militant pacifist she was to become” (*Contemporary Authors* 317).

In 1948, Levertov married the American writer Mitchell Goodman whom she had met in Paris and her son Nikolai was born in 1949. Right after her marriage, she went to the United States where she immersed herself in American life and letters and studied the American modernist poets. This move was crucial to her development as a postmodern poet. Her husband’s friendship with Robert Creeley led to her involvement with the Black Mountain poets. She was influenced by Charles Olson’s aesthetics, and her correspondence and conversations with Robert Duncan. While her poetry appeared in Projectivist-oriented magazines such as *The Black Mountain Review* and she was linked to the Beats by various anthologies, she gradually began to develop the style that was to make her an internationally respected American poet. In 1956, she became an American citizen. Levertov first made her mark as a poet in the
late 1950s and her poetry was recognized as distinctive and brilliant. Her first U.S. book, *Here and Now* (1958) and the second, *Overland to the Islands* (1959), launched her as an American poet. She received several prizes for her work, and soon became Poetry Editor of *The Nation*. By the beginning of the 1960s, she was widely recognized as one of the most accomplished poets of her generation.

Levertov's American poetic voice was indebted to an early generation of poets – William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, H. D. and Wallace Stevens. The most illustrious of her ancestors in the literary lineage is Williams who more than any other became her mentor and the inspiration for her poetry. She was greatly influenced by the immediacy and vitality of his objective verse and her later work reveals this. His influence is also clearly seen in the area of theme. Williams was a humanitarian, and the sentiments and the human concerns of his work encouraged Levertov in her own choice of themes. Harry Marten observes in *Understanding Denise Levertov*, “Williams’ influence was most profoundly felt in Levertov’s sympathy for the workings of his imagination, his conviction of the interconnectedness of the ordinary with the sensuous and intuitive” (11). However, her concern with the spiritual takes her beyond Williams’ sensuality. Her work also reveals the impact of Rilke, the early twentieth century German poet, whose work she had been reading for several years before she went to America. “Thus,” she says, “all the useful and marvelously stimulating technical and aesthetic
tendencies that I came upon in the 1950s were absorbed into a ground prepared not only by my English and European cultural background in general but more particularly by Rilke’s concept of the artist’s task – a serious, indeed a lofty, concept [...](NSE 231). Rilke was “an important influence,” a “mentor” (NSE 231) whose poems were important to her as Marten points out, not only for their “elegant beauty,” but also “because they so clearly embody Rilke’s stated convictions that poems are not simply feelings but experiences and that the pursuit of art is an almost religious activity” (19).

Levertov has always admitted that Hasidism had given her since childhood “a sense of marvels, of wonder” (Conversations 126). She first heard the Hasidic tales as a child from her father, and she reencountered them in the fifties through her reading of Martin Buber’s books. Hasidism is a Jewish mystical sect that sees God as immanent in creation and emphasizes the holiness of the “here and now”. Buber describes the Hasidic belief as “joy in the world as it is, in life as it is, in every hour of life in this world, as that hour is [...] hasidism shows men the way to God who dwells in them ‘in the midst of their uncleannesses’”(qtd. in Wagner 26). At the core of Hasidic teachings is the concept of a life of fervour, of exalted joy. According to Joan F. Hallisey, “Hasidism, unlike pantheism, made manifest the reflection of the divine in the ordinary and revealed the ‘sparks of God that glimmer in all beings and in all things’” (165).
In Hasidism, “there was a recognition and joy in the physical world. And a sense of wonder at creation” (Conversations 126). In Levertov’s poetry one clearly feels not only the Hasidic sense of wonder and joy in the physical world, but also a “sense of the sacred glimpsed in and through the particular instance of the momentary, the secular, the worldly” (Hallisey 165). Without doubt it is her love of the material world that makes believable her vision of the spiritual.

In trying to represent the world as it is, Levertov describes the natural environment and the commonplace routines of human experience. Simultaneously, she tries to understand the disorders that threaten to overcome human potential. She suggests that in order to understand the world one must understand the self. In her early work, therefore, she explores her relationship to her ancestors, her parents, other members of her family and her domestic responsibilities, and also examines the relationship of the individual to the world. In 1959, Levertov became a New Directions author when its editor James Laughlin detected her unique voice in With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads (1959). In this collection she endeavours to know the world in all its variety and delineates the nature of man’s relationship with the natural world and with his created environment.

With the onset of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s, Levertov’s social consciousness began to inform both her poetry and her private life more profoundly. Her poems during this period take
their subjects directly from contemporary social issues and centre on the appropriate inner response to the issue. *The Jacob’s Ladder* (1961), and *O Taste and See* (1964) for instance, reveal the degree of involvement she has in social issues. They contain poems that are more emphatically social, whereby she seeks to awaken her readers to social responsibilities.

The early 1960s also marks the middle of Levertov’s life and a point of transition from a private to a public person. It was during this time that she began what was to be a series of academic appointments. Teaching brought her into contact with the student generation, and with political activism on the various campuses. In an interview featured in *Conversations With Denise Levertov*, she admits to William Packard that if it wasn’t for teaching, she might have found herself “very isolated politically” (37). During the 1960s and 1970s, she and her husband were deeply involved in the campus protests against the war in Vietnam, speaking at campus rallies and public demonstrations. She was briefly jailed on several occasions for civil disobedience. Her response to critics and friends who felt she was sacrificing her poetic gifts by making her poetry socially useful was that there could be no “separation between so-called political poetry and so-called private poetry in an artist, who is in both cases writing out of his inner life” (*Conversations* 31).

*The Sorrow Dance* (1966), *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), and *To Stay Alive*, (1971) document Levertov’s attempt to expand the realm of poetry to encompass social and political themes. From writing meditative and
lyrical poems, she moves on to writing poems on war and other political disasters. Major blocks of her poetry in these collections vividly present the horror of war and passionately maintain the immorality of involvement, reflecting her political concerns and her anguish over public policy. Harry Marten remarks:

Widely acclaimed as one of America’s most skilled, intelligent, and innovative poets, she is recognized, too, as an important activist-writer whose response in words and actions to “Life at War” (Sorrow 79) in Vietnam, Latin America, Detroit, and elsewhere, has helped stir the nation’s conscience. (3)

The anti-war movement was actually part of a larger social upheaval that included the feminist movement and the Civil Rights movement. Levertov, however, says little about the Civil Rights movement, and she did not actively participate in the feminist movement. Her poetry, nonetheless, includes many poems about the situation of women, poems that may or may not be feminist in intent, but are clearly feminist in thrust. Many feminists, consequently, have claimed her as a source of inspiration. In an interview with Fay Zwicky, Levertov objects to the term and the concept, “Women’s Poetry,” which limits readership. She remarks, “I feel that the Arts always have transcended and must transcend gender” (Conversations 117).
The Footprints (1972) and Freeing of the Dust (1975) offer powerful social observations and commentary without reducing experience to mere propaganda. They show her suffering a loss of authenticity, of poetic vision and poetic power – a consequence of the evil she encounters with the onset of war. While they reveal the violence and the chaos, the anguish and terror of the times, her poems cast a light into the dark. This was also a painful time for her personally, as she and Goodman were divorced in 1974, and her collections of this time contain many poems that explore such topics as her divorce, her son, and feminine themes. However, as she admits to Janet Tassel, “Divorce doesn’t have to be acrimonious” (Conversations 128), and her poems reveal her sensitivity and understanding as she broaches the subject. In this context, it is to be noted that though Levertov wrote many poems of a personal nature, she didn’t consider herself as a confessional poet. As she understood it, “the confessional poem has as its motivational force the desire to unburden the poet of something which he or she finds oppressive” and posed the danger of reducing a work of art simply into a process of purgation (Conversations 97). She believed firmly that the poet is both ‘maker’ and ‘instrument’ and poetry a ‘power.’ She had no patience with those who viewed “art as some sort of exercise in narcissism or therapy for the artist” (Conversations 128). The Freeing of the Dust, the last of her five collections on the war, reveals a cessation of struggle wherein she knows a new peace and hope. The answers to the many questions troubling her
come from within, as the spirit of renewal in her private life leads to her rediscovery of herself.

Levertov travelled extensively and her travels beyond England began after the war when she worked as an *au pair* girl in Switzerland, Holland, and France. After her marriage, she lived in Italy, France, Mexico, and New York. In the 1960s, when she was involved in the protest against the war in Vietnam, she travelled to Moscow, and in 1972, she and fellow poet Muriel Rukeyser went to Hanoi. In West Somerville, which is where she lived after her divorce, she felt increasingly cut off from nature, and on her return from a trip to Europe in 1988, she moved to Seattle. There she lived in a house close to Lake Washington and to a beautiful park, from where she was afforded a view of Mount Rainier, which was a source of inspiration to her in her last years, and offered an intimate and nurturing relationship with nature, as did the landscape of her childhood. However, as Janet Tassel observes, “Levertov has not only traveled the voyager’s miles; more important, she sees herself as a pilgrim in the country of art, repeatedly introducing in her work the theme of life as a pilgrimage” (*Conversations* 128). She begins her poem “Overland to the Islands” thus: “Let’s go – much as that dog goes, / intently haphazard.” A good deal of her poetry is characterized by this “haphazard” movement in a journey for its own sake, with “every step an arrival” (*CEP* 55).
And so we find in her pilgrimage in the “country of art,” that from poems which deal with matters of current affairs and public policy Levertov reaches further still, composing poems that deal with private events and take as their primary subject the relationship of man to a spiritual presence, thus defining an important theme that amidst chaos there is an essential order linking all experience. The seed of change is most clearly seen in Life in the Forest (1978), a threshold book that offers new directions. At the heart of the collection are a series of poems that describe the death of the poet’s mother that reveal a vision of energy that outlasts the body and some sense of design even in the face of death. This collection speaks of the spirit of coherence amidst chaos. Her encounter with death brings on a wrestle with doubt, the nature of identity, commitment, and change. She gradually comes to acknowledge that life is change and that the past gives shape and definition to the present.

The subject of belief is central to most of her poems. A celebration of mystery has also been a constant theme of her poetry. And as Levertov explores the mystery of experience she finds the spiritual to be an intensification of the daily event. In her book Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition, Suzanne Juhasz describes Levertov’s poems as “rites moving around an experience, with the insight of words granting it significance, even holiness” (61). Her later works have evolved toward a vision of the mysteries of human experience that confirms religious conviction and offer her poetry of belief
for this “Age of Terror” (CB 98). *Candles in Babylon* (1982) speaks of the importance of faith that will not deny doubt. *Oblique Prayers* (1984) contains revelations of spiritual conviction and suggests a complex harmony of all created things. There is a clear movement toward explicit religious and spiritual concerns here and in the following volumes. *Breathing the Water* (1987) celebrates man’s relationship to nature and affirms the connection between the physical and the spiritual. In these collections we see how the poet develops her vision of the mysteries of human experience into a statement of religious conviction and faith.

The poems in *A Door in the Hive* (1989) are truly lyrics while speaking of political and religious affairs. *Evening Train* (1992) published in the year she moved to Seattle, is a collection that “reveals an important transition”, according to *World Literature Today* reviewer Daisy Aldan, “toward what some have called ‘the last plateau’: that is, the consciousness of entering into the years of aging, which she [experienced] and [expressed] with sensitivity and grace” (qtd. in *Contemporary Authors* 318). This collection carries the pilgrimage of her poetry into new territory with her meditations on the timeless and the timely.

*Sands of the Well* (1994), shows Levertov at the height of her powers and she takes the reader to a fresh awareness of the “Primary Wonder”(*SW* 129). Her journey brings her ultimately to prayer, as she is lost in contemplation. *The Life Around Us* (1997), Levertov’s response to ‘the green world,’ is a selection of poems on nature in which as Levertov
writes in the foreword, “celebration and fear of loss are necessarily conjoined” (xii). *The Stream and the Sapphire* (1997) presents a collection of poems on religious themes originally published in seven separate volumes, which traces her pilgrimage of faith. It was on December 20, 1997 that she died from complications of lymphoma. *The Great Unknowing: Last Poems* published posthumously in 1999 displays the passion, lyrical prowess, and spiritual jubilation that filled Levertov’s final days. They shine with the artistry of a writer at the height of her powers, testifying to the words of a reviewer for *World Literature Today* on the jacket of *Sands of the Well*: “Levertov [. . .] fulfills the eternal mission of the true Poet: to be a receptacle of Divine Grace and the ‘spender of that Grace to humanity.’”

Levertov felt a sense of privilege and an attendant moral obligation in being a poet and teacher, and the child of a socially conscious family. She believed that a poet’s role stems from the fact that he “has received a gift, the gift of poetry, and he is obliged to serve his gift, to be a voice” (*Conversations* 86). Thus conscience and circumstance virtually forced her into the politics of the anti-war movement, and into the broader anti-nuclear, environmental, and social justice concerns which evolved from it. Also, as she tells Sybil Estess, for her, “writing poetry, receiving it, is a religious experience” (*Conversations* 96). We find therefore, that hers is a poetry that is “in search of significance underneath and beyond the succession of temporal events: a poetry which attests to the “deep spiritual
longing” [. . .] increasingly manifest in recent American poetry” (NSE 4). The inclusion of political, social, ethical and religious themes in her poetry has resulted in a lot of adverse criticism for this “Christian anarcho-socialist” as she dubbed herself, and her detractors dismiss her as a propagandist. Such criticism did not bother her in the least as is proved by her conviction: “My politics and my muse happen to get along well together” (Conversations 132). And so Levertov continued her pilgrimage till her death, carefully crafting and honing fine works of art, all the while singing with a clear voice that was committed to acute observation and engagement with all the beauty, mystery and pain of earthly life. Her poems “written on the road to an imagined destination of faith”, and “addressing doubts and hopes rather than proclaiming certainties” (NSE 257), live on and continue to give hope to their readers.

The gods die every day
but sovereign poems go on breathing
in a counter-rhythm that mocks
the frenzy of weapons, their impudent power. (CEP 130)

B. “Vesuvius at Home”: Locale, Life and Legacy

Behind Me – dips Eternity –
Before Me – Immortality –
Myself – the Term between – (Emily Dickinson, Poem 721)

Emily Dickinson wrote over a period of about twenty-five years, having no audience for the public performance of her life or work. At a
time when women enjoyed virtually no intellectual freedom, Dickinson chose to carve out her own role. As Roger Lundin remarks in his book *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*,

This woman who loved letters because they gave her “the mind without corporeal friend” lived the most intensely focused inner life of any major figure in American history. In doing so, she discovered what Blaise Pascal once memorably termed the “greatness and wretchedness” of humanity. And in living her extraordinary life as she did, Dickinson was able to practice an art of belief that eventually made her the greatest of all American poets and one of the most brilliantly enigmatic religious thinkers the country has ever known. (5-6)

The enigmatic and reclusive Emily Dickinson has been much mythologized by posterity. As the legend goes, she dressed only in white, shied away from publishing her work, and almost never left the grounds of the family home. The creation and perpetuation of this “myth of Emily” can be attributed to many of her early biographers, playwrights and novelists in their attempts to arrive at cogent reasons for the life-style of this “New England Nun” in white, cloistered behind the walls of her father’s house. Paul J Ferlazzo remarks in his book *Emily Dickinson* that though she was “Trapped by an era considered intellectually dogmatic and emotionally limited, the poet triumphs through her writing, which
outlives the age and proves to be timeless” (13). Later scholarly and academic studies of the poet have revealed that the real woman and poet may prove to be more interesting, and certainly more important than the myth.

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, a small New England farm community with a staunch Puritan culture, where evangelical devoutness permeated every action. The future poet was reared according to strict Puritan doctrine tinged with transcendental idealism. Her compulsive interest in death, as well as her numerous poems on the religious experience and God, reveals her inescapable heritage. J. B. Pickard points out in *Emily Dickinson: An Introduction and Interpretation* that the tensions resulting from the clash of her perceptive, inquiring mind with the rigidly orthodox community produced some of her finest poems. He remarks:

Though she was repelled by Calvinism’s grim dogmas and spent her life rebelling against them, she never escaped its eschatological emphasis. She was continually preoccupied with death, resurrection, immortality, and judgement and never ceased examining the undeniable reality of God. Her almost obsessive concern with death [. . .], fascination with pain, and contemplation of religious experience reveal her attachment to basic Calvinism. (8)
We find that Emily Dickinson was raised in Puritan orthodoxy, only to develop a liberal spirit that turned away from inherited beliefs through a desire to understand and appreciate the larger world around her.

It is surprising that there is hardly any mention in Emily Dickinson’s poetry of her ancestors, for it was indeed a rich family history to which she could have turned her attention, if she had chosen to do so. Hers was the eighth generation of a family that had lived in New England since the great Puritan migration of the seventeenth century. Her ancestry can be traced to the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony when one of her ancestors, Nathaniel Dickinson, was among the four hundred or so settlers who sailed to the New World in the migration that began in 1630. He was a courageous and God-fearing visionary, and his descendants took root in the area of Amherst. For many generations the Dickinsons farmed the land, remaining active in civic affairs and committed to the covenantal faith of their Puritan ancestors. However, Emily Dickinson’s grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, entered college and graduated. He became deeply religious after a serious illness and joined the West Church of Amherst, in time becoming its deacon. As a Trinitarian, he had bound himself to a conservative brand of religious commitment. The Trinitarian belief that religious ideas and practices must not be understood only intellectually, but also experientially, encouraged what has been called the fervent spirit of religious revivalism, “The Great Awakening,” which coursed through New England – and Amherst – in
Emily Dickinson’s day. After his stint at ministry, Samuel Fowler Dickinson turned his attention to law, thus setting the course for his family. The stage for Emily Dickinson’s life was actually set when her grandfather left the ministry and entered the law in Amherst at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Emily was the middle child in a closely-knit family. Her father Edward was a leading citizen and lawyer, a stern man, totally devoted to his work, authoritarian in his relationship with his wife and children. Emily saw him as a heroic and admirable figure. As George F. Whicher puts it in *This was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson*, “His gods were her gods” (27). She stood in awe of him as a child, and anticipated his will as a grown woman. His influence on Emily, particularly one that would greatly affect her life and work is clearly seen in an observation made by Jack L. Capps in his book *Emily Dickinson’s Reading 1836 – 1886*: “One of Emily’s difficulties was inherited from her father: an unyielding devotion to truth, an absolute integrity that would never permit her to profess a thing that she did not sincerely believe (29). Her mother Emily Norcross Dickinson was fearful, meek, and utterly submissive. Their relationship was complex and ambivalent. Yet her mother was always present in her life, an unhappy, shy woman whose ineffectuality and submissiveness provided no model for her brilliant daughter. “My Mother does not care for thought”, Emily once wrote about her (*Letters* 404). Still, she spent much of her time nursing her lovingly through years
of invalidism, and she wrote with much affection about her. Emily had a close and understanding relationship with her older brother Austin. His wife Sue Gilbert had been a schoolmate of Emily’s at Amherst Academy. Emily accepted Sue as a sister and trusted friend for many years, but later they gradually drifted apart. Lavinia, Emily’s younger sister was devoted to her, protecting her privacy and sharing her confidences.

Very little is known of Emily Dickinson’s childhood. She grew up in a secure, well ordered family. At an early age she began learning music. A crucial event during these years is the family’s move from the homestead to a house close to the centre of the town and beside a cemetery. It is small wonder that Emily grew up conscious of death, for funeral processions passed the Dickinson house on the way to the cemetery.

Emily Dickinson attended Amherst Academy for seven years starting from 1840. Her training in mathematics, astronomy and science was extraordinarily thorough for a young woman of her day. She was a brilliant student, had friendship with other students and visited the homes of friends and neighbours. It was here that she met the young ladies who were to remain, along with those from home, her long-standing friends: Abiah Root, Harriet Merril, Sarah Tracy, Emily Fowler (Noah Webster’s granddaughter), the Gilbert sisters (Sue was to become her brother Austin’s wife), and Jane Humphrey. During her last term at the Academy she came under the influence of the young principal,
Leonard Humphrey, whom she somewhat idolized and considered as one of her first “masters.” His sudden death in 1850 was her first affliction and one she found hard to bear.

Poised between childhood and maturity, she attended Mt. Holyoke Academy for one year, but she had no desire to continue there. It was while she was there that she met Benjamin F. Newton who had come to Amherst for an apprenticeship in her father’s law firm. He exposed her to the world of thought and writing from which she had been sheltered and gave her Lydia Child’s socially radical book, *Letters from New York* and also a copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poems. Newton was another early master or “Preceptor,” as she called him. He acknowledged her potential as a poet and encouraged her in her writing.

When during the last years of her schooling several religious revivals took place at Amherst Academy and at Mt. Holyoke, Emily found herself twice at a crossroads. However she resisted all ‘converting influences’ strenuously and with lonely defiance. Her ability to say “no” was already well developed at that time. Though it released her from what she believed was an imprisonment in dogma, it did not however, free her from feelings of guilt. The fact that many of her friends had undergone the conversion to which she herself could not submit also caused her much grief. She confessed her turmoil to Abiah Root:

I was almost persuaded to be a Christian. I thought I never again could be thoughtless and worldly – and I can say that
I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior. [...] There is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world can never fill. I am far from being thoughtless upon the subject of religion. I continually hear Christ saying to me Daughter give me thine heart. [...] I hope at some time the heavenly gates will be opened to receive me and the angels will consent to call me sister. I am continually putting off becoming a Christian. (Letters 27)

Her letters display her suffering and open envy of those who could find peace by submitting to orthodox conversion. But final conversion was repugnant to her questioning, pragmatic mind. It is not clear why she veered away from professing an orthodox belief although she was intensely concerned with the salvation of her soul and deeply aware of spiritual reality. As her childhood and formal education come to an end, we find that “her spiritual courage and integrity had been tested by two severe religious experiences out of which she had somehow preserved her uncommitted position,” and that “it had toughened her delicate spirit for the emotional crises that lay ahead” (Pickard 17). She was now ready to enter the tumultuous years of the 1850s, which brought full emotional maturity and final poetic development.

Emily’s life after returning from Mount Holyoke was in general satisfying, filled with the daily round of household activities. Gerda
Lerner quite astutely points out in her book *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* that

While the outward events of her life were quite conventional during this time, her inner development was intense. The crisis over religion and her refusal to go the way of her family and friends by experiencing “conversion” were certainly momentous for her future work. Her “wrestle with God,” as her biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff described her lifelong struggle, began in this negative decision. In her religious battles she confronted a patriarchal God who had turned his face away from humankind and refused to reveal his meanings. Her deepest fears over abandonment and loss of love resonated in her poems as despair over the absence of God. (183-184)

During her twenties Emily Dickinson lived much like her younger sister Lavinia – she played the piano, visited neighbours, entertained a number of suitors and took walks in the garden with them. Her father moved his family back into “Homestead,” the house on Main Street in Amherst, which henceforth would be the place of residence for Emily. Newton’s death in 1853 came as a shattering blow, raising again the eternal dilemma of her life, the relation of death to immortality. His death stopped her writing for years by her own admission. In general, her life until the middle 1850s remained outwardly normal and filled with new
friendships. The revival that converted her father and Sue passed her by while her attendance at church became more and more rare. She took the first hesitant steps toward seclusion by refusing to go from home unless forced and became increasingly jealous of her privacy. Perhaps the death of Newton occasioned this desire for solitude. She kept in touch with the outer world through her correspondence. As Pickard notes, “The woman was changing, slowly moving toward the love crisis whose white heat was to forge her untempered spirit” (22).

There have been so many farfetched stories fabricated about her love crises that it is almost impossible to identify the man. Emily Dickinson’s letters and poetry indicate some climactic emotional experience during 1860 – 1862, which has been presented in Theodora Ward’s *The Capsule of the Mind*. Pickard summarizes the pattern of her love crises thus:

Reading the poems and letters chronologically from the late 1850s – 1865, one finds a detailed record of a growing emotional attachment. Fed by impossible hopes and increasing erotic desire, this passion burned most intensely at a dramatic summer meeting – only to be extinguished by sudden separation. During the succeeding desolate months, she strove to mend the charred bits of her shattered emotions. Gradually she accepted the loss and began to analyze the experience with surprising detachment. In the
final stage, personal renunciation was transformed into spiritual triumph. (22)

Dickinson herself refers repeatedly to a deep crisis which occurred somewhere between 1858 and 1862, which brought her close to madness, and from which she gradually recovered. The years following upon this period of her greatest suffering are the years of her most intensive creativity. From all the material available we can reconstruct the various elements that must have brought on this crisis. First, there was the disillusionment about her relationship with her father, who doted on her brother Austin and never gave her what she most wanted from him – the recognition of her worth as an intellectual equal. Then there was her passionate love relationship with Susan Gilbert who later married Austin, a fact that was experienced by Emily as a betrayal. A second passionate love for Kate Anthon also ended in rejection, a greater disappointment for Emily, because Kate and Susan remained close friends. However, the three “Master” letters are the strongest evidence that her painful rejection in love came from a man. Her biographers have variously focused on the Rev. Charles Wadsworth or on the editor Samuel Bowles, both married men, as the object of these letters. Gerda Lerner poses the possibility that “Master” was a fictive character and remarks thus:

The comment she made in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson suggests her felt need for a “Master” in her life who could contain the frightening, dynamic forces which at
that time seemed to threaten her sanity: “I have no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize – my little Force explodes – and leaves me bare and charred –” The mystery remains. (188)

Her fear that she was going blind because of a visual impairment she suffered, and the steady deterioration of her mother’s health are probably two additional conditions that helped to bring on the depression and crisis. Though we will never know the actual causes of the crisis that nearly killed Dickinson and brought her to the brink of madness, there is no doubt that she freed herself by writing some of the greatest poetry ever written by a woman. The sense of power and victory over fear she experienced after these struggles is reflected in her work:

’Tis so appalling – it exhilarates –

So over Horror, it half Captivates –

The Soul stares after it, secure –

To know the worst, leaves no dread more – (Poem 281)

Emily Dickinson became in the last decades of her life, a near recluse in her father’s house, seeing only her closest relatives and seldom leaving her room. She cultivated notable eccentricities, such as dressing only in white and speaking even to close friends only from behind a half-opened door. Her carefully calculated stance of the recluse and introvert freed her from unwanted social obligations, from the need to explain her refusal to get married and from many of the domestic obligations
expected of young women of her class. Gerda Lerner points out her proximity in the choice and style of life, with several of the great women mystics – Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Christine Ebner and Julian of Norwich, whose power derived from their rejection of the “normal” life of women, from their chastity, their enclosure, their concentration on the inner self and its visions (181). It is to be noted that in several of her poems Emily Dickinson refers to herself as a “nun,” and in her work there are many references to herself as serving mysteries beyond her own comprehension.

There is a lot of critical and biographical material on Emily Dickinson. Both critics and biographers have been preoccupied with explaining her decision to live the life of a recluse. While earlier critics have based their explanation on unrequited love, recent feminist critics have tried to trace her strong love relationships with one or more women through her poems and letters. Commenting on Dickinson’s deliberate and carefully considered choice of seclusion and the life of a poet, Lerner remarks:

She had alternatives and chose her life and did so not in bitterness and delusion but in ecstatic creativity and celebration of her hard-won powers. What she won and what she created was the conscious life of the mind, the world in which she was “Empress … Queen,” the equal of
the heroes of myth and literature, a soul free to argue with

God and negotiate the terms of her dialogue. (182)

The period from 1866 to her death was the period of her most reclusive life, for she no longer left the grounds of her father’s house. She continued her active involvement with her family and with a few close friends. She even encouraged new friendships, such as with Helen Hunt Jackson and Mabel Loomis Todd, both of whom admired her work. Mabel Todd would later be the driving force in arranging for posthumous publication of her poems. In the last decade of her life, Emily Dickinson gave full and joyous expression to her love for Judge Otis Lord, an old family friend, though she rejected his proposal of marriage. The remaining years brought repeated encounters with the death of loved ones. After several years of illness, she died in 1886.

She had taken loss, disappointment and abandonment through death and absence and turned them into renunciation, transforming them into sources of power [. . .] Renunciation of self was transformed into the immense discipline which could disdain what it could not gain and thus triumph over desire. It was out of this renunciation – which the mystics expressed through their chastity and their mortification of the flesh – that she could gain the arrogance of the God-wrestler, the divine Creator and the keeper of mysteries. (Lerner 190 - 191)
Even as Dickinson moved deeper into seclusion, she maintained contact with the world through her highly selective encounters, her correspondence, and through periodicals and books. In this manner, as Roger Lundin says, “While the actual circumference of Emily Dickinson’s life continued to contract [. . .], her imaginative circumference expanded even larger” (193). The correlation of her reading with her letters and poems affords a significant means of understanding the intellectual and literary influences affecting both the poetry and the poet. It was through her reading that she gained the vicarious experience and perspective that made possible the perceptive observations and penetrating analyses characteristic of her poetry. Her fondness for books and reading developed long before she sequestered herself in the homestead, and the reading interests that she manifested in her adolescent and young life were not inhibited by the seclusion of later years. During the seclusion her closest companions were her Bible, Watt’s *Psalms and Hymns*, Shakespeare, the seventeenth-century Metaphysicals, Emerson, Dickens, George Eliot, and the Brownings. She also read the daily newspapers and several periodicals. In this manner she was able “to exploit her physical isolation and achieve an intellectual expansion that might otherwise have been impossible” (Capps 145).

Emily Dickinson’s mind was formed during the three decades before the Civil War, and thereafter was protected from all shaping influences. Speaking of her relations with time and place, Whicher notes:
“Her mental climate was much the same as Emerson’s. What she actually represents is the last surprising bloom [. . .] of New England’s flowering time” (153). Two of the strongest currents of the age that came to a confluence in her poetry are the Puritan tradition in which she was nurtured, and the spiritual unrest, typified by Emerson, which was everywhere eroding custom. Like most New Englanders of her time, Dickinson was saturated in the Bible from early childhood. The use she made of it is an index to the elements of Puritanism that were most valid to her. For the Trinitarians, the Bible was the basis of faith and it was also a source of much of Emily’s inspiration. Its images, rhythms, figures of speech, verbal and musical patterns, made their way into her letters, and infiltrated the very texture of her poetry. Biblical phrases were always at her tongue’s end, and certain Old Testament characters like Jacob, Moses and David were vivid to her imagination. Emily Dickinson’s familiarity with the Bible was an inescapable consequence of her New England upbringing. However, she was dexterous in her use of it in a highly individual fashion. Regarding the references to the Scriptures in her letters and her poetry, Bettina L. Knapp remarks in Emily Dickinson that there were other reasons for Emily’s emphasis on Biblical quotations.

Not only was Church ideology based on the Bible, but its preoccupations, scrutinized by the Protestants of New England, were closely linked with the questions in Emily’s own inquisitive mind. Her intellectual maturation and the
sounding out of a personal and individual ethic revolved around such notions as truth and unity of purpose and being. Even more essential was her need to understand better humankind’s relationship with Nature, with God/Christ, concepts such as good and evil, the notion of immortality and resurrection. Most assiduously, her thoughts probe the biggest Mystery of them all – Life and Death. (25-26)

America witnessed a shift of sensibility between the time of Dickinson’s birth and death. When she was born, the intellectual landscape was still ruled by a benevolent Deity. By the time of her death, Darwin’s theory of evolution had shattered the argument from design. So the time when Emily came into maturity was a time of spiritual unrest when “confidence in the truth of revelation, though still firmly affirmed, had become hollow at the core. Though the fabric of Puritan belief seemed as unshakable as ever, its foundations were sapped” (Whicher 63). James Turner wrote a book in 1985 called Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America in which he makes a powerful and convincing argument that open unbelief becomes a lively intellectual and social possibility between 1850 and 1880 in America. Turner’s point is that until the early and mid-1800s, there had been isolated atheists and unbelievers in the western world. For complex reasons, it becomes an
acceptable and plausible possibility in the mid and late 19th century in America and in the western world (44, 4).

One of the consequences of this, is that the experience of Belief seems inevitably in the second half of the 19th century to incorporate within itself the possibilities of Unbelief. That is, Doubt and Unbelief are not things that one gets over, or that are antithetical to Faith and Belief, but they become for some individuals part of the identity of Belief and Faith. This is increasingly the case in the 20th century and it is a present reality of spiritual experience for Catholics and Protestants throughout the western world. Dickinson is a forerunner there.

Thomas Moore in his spiritual books such as Care of the Soul and The Soul’s Religion, sees religion not as a set of Beliefs, but as a deep engagement with everyday life – made possible through the practices of Emptiness and Unbelief. Emptiness is an idea discussed in many different religions. In Buddhism, the term ‘sunyata’ is used for ‘emptiness’ – and in Christianity the word ‘kenosis’ is sometimes used. And Emily Dickinson’s poetry may be taken as an illustration of this idea of religion as an engagement with life through the practices of ‘emptiness’ and ‘unbelief’.

“With her numerous poems about God and faith” says Roger Lundin, she “demonstrated an impressive grasp of intellectual history. She realized that she was living through a revolutionary period, when unbelief had for the first time in history become a lively possibility [. . .] Dickinson lived through that revolution and contributed to it (150-151).
Dickinson’s work goes far beyond self-exploration as Gerda Lerner remarks.

Dickinson’s poems, read in their entirety and read along with her letters, reveal her as a major thinker who created a work of large scale. Like her predecessors, the medieval mystics, Dickinson was concerned with the large, metaphysical questions: Man’s relationship to God, to death and to Redemption. Unlike them, she was not sustained or supported by an institutional framework of explanation — she rejected both the Church and the Calvinist theology in which she was raised. In their place she developed a loving and ultimately healing nature philosophy, and she wrote of love, friendship and nurturance, of rejection, betrayal and loss. (190)

In fact, what gave verve to Dickinson’s “beliefs” was the theological innovation of her day. She revelled in the kind of new idea of God and in the new faces of God that emerged in 19th century New England. There was a whole movement of evolutionary theology based on the study of science resulting in a sense of wonder at the grandeur of the universe. And even before Darwin, New England scientists had articulated an evolutionary theology that reconciled the new discoveries of science with religion. The general theological drift of the late nineteenth century American culture is beautifully captured in this classic expression
given by H. Richard Niebuhr: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross” (185). Increasing numbers of people were attempting to find in the ‘worship of humanity’ and the ‘service of man,’ a form of religion. However, as Lundin remarks, when the secular transformation of religious belief began in earnest in Amherst circles after the Civil War, “Dickinson was no more in harmony with it than she had been with the Whig revivalism of her early adulthood.” And her letters “attest to her passion for the perennial questions about language, consciousness, and God” though “the emerging positivism of her day was ready to dismiss such questions as irrelevant [. . .].” He concludes, “Dickinson’s reputation has flourished because she apprehended the truth in ways that the rationalism, scientism, and sentimentalism of her age – and ours – could not and cannot begin to understand” (Lundin 219-220).

Unlike her contemporaries – the transcendentalist writers Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman – who had discovered the Sublime within the self and in communion with nature – it seems that Dickinson’s poetry would grope at Belief – and at God – for all of her life. This separates her rather significantly from Thoreau, and very significantly from Whitman. In a famous passage of “Song of Myself”, Whitman calls all the gods of eastern and western theism “old cautious hucksters”, and he said “[. . .] they bore mites as for unfledged birds/ who have now to
rise and fly and sing for themselves.” This is a transcendental passage par excellence, celebrating the power of the individual to assume the prerogatives of the now deceased or departed deity. Dickinson did not have that sublime and serene optimism. She was more troubled than they were, and so many of her poems express some combination of confusion and lament about the decline. One of the best is a poem about the ebbing of belief called “Those – dying then”, written near the end of her life in the early 1880s, where she says that God’s “Hand is amputated now / And God cannot be found –” And this poem expresses Dickinson’s profound sadness and sense of consternation and confusion over this, for “The abdication of Belief / Makes the Behaviour small –” (Poem 1551). This is one of the most telling descriptions of a consequence of the loss of faith or the loss of Christian narrative. She knew that in losing this story as she had known it, she was losing something important.

Emily Dickinson produced an awesome body of work – 1,775 poems – of which fewer than twenty were published during her lifetime and most of these without her permission. This was not due to shyness or over sensitivity, as many of her interpreters have declared, but it was another deliberate choice she made. She began writing in 1849, at age nineteen. In 1854 she wrote to her friend Jane Humphrey: “I have dared to do strange things – bold things, and have asked for no advice from any” (Letters 95). She made clear in references in other letters that “the strange” and “bold things” were connected with her decision to live a poet’s life.
This decision was, for her, a momentous turning point and a new beginning.

For Emily Dickinson, christening by water in the country church was superseded by a new baptism – one in which she gave herself freely to the call of Poetry, which is the “Crown” she chooses:

[......................]

Baptized, before, without the choice,

But this time, consciously, of Grace –

Unto supremest name –

Called to my Full – The Crescent dropped –

Existence’s whole Arc, filled up,

With one small Diadem.

My second Rank – too small the first –

Crowned – Crowing – on my Father’s breast –

A half unconscious Queen –

But this time – Adequate – Erect,

With Will to choose, or to reject,

And I choose, just a Crown – (Poem 508)

No longer a creature defined by others and named by them, or the child on her father’s breast, conscious and “called to my Full,” she expresses her vocation, her search for the “one small Diadem” – Poetry.

Sometime late in the 1850s Dickinson began a number of attempts to get her poems published. She sent poems to Samuel Bowles, editor of
the *Springfield Republican*, a weekly of the 1840s, who finally published four of them. In 1862 she approached Higginson with several letters, asking for his support, his literary advice, his judgement upon her work. Though he was unable to appreciate her unique gifts, he responded with some encouragement, but advised her against hurrying into print. She had also submitted a few poems to friendly editors, who published them with alterations in punctuation and words, to her horror. All of this strengthened her decision to give up the quest for publication rather than to accommodate her style and craft to the demands of the market. With this ultimate refusal she freed herself to write as her talent dictated.

In Dickinson’s reckoning, poetry ranked above all other goals to be sought, and even included “the Heaven of God” (Poem 569), and from the time of her acknowledgement of her vocation, expressed her ambition and her pride in a language of assertiveness and strength. We see that her meekness and her quiet conventional life were highly deceptive, for beneath it rocked a fire. Referring to herself as “a volcano,” as “Vesuvius at Home” she wrote:

> On my volcano grows the Grass

> A meditative spot —

> An acre for a Bird to choose

> Would be the General thought —
How red the Fire rocks below –

How insecure the sod

Did I disclose

Would populate with awe my solitude. (Poem 1677)

“No other person in American history has become so famous in death after having been so anonymous in life” (Lundin 5). Yet, Emily Dickinson remains an enigma. After her death in 1886, her sister discovered her poems – almost two thousand of them – sewn neatly into 40 bundles or fascicles, and locked inside a chest in her bedroom. They were, to use her own words, “[. . .] my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me –” (Poem 441). In 1857 Dickinson had begun to create “packets” of her poems, arranging them in groups of up to twenty and sewing them neatly together. Between 1858 and 1861 she composed fewer than a hundred poems a year. The next three years brought an astonishing outburst of creativity: 1862 – 366 poems; 1863 – 141 poems; 1864 – 174 poems; 1865 – 85 poems. Thereafter no single year produced more than fifty poems.

Poetic creation, for Dickinson, was like the opening of doors and windows onto an unknown and frightening world – “I’ve seen a Dying Eye / Run round and round a Room” (Poem 547) – leading on through inner circular paths of memory, recollection, contradiction, where nothing is fixed. “I dwell in Possibility,” Dickinson wrote, and her inner world was a fortress “Impregnable of Eye” (Poem 657), where secretly and
privately she forged on, “How powerful the Stimulus / Of an Hermetic Mind” (Poem 711).

A Word made Flesh […]

A Word that breathes distinctly

Has not the power to die […] (Poem 1651)