CHAPTER I

The Themes of Emily Dickinson

The main effort at establishing Emily Dickinson as a rebel poet, begins with a detailed study of her concurrent themes, focussing upon the novelty of her treatment of them not only from the conventional point of view but also from those of her contemporaries.

Looking back just two centuries from the birth of Emily Dickinson the old New England Church provides enough evidence of the Puritan's sense of grace and beauty expressed in simple forms. There were limits imposed on literary compositions too; the style of the artist, his approach to his materials and his medium which must be useful to society, the aim being to set forth the glory of God and not to indulge in the artists' imagination. Though a poet, Anne Bradstreet wanted to make it clear to her children that:

"I have not studied in this you read to show my skill, but to declare the truth, not to set forth myself but the glory of God".¹

Deep into the nineteenth century the old ideas and opinions clung to the new nation.

Whitman observes in the opening of his 1855 Preface to the Leaves of Grass that "the slough still sticks to opinion and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms."

The conventional poet of Whitman's day took the easy way out of stating again the old conceptions from abroad and affirming anew the outworn

affirmations of the past. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life" disturbed nobody's comfortable beliefs. Walt Whitman could have remained snug and safe by strictly adhering to the sentimental verses like "O Captain, My Captain," which proved so popular during that time. But his choice was deliberate. Like Emily Dickinson he chose to look deeply into his own nature, to make profound discoveries of the self and spirit there.

For Emily Dickinson too, poetry is less a form of self expression then a probing and questioning of her inner life, her soul. In fact her grand theme is - "Life as it is involved in her life ............. Her empire is, in the poems, one over which she has total dominion - her soul." ²

Emily Dickinson, descendant of a Puritan New Englander, was born too late to live by the laws of Puritanism. Inspite of her great reverence for orthodox religion and morality, Emily Dickinson could not conform to the doctrinal aspect of Puritanism. She could neither reject outright nor finally accept the religious dogmas, all along she struggled with her faith. The reading of the Bible inspired her with her various structures and thematic images of many of her poems. Her principal themes are therefore death, immortality, love and nature.

Emily Dickinson's poems strongly suggest her preoccupation with the subject of death, almost to the point of obsession. Her experience of death came as early as thirteen when she lost one of her dear friends. Perhaps the greatest influence on her response to death was the death of her preceptor Benjamin Franklin Newton. She talks of him as a friend who taught her immortality. For her "a friend without a corporeal frame means immortality".

By the closing years of her life Emily Dickinson had witnessed the death of her close and dear ones, her father's death in 1874, followed

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by the death of Samuel Bowles in 1878. Four years later Rev. Charles Wadsworth's and her mother's death which followed in quick succession, led her to write to her cousin in the year nineteen eighty three,

"The Crisis of the sorrow of so many years is that it tires me."  

She was close enough to death to talk about it freely. Her reflections on the subject of death is not wholly philosophical, for death is not merely an abstract idea for her. An enumeration of her various death poems brings to light the fact that Emily Dickinson has treated the subject of death along various lines. She has personified death as a gentleman and lover. She has also presented the state of death as the passing of the discarnate mind from one world to another - from actual consciousness to the consciousness of the dead.

Above all, through the theme of death Emily Dickinson has raised problematic questions such as of the afterworld and life after death.

In the poem, "Because I Could Not Stop For Death", death is humanized and made to behave like a gentleman-lover. On the descriptive level the poem is an excellent example of a metaphysical conceit describing in a single image a bridal journey, which is in fact the funeral procession.

In its obvious interpretation the poem is simply the courting of a lady by a kind gentleman who is finally taken away in a coach to a

"............... House that seemed / A swelling of the ground/.
The roof was scarcely visible .............."  

3. The Letters of Emily Dickinson, 3 Vols. ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. (Cambridge : Harvard University Press , 1958) In subsequent chapters, Emily Dickinson's letters will be referred to by the volume number to be followed by the page number.

4. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed by Thomas H. Johnson London : Faber and Faber ; 3 Queen Square, - 1970. All references to Emily Dickinson's poems are from this edition indicated as 'J' followed by the number of the poem quoted.
At a deeper level of meaning the poem presents an unified vision of the themes of death. The narrator of the poem, obviously the dead woman, describes her journey in all its picturesque details - the school and the children playing, the fields, and also the setting sun as she sees passing by in her journey towards eternity.

Allen Tate's remark on the poem that - "The terror of death is objectified through this figure of the genteel driver ................." is questionable. The narrator's voice does not at any point seem to reveal terror or agony. Infact the word 'kindly' suggests how great a favour has been bestowed upon the narrator. The opening lines impart a sense of premonition, as if the narrator had been informed about the visit - Death.

There is no regret nor any sense of doubt. Before the journey had actually started the narrator was busy with her life's tasks, but now she declares -

"I had put away / My labour and my Leisure too, / For His civility " (J. 103)

The third and the fourth lines of the poem state the number of passengers in the coach and identifies them.

"The carriage held but just ourselves -
and Immortality."

The travellers are the narrator, the coachman (Death) and Immortality. Emily Dickinson is very particular about such terms as Eternity and Immortality. She clearly distinguishes the three terms - Eternity, Immortality and the self:

"Behind me - dips Eternity -
Before me - Immortality
Myself - the term between ;" (J. 721)

Both Richard Chase and Charles R. Anderson are of the opinion that "Immortality" in the poem is the end of the journey.

According to the Christian theology the soul is the immortal essence in the human personality. Surprisingly enough, Emily Dickinson's ideas about death are well contained within the theological framework of Christianity, inspite of her non-conformist attitude. In this light "Immortality" can best be explained as the immortal soul.

Allen Tate's remark about Emily Dickinson's 'Terror of death does not hold good, because 'terror' finds no place in her attitude towards death. Hers is not the attitude of an escapist ; hers is but a stoic acceptance of death. Emily Dickinson is keenly aware of a sense of division, a feeling of bisection (as the poet calls it ) in the mind which leads her to accept the fact that a part of one's self is certainly mortal. She describes Imortality as the divided part of the body -

"Mind without corporeal frame".

The two separate entities - the mortal body and the immortal soul pass through death to reach the state of eternity. As we read the poem we find that the first part of the poem relates to the visual experiences of the mortal self, ending in the imaginative sensations of the immortal self. Slowly and leisurely the journey proceeds.

However, in the succeeding stanzas the movement becomes fast and the quickness is evolved by the alliteration of the word" passed".

"The coach passed the school, where children strove
. . . . Passed the fields of gazing grain . . . .
. . . . Passed the setting sun". (J. 103)

The images of child, grain and sun are significantly used to represent, respectively the three progressive stages of life— the beginning, the prime and the end. The "setting sun" symbolizes the completeness of life and obviously means the end of life. It is at this juncture when the narrator passess the "Setting sun" the shift in the narrator's consciousness from one
world to another starts. Her sense perception now gives way to imagination. The ordinary consciousness changes into mythopoeic consciousness. Her imagination is at its best when she describes the grave in terms of a swelling of the ground and the line "the cornice in the ground" makes the visual impact clear and lasting. By the end of the poem we find that the narrator's consciousness is placed out of time. It has been 'centuries' since the day the narrator travelled towards Eternity but her consciousness has failed to keep account of the worldly calendar. Time has stopped for her and the consciousness feels that the time between her burial and the picking up of her memory is "shorter than the Day".

In the poem "I heard a fly buzz when I died," (J. 465)

The theme of death reaches a different dimension. Emily Dickinson's scepticism about life after death enters the poem in the form of a fly. The fly becomes the dominant factor against which the speaker is struggling.

The poem is a familiar death-bed scene. The narrator is reminiscing about a past experience. The buzzing of the fly stands in contrast to the "stillness in the room" filled with the bereaved ones. As the voice speaks from the present she can only recall that

"I could not see to see".

The whole experience is a mental reconstruction of the past event of death. The 'fly' has religious overtones. The narrator had

"signed away / what portion of me be / assignable ........................." (J.465)

It means that the worn out body and tired brain have accepted death, Just "then it was / there interposed a fly". (J.465)

The fly in its general meaning stands for dirt, evil and mischief. In the poem it signifies the decaying and dying situation. Keeping in mind the scepticism of Emily Dickinson, the 'Blue Fly' can be best explained as the evil spirit
coming at the moment of death to take possession of the unblessed soul of the narrator. The fear of damnation lingered in the mind of Emily Dickinson as she could not respond to the call of the Puritan faith and God. The religious crisis is apparent here. It is the theme of death which leads to the question of an after world.

The general concept of immortality as impersishability was rooted in all thinking in primitive society. But it is impossible to pinpoint the stage of mental development at which survival after death began to be doubted. Plato's dualism of body and soul tended to settle with the passage of time into a neat division of body and soul, which collapses at death to launch the soul on its journey to eternity. The question that must have constantly posed itself before Emily Dickinson was whether the soul would retain its finite identity after physical death or merge with the infinite being.

The security of immortality promised by the orthodox belief is for her a tame prospect in which paradise is a "House of Supposition" and "Heaven quite insecure" (J. 696).

"The first fact of Emily Dickinson's experience then, was that whatever the Bible may mean by Paradise or Eden, the world of lost innocence and happiness symbolized by the unfallen Adam and Eve, it is something that is given in experience. It is attainable, the poet has attained it .................. "

Emily Dickinson is highly sceptical about the accepted dogmatic formula regarding the intricate problem of immortality - as a future life of eternal union with God or eternal damnation. Even as a girl Emily Dickinson felt the inadequacy of her faith to provide "a God so strong as that / To hold my life for me". (J.576).

She even claims that "The fact that Earth is Heaven / Whether Heaven is heaven or not " (J.1408). She refuses to accept the notion of life as a valley of misery and unhappiness, the only means of escape from which is heaven. At times Emily Dickinson adopts a childlike notion of Heaven. In a letter to Mrs Holland, written late summer in the year eighteen fifty six she writes:

"My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have seen in June . . . . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . "She also writes in the same letter,

"If roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one below - and if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I have seen - I guess that He would think his paradise superfluous ".

Life purified of the temporal, experiencing supreme joy, and self-fulfillment, amounts to Immortality here and now.

To Emily Dickinson, death is an adventure of the consciousness. her conception of death as an aspect of reality is not dogmatic and nor is immortality.

Immortality is an abstract truth for her based on her direct experience of death.

Emily Dickinson's theme of Death and Immortality are intimately associated with her concept of God and religion. Though the idea of a heaven of eternal happiness did not impress her, Emily Dickinson at times regrets her non-conformist attitude. So poetry became for her the only means of association between her soul and God - whom she conceives of as Absolute Reality. Emily Dickinson is however very sceptical about the Puritan God and faith.

The themes of Death and love are interrelated in Emily
Dickinson's poetry.

So closely are the themes interwoven that it is difficult to exactly pinpoint the lines of demarcation between each theme, as each one is involved in another. The themes are positioned like the strings of a lyre, one cannot be touched without disturbing the others.

As to the themes of love and death, it can be seen that in Emily Dickinson, love becomes an emblem absorbing the cycle of life, death and resurrection and immortality. This is how the finest of Emily Dickinson's love poems have their roots in her religious consciousness.

"Circumsference thou Bride of Awe/Possessing thou shalt be / possessed by every hallowed knight
That dare to covet thee ". (J.1620)

It can be recalled her that 'Awe' is Emily Dickinson's personal term for God. The relationship between the 'circumference' and 'Awe' has been equated to the bride and the bridegroom. The 'circumference' is possessed by a greater consciousness - God to whom the poet responds like a virgin. God courts her soul, takes it to heaven - this is the union with her lover, possible only after the mortal existence on the earth has ceased. Though she abandoned and abdicated the Puritan god, yet she could not altogether remain uncompromisingly hostile to the concept of Trinity in Christian theology or the 'Celestial Host' as she calls them. Christianity and Puritanism offered her valuable ingredients - a mixture of ideas and emotions that constitute her poetry; specially the notion that the soul remains immortal even after death and attains oneness with the person of God in Trinity. But expressing this idea in her poems, Emily Dickinson reject the theological principles and her conception of Immortality is centred in the lovers themselves.
"These Fleshless Lovers met -
A Heaven in a gaze -
A Heaven of Heavens - the privilege
of one another's Eyes". (J. 625)

The paradise or Heaven is the place of unification for the lovers separated on earth by the severity of moral and social laws. Certain other poems deal with the possibility of a knowledge of immortality which would enable the lovers to meet in the post-mortal life.

Emily Dickinson's love experience recognises God as lover, a - "Dim companion" of her soul - and also establishes union with Him in Eternity. The other fact is that, in the union with God, the lover brings about a conversion in her which is both emotional and physical.

In the poem "He touched me, so I live to know", (J. 506) Christ the lover touches the narrator, and the latter groping upon the lover's breast finds "it was a boundless place ....."(1.4)

The experience of the narrator is not merely the physical touch but also the realisation of the expansiveness of the lover in contrast to the puniness of the narrator. Just as the stream flows towards the sea to submerge its identity in its (sea) limitless expanse, so does the narrator lose her identity in the person of the lover, and this experience has changed her profoundly:

"And now I am different from before,
As if I breathed superior air -
Or brushed a Royal Gown -
My feet, too, that had wandered so -
My Gypsy face - transfigured now -
To tenderer; Renown" - (J. 506)

In the poem "I am alive - I guess -", the narrator has already "stepped into immortality". The speaker is immensely
happy for being not merely alive but

"Alive - Twofold
The Birth I had
and this - besides, in - Thee ;" (J.470 1.27,28 )
she has now become one with God and has attained immortality.

Emily Dickinson's uncompromising attitude towards the Puritan God and theology was reflected as early as her school days, when she could not bring herself to answer the call of God. At the age of seventeen Emily Dickinson declared herself "standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless ". The struggle for faith continued throughout her life. Inspite of being sceptical about an after life, Emily Dickinson was very often plagued by the idea of a damned soul. But her faith was in the integrity of her own mind and so her individual triumphed over all other things. She remained a critic of the Puritan God throughout her life, though she would have been nothing, she feels, without God.

There is a sense of regret expressed in several of her poems:

"Those-dying then,
Knew - where they went -
They went to God's Right Hand -
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found ". ( J. 1551 )

God is to her an' Absolute Reality' and while dealing with this 'Absolute Reality', she very often wears the mask of a child. Her mood is generally surcharged with a mixture of wit, humour, irony together with a kind of childlike innocence. This is discernible in her parody of the Lord's Prayer:

"Papa above ; / regard a mouse
O'erpowered by the cat ;
Reserve with in thy kingdom
A 'Mansion' for the Rat ;"
Snug in seraphic cupboards
To nibble all the day,
While unsuspecting cycles
Wheel solemnly away ; " (J.61)
The poem " I never lost as much but twice" is Emily Dickinson's charge against Providence for stealing away from the already impoverished.

The loss of her loved ones forces an exclamation from her which is as much an accusation as a plea :

" ............ twice have I stood a beggar
before the door of God ;
Angel - twice descending
Reimbursed my store -
Burglar ; Banker - Father ;
I am poor once more ; " (J. 49)

Behind this playful and sporting attitude towards this 'Absolute Reality' , there is a clear-cut manifestation of sincere and abiding faith as she (Emily Dickinson) remarks in 1848 :

" I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important a subject ."

The Biblical myth about Jacob who wrestles with an angel all night and defeats it, and in the morning discovers that it was God ; fascinated her and she frequently refers to it in her poems and letters. The poem " Two Swimmers wrestled on the spar " - (J.201) is a reference to this Biblical Myth -

"Two Swimmers wrestled on the spar -
Until ' the morning sun -
When one - turned smiling to the land -
Oh God ; the other one :

The stray ships - passing
Spied a face -
Upon the water borne -
With eyes in death - still begging raised -
And hands - beseeching - thrown ; " (J.201)

Here the wrestlers (Jacob and the Angel) are introduced as swimmers and the sea is introduced in the background where the swimmers wrestled until morning.

Since Emily Dickinson's intention is to convey her personal feelings through the poem; she quite conveniently changes the Biblical myth into a poetic one.

Emily Dickinson identifies herself with Jacob who wrestles with faith. In the poem God is victorious and He does not bless Jacob. This is exactly the situation in which the poet visualises herself. Literally the poem is a reflection on the final destiny of a person who defies God. Through it Emily Dickinson projects her own position as a non-believer. God refusing to bless Jacob, projects her fear that her prayers may be un-blessed and therefore unanswered.

Surprisingly enough, for Emily Dickinson God and love are synonymous. He has been projected in several poems as the lover figure, the 'Awe' whose bride is the poet; (J. 1620) as the superior Man who touches her and she is transformed in mind and matter; (J. 506). She also calls Him "My Dim Companion" (J.275). The poet employs various symbols, images and metaphors to concretize her relationship with God or the greater consciousness - like that of the sea to the moon, bride to the bridegroom, daisy to the sun.

Through her unique technique of presenting the theme of God and religion, Emily Dickinson succeeds in making it clear that her God and religion is not just a ritual or a sacrament. God must be for her an experience of the consciousness. She must feel a total sense of belonging to God - what God is for her and she for Him. She expects to feel His presence with her whole body, mind, and soul.
This is what she indicates when she announces "The Bible deals with the centre and her business is circumference'. 'Centre' for her is the doctrinal aspect of religion and she feels alien to it. It is Emily Dickinson's mythopoetic imagination that creates for her the world of circumference - it is the metaphor through which she describes the activity of the consciousness. In this innermost part of her consciousness she finds her God and Heaven. Through the experience of her circumference she reaches Paradise.

Perhaps the most recurrent theme in Emily Dickinson, next to the theme of Death and Immortality, is Nature. Nature was the most popular subject picked up by the poets of the 1860's. It continued from Blake and Wordsworth in England to Emerson in America. The theme was exhaustively explored.

To Wordsworth Nature was an expression of the Divine will, a 'guide, friend and philosopher'; a cure of the evils of civilization, and also a means of glimpsing immortality. In America, Emerson was the poet perhaps the closest to Wordsworth. They all philosophised about Nature. Emily Dickinson's treatment of Nature is different and unique. Her's is a fresh approach, she never idealizes nature nor evolves a philosophy around it. Her treatment of Nature is so varied that a single definition is inadequate to describe her attitude towards Nature.

In most of her minor poems, she like Wordsworth, declares the existence of a mystical bond between Nature and man.

"Several of Nature's People/ I know, and they know me/ I feel for them a transport of cordiality "(J.986)

Unlike her Puritan heritage, she does not see Nature as a stern preceptor. At times her attitude towards Nature is humorous and friendly. It is in sheer delight and mirth she writes:
"In the name of the Bee / And of the Butterfly / And of the Breeze, Amen;" (J. 18)

Yet in certain other poems Emily Dickinson's friendly and close association with nature is reversed. She becomes unsure as to the identity of Nature:

"Nature and God—I neither know
Yet both so well knew me
They startled, like Executors
Of My identity." (J. 835),

Most of her nature poems are an excellent appreciation and minute description of Nature in all her subtleties and moods. For her Nature is that part of creation belonging to a higher order and so:

"Nature is what we know/yet have no art to say / so important our wisdom is / To her simplicity." (J. 668),

Emily Dickinson's Nature poems expressing a certain mood of nature, and her reactions to it, can be termed as reflective poems of her early stage of writing. The poem "These are the days when Birds come back" (J. 130), describes beautifully the transition period between winter and spring. The sky is described as 'fraud' as it resumes the "Old sophistries of June"

"a blue and a gold mistake." (J. 130)

The 'fraud' cheats the birds as well as the poet and a few birds fly to take a backward look. As the air alters "softly/Hurries a timid leaf". The whole process of renewal of nature is sacred to the poet and she appeals to Nature to "Permit a child to join" in this 'communion'. The poet wishes to appreciate the beauty of every object of Nature visually and physically, therefore she pleads:

"Thy sacred emblems to partake
Thy consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine;" (J. 130)
The same mood is persistent in several other poems like "Further in summer than the Birds", (J. 1068) "There is a morn by men unseen" (J. 24)

Towards the end of her poetic career, Emily Dickinson's Nature poems seem to contain less of such concrete images, like the Bobolinks, Bee, Bird, Sky and Sea. Her concern is now with mystical ideas and so the images and symbols used are abstract.

"Bring me the sunset in a cup" is an excellent example of this abstraction. Here, the poet like an inspired person questions:

"How far the morning leaps - Tell me what time the weaver sleeps who spun the breaths of blue?" (J.128) She even asks for the sunset to be brought in a cup. She feels at this stage a direct communion with Nature. Such moments of exhilaration, and ecstasy leads her to proclaim: "And Awe - was all we could feel;".

It is as if Emily Dickinson has been visited by Shelly's "awful, unseen presence", the spirit of the "Intellectual Beauty", when she is inspired and talks like an Oracle.

"A little Madness in the spring
Is wholesome even for the king" (J. 1333)

This 'madness' in ecstasy, she finds is tiring, and expresses itself in the beauties of nature. In such ecstatic state of mind even the awful and terrifying moods of nature create an emotional turmoil which is at once intense and vivid. The experience recorded in the poem "I started early took my Dog", (J.520) is one such terrifying experience.

On its literal level the poem is a record of the poet's walk by the sea shore with her dog. She is in a most relaxed state of mind. As she stands "Aground upon the sands" the sea advance towards her. The sea is personified here first as a 'Tide' then as
'He'. Gradually
"the tide/went past my simple shoe -
And past my Apron - And My Belt
And past my Boddice - too -"

With this experience the narrator in the poem is moved emotionally and physically. Soon the narrator faces a kind of agonising terror as the sea "made as He would eat me up . . . /And then I started - too -". She is terrorised by the expanse of the sea against the backdrop of which she is just a puny, helpless, fragile creature - "as a Dew/upon a Dandelions sleeve". 'He' follows her as if trying to court her but she escapes 'His' grip and succeeds in resisting 'His' advances. The line "I felt his silver heel" reveal her appreciation of the beauty of the sea even in its terrifying aspect. In the last stanza the sea is seen withdrawing in degrees:

"And bowing - with a Mighty look -
At me - The sea withdrew -"

Emily Dickinson's whole conception of nature owes its allegiance to the bees and bobolinks and roses of her garden. Similarly the tiny incidents in her exclusively private world, formed the basis of the drama of life she constructed in her poems, like - Death and Immortality, ecstasy and suffering, love and separation. What was outside her 'circumference' was outside her orbit. Her only form of communication with the outside world is her poetry.

"This is my letter to the world", (J.441) is what she says of her poems. Her poems mirror her feelings and reflect a rebellious mind and a unique personality at work.

Critics claim that the educated Americans of Walt Whitman's time found him repugnant because the poet deviated from the 'genteel tradition' of his time by writing unabashedly about sex and the 'body electric', - such ideas which were taboo during that
period. Emily Dickinson too may have been unacceptable but decidedly to a lesser degree than Whitman; had her poems been published during her lifetime. Emily Dickinson defied tradition only in her choice of themes and style. She never wrote about the conventional God or religion. Nor did she stick to the traditional metre and rhyme scheme, or poetic language of her time. Whereas the erotic and amorous nature of Whitman's writing debased the very decency of contemporary life. The poet outrageously claims:

"As the hugging and loving bed-fellows sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day with stealthy tread, .... " (Song of Myself)

It was precisely because Emily Dickinson's thought and techniques ran ahead of her time that she failed to reach the limelight, as well as acceptance and recognition when she was alive. The fame she earned posthumously and the delight with which she is read today, is proof enough of her modernity. Critics have failed to fully appreciate so mysterious a poet and assign to her a specific place in the literary genre. That she is simultaneously called a metaphysical poet, mystical poet, religious poet, transcendental poet, establishes the enigmatic range of her imagination. Recognising the novelty of the treatment of her themes, modern critics have made claims of discovering her and of restoring her.

The fact that Emily Dickinson had kept her poems hidden fully convinced that they would never see the light of the day; makes her poems all the more precious.

The utmost secrecy with which she confined her poems, is a distinct clarification of the point that she wrote not to impress her critics, nor to baffle her readers with her wit. For her, writing poetry was the only means of communication between her inner soul and
the outside world, and what she wrote was the ultimate truth as she perceived it.

To quote Richard Wilbur -

"The poems of Emily Dickinson are a continual appeal to experience, motivated by an arrogant passion for the truth. 'Truth is so rare a thing', she once said, 'it is delightful to tell it'.

In the process, when she found the Christian religion and God falling short of her need to establish the truth she conceived, Emily Dickinson did not hesitate even to replace Christianity with her own personal religion.

"The result is a home-made religion to suit her: the old terms are made to mean their opposites; the rituals are stolen and deritualized; the sacred is desecrated; the forms are reformed. . . . . . . The allusion functions as camp; the naivete is revolutionary . . . . . . ."

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In subsequent chapters reference to this book will be cited as Keller to be followed by the page number.