Split the Lark and Find the Music

—Constructing Emily Dickinson's Poetics

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson had a comparatively systematic poetics that remained hidden in her poems and letters.

Dickinson's poetics evolved from her worldview demonstrated in her independence of the established religion for ready-made perspectives. She valued individuated interpretation of the world around and emphasized subjectivity in such interpretation. Her independent thinking led her to view poetry unconventionally. Dickinson defined poetry in terms of its effect on the audience and built her poetics around the audience.

Although her poetics is audience-centered, Dickinson anticipated the intentional fallacy of New Criticism by placing great emphasis on the study of the work itself. Her preference of ambiguity and tension also anteceded the New Critical notion of the poetic language.

While Dickinson gives the poet the maximum autonomy and ultimate freedom in poetic creation, she is aware that the poet has to negotiate between her own normal psychology and the creative urge that is all too powerful and possessive. The poet is nothing but a representative of the Verse. On this point, Dickinson anticipates Jung's archetypal theory by many years. Dickinson also anticipates structuralism in that she believes that not only does the poetry of the past influence the poetry of the present, the poetry of the present changes the meaning of the poetry of the past.

Dickinson does not only put her poetics to practice, she discusses it, in her poems and letters, intelligently. She anticipates many of the modern critical theories, and she combines them in a systematic way.

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Introduction

Emily Dickinson (1830—1886) has been studied for more than a century, first as a literary hermit or deviant, then as a genius or mystery. Much has been published on her poetry and letters, yet little has been done to (re)construct or systematize her poetics. Some scholars have written on her way of manipulating the audience (Hubbard 28), some on the grammar of her poetic language (Miller). Some scholars even claim that Dickinson was a poet without a project (Porter 236-37). It's highly questionable that Emily Dickinson who was so passionate about poetry and achieved so much could have had no comparatively complete and systematic ideas of what poetry is. It is true that Emily Dickinson did not write either much or expressly about her ideas of poetry, yet her poetic ideas can be retrieved from her writings, poetry and prose, if we delve into them from the right angle and with much care.

Dickinson's poetic practice is also a valid source of her poetic ideas because she was a conscious poet whose practice should clearly reflect her ideas. Dickinson is different from the traditional poets whose attention is much focused on the poetic forms (meters, rhythm, sound effects, etc). Dickinson's poetic forms are almost all hymnal stanzas or variations of the hymnal stanza. Coupled with her liberalism in language use, her little varied stanzaic form saved her the trouble of experimenting with meters and enabled her to concentrate on the theme and other internal structural features of the poem.

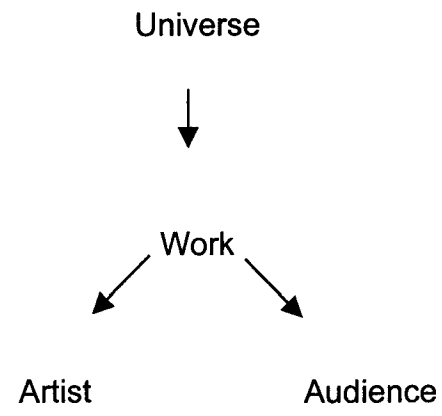
Dickinson was a conscious poet also because she took poetry deep into her life or her personality. It is well documented that Dickinson often sent poems to friends and relatives, sometimes to accompany the letters and sometimes using poems in place of letters. Considering that letters were her primary connection with the outside world, it is safe to say that Dickinson made poetry the essential part of her life, not to mention how much time she must have spent on writing poems just to complete 1775 poems within 36 years while doing household chores and taking care of her bed-ridden mother. Friends, even brother Austin, accused Dickinson of "posing" (Sewall 442, 510). But her "posing" was more of a poet than of a spinster or recluse. Obviously, the purpose of posing is to attract attention. But Dickinson did not desire worldly attention. She might have posed in her correspondence with the editors. And that was to attract attention to herself as an aspiring poet, not as a woman. A poseur usually appears to be haughty or self-proud. But that is not Dickinson. While she tactfully declined to take Higginson's advice on her poetic form, Dickinson always remained humble and sincere in their correspondence. A poseur resorts to exaggerated and inappropriate acts to put up a façade. Dickinson's "posing" was hardly inappropriate. The most highlighted scene was her meeting with Higginson, when she put two daylilies into Higginson's hand, saying "These are my introduction" (L342a). This scene is more than dramatic, and the flowers carry more meanings than the usual association with the fair sex. Considering that Dickinson often referred to herself as daisies, grass, so on and so forth, the homely daylilies were indeed an appropriate introduction. If this was posing, then

Dickinson was actually acting out her poetry. Dickinson brought poetry into many moments of her life, even her own death. Anticipating the end of her life, she wrote to the Norcrosses, "Called back" (L1046). Borrowed from a book title, this short phrase turned out to be very poetic in this situation. It offers a new perspective from which to look at death, both for herself and for her relatives. When we understand what Dickinson meant, we don't see her acts or words as posing. Instead, these acts and words are a valuable index to Dickinson's thoughts.

It is time to tackle the hermeneutic dilemma, to understand the whole in terms of the parts and to understand the parts in terms of the whole.

To better understand Emily Dickinson's poetry, we need to understand her poetics and, of course, the first step toward such understanding is to construct her poetics from her individual poems and letters. Dickinson's poetic ideas are scattered in her poems and letters, and indeed, it is no easy job to gather them together for systematic analysis. Yet, we are not completely without a chart. Thanks to M. H. Abrams' monumental work *The Mirror and the Lamp*, we know what to expect in this search for Dickinson's poetics.

M. H. Abrams in his *The Mirror and the Lamp* maps out the world of literary creation (6):



Abrams places the universe, the artist and the audience in a triangle, and positions the work in the center of the triangle. Abrams does not provide lines that connect the universe and the artist, the universe and the audience, and the artist and the audience. But in fact they are all connected, and their connection gives the raison d'être to the work. Obviously, the artist and the audience share the same universe; in most cases they live in the same society and culture. They both interact with the universe / society, and they both have ideas about the universe / society and their life in it. For whatever reasons (temperament, training, practical needs, etc.), the artist takes the initiative to build a communication with the audience. In this sense and only in this sense, the artist is the active agent and the audience a passive recipient. However, the artist-audience communication is not the daily face-to-face type. In the typical situation, the artist has to reach the audience through her work; the work is the only channel available between them. Also, the artist-audience communication is not a one-way transmission, as indicated by Abram's map, but a two-way interaction, as will be proved by Dickinson's case later. Abrams' triangle is somewhat

misleading in that he draws a line connecting the universe and the work. In fact, the universe does not and cannot affect the work directly. The universe's influence upon the work is through the artist. It is the artist who creates the work. If repositioned linearly and excluding the audience's feedback to the work and the artist, the process goes from the universe to the artist to the work to the audience.

With Abrams' map in mind, I will start the search for Dickinson's poetic ideas. I will look for Dickinson's idea about the universe or the world, her idea about literary work or poetry, her idea about the artist or the poet, and her idea about the audience. And also I will relate her ideas to each other and form an organic poetics of Emily Dickinson. Abrams's map is only a prototype, a guideline, and it is no surprise that Dickinson's ideas extracted from her writings might in places prove quite original or complementary to Abrams' map.

Dickinson's originality will be further demonstrated in comparison of her poetic ideas with some modern critical theories. I don't expect Dickinson's poetics to be in complete harmony with any single one of modern critical theories; I believe that her originality lies in that she was a forerunner to many of the modern critical theories. This poses a primary challenge to the systematizing of her poetics, because such an effort, in effect, will be to synthesize modern critical theories. Given the diversity of and contradiction among the critical theories, this synthesizing effort would probably prove to be a premature attempt. But if it has something to offer to the understanding of Dickinson's poetry, it should be attempted. The uniqueness of Dickinson's poetry is universally

acknowledged and amply studied. Yet it seems to me that most of the studies are of a descriptive nature. They have illustrated the uniqueness, but have not explained it. They are more concerned with "how" than with "why." Reconstructing Dickinson's poetics will improve our understanding of Dickinson's poetry, specifically, in terms of why Dickinson chose to write her poems like they were.

We, as readers, share this universe and human life with Emily Dickinson and the poet derives her poetic principles from her view of the world. And that brings us to the first chapter on Emily Dickinson's view of the world.

CHAPTER ONE

The Universe

Emily Dickinson's well-known withdrawal from active social life renders her ideas of the world especially important for studies of her poetics, because Dickinson, like any other poets, thought about and wrote about the world, however seemingly limited the world in which she lived.

Dickinson's withdrawal from the outside world is sufficiently documented but insufficiently interpreted. Whether she withdrew to her household duties or from unreturned love, she lived in a limited world. Her numerous letters, short and long, sent to other towns and across the street, may be the evidence that she did not withdraw completely from the social life. But a social life sustained by mail is no doubt a very limited one. What concerns us here is to what Dickinson withdrew. Of course she could look inward for material. But many inward-looking persons become emotionally impoverished or eventually go insane, because they can find little else, besides an isolated ego there if their minds are cut off from the outside world. My contention is that Dickinson's withdrawal was not turning inward to an egoistic landscape that would probably turn out to be a wasteland without nourishment from the outside, but rather turning into another direction of a richer world. The chart of that world is given in her reply to Higginson's inquiry whether she had companions. Dickinson replied:

> You ask of my Companions Hills — Sir — and the Sundown — and a Dog — large as myself, that my Father bought me — They are better

than Beings — because they know — but do not tell...I have a Brother and Sister — My Mother...and Father... They are religious — except me — and address an Eclipse, every morning — whom they call their "Father." (L261)

There are two important notes in Dickinson's reply. First, Dickinson put Nature as her companions before her family members. To the ordinary people, companions are definitely fellow human beings. Higginson would have meant this, too. But Dickinson looked elsewhere for companions. She was more willing to be accompanied by things in Nature. Second, her family members were different from her in that they were religious and this made them lesser companions. Love of Nature is a tendency shared by many poets, therefore it cannot be used to explain Dickinson's withdrawal, or at least, it cannot be used as the only explanation. Her skepticism about religion in the letter quoted above is a crucial clue to the truth.

In the 19th century New England, people's worldviews centered on the idea of religion. People's relation with the world was much fashioned by their relation with their shared supposed creator, God. One piece of evidence is sufficient to prove the religious dominance. Young Emily Dickinson had a science professor at Amherst who attempted to instill the greatness of God into the students' minds through studies of nature. As Richard Sewall notes in his biography of Emily Dickinson, Edward Hitchcock, President of Amherst College, "set about leading his students to God through the study of His works. He did this not only in his college lectures, frequent sermons, and other public orations, but

on botanical and geological field trips with his students and young people of the town"(344). If sciences, which were supposed to deal objectively with the physical world, were made to serve God, there would be nothing left out of religion. The entire world was perceived through the eyes of religion.

Emily Dickinson began to think about the world early in her childhood or rather she wrestled with the world around her. What she did was to get into contact with the world itself without the aid of God or religion. She was reluctant to be a believer, unlike many of her schoolmates and friends. Religion as an established institution did not suit Dickinson's mind. She was not willing to take over other people's worldviews and experience the world through the ready-made framework. Her teacher Miss Lyon listed her as a "No-hoper" as opposed to those who had "expressed hope of accepting Christ" (Sewall 360-61). She intended to have her own way of knowing the world. This particular worldview of hers, later, was to lead her to discard the poetic conventions of her time and justified her poetic experiment, at least to herself. The poetic conventions, like the established religion, are fixated beliefs about poetry. They demand conformity and resent individuality. Dickinson wanted to see the world with her own eyes and consequently must speak about the world she saw in her own way. Dickinson's early letters reveal that she had been torn between the idea of becoming a believer and the idea of remaining independent. Part of her wanted to become a believer, to be like others, part of her felt repulsed from the church. In 1848, Dickinson wrote to her best friend, Abiah Root:

> Father has decided not to send me to Holyoke another year, so this is my last term...
>
> ... Abiah, you may be surprised to hear me speak as I do, knowing that I express no interest in the all-important subject, but I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world. (L23)

This was surely a battle of the free young soul against the urge of conformity, a baffling experience every teenager must deal with during growing up. What is important to us here is that Dickinson made a distinction between religion and the world. Religion is not the world, but only one view of the world. When Dickinson gave up religion, she did not give up the world. She was part of the world, and she did not alienate herself from the world. While keeping away from God, she embraced Nature and human hearts, as evidenced by her poems on Nature and human passions.

Since social life was overshadowed by religion, it is natural that Dickinson turned to Nature for inspiration. But Dickinson was different from the Romantic poets who tended to see only beauty or God's image in Nature. Nature in Dickinson's poetry has a multiple personality. In romantic poetry, Nature is more often presented as beautiful and sympathetic, but Dickinson's Nature often surprises the reader with its naked cruelty (J328) and destructive violence (J601).

Since God and religion were part of the world, Dickinson did not neglect them. Unlike Nietzsche who was to declare God dead ("Antichrist" 111), Dickinson kept him alive but undeified him into a personality no greater than a human being, or rather, she killed God as a religious authority on people's worldly affairs. In her poems God and his angels are no more sacred than human beings. God could be a "stately lover" (J357) capable of jealousy (J1260), God could also be a jealous playmate (J1719); the seraphs could be onlookers at an amusing scene (J214), the angels could be like school children (J231); God and angels could be no more powerful than a Gymnast (J59). In one sense, Dickinson gave up God and religion; in anther sense, she incorporated or subsumed them into her own world.

In Dickinson's case, this battle between religion and the world was rendered more meaningful by her later comment on her role as a poet. She wrote to Higginson when she was 32 years old and well into maturity both as a person and as a poet, "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person" (L268). "The Representative of the Verse" was an identity Dickinson had been trying to establish for herself besides her identity as a daughter in the Dickinson family. Retrospectively, "the non-believer Emily Dickinson" was also an identity she tried to establish. To be a non-believer, Dickinson had to stay away from the convention she was born to; to be a representative of the verse, Dickinson had to separate herself from the identity her family and society expected her to take. Both efforts were to make someone

out of herself. The religious non-believer finally matured into a poetic non-conformist.

Besides God and religions, Dickinson wrote much about the self. Many of her poems dwell on the consciousness of the self, inner conflict of the self, and traumatic experiences concerning the self. This concern might have come out of her religious situation. As a non-believer, different from the others, Dickinson must have felt the constant need to define her identity, to explore who she was. The attention to or obsession of the self is a thematic hallmark of modernism. If God could not act as an authority, no others could. Therefore, a person must / has to perceive the world through his own eyes, and what he sees is the world; the rest is something else. Dickinson's worldview centers on subjectivity. Right on this point she anticipated the modernists. Kenneth Stocks discusses this issue in *Emily Dickinson and the Modern Consciousness*. His study focuses on how Dickinson's consciousness of the human dilemma anticipated that of the modernists. The content of the consciousness doesn't concern us much here, but Stocks points out that Dickinson's responses to the world are "subjective" (2). No responses can be said to be objective; by "subjective," I believe, Stocks intends to emphasize the individuated interpretation in Dickinson's responses to the world. This individuated interpretation is the start of the modern philosophy. Father of modern philosophy René Descartes said, "I think, hence I am" (27). The emphasis on the individual ("I") and on the interpretation ("think") set the modern thought in a new direction, though ironically Descartes' intention was to prove the existence of God.

Dickinson's subjective interpretation of the world is best manifested in her creative use of geographical names in her poems and letters; that is, she converted those geographical names into something else, or rather she injected new meanings into those rather objective static names. For example, she wrote "Our lives are Swiss — / So still — so Cool —" (J80). The adjective for Switzerland is used as a common adjective, to indicate that "our lives" are isolated, tranquil until we look beyond it ("Till some odd afternoon / The Alps neglect their Curtains / And we look farther on!"). In J285 she claimed "I see — New Englandly —" demanding a new interpretation of the proper noun "New England." In one of the letters, she used "Philadelphia" for her friend Charles Wadsworth who had recently died, "My Philadelphia has passed from Earth" (L750). This is a personal allusion whose origin might have escaped us, but it is clear that Dickinson placed a very warm feeling into the name "Philadelphia."

Dickinson refused to have her poems tailored to suit the popular taste of the times. At first, it seems that Dickinson had idiosyncratic ideas about poetic forms. But a careful examination of the "surgeries" done by the earlier editors (for example, a comparison of the liberal edition by Mabel Loomis Todd and the relatively faithful edition by Thomas H. Johnson) shows that with the poetic forms trimmed, Dickinson's cutting insights were also dulled. Dickinson realized this from the very start. She complained to Higginson about how the *Springfield Weekly Republican* treated her poem J986 (A narrow Fellow in the Grass): "Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me — defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one — I had told

you I did not print — I feared you might think me ostensible" (L316). What the editors intended to do was in fact to bring Dickinson's poetry back into the conventional framework or worldview, which was against Dickinson's will. Again, Nietzsche summarized the relationship between the form and the content in a brief and sharp manner: "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar" ("Twilight" 38). Dickinson's unconventional forms are a result of her unconventional content, both of which are manifestations of her ideas about poetry. This brings us to the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

Poetry

Theories revolve around definitions. A discussion of Dickinson's poetics should begin with her definition of poetry.

According to Higginson, Dickinson once said: "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way [Sic]" (L342a). There are many ways to define poetry. Some define poetry in terms of emotion, like William Wordsworth who defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (260); some define it in terms of language, like Coleridge who said "poetry = the *best* words in the best order"(48). It is interesting to note how the two close friends and collaborators define poetry in different ways. Wordsworth defines poetry in terms of the poet. For him, poetry is the poet's expression, a source of radiation, most likely to be solitarily located in the universe. Coleridge's definition is structure-centered, a meta-definition that is self-reflexive / self-contained. At the first glance, Dickinson's definition doesn't look like a definition at all. Her definition is broad enough to include arts of any kind, and indeed any phenomenon, natural and social. Anything that is capable of producing the stated effects can be termed "poetry." But a closer look reveals that Dickinson defines poetry in terms of its effect on the audience and by doing so she opens up

possibilities. And in the sense of possibility, for her, poetry is not a finished product, but a potential energy to be triggered off by the audience.

When Dickinson defines poetry as a particular effect upon the reader, she manifests that her poetics is audience-centered. In fact, Dickinson made it more clear in another letter to Higginson: "Nature is a Haunted House—but Art—a House that tries to be haunted" (L459A). Of course, it is the audience that haunts the house of art. Obviously Dickinson is making a distinction between Nature and House. Nature is a natural phenomenon while House is made by humans. Art or poetry, like a house, is also artifact, but it tries to function like Nature, i.e. to haunt or appeal to people.

The audience-centered definition of poetry places Emily Dickinson in the vanguard of modernism. Traditional theories typically leave the audience out of the scene of the critical analysis, referring to it only when moral effects or catharsis is concerned. New Criticism particularly puts the audience into exile by the notion of the Affective Fallacy. The audience was not invited back and restored to power until Reader Response and Feminist theory entered upon the scene as active critical forces in the 1950's. While Feminists search for an alternative meaning in the text by means of the feminist lenses, Reader Response theory claims that the reader / audience does the reading and creates the meaning. Stanley E. Fish made a distinction between the "positivist" meaning and the "experiential" meaning (395), which saved Reader Response theory from the disgrace of falling into the trap of the Affective Fallacy, because the meaning of the text is not embedded in it, but is carried out in the reading or the reader's

experiencing of the text. "The reader is always making sense" (401) and that sense is the meaning of the text. Experiencing the text is just how Dickinson defines poetry, and that's "the only way" she could tell poetry from non-poetry.

While Dickinson's definition of poetry points to Reader Response theory, her poems demonstrate the idea even more clearly. J168 argues for the validity of different perceptions and readings:

> If the foolish, call them "flowers" —
> Need the wiser, tell?
> If the Savants "Classify" them
> It is just as well!
>
> Those who read the "Revelations"
> Must not criticize
> Those who read the same Edition —
> With beclouded Eyes!
>
> ...
>
> Low amid that glad Belles lettres
> Grant that we may stand,
> Stars, amid profound Galaxies —
> At that grand "Right hand"!

It doesn't matter whether one call it "flower" or "grass" as long as one can look at it and sense the beauty. There is no point for the wiser or the savants to tell "the truth," because what counts is the individuated experience, and every individual experience is justified in its own right.

Dickinson endorsed multiple readings of the text, not only because everyone should have a right to his or her own interpretation, but also because multiple readings help poetry, as she explains in J1467:

> A little overflowing word
> That any, hearing, had inferred
> For Ardor or for Tears,
> Though Generations pass away,
> Traditions ripen and decay,
> As eloquent appears —

A poem must be overflowing with meanings so that it can stand the test of time, be meaningful to later generations. This is especially important for Dickinson since "Her Message is commited / To Hands I [she] cannot see—" (J441).

For the reader to construct meanings out of the poem, the poem must provide a shared frame of reference. The shared frame of reference should include language rules (grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.), poetic conventions (use of image, metaphor, etc.), and also sufficient clues for the reader to decode / interpret the poem. Dickinson's poetry falls short in this sense. Not only were her poetic forms unconventional (except that her altered hymnal form), her

worldview was also challenging to many of her contemporaries, as discussed in Chapter One. The meeting between Dickinson and Higginson, the famous editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* who could be viewed as the representative of the literary taste of the time, was symbolic of the encounter of the poet and the audience. Before their meeting, Higginson knew very little about Emily Dickinson, but at the very first moment, Dickinson put Higginson to the task of interpretation by placing in his hands two day lilies and saying "These are my introduction" (L342a). And Higginson's comment on her was very revealing: "I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me"(L342b). No poets had ever before demanded so much from their audience as Dickinson did. By following the poetic conventions, traditional poets provided solid grounds upon which the reader could build his interpretation. In other words, the traditional poets tried to gratify the reader's expectation. But Dickinson did not want to present easy finds and withheld much of the background information needed for straightforward interpretation. Without providing much background information, like at the beginning of her meeting with Higginson, Dickinson demands interpretation from the audience.

Considering her life and her seclusion, it is logical to infer that she intended her poems to be read New Critically. By withholding background information about her life and by deviating from underlining poetic conventions, Dickinson could only expect reader to concentrate on her poems. Though Dickinson emphasized the effects of a poem on the reader, which the New Critics termed "the Affective Fallacy" (Wimsatt 21), she embraced the New Critical idea

about the Intentional Fallacy that is "a confusion between the poem and its origins" (Wimsatt 21). And she expressed the notion of a poem being an organic whole in several of her poems. Her poem J1142 extends the house of Art metaphor and explains how the house is built:

> The Props assist the House
> Until the House is built
> And then the Props withdraw
> And adequate, erect,
> The House support itself
> And cease to recollect
> The Auger and the Carpenter —
> Just such a retrospect
> Hath the perfected Life —
> A past of Plank and Nail
> And slowness — then the Scaffolds drop
> Affirming it a Soul.

A poem, like a house, whatever it has gone through, must eventually stand by itself and judged in terms of itself. In writing a poem, the poet may get his inspirations from his life or people around him or books he has read. But those are only "props" which only help to build the poem, never the poem itself. So are the notes and drafts. They are not the poem, nor part of the poem. The "props" don't contribute to the effect of the poem, though they may prove helpful to

understanding of the process of poetry-writing. The idea of the poem standing by itself is further confirmed by J883:

The Poets light but Lamps —
Themselves — go out —
The Wicks they stimulate —
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns —
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference —

The poet must withdraw from his / her work once it is completed. The poem must speak for itself, and the poem can speak for itself if it is a good one (if it has the "vital light"). By the metaphor of the house and metaphor of the lamp, Dickinson illustrates the founding notion of the Intentional Fallacy that characterized New Criticism that was to flourish many years later.

To understand Dickinson's poetry from the New Critical perspective, one must understand Dickinson's idea of language, for poetry is made in language and has to rely solely on language if it is intended so. When New Criticism separates the author and the audience from the work, there's only the language in the work to be scrutinized. For the poetic language, New Criticism emphasizes the ambiguity and tension it creates, and ambiguity and tension are just what

Dickinson's poetic language creates. And Dickinson did it knowingly. Cristanne Miller examines J675 in great detail and points out:

> The dominant metaphor of "Essential Oils" suggests that language, too, must undergo transformation in the creation of poetry...All of these transformations or disruptions of what is normally expected in language work toward creating multiplicity of meaning and an indeterminate reference, two characteristics that open questions of meaning but frustrate the referential or informative communication most language provides...(4-5).

Miller believes that J675 expresses Dickinson's idea about the poetic language. And Dickinson's idea is that the poetic language differs drastically from the everyday language in that the poetic language is reduced to its essentials by means of transformations and deviations from the norm ("It is the gift of Screws"). The purpose of such a poetic language, as Miller explains, is aimed at creating multiplicity of meaning or ambiguity by means of which the poem's appeal will last longer, achieving the status of a "Ceaseless Rosemary" (J675).

Note that Dickinson commented on language in some of her poems and her comments are mostly on the effects language has on its audience. J479 reveals the soul-piercing, instead of mind-soothing, effect of language:

> She dealt her pretty words like Blades —
> How glittering they shone —
> And every One unbared a Nerve
> Or wantoned with a Bone —

For language to achieve such effects, it cannot assume the conventional form employed in daily conversations and the fluent styles in the so-called belle lettres. There must be something unconventional or even radical about it.

Even when the effect of language is that of joy, it has something forceful about it:

Breaking in bright Orthography
On my simple sleep —
Thundering its Prospective —
Till I stir, and weep —

Not for the Sorrow, done me —
But the push of Joy —

(J276)

Even if the poetic language is to bring joy to the reader, it has to "thunder" its meaning / potential ("prospective"), to make the reader "stir" or "weep." The joy is not a result of catering, but of stimulating ("push").

Sometimes, language or art works in a mysterious way:

I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes
In a Cathedral Aisle,
And understood no word it said —
Yet held my breath, the while —

And risen up — and gone away,

A more Bernardine Girl —

Yet — know not what was done to me

In that old Chapel Aisle.

(J183)

Sometimes the reader can still be affected or feel elated though he does not fully understand what is in the poetic language.

Since she attended school (though only for a short time) and she was well read, Dickinson must have known what kind of language was normally expected of a poet. In fact, Higginson once tried to "correct" her poems, but Dickinson kept on writing in her own style. So all her ungrammaticality and unusual use of words is intentional. Dickinson was always conscious of what she was doing with language and she paid so much attention to the effect of language because she noticed how language could affect people. In a letter to Holland, she shared her discovery: "Amazing Human Heart—a syllable can make to quake like jostled Tree—what Infinite— for thee!" (L715). To make "human hearts to quake," to affect the audience, the poet must choose the right "syllable," or le mot juste, in T. S. Eliot's words, and use it in the right way. Only so could the audience, though varied, be touched. Here, Dickinson summons Reader Response theory and New Criticism into cooperation to serve her purpose.

Death is older than religion, and so is immortality. Dickinson believed that poetry, not religion, is the way to immortality. J539 makes it clear:

The Province of the Saved

Should be the Art — To save —

Through Skill obtained in Themselves —

Immortality is not bestowed on one, but must be achieved by oneself through practicing art. In poetry, the poet leaves a legacy and lives in the mind of the later generations:

544

The Martyr Poets -- did not tell --

But wrought their Pang in syllable --

That when their mortal name be numb --

Their mortal fate -- encourage Some --

The Martyr Painters -- never spoke --

Bequeathing -- rather -- to their Work --

That when their conscious fingers cease --

Some seek in Art -- the Art of Peace --

In this sense, poetry is future-oriented or has a continuous life. A poem is not only meant for the poet's contemporaries, but also for generations to come. In another word, a poem is also supposed to be accessed from and evaluated in more than one historical period. Though Dickinson did not express the structuralist viewpoint explicitly, she did practice it when she made the judgment "Mrs Hunt's Poems are stronger than any written by Women since Mrs—

Browning...While Shakespeare remains Literature is firm—" (L368). Dickinson's comment is not the customary tribute to the big names in literature. From what we know about Dickinson's rebellious attitude to literary convention, we can be safe in saying that Dickinson would not waste time with such polite small talk in her letter to Higginson. She meant what she said. And in her words is the comparison and evaluation of literary works across historical periods. If Helen Hunt's poems were evaluated against Mrs. Browning's, Mrs. Browning's poems would affect the appreciation of Hunt's poems. If these two poets could be compared, it would be possible that Helen Hunt's poems would affect readers' appreciation of Mrs. Browning's poems. So what Dickinson endorsed was in fact the structuralist point of view held up by T. S. Eliot in his "Tradition and Individual Talent," in which he advocates the notion of all works, past and present, existing in "simultaneous order" (38).

Dickinson replaced religion with poetry as a path to immortality. This probably is the highest praise that poetry has ever received. Accordingly, Dickinson places the poet on the highest rank.

CHAPTER THREE

The Poet

Dickinson's idea of the poet derives from her idea of the world, her idea of the individual in the world and her idea of poetry. The poet lives in such a world and is supposed to do such a work, she must possess certain qualities to fulfill her purpose.

In Dickinson's eyes, the poet is almost omnipotent. Contrary to Plato who wanted to banish the poet from his republic, Dickinson put the world into the poet's mind (J569):

I reckon — when I count at all —
First — Poets — Then the Sun —
Then Summer — Then the Heaven of God —
And then — the List is done —

But, looking back — the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole —
The Others look a needless Show —
So I write — Poets — All —

Not only does the poet's mind contain the world, in a sense, the poet's mind creates the world as well. J1755 demonstrates the poet's switch from dependence on the physical world to the dependence of her own imagination:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,

One clover, and a bee,

And revery.

The revery alone will do,

If bees are few.

Instead of mimicking the shadow of the logos, the poet is capable of creating his own world, thus freeing herself from God's rule. The poet intuitively knows what the world is like or should be:

J1052

I never saw a Moor --

I never saw the Sea --

Yet know I how the Heather looks

And what a Billow be.

I never spoke with God

Nor visited in Heaven --

Yet certain am I of the spot

As if the Checks were given --

This independence of the Creator, be it God or Demiurge, confers autonomy upon the poet who, in turn, confers a certain autonomy upon his poetic works.

Although the poet has autonomy, he is not completely autonomous in the creation of his own poetic works. "When I state myself, as the Representative of

the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person"(L268). The poet is only a *representative* who has obligations to fulfill and who is responsible not only to himself, but also to a higher cause / force. The poet's being instrumental in the cause of poetry is not a modern notion. In the past the poet was believed to be inspired by divine spirits. The etymology of the word "inspiration" bears the witness. But Dickinson would not tie herself with any deity, however liberal or human they seemed to be. The name of "Muses" appears once in her poems and letter respectively and in both cases it is spelled in lowercase. Considering Dickinson's habit of capitalizing words, the lowercased "Muses" should be more intentional than accidental. A contextual analysis should be more convincing than merely a formal and statistical fact. In her first poem J1 written in 1850, Dickinson summons "muses nine" to the service of her teenager romance:

> Awake ye muses nine, sing me a strain divine,
> Unwind the solemn twine, and tie my Valentine!

If the playful tone, which could be considered disrespectful to the deities of arts, could be attributed to the rhetorical situation of the Valentine's Day, then a letter written three years later, on another occasion, would suffice to reveal her serious thoughts.

> And Austin is a Poet, Austin writes a psalm. Out of the way, Pegasus, Olympus enough "to him," and just say to those "nine muses" that we have done with them!
>
> Raised a living muse ourselves, worth the whole nine of them. Up, off, tramp!

> Now Brother Pegasus, I'll tell you what it is—I've been in the habit *myself* of writing some few things, and it rather appears to me that you're getting away my patent, so you'd better be somewhat careful, or I'll call the police! (L110)

In this letter Dickinson declared her intention to be a poet, not a poet who awaits or sue the divine inspiration, but a poet who is the inspiration herself, "a living muse...worth the whole nine of them." By claiming equality to the Muses, Dickinson in fact declares the poet's autonomy, though this autonomy has conflicts within itself:

> J642
>
> Me from Myself — to banish —
>
> Had I Art —
>
> Impregnable my Fortress
>
> Unto All Heart —
>
> But since Myself — assault Me —
>
> How have I peace
>
> Except by subjugating
>
> Consciousness?
>
> And since We're mutual Monarch
>
> How this be
>
> Except by Abdication —

Me — of Me?

I find it difficult to agree with scholars who think that this poem is about the general inner conflict of a person and not particularly about inner conflict of a poet (Duchac 274-78). A careful reading should show that this poem is exactly about the psychology of the poet at work. The key word in the poem is "Art." The word "Art" must mean "the art of poetry," instead of its usual meaning of "a technique or skill of any kind." Otherwise, the following two lines "Impregnable my Fortress / Unto All Heart—" would be left incomprehensible. Besides, if the poem is about the psychology of a non-creative process, with "subjugating / Consciousness," the poem could be reduced to the old saying "The idiot is the happiest," which is a cliché that would not have triggered Dickinson's poetic imagination. Furthermore, since the two psychological forces are of equal power ("We're Monarch"), they should both be able to govern the person in a comprehensible and comparatively consistent manner. But the ordinary unconsciousness, being fragmentary and fitful, is incapable of such a task. Only the unconsciousness bent on an artistic creation can show traces of organizedness or purposefulness. Carl G. Jung's analysis of the creative psychology proves relevant here.

According to Jung, there are apparently two kinds of creative processes. With one kind, the poet is "wholly at one with the creative process, no matter whether he has deliberately made himself its spearhead, as it were, or whether it has made him its instrument so completely that he has lost all consciousness of this fact" (Jung 310); with the other kind, the poet "is not identical with the

process of creation; he is aware that he is subordinate to his work or stands outside it, as though he were a second person; or as though a person other than himself had fallen within the magic circle of an alien will" (Jung 311). In either case, the poet is not quite himself while engaged in the creative process; he is driven by the creative urge. And Jung called it "autonomous complex":

> We would do well, therefore, to think of the creative process as a living thing implanted in the human psyche. In the language of analytical psychology this living thing is an *autonomous complex.* It is a split-off portion of the psyche, which leads a life of its own outside the hierarchy of consciousness. Depending on its energy charge, it may appear either as a mere disturbance of conscious activities or as a supraordinate authority which can harness the ego to its purpose. Accordingly, the poet who identifies with the creative process would be one who acquiesces from the start when the unconscious imperative begins to function. But the other poet, who feels the creative force as something alien, is one who for various reasons cannot acquiesce and is thus caught unawares. (Jung 313)

In Jung's analysis, two things are very obvious. First, in the creative process, the poet falls between the autonomous complex and his normal consciousness that are often in conflict with each other. And the poet must finally, succumb to the autonomous complex, knowingly or unknowingly. Second, the autonomous complex has a purpose to fulfill, even though it is in the terrain of the unconsciousness. In other words, it is not chaotic. The chaos usually associated

with it is caused by the poet's resistance to it. Dickinson's term for it is appropriate. A "monarch" rules with absolute power and has its own way of controlling things. Dickinson once confided in Higginson and here again used the word "monarch," "I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize—my little Force explodes—and leave me bare and charred—" (L271). The "life" mentioned here is definitely not the everyday life; it is the life of a poet, and the force is the creative urge. It's clear enough by now that J642 discusses the psychology of the poet who struggles between his normal consciousness and the creative process.

As for why this autonomous complex is not chaotic, Jung's concepts of the collective unconscious and the archetype provide the answer. The creative process is one in which the archetypes get expressed (Jung 318). And archetypes have definite forms (Jung 60). When the archetypes try to get into tangible and comprehensible forms through the aid of the poet, they shape the forms or pattern of the poetic works.

While Carl Jung talks about creative power in general and adopts a psychological approach that may seem mysterious to many, T. S. Eliot made it more specific about the poet's role in the poetic tradition. Jung traces the poet's creative process back to the antiquity of the collective unconscious, but T. S. Eliot pulls the lens closer up to the somewhat recorded literary history and conscious efforts on the poet's side. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" presents two major ideas. One is that "The progress of an artist is a continual

self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot 40) which is exemplified by the statement that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (43). This idea is almost the same as Jung's and Dickinson's. The other idea is that a poet must have a keen sense of tradition. And unlike Jung's collective unconscious or archetypes, tradition "cannot be inherited"(38). "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artist" (38), because "the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (38). As one of the greatest critics of the early 20th century, Eliot touched upon this structuralistic truth and elaborated upon it with much effort. However, Emily Dickinson presented the same truth in a summary and metaphoric manner in one single sentence and she emphasized what is missing in Eliot's point of view. In a letter to Higginson, Dickinson wrote, "Today, makes Yesterday mean" (L268). Dickinson scholarship has paid little attention to this seemingly homely line, though there was some discussion of how this sentence should be interpreted on the listserv emweb@rotman.utoronto.ca and the opinions were divided. The focus was laid on what Dickinson meant by the word "mean." Some believed that "mean" means "average," so "Today makes Yesterday become average / ordinary / less commendable;" some thought that "mean" means "standard / reference," so "Today makes Yesterday's mean" (achieving the status of Yesterday); yet others took the word "mean" to be a verb, so "Today gives Yesterday meanings"

(emweb@rotman.utoronto.ca Oct 16-17, 2000). Whatever the word "mean" means, one thing is clear: Dickinson believes that the present has a retroactive effect on the past. Both Jung and Eliot dwell on how the past affects the present. The collective unconscious and archetypes from the past provide the poet with motifs and patterns; tradition determines how the poet is evaluated. Without Dickinson's contribution of "Today makes Yesterday mean," neither Jung's theory nor Eliot's is complete. We cannot know about the collective unconscious without the later-day poets' concretizations / particularizations of it. In fact, the abstraction of an archetype is a backward process, going from the present to the past. Without today's effect upon yesterday, Eliot's concepts of "simultaneous existence" and "simultaneous order" will be faulty hypotheses. The proof of the validity of Dickinson's assertion lies in the fact that studies of Dickinson's poetry have changed the way we view the critical theories of the past; we have a better understanding of their applications and how they interact with each other, as marginally evidenced in this and the previous chapters.

So great is the poet, yet Dickinson wrote:

> Nor would I be a Poet —
> It's finer — own the Ear —
> Enamored — impotent — content —
> The License to revere,
> A privilege so awful

What would the Dower be,

Had I the Art to stun myself

With Bolts of Melody!

(J505)

Without the "Ear" / the audience, the "Bolts of Melody" would be a pitiful pantomime. Dickinson was much aware of the significance of the audience and developed a rather complete theory of the audience, which is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Four

The Audience

The overemphasis on and misunderstanding of Dickinson's resignation from society has created the impression that however artistic, her poetry is only for self-expression. Thomas W. Higginson, the preceptor of Dickinson and the initiator of Dickinson study, wrote in his preface to an edition of Dickinson's poems in 1890: "The verses of Emily Dickinson belong emphatically to what Emerson long since called 'the Poetry of the Portfolio'—something produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer's own mind" (26). This gives the false impression that Dickinson did not care about audience. Success by accident is no compliment to a poet. And it is impossible for a poet who writes so voluminously to lack a clear idea of the audience. In fact, as a poet, Emily Dickinson was always conscious of the audience and had a systematic idea of the audience.

Even though Dickinson declared in her letter to the *Atlantic Monthly* editor Thomas W. Higginson that she had no intention of publishing her poems—"I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish'—that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin— " (L265), it is no evidence Dickinson did not desire an audience. To Higginson, a professional editor, "to publish" would naturally mean "to print and present to the contemporary public," and that would be the only way for a poet to reach the audience. But for Dickinson, publication

was not the only way, nor the best way to reach the audience. Her withdrawal from publication doesn't necessarily mean that she didn't want an audience. In fact, Dickinson did want to reach out and share her poetry which she called "Heavenly Grace" with other people, as she made clear in J709:

> Publication – is the Auction
> Of the Mind of Man –
> Poverty – be justifying
> For so foul a thing
>
> Possibly – but We – would rather
> From Our Garret go
> White – Unto the White Creator –
> Than invest – Our Snow –
>
> Thought belong to Him who gave it –
> Then – to Him Who bear
> Its Corporeal illustration – Sell
> The Royal Air –
>
> In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
> Of the Heavenly Grace –
> But reduce no Human Spirit
> To Disgrace of Price –

Dickinson did not grudge sharing her poems with others; she did want to "[b]e the Merchant / Of the Heavenly Grace –", only that reducing the spiritual value "[t]o Disgrace of Price" was beyond her consideration.

Dickinson's intention of presenting her poems to an audience is also manifested in her attempt to finalize her poems. It is a fact that Dickinson revised her poems, and at some point she made fair copies of the poems and then sewed them into fascicles. This means that she attempted to make the poems somewhat final. When Thomas Higginson called Dickinson's poetry "the Poetry of the Portfolio," he got only half of the picture which was that Dickinson's poetry came from her limited personal life. Thomas Niles, a publisher who got into contact with Dickinson of late years, got the other half of the picture. He wrote to Dickinson: "If I may presume to say so, I will take instead a M. S. collection of your poems, that is, if you want to give them to the world through the medium of a publisher" (L813b). What's important here is that the publisher called Dickinson's poems a manuscript *collection*. That is, he viewed her poems as an alternative way of publishing. He clearly indicated that there would be other ways of giving her poems to the world than "through the medium of a publisher". Those fascicles might be her own way to present her poems, her own way to "publish." Melanie Hubbard argues that Dickinson has her own way of presenting her poems by utilizing the paper she composed on. Dickinson used to compose poems on used papers—shopping bags, wrapping papers, and advertisement leaflets, and her poems fit well into the contexts formed by the printed information (27-54). Why Dickinson chose to present her poems in this manner can be

discussed later; what concerns us here is that she made conscious attempts to *present* her poems. The act of presenting is the acknowledgment of the audience.

Barbara Antonina Clarke Mossberg in her 1984 essay "'Everyone Else is Prose': Emily Dickinson's Lack of Community Spirit" analyzes Dickinson's seeming arrogance into a conscious strategy to attract attention:

> She [Dickinson] may have retained her self-image as an isolated "Kangaroo" as an aesthetic strategy, to keep herself hungry and alienated enough to write poetry. For words come out of her need to belong, to commune, to reconcile and to alleviate her sense of separation...she needs a community, but she cannot let herself have one; she must be mother and community to herself...To her own community is ... to sustain the *need* to communicate and break the barrier of her self-imposed isolation" (235).

From the means we can see the ends. For a poet, the community is the audience, the others than herself. If Dickinson devised a strategy to cope with the audience, she must have been conscious of the existence of the audience, and her audience was not always remote or incorporeal if we bear in mind that she frequently sent her poems to friends and relatives.

Even without this kind of biographical speculation, we can still prove that Dickinson had a strong sense of audience. Her letters and poems, if read correctly, provide sufficient evidence that she has always had her audience in

mind and her idea of audience is much developed. In J441, Dickinson compares her poem to a letter:

> This is my letter to the World
>
> That never wrote to Me –
>
> The simple News that Nature told –
>
> With tender Majesty
>
> Her Message is committed
>
> To Hands I cannot see –
>
> For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen –
>
> Judge tenderly – of Me

A letter needs a reader / audience. Even though Dickinson knows that her chance of finding the audience is scarce in her lifetime or she did not choose seek it out in the conventional ways, she is sure that she will be judged by the audience, thus the plea of "Judge tenderly – of Me." To Dickinson, the audience is not always remote or posthumous. In J494, Dickinson has a definite audience in her mind: "Going to Him! Happy Letter! / Tell Him —" J494 has two versions, which means that Dickinson revised the poem. But what remained unchanged is the definiteness of the audience. The other version begins: "Going — to — her! / Happy — Letter! Tell Her —" Whether the audience is "Him" or "Her," the audience is clearly defined, since a pronoun (a signifier) indicates intimate knowledge of the signified.

The conclusion drawn from her poems that Dickinson has a strong sense of audience is consolidated by her practice of including her poems in letters sent to relatives and friends. Not only did Dickinson include poems in her letters, but sometimes the whole letter was a poem, for example, L305 to Susan is the first stanza of the poem J809. The whole letter reads:

Dear Sue—

Unable are the Loved—to die—
For Love is immortality—
Nay—it is Deity—

Emily.

This letter is very appropriate for the rhetorical situation, for Susan just lost her sister to death and needed consolation (Johnson, 186). Dickinson not only chose the poem to present to the particular audience, but also to present it at a particular time. For Dickinson, letters are poetic and poems are epistolary:

> Indeed, early in the 1860's, when Emily Dickinson seems to have first gained assurance of her destiny as a poet, the letters both in style and rhythm begin to take on qualities that are so nearly the quality of her poems as on occasion to leave the reader in doubt where the letter leaves off and the poem begins." (Johnson. Intro. ix)

Only when she became confident as a poet did the boundary between her letters and poems begin to merge. It is not only that she brought poetic qualities into her

letters; she also brought epistolary functions into her poems. Dickinson confirmed this in a letter to Samuel Bowels: "Because I could not say it—I fixed it in the Verse—for you to read" (L251). If Dickinson considers her poems as letters, as in J441, the audience is an indispensable part of her poetic enterprise. This is true if we look at how Dickinson defines poetry. According to Higginson, Dickinson once said: "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way [Sic]" (L342a). She defines poetry in terms of the audience. Not only did Emily Dickinson have a strong sense of the audience, her idea of audience is a systematic construct.

Audience as Mirrors to Correct One's Poetic Art

Dickinson refrained from publishing, but when Higginson published his "Letter to a Young Contributor" in the famous *Atlantic Monthly*, she seized the opportunity and wrote to him discussing her poems (she enclosed four of her poems in the letter) (Johnson 172). This discrepancy between her attitude and practice asks for explanation.

Though Dickinson was reluctant to publish, she did want to improve her art. In her first letter to Higginson, she wrote:

> Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?
>
> The Mind is so near itself—it cannot see, distinctly—and I have none to ask—(L260)

It should be noticed that Dickinson did not ask whether her poems were good enough for publication; instead, she asked if they were "alive." That is, whether her verse appeared alive in the eyes of other people, other than herself. She could not know that because she was too close to her poetic creations to examine them objectively, so she decided to use Higginson as a mirror to examine her poems. Dickinson had never known Higginson before; therefore, Higginson registered in Dickinson's mind not emotionally, but symbolically. As the editor of a literary magazine, Higginson would naturally represent the potential audience of her poems. If Dickinson considered herself "the Representative of the Verse" (L268), it would not be far-fetched to infer that she considered Higginson or anyone in that position the representative of the audience. Dickinson needed the audience to judge and correct her poems, as she made it clear in L265: "You think me 'uncontrolled'—I have no Tribunal." She attributed her being "uncontrolled" to having no judges or guidance. In many of her letters to Higginson, Dickinson asked for truths about her poems and asked Higginson to help her improve. For example, in L271 she wrote:

> Are these more orderly? I thank you for the Truth—
>
> ...
>
> I think you called me "Wayward." Will you help me improve?

And she was willing to hear the truths: "Men do not call the surgeon, to commend—the Bone, but to set it, Sir, and fracture within, is more critical. And for this, Preceptor, I shall bring you—Obedience—the Blossom from my Garden,

and every gratitude I know" (L268). And despite the "painful surgery" she continued sending him more of her poems (L261).

It's in the correspondence with Susan Gilbert Dickinson that we have more definite evidence that Dickinson revised her poems based on the audience's response. Dickinson sent Susan her poem J216, but Susan was not satisfied with the second stanza. Dickinson rewrote it and sent it again. When Susan was still not pleased with the effect, Dickinson wrote a new stanza. Apart from the emotional ties between them, Dickinson took pains to revise because "[y]our praise is good—to me—because I *know* it *knows*—and *suppose*—it *means*— " (L238). Dickinson took the audience's response seriously because she believed that it would help improve her art.

Scholars who argue that Susan co-authored this poem may have gone a bit too far, yet it's obvious that Dickinson did try to involve her audience in the creation or completion of her poems.

Audience as Co-author

It is rare in the history of pure literature that a poet or a novelist collaborates in person with another. Ernest Hemingway even claimed that "[w]riting, at its best, is a lonely life... For he does his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day" (Baker 528-29). But the poet-audience collaboration can be on a higher level. If we consider a fair copy or a printed version of a poem as the end of the poem's composition, then Dickinson did not involved the audience much in the process. However, a

poem is not a poem until it is read by the audience, for only when it is read and understood does a poem exist for the audience, and to understand a poem, the audience has to negotiate meanings out of it (Shetley 4-6). It is universally true that every writer involves the audience in this sense. But Dickinson is more conscious and tactful in this kind of post-compositional involvement. In J494, Dickinson writes:

> Going to Him! Happy letter!
>
> Tell Him—
>
> Tell Him the page I didn't write—
>
> Tell Him—I only said the Syntax—
>
> And left the Verb and the pronoun out—

So what she presents is an incomplete work in the traditional sense. To understand the message sent, the audience has to fill in what she has left out. In this way, Dickinson involves her audience in the writing of her poetry. A reader of Dickinson's poetry always feels the need to straighten out her syntax. This reading practice serves as powerful evidence that Dickinson designs a position in her poetry for the audience.

Dickinson understood that a finished poem is to be changed once it meets the eye of the audience. She declared this belief in J1071:

> Perception of an object costs
>
> Precise the Object's loss —
>
> Perception in itself a Gain
>
> Replying to its Price —

The Object Absolute — is nought —

Perception sets it fair

And then upbraids a Perfectness

That situates so far —

A poet cannot claim a poem to be completely hers. When the reader reads it, the poem is changed and is different from its finished form ("Perception of an object costs / Precise the Object's loss—"). The so-called "complete autonomy of the work" simply doesn't exist ("The Object Absolute — is nought —") because the reader is to intervene and to make it complete ("upbraids a Perfectness").

The audience changes the poem by interpreting it in a way other than the poet intends, or one may say that the meaning of a poem depends on the audience's interpretation:

...

The Fashion of the Ear

Attireth that it hear

In Dun, or fair —

So whether it be Rune,

Or whether it be none

Is of within.

The "Tune is in the Tree —"

The Skeptic — showeth me —

"No Sir! In Thee!" (J526)

This poem explains the inevitability of a poem being changed by the audience. The audience ("the Ear") gives meaning to the "tune," whether it is "dun" or "fair." Whether the poem "neutral" is possible is out of the question; the appreciation or perception of the poem is always subjective. The meaning of the poem is not in the poem ("in the Tree"); it is in the audience ("in Thee"). Therefore, the involvement of the audience in the poetic creation is not an option, but a must. And by interpreting, the audience collaborate with the poet in bringing out the meaning of the poem.

Audience Manipulation—aesthetic issues

Even though Dickinson was willing to involve the audience in her poetic creation, she knew that the poet should take the leading role. After all, what the reader reads is what the poet writes. The poet has the means to manipulate the reader, and to ensure her intended effect, the poet has the need to manipulate the reader. Sometimes the poet can be quite aggressive. In L1042 Dickinson wrote: "Audacity of Bliss, said Jacob to the Angel 'I will not let thee go except I bless thee'— Pugilist and Poet, Jacob was correct— ." Dickinson did not use this biblical reference because it was handy; she changed the whole story to express her idea. In the Bible, Jacob asked to *be blessed* (Johnson 330). But in Dickinson's version, Jacob, the pugilist and the poet in one, struggles to *offer*

blessings. The poet must effect something in the reader. (in J59, it is Jacob who persisted to be blessed, but then he was stronger than the angel with whom he wrestled a long time.)

Dickinson found some ways to carry out her plans of manipulating the audience. The most important way is to withhold from the audience, because

> ...Spices fly
>
> In the Receipt—it was the Distance—
>
> Was Savory— (J439)

This idea of giving by not giving is deeply rooted in Dickinson's philosophy. In many of her poems she talks about this metaphysical approach. The first stanza of J67 reads:

> Success is counted sweetest
>
> By those who ne'er succeed.
>
> To comprehend a nectar
>
> Requires sorest need.

It does not matter much whether Dickinson intended "nectar" to mean the beauty of a poetic work. What is shown here is her insight into human psychology. And such a metaphysical spark is not accidental in Dickinson. Each of the six lines of J135 is a paradoxical statement on how the human mind works.

> Water, is taught by thirst.
>
> Land -- by the Oceans passed.
>
> Transport -- by throe --
>
> Peace -- by its battles told --

Love, by Memorial Mold --

Birds, by the Snow.

Based on this understanding of the human nature, Dickinson's poetics would naturally have a position for audience manipulation. Of course there are many ways to control the readers' mind. The syntax (J494) is only one of them. Sometimes, she found that to play hide-and-seek was a good idea:

Good to hide, and hear 'em hunt!

Better, to be found,

If one care to, that is,

The Fox fits the Hound—

Good to know, and not tell,

Best, to know and tell,

Can one find the rare Ear

Not too dull --(J842)

The hide-and-seek approach can be viewed as an outgrowth out of the "withholding" strategy, but it is more manipulative in that the poet chooses what to withhold and what to present and how to present.

Ambiguity is another way to manipulate the audience. In fact, ambiguity is one of the characteristics of poetry. Dickinson declares in J657:

I dwell in Possibility—

A fairer House than Prose—

More numerous of Windows—

Superior—for Doors—

In Dickinson's terminology, prose is the opposite of poetry. In J613 Dickinson talks about her childhood experience when the adults shut her "in Prose" because "they like me 'still.'"

They shut me up in Prose --

As when a little Girl

They put me in the Closet --

Because they liked me "still" --

"Prose" is defined as "still," which means "steady" or "definite" or "unchanging." In J657 the "house" fairer than prose is definitely poetry. And in the poem she equates "possibility" with "poetry" that is open to interpretation. By creating ambiguities in her poems, Dickinson takes control of the audience's reading process because the audience has to decipher her language and arrive at a definite meaning or if he / she chooses, to be content with the ambiguity.

The medium of poetry is conventionally ink and paper. Dickinson did not only use her ink (words) to control her audience, she also made a fuller use of her paper. By this, Dickinson drastically changed the audience's reading process. Hubbard did a pioneering research on the materiality of Dickinson's poems. As Dickinson composed on the scrap papers (brown wrapping paper, pharmacy paper, snippets of stationery), she incorporated the materiality of the papers and their existent texts. Her poems thus composed should be viewed as

contextualized compositions and read as interacting processes. This would surely change the conventional idea and practice of reading:

> When her compositional practices move from the use of variants which produce the impossibility of objectifying the poem to the even more complex situations with already textualized media such as newspaper clippings and advertisements, they produce a reading experience which dissolves altogether the notion of the poem as an object. Paradoxically, as Dickinson's practices investigate thought's inevitable materiality, what the reader derives is more and more relational and imaginary. The poem takes places as a set of relationships formed with and by the reader. (Hubbard 28)

If Dickinson intends her poem as "a set of relationships" to be formed and modified as the reader reads along, then, reading of her poem would be an on-going process. In fact, any reading is a process. What is special is that Dickinson used the unusual means (in this case, the materiality of the medium to which she committed her poems) to influence her audience. That is, Dickinson made extra efforts to take control of her audience.

Dickinson did not always go beyond the conventions to influence her audience. She employed less radical methods, too. For instance, she invented sparse or twisted syntax and used equivocal diction to trigger the audience's mind. Cristanne Miller's *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* is a comprehensive

study of Dickinson's poetic language. And I would refer interested readers to her work, rather than reiterate here what she has ably articulated.

As discussed above, Dickinson's idea of the audience is logical and systematic. She first establishes her poetry as audience-centered. Her poems are to give the audience powerful feelings and they are a means to interact with the audience. Whatever she does with her poems is to ensure and control this kind of interactive relationship. Her poetic purpose being such, it is logical that she views the audience first as a mirror to test her poetic effect and modifies her work based on the audience feedback. To involve the audience not only emotionally but also intellectually is the best way to interact with them. Dickinson so devises her poems as to invite or even force the audience into a poetic collaboration with her. She does not only employ conventional methods (syntax and diction), but also resort to some unconventional or even radical means (fascicles and materiality of the paper). Both in theory and practice, Dickinson creates her poetry around and for her audience.

Though Dickinson's poetics is audience-centered, audience is only one part of it. A sufficient understanding of her poetics must include the logical relationships among the different components—her ideas of the world, the poet, poetry and audience. It's desirable and would be more convincing if we can formulate an overview of Dickinson's poetics in her own words, without violating the contextuality of the original words.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dickinson's Poetics

As discussed in the previous chapters, Dickinson's poetics is in fact a forerunner to many of the modern critical theories. Historically, this might be purely a coincidence. Emily Dickinson happened to have touched upon some of the theories that happened to be originated and popular in our times. But it is not coincidental that Dickinson could ever host these ideas in her single mind, because her poetics has an intrinsic logical order. The logic that links her modern poetic ideas is in fact a commonsensical one that is accessible even to beginners of literary studies.

It is up to the biographers to find out why Dickinson shunned religion and how far she went. But the simple fact that Dickinson stayed away from religion serves as a starting point to the tour of her poetic landscape. Dickinson's turning away from religion is a manifestation of her independent thinking. She refused to look at the world through the framework of the established religion; instead, she preferred to look at the world in her own way. This means a personalized interpretation of the world and a high degree of subjectivity. In the religion-dominated society of the 19th century, such inclination toward spiritual freedom was definitely rebellious, but Dickinson managed to be docile as a daughter while remaining an incorrigible pupil of the poetic art. Her vanguard position was not in social reform but in literary emancipation where her independent thinking and personalized interpretation of the world brought her to literary modernism.

Subjectivity and personalized interpretation is the hallmark of modern philosophy and this subjectivity and personalized interpretation marked Dickinson's departure from the literary conventions:

1. Dickinson defined poetry in her own way as the effect on the audience.
2. Interpretation of the poetic work is largely in the hands of the audience.
3. Language is used to create the desired effect (not necessarily tension and ambiguity), and to that goal, the poet should use language creatively, often breaking the rules.

To stay away from convention, or to establish herself outside convention, Dickinson must draw attention to her poems, instead of her life, because a poet could easily got placed in a stereotype once her poetry is viewed in terms of her life, especially when she is socially overactive or the opposite. To divert attention from her life to her poem, Dickinson withdrew from the active social life. The exclusive attention to her poems she so desired is characteristic of New Criticism.

With the notions of the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy, New Criticism is rather an attitude than a practical approach. At this point, structuralism is introduced to uncover the meanings or more meanings in the poem. Structuralism examines the relations between the parts and the whole. And the parts-whole relation exists both in a single individual work and in a genre or a tradition. This relation can be local or global, synchronic and diachronic, because "Today, makes Yesterday mean" (L268).

As an expansion of New Criticism, structuralism is still largely focused on the texts, still maintaining that meaning comes from within the text and / or related texts. Reader Response Theory is a breakthrough because it includes the audience as one of the sources of meaning. In fact, it contends that meaning comes from the interaction between the audience and the text. Reader Response Theory necessitates the manipulation of the audience, providing a purpose to the various literary techniques. Dickinson went to extremes sometimes in devising her techniques, but she kept focused on the purpose of affecting the audience of which she had a systematic idea.

Reconstructed in her own words, with the implications spelled out and connections made, Dickinson's poetics would read like this, starting with her departure from orthodox religion:

> Some keep the Sabbath going to Church --
>
> I keep it, staying at Home --
>
> With a Bobolink for a Chorister --
>
> And an Orchard, for a Dome --
>
> (J324)

I have little use for the established religion, since I have built my own out of Nature. If you look at the world in a different way, for example, viewing a Bobolink as a Chorister, you will have your own religion, a totally new way of

looking at the world. But I am no romanticist who copies and depends on Nature and does nothing more. I think:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,

One clover, and a bee,

And revery.

The revery alone will do,

If bees are few.

(J1755)

You can change Nature, depending on how you approach it, and you can get rid of it, too, if you wish. After all, ""Nature" is what we see —" (J668). What really counts is Subjectivity. The Subjectivity, which others call Brain, is the whole Universe:

The Brain -- is wider than the Sky --

For -- put them side by side --

The one the other will contain

With ease -- and You -- beside --

(J632)

The Poet has the Brain and he is the world: "So I write — Poets — All —" (J569).

The Poet, great as he is, should not brag about himself—

How dreary -- to be -- Somebody!

How public -- like a Frog --

To tell one's name -- the livelong June --

To an admiring Bog!

(J288)

To tell your name is no good. Don't present yourself, present your poems. Poems can speak for themselves. "Nature is a Haunted House—but Art—a House that tries to be haunted" (L459a) and that house must stand by itself.

The Props assist the House

Until the House is built

...

then the Scaffolds drop

Affirming it a Soul.

(J1142)

Put your Soul into your poetry, not your life. Poetry will bring it to Immortality:

The Province of the Saved

Should be the Art -- To save --

Through Skill obtained in Themselves --

(J539)

As for fame, I don't worry about it:

Fame of Myself, to justify,

All other Plaudit be

Superfluous -- An Incense

Beyond Necessity --

Fame of Myself to lack -- Although

My Name be else Supreme --

This were an Honor honorless --

A futile Diadem --

(J713)

To publish for fame, I think, "is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man... " so "reduce no Human Spirit / To Disgrace of Price —"(J709).

Ah, Poetry! What is Poetry? "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way" (L342a). I am the reader and I say what Poetry is. Poetry is what you experience, the effect that piece of writing has on you. You see, I am back on Subjectivity again. My term

for Poetry may be too broad, but Poetry is "A fairer House than Prose —" (J657) and I prefer to "dwell in Possibility" (J657). A Poem should allow many readings, and that's how "eloquent appears" "Though Generations pass away, Traditions ripen and decay" (J1467). You see, my definition of Poetry frees it from Tradition and Convention. Poetry lives while Audience lives.

Audience is so important to Poetry. Audience, they make Poetry, somehow:

The Fashion of the Ear

Attireth that it hear

In Dun, or fair —

So whether it be Rune,

Or whether it be none

Is of within.

(J526)

Sometimes I wish I were the Audience:

Nor would I be a Poet —

It's finer — own the Ear —

Enamored — impotent — content —

The License to revere,

A privilege so awful

What would the Dower be,

Had I the Art to stun myself

With Bolts of Melody!

(J505)

Practically, the Poet needs the Audience to help with the writing, or should I say, a Select Audience? The Poet needs to test his work on the Select Audience. That's why I sent my poems out to Mr. Higginson and asked for his opinions, though I did not always follow them. After all, the Poet should take full responsibility. We, the Poets, are "Raised a living muse ourselves, worth the whole nine of them" (L110).

Well, on second thought, the Poet may not have a full control of his work. Sometimes I feel that "I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize—my little Force explodes—and leave me bare and charred—" (L271). You may say I am not quite myself when I write poetry:

Me from Myself — to banish —

Had I Art —

Impregnable my Fortress

Unto All Heart —

But since Myself — assault Me —

How have I peace

Except by subjugating

Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch

How this be

Except by Abdication —

Me — of Me?

(J642)

There seems to be another Monarch inside me that tries to take over control. To have peace of Mind, I have to give in to it and follow its directions. "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person"(L268).

When I say the Verse, I mean Poetry, of all times and ages. Poetry has a life of its own. In my first letter to Mr. Higginson, I asked him "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" (L260). Poetry lives longer than the Poet, and I intend to commit my Poetry "To Hands I cannot see —" (J441). The Poet can live only forward, but his Poetry can live backward, too. How wonderful.

"Today, makes Yesterday mean" (L268). The Art of the Saved extends both ways.

"Amazing Human Heart—a syllable can make to quake like jostled Tree—" (L715). Of course, not all syllables and all words are capable of such a feat. "The broadest words are so narrow we can easily cross them—but there is water deeper than those which has no Bridge" (L413). You must finds "words like Blades," "And every One unbared a Nerve / Or wantoned with a Bone —" (J479). There are other tricks, too. "I only said the Syntax —" (J494). Let the audience guess the rest—

Good to hide, and hear 'em hunt!
Better, to be found,
If one care to, that is,
The Fox fits the Hound —

Good to know, and not tell,
Best, to know and tell,
Can one find the rare Ear
Not too dull —

(J842)

And "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant — Success in Circuit lies" (J1129). One more thing about language. Be Frugal with your words. "I hesitate which word to take, as I can take but few and each must be the chiefest, but recall that Earth's most graphic transaction is placed within a syllable, nay, even a gaze — " (L873). "I fear a Man of frugal Speech — / ... / I fear that He is Grand —" (J543). There are many ways to be frugal with words. To experiment on syntax is only one of them. One way to combine Circumference and Frugality of Words is to paint Pictures in Words. "Of Pictures, the Discloser — / The Poet — it is He —" (J448), Yet, "I would not paint — a picture — / I'd rather be the One" (J505). You should know that "Beauty — be not caused — It Is —" (J516). If you want to show Beauty in your poem, your poem should better be Beauty itself.

"I died for Beauty — but was scarce" (J449).

It should be clear that Emily Dickinson was a conscious poet with a project. She not only carried out some critical principles in her poetry, she made comments and statements about the principles, and her comments and statements are interrelated and form a systematic idea of the poetic art. Dickinson has a poetics that heralds many of the modern critical theories, though she did not use the exact terms.

Having analyzed Dickinson's poems and letters and reconstructed her poetics, I would like to conclude this thesis with Dickinson's poem J861, which I think best summarizes my belief in her critical status and my critical approach to her poetics:

Split the Lark — and you'll find the Music —
Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled —
Scantily dealt to the Summer Morning
Saved for your Ear when Lutes be old.

Loose the Flood — you shall find it patent —
Gush after Gush, reserved for you —
Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!
Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true?

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