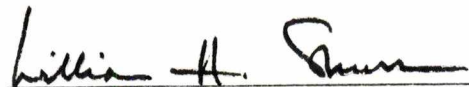


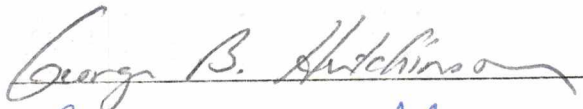
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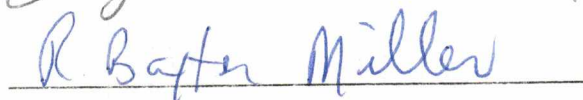
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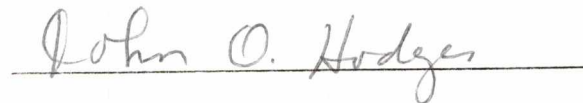


W. H. Shurr, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:







Accepted for the Council:



Vice Provost
and Dean of The Graduate School

EMILY DICKINSON AND CONFESSIONAL POETRY

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Nabil M. Alawi

August 1990

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to introduce Emily Dickinson as a precursor of the post World War II generation of confessional poets, and to offer a reading of her poems on the basis of her personal experiences and on the basis of a unique presentation of the self in her art.

Emily Dickinson was the promoter of an American tradition of the poetry of the self which was interrupted by the objective trend in literature that culminated in the works of T.S. Eliot and the imagists of the post World War I generation who maintained, in Eliot's words, that "the more perfect the artist, the more separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates, the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmit the passions which are its material."¹ Confessional poets saw no such separation. For them the man who suffers is the one who creates.

By breaking away from the earlier tradition of personal poetry with all its Puritan manifestations, and by introducing new innovations in form and content, Emily Dickinson provided a background for the post-imagist poets of the 1960's. Her importance derives from three aspects of her poetry. First, her representation of a tragic, rebellious, independent and profound self which finds therapy in writing poetry. Second, her feminist tendencies

¹T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) 65.

which are typical of modern poets who associate feminism with confessionalism. Third, her treatment of twentieth century themes popular among confessional poets, such as alienation, loneliness, suicide, death, personal failure and mental breakdown.

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INTRODUCTION

Dickinson's life in a small New England town (Amherst, Massachusetts), with its strong Puritan roots, made her poetry less bold and more reticent than that of twentieth century confessional poets. However, Dickinson is seldom deterred by social restrictions. To avoid any scolding by the public, she used heavy symbolism and declined all invitations for publication. In her poetry one finds what John Cody calls, in his After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson, "an inner conflict involving the poet's need to conceal herself and unconscious impulse to expose that which is prohibited to view."¹ Had Dickinson been free from the restrictions imposed on her by her post-Puritan culture, she would have written more openly. As it happened, publication of her poems in the 1890's would offer example and stimulus to a later generation.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first chapter presents a definition of confessional poetry. My point of departure is two prominent works in the field of confessional poetry, namely, M.L. Rosenthal's The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II (1967), and Robert Phillips' The Confessional Poets (1973). The studies provided by both Rosenthal and Phillips about confessional

¹John Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971) 424.

poetry are mainly thematic with little reference to form, perhaps because confessional poets don't agree on matters of form. Rather than defining confessional poetry, Phillips lists its characteristics, deriving them from confessional poetry since 1959. Among the characteristics he lists are: subjectivity and the expression of personality, purgation of emotion, treatment of themes like alienation of the poet, moral courage, personal failure, madness, death, suicide, etc. Some of the characteristics presented by Phillips are redundant and not necessarily exclusive characteristics of confessional poetry.

Confessional poetry, I believe, is basically autobiographical. Whereas it reacted against the imagists' objective treatment of their material, by presenting personal pain and defeat, it incorporated the same sense of loss and alienation shared by many imagists. Confessional poets deplored the treatment of impersonal subjects in favor of a gloomy romantic treatment of the self. They shared with the Romantics the spontaneity of composition; confessional poetry springs from a deprived self in need of therapy, and confessional poets emphasized the therapeutic function of their poetry since it expresses the self nakedly without restraint. Confessional poetry is, as Rosenthal and Phillips point out, personal, subjective, traumatic, and alienated, but more important is that it is systematically so.

Chapter I also alludes to different confessional works of the great writers of the Western tradition. By dealing with such works as St. Augustine's and Rousseau's Confessions, I am presenting a contrast with the liberal treatment of the self that Dickinson's poetry offers. Such contrast shows how Dickinson diverged from the ancient traditional mood of confessions.

Chapter II offers a presentation of the treatment of the self in American Literature and deals with two distinguishing influences on the American experience of self expression: the frontier life and the Puritan experience.

This chapter also alludes briefly to the treatment of the self in the works of the literary giants of the American Renaissance: Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman. It also attempts to show Dickinson's contributions to the American development of self-expression. One of Dickinson's contributions to the twentieth century confessional poets stems from her intense and direct treatment of the self. Dickinson broke away from other earlier traditions through her secular representation of the self and through her attention to both its spiritual and corporeal sides.

Chapter III shows how Dickinson's private life is symbolically portrayed in her poetry. This chapter's focus is the transparency of Dickinson's secret relationship with Reverend Charles Wadsworth. Much of what we know through the biographical material available to us refers to a major

important event in Dickinson's life which occurred during the year 1862. This event is apparently related to a love relationship, the nature of which remains a mystery. During that year (1862), Dickinson's production of poetry accelerated and her need for a private audience became greatest. Her urgent need for an audience coincided with Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor" in the Atlantic Monthly, April 1862, urging young writers to "charge [their] style with life." Dickinson's reply to Higginson's letter became a major literary event in the history of Dickinson's work. In that letter, Dickinson included four poems: "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers" (two versions being available to us, of 1859 and 1861), "I'll Tell You How the Sun Rose" (1861), "The Nearest Dream Recedes -- Unrealized" (1861) and "We Play at Paste" (1862). The numbers given to these poems by Johnson are: 216, 318, 319, and 320 respectively.

Separation is the major theme that dominates the four poems: separation by death is treated in poem #216 and separation through the inaccessibility of the lover is treated in the other three poems. In treating separation through the inaccessibility of the lover, Dickinson uses three of her favorite symbols: the sun, the bee, and the pearl. The lover is difficult to catch "Like the June Bee -- before the school boy," and he disappears like a pearl in the sand or like the setting sun.

Dickinson's second letter to Higginson ten days later carried further reference to an important event in her life, "I had a terror -- since September --," she wrote, "I could tell to none -- and I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground -- because I am afraid." No matter what the cause of her terror was, Dickinson rose to sing out of suffering. In one poem that same year (1862), she wrote "We -- tell a Hurt -- to cool it --" emphasizing the therapeutic function of writing poetry.

Dickinson's portrayal of her love can be found in almost all her work. Taken as a whole, her poems are seen by many critics as a narrative unified by Dickinson's personal image which begins with childhood, matures into adulthood and retreats into complete withdrawal. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar noticed that:

Dickinson's Life itself . . . became a kind of novel or narrative poem in which . . . this inventive poet enacted and eventually resolved both her anxieties about her art and her anger . . . Indeed, understood as an elaborate set of dramatic monologues, her poems constitute the "dialogue" in an extended fiction whose subject is the life of that . . . person who was called Emily Dickinson.²

Chapter IV treats Dickinson as a woman poet. Dickinson was the first American who thought of herself as a woman poet. By experimenting honestly with the concept of the

²Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 583.

female self and by transcending her conventional role as a woman, Dickinson became a foremother for confessional and feminist literature of the twentieth century.

Dickinson's relationship with women of her time has been the concern of many feminists. Dickinson's relationships with Kate Anthon and Susan Gilbert were the most prominent. Dickinson, through her relationship with these women, treats a twentieth century theme: female bonding, woman's love of a woman.

The last two chapters of this dissertation present a comparison between Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. Chapter five suggests a biographical similarity, and chapter six presents a thematic analogy. Sylvia Plath is one of the most important confessional poets of the 1960's. By comparing her work with Dickinson's I am suggesting a degree of influence that Dickinson's poems had on Plath's generation of confessional poets.

Both Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson began a personal poetic career with a stage of alienation which led them to suicidal depression and mental breakdown. Their poems reflect with much authenticity and deliberation a self caught in the abyss of loneliness and alienation and prompted to rebellion. Both writers made of their lives a symbolic protest against their societies. While Plath made her suicide an ultimate symbol of protest, Dickinson turned to complete withdrawal. Dickinson's withdrawal has been

viewed by many critics as a protest against that same society which kept her outside its limits. She was alienated from herself, her home and her society. She never left home, yet she never felt at home. Her alienation is portrayed in one of her poems where she constructs an image of a house and a door she was never able to enter.

I Years had been from Home
And now before the Door
I dared not enter, lest a Face
I never saw before

Stare stolid into mine
And ask my Business there --
"My Business" but a Life I left
Was such remaining there?

I leaned upon the Awe --
I lingered with before --
The Second like and Ocean rolled
And broke again my ear --

I laughed a crumbling laugh
That I could fear a Door
Who Consternation compassed
And never winced before.

I fitted to the Latch
My Hand, with trembling care
Lest back the awful Door should spring
And leave me in the Floor --

Then moved my Fingers off
As cautiously as Glass
And held my ears, and like a Thief
Fled gasping from the House. (609)³

"Hardcastle Crags" is a poem written by Plath while she was living in England. The poem presents a theme similar to

³All quotations from Dickinson's poems are from: Thomas Johnson, ed., The Poems of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1951.) Henceforth, poems by Emily Dickinson are cited according to Johnson's numbering.

that in Dickinson's "I Years had been from Home."

"Hardcastle Crag" describes a woman's attempt to break out of a confined space. Similar to Dickinson's house-door image, Plath constructs an image of a town in relation to the outside world. The woman in Plath's poem attempts to reach out to the outside world, but it threatens to break her down to mere "quartz grit." Dickinson's Door, on the other hand, is set like a trap for her and she fears "Lest back the awful Door should spring / And leave [her] in the Floor." Both women are struck by the immobility and indifference of the rock-like outside world. Through a series of contrasting images and sound effects, the two poems establish the picture of the outside world. The rolling ocean, the crumbling laugh and the fitted latch in Dickinson's poem, contrast with the "firework of echoes from Wall to Wall," the moving sea and the "Flintlike" feet in Plath's poem. The two poems end with retreat before an impending threat. Dickinson fled "Like a Thief . . . gasping from the House," and the woman in Plath's poem turned back "just before the weight of stones and hills of stones could break / Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light."

Flintlike, her Feet struck
 Such a racket of echoes from the steely street,
 Tacking in moon-blued crooks from the black
 Stone-built town, that she heard the quick air
 ignite
 Its tinder and shake

A firework of echoes from wall
 To wall of the dark, dwarfed cottages.
 But the echoes died at her back as the walls
 Gave way to fields and the incessant seethe of
 grasses
 Riding in the full

Of the moon, manes to the wind,
 Tireless, tied, as a moon-bound sea
 Moves on its root. Though a mist-wraith wound
 Up from the fissured valley and hung shoulder-high
 Ahead, it fattened.

To no family-featured ghost,
 Nor did any word body with a name
 The blank mood she walked in. Once past
 The dream-peopled village, her eyes entertained no
 dream,
 And the sandman's dust

Lost lustre under her footsoles.
 The long wind, paring her person down
 To a pinch of flame, blew its burdened whistle
 In the whorl of her ear, and like a scooped-out
 pumpkin crown
 Her head cupped the babel.

All the night gave her, in return
 for the paltry gift of her bulk and the beat
 of her heart, was the humped indifferent iron
 Of its hills, and its pastures bordered by black
 stone set
 On black stone. Barns

Guarded broods, and litters
 Behind shut doors, the dairy herds
 Knelt in the meadow mute as boulders
 Sheep drowsed stoneward in their tussocks of wool,
 and birds
 Twig-sleeping, wore

Granite ruffs, their shadows
 The guise of leaves. The whole landscape
 loomed absolute as the antique world was
 Once, in its earliest sway of lymph and sap,
 Unaltered by eyes,

Enough to snuff the quick
 Of her small head out, but before the weight
 Of stones and hills of stones could break

Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light
She turned back.'

The gasping image in Dickinson's poems is portrayed in Plath's breath-taking run-on lines.

The thematic similarities between Plath's and Dickinson's works are confessionally existential. Their point of departure is the alienated self which matures in a stage of fortitude and degrades into personal failure.

'Sylvia Plath, The Collected Poems, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper and Row, 1981) 62.

CHAPTER I

CONFESSIONAL POETRY: A DEFINITION

Confessional poetry as we know it today is different from previous poetry of the private self. Confessional poets of the twentieth century such as Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg and others have made certain contributions to the poetry of the self which confirmed confessional poetry as a movement in the history of modern American poetry. Their contributions, I believe, were anticipated a century earlier in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. In this chapter, I will provide a definition of confessional poetry and then trace some of the influences on it and some of the manifestations of the confessional impulse in the literary history of Western literature. These manifestations were more prevalent in American literature than they were in British literature for reasons I will discuss in the second chapter.

With the publication of Robert Lowell's Life Studies and Snodgrass' Heart's Needle in 1959, the confessional mode in American poetry came of age. The 1960's witnessed the height of the popularity of confessional poetry. Several of the poets that we term confessional wrote their major works in the 1960's. John Berryman's Sonnets appeared in 1967, Lowell's For the Union Dead in 1964, Sylvia Plath's The

Colossus in 1960, and Ariel in 1966, and Anne Sexton's To Bedlam and Part Way Back in 1960.

Lowell's Life Studies and Snodgrass' Heart's Needle were the first two works to form a major break from the Imagist school, with its emphasis on what is witty and obscure, towards the personal and the psychological. Lowell was a student of William Carlos Williams, who was not a confessional poet, but who attracted a young generation of poets of his time to innovations in form and idiom, and directed them towards an easier style divorced from the complications of the Imagists and Eliot. Williams' dissatisfaction with The Waste Land, his rejection of the sonnet and the iambic meter as dead forms, his removal of punctuation and his incorporation of the title of the poem into the syntax of the poem were indications of a freer style and a daring motion for the young poets to take a different path. Williams' main concern with the search for an independent American idiom led him to concentrate on the importance of the American scene, the American idiom and the American individual. This paved the way for the young poets to adopt a simple, provocative, personal and original style in which the image becomes only a tool rather than the structural raison d'être of the poem. Williams' attitude towards poetic material made possible the achievement of confessional poetry. He advocated rebellion against the impersonality of T.S. Eliot's dictum 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."¹

Lowell and other confessional poets (particularly Theodore Roethke) were under the direct influence of Williams. It was during his early contact with Williams that Lowell wrote Life Studies. Lowell's confessional poetry in Life Studies was a departure from his early impersonal and oblique style towards a poetry which speaks in a personal voice tormented with memories and self-hatred. Life Studies was a major influence on confessional poets of the 1960's. Three of them (Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W.D. Snodgrass) were actually students in Lowell's seminar at Boston University in 1958, when Lowell was engaged in writing Life Studies.

Snodgrass' Heart's Needle was another major influence on the group. Lowell himself acknowledges the fact that Snodgrass was a co-founder of the movement. "He [Snodgrass] did these things before I did, though he's younger than I am and had been my student,"² Lowell once said. Anne Sexton was also moved by Snodgrass' Heart's Needle. She described

¹T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1969) 21.

²From an interview with Robert Lowell by Frederick Seidel, in Writers at Work: The "Paris Review" Interviews. Ser. 2, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press, 1963) 347.

her feeling after reading the title poem: it "held me and hurt me and made me cry."³

The critical reception of the confessional school has not been encouraging since the naming of the group by M.L. Rosenthal in his The New Poetry in 1967. That is, there has been a tremendous flow of confessional poetry with little critical concern. The criticism of confessional poetry available to us is limited to articles in periodicals, collections of essays and, in some cases, a chapter in a book about modern poetry or about any of the individual confessional poets. The only published book-length study we have is Robert Phillips' Confessional Poets (1973).

Rosenthal used the term "confessional" to designate the qualities shared by the confessional poets in general, and particularly, to describe Robert Lowell's treatment of the self in his Life Studies. Rosenthal notices that:

because of the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of Life Studies, the word 'confessional' seemed appropriate. . . The mixture of love and loathing, humor and horror, had the impact of a purely personal release.⁴

³David Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987) 595.

⁴M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 26-27.

Phillips is more explicit in his study and offers a deeper analysis of the term. The first chapter of his book, Confessional Poets, concludes with a long list of the dominant characteristics of a confessional poem:

It is highly subjective
 It is an expression of personality, not an escape from it.
 It is therapeutic and/or purgative.
 Its emotional content is personal rather than impersonal.
 It is most often narrative.
 It portrays unbalanced, afflicted, or alienated protagonists.
 It employs irony and understatement for detachment.
 It uses the self as a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology.
 There are no barriers of subject matter.
 There are no barriers between the reader and the poet.
 The poetry is written in the open language of ordinary speech.
 It is written in open forms.
 It displays moral courage.
 It is antiestablishment in content, with alienation a common theme.
 Personal failure is also a favorable theme, as is mental illness.
 The poet strives for personalization rather than for universalization.⁵

The definitions provided by Rosenthal and Phillips are loose and could encompass more poets than those in the confessional group of the 1960's. It was only in 1978 that Paul Gaston gave the definition a sharper focus by answering an important and valid question: "Is the contemporary poetry we call 'confessional' and attribute to poets like Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton in

⁵Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) pp. 16-17.

any way different from earlier first-person poems on private subjects?"⁶ In answering this question, Mr. Gaston emphasized the specialization, the organization, the consistency of the confessions in the poets' careers and the devotion to the confessional impulse as the major factors that distinguish confessional poetry from "earlier first-person poems."

One obvious but significant quality of the poetry we regard as confessional is its high degree of specialization in the revelation of the poet's private concerns. The contemporary confessional poet is regarded as such not because he or she writes some poems that may be considered confessional, but because he or she has organized the confessional impulse into discrete and consistent projections of his or her personality.⁷

Added to this quality of confessional poetry that Gaston presents is, I believe, a systematic expression of the traumatic self. Almost all the poets of the confessional group have poetic careers intimately entwined with their lives (Lowell demonstrates that by including a prose section about his life, "91 Revere Street," in Life Studies) which represent a system of confessions in three stages; it begins with existential alienation, culminates in a personal trauma and then descends into either personal failure or psychological liberation.

⁶Paul L. Gaston, W.D. Snodgrass (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978) 17.

⁷Gaston, p. 17.

The stage of alienation begins in a world devoid of meanings, and is intensified by personal anguish resulting from the poet's dealings with the outside world. Issues like God, nature, and society become of little concern for the poet since they offer no solution for the human dilemma of being. The poet then turns to his lonely self, "That self," according to Snodgrass, "he cannot help being" and protests against the chaos surrounding him by exposing his internal agony. His suffering then culminates in a confessional moment which is the most dangerous moment of his life. It is imaginative, productive, yet suicidal; it marks a turning point in the poet's career: it drives him towards either failure or liberation.

Confessional poetry is, as Rosenthal and Phillips point out, personal, subjective, traumatic, alienated but philosophical and therapeutic, and in most cases ironic. More important, however, is that it is systematically so. The poets whom we refer to as confessional have careers which represent the flow of their lives in a systematic way. One could think particularly of the lives and poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman to see illustrations of this theme. Emily Dickinson, as I will show in the course of this dissertation, anticipated this particular system of confessions a century earlier. Her career as a poet is tragically autobiographical. She kept poetry as a spiritual record of her daily activities. She

even included some of her poems in her letters to most intimate friends. A close scrutiny of her poetry would show that her poetic career falls into three distinct stages which begin in alienation, culminate in a personal trauma and end in personal failure.

Confessional poetry, of course, did not start with Lowell and Snodgrass. The confessional impulse has always been a distinguishing characteristic of the treatment of the self in literature. Being entwined with religion, many of the confessional writings until very recently tended to emphasize the spiritual side of the self with no consideration for the corporeal self. Thus writing about the self in all its forms (autobiographies, letters, journals. . . etc.) remained attached to the religious impulse until it established its independent form in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Confessional poetry as we know it today is an American phenomenon established by Whitman, extended by Emily Dickinson, interrupted by the imagist movement of the early 20th century, and then resumed by the confessional group of the 1960's.

The confessional mode in Western literature is an ancient one. Robert Phillips, in The Confessional Poets, traces it back to the cavemen:

There have always been confessional poets. That is there have always been confessional artists, some of whom happen to be poets. Even the cavemen drawing on walls the images of animals

they had to kill, were in their way confessional artists."

The confessional mode could be traced back to the cavemen, but the term "confessional" was first introduced to literature in its Judeo-Christian capacity. In its religious connotation the word "confession" represents an important condition for divine forgiveness. In the Old Testament, God directs Moses to say to the people of Israel "when a man or woman commits any of the sins that men commit by breaking faith with the Lord, and that person is guilty, he shall confess his sin which he has committed" (Numbers 5:6). And the New Testament concludes with John's words: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9).

Traditional Judeo-Christian confession became responsible for an immense body of literature which was centered on God's grace and divine forgiveness. The Christian impulse remained a dominant factor in the representation of the self in literature until the 19th century. And even during the 19th century, the Romantics in both Britain and America inherited from Christianity an aesthetic value which transformed the power of God into a metaphysical power sometimes embodied in nature and sometimes illuminating the personality from within.

*Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) 2.

Through the whole sweep of the literature about the self there have always been tendencies in Western literature to secularize the confessional mode - I think particularly of Rousseau and Franklin. But such attempts at secularization have always been faced with the same dilemma of human existence; they were unable to offer the same solace that religion offers. It is only in the poetry of Emily Dickinson that the confessional mode in poetry becomes capable of standing by itself as a secular form by resorting to existential methods, not to God, to resolve the dilemma of the self caught within the limitation of human existence.

The most influential Christian work with confessional significance is Saint Augustine's Confessions (379-401). When Saint Augustine wrote his Confessions, it was a new form. At that time others wrote biographies, autobiographies, and sometimes meditations, but not confessions. Saint Augustine's Confessions is most closely connected to an autobiography, but it is more selective. It treats the self with much depth. Despite the fact that he includes some dates and events, Saint Augustine was most interested in the Christian significance of events. Pear-stealing (an episode about early boyhood that Augustine records in his Confessions) is recorded to show how such an event functions in the same manner that the forbidden apple functions in the Old Testament. His choice of episode is dependent on the provisions of God. So he gives less

importance to events and details in favor of meditation and interpretation.

Many confessional narratives were written after Saint Augustine's out of a similar religious impulse. Bunyan's autobiography, Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, was the most prominent contribution to the genre. However, through the ages and with the gradual failure of the church and its confessional to cope with the psychology of sinners, confessional writings began to search for a substitute. The self with all its follies became the center of interest for writers. Attention was directed towards the improvement of life on earth rather than life after death.

Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote his Confessions in 1784. His Confessions are not like those of Saint Augustine. Rousseau doesn't direct his confessions to God. He directs them to his fellow men. They are more of a secular confession than anything else. The aim of Rousseau's Confessions is less to gain forgiveness than it is to gain personal relief and pleasure. This is how he states the purpose of his Confessions in Book II:

The weight, therefore, has remained heavy on my conscience to this day, and that I can truly own the desire of relieving myself, in some measure, from it, contributed greatly to the resolution of writing my confessions.'

'Jean Jacques Rousseau, The Confessions trans. Maurice Leloir, (London: The Aldus Society, 1901.) I, 78.

Among the major contributions that Rousseau passed on to the Romantics was a secularized confessional self. His Confessions is an attempt to speak honestly of his own life, with all its details. "Thus have I acted," he wrote, "These were my thoughts, such was I. With equal Freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues."¹⁰ Yet Rousseau's emphasis lies more on his remembrance of things past - his thoughts - than on a mere recording of his experience. In the same manner Wordsworth wrote his Prelude, a poem about the "Growth of a Poet's Mind: An Autobiographical Poem."

Rousseau became the most influential writer of Romanticism. Byron described him as one of "Those Oracles which set the world in flames / Nor Ceased to burn till kingdoms were no more."¹¹ Under the influence of Rousseau, Romantic writers wrote with an autobiographical impulse in an attempt to dig into the individual's past and capture his present. The emphasis on autobiography brought with it a re-examination of the self. Romanticism explored the self in all its manifestations and aspirations. It began with an increasing concern with the common man and an increasing concern with the primitive, the savage, the peasant, the fisherman and the shepherd. The interest in the common man

¹⁰Rousseau, p. 252.

¹¹From Child Harold in Lord Gordon Byron, The Works of Lord Byron: Poetry ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 7 vols. (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1966) 2: 267.

led to a concern with his personal experience embodied in his glorious past, a past which was examined in relation to nature. Thus the Romantic writer, unlike Saint Augustine, strove to expose himself to nature and not to God.

Romanticism associated itself with individualism, and in their treatment of the individual the Romantics anticipated modern themes such as alienation, melancholy, personal failure and madness. These themes were the result of the disappointment brought about by the failure of historical movements. The French Revolution culminated in the Reign of Terror and the Napoleonic wars, and the Industrial Revolution brought woes to European nations by transforming them from agricultural societies into industrial ones.

The frustrations of the individual were expressed in the Romantic Lyric, which was the most suitable medium for personal expression. The lyric was not a popular form during the Neo-Classical period because of the tendency toward the obliteration of the individual. Romantic writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Burns, Shelly and Byron insisted on writing lyrics in spoken language and made it a medium for the confessional exploration of the self.

Even in their long poems, the Romantics were not less confessional. Wordsworth was concerned with two themes in his Prelude: Self (man) and nature. His concern was basically centered on the relation between the internal life

of man and nature (the external world). The interaction between self and nature in Wordsworth's Prelude is best described by Frank McConnell.

Wordsworth's attempt to redeem nature - to integrate it with the rhythms of his own consciousness - finally led him to a vision of self-in-nature which all but obscures the conventional imagery and existence of the natural world, turning that world rather into an almost abstract principle of otherness, of alternate resistance and support to the life of the mind, whose sensory qualities are important mainly for their functioning within this eternal give-and-take. It is the same deeply motivated response which confessants have to sacramental 'evidences of election,' turning them to use only as elements in the inner tension between the mind, the heart, and the memory.¹²

According to Wordsworth and other Romantics, ultimate happiness is to be achieved by the harmonious relationship that one can create between the self and the "natural world" or the "otherness" that McConnell refers to, which emerges as a result of the interaction between self and nature. At least a certain degree of happiness is attainable according to the Romantic writers; this is certainly a major feature that distinguishes them from confessional poets of the twentieth century. Twentieth century poets of the confessional school resort to existential methods to resolve the dilemma of their existence.

¹²Frank D. McConnell, The Confessional Imagination: A Reading of Wordsworth's 'Prelude'. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 5.

For centuries the confessional impulse remained under the dominance of religion until the Romantics set it free by directing their confessions to a deity other than God -- Nature. The Romantics wrote with an autobiographical impulse and gave their art a secular view. The confessional poets of the 1960's revived the term "Confessional" to use it with a different connotation from that which existed in the religious writings of earlier centuries. They charged the term with a new meaning asserting the strains of self definition and constantly bringing the whole idea of being into question. They have made their lives a sign of protest against injustices in society and nature.

CHAPTER II

CONFESSIONAL POETRY: THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The Confessional mode in American literature took a different turn from that in Western literature in general. Different influences related to the American experience were responsible for such differences. Of these influences, two are of prominent importance: the frontier life and the Puritan experience.

Frontier life made it essential for the American individual to record his personal experience as a way of preserving an example and establishing a new tradition for those who would follow. As a first settler, the American came to the New World with the hope that his journey would be a new beginning, a beginning which necessitated a renunciation of a past ridden with persecution and prejudice in Europe and anticipating a new one based on his dreams of tolerance, freedom and equality. The American, according to R.W.B. Lewis, came as "an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources."¹ These qualities of self-reliance and "self-propulsion," made of him a creator -- an "American Adam" witnessing a whole culture in the making. But in order to

¹R.W.B. Lewis, The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the 19th Century (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) 5.

let this culture prosper in peace, he had to speak honestly and openly of himself as portrayed in his present experience and to obliterate his past with all its "conventions and traditions." These traditions, according to Lewis,

had to be washed away, like sin, so that the natural could reveal itself again and could be permitted to create its own organic conventions. They had to be renounced, as the first phase of the ritual, and if renunciation was, as Emily Dickinson thought, a piercing virtue, it was not because it made possible an experience of God in an infusion of grace, but because it made possible an experience of self in a bath of nature.²

The second influence on the historical roots of confessional poetry in America is the Puritan experience. The Puritan pilgrims who first settled Plymouth plantation and the Massachusetts Bay Colony considered themselves soldiers destined to come to this part of the world to protect it from the imminent destruction of Satan. Each pilgrim took on himself the responsibility of fighting evil. In order to achieve this end, a pilgrim must prepare himself both internally and externally for the combat with evil; internally by cleansing his heart and making it capable of "feeling" faith (since they believed that faith is felt with the heart rather than understood); and externally by emulating the character of Christ and the other Saints. These realities made them lead a highly self-conscious life,

²Lewis, p. 23.

or as Adrienne Rich noticed, their life was "the most self-conscious ever lived."³

The task of maintaining a clean heart was monitored by writing diaries which were a sort of spiritual record for the Puritan's daily confessions, meant to keep him self-conscious of his errors. They helped him according to Kenneth Murdock "in keeping fresh in his memory what he learned each day about himself and about his relation to God's Law, and in helping him to devote all his energies to divinely approved ends."⁴

To emulate the character of Christ and other Saints, Puritans wrote biographies, autobiographies and histories. They preached that the study of the lives of noble men is the reservoir of lasting truths. Cotton Mather encouraged his students to study the lives of men even before the coming of Christ since the Pre-Christian period is seen as a preparation for the coming of Christ. Murdock describes Puritan writing as "personal literature," for they "produced more diaries than did other groups,"⁵ and in their diaries they were eager to present the very specific details of personal experience since the individuals' personalities,

³Wendy Martin, An American Triptych: Ann Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 18.

⁴Kenneth Murdock, Literature and Theology in Colonial New England (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949) 101.

⁵Murdock, p. 17.

especially those worth imitating, were considered the guides to righteous conduct.

The piety of Puritan biographical and autobiographical writings was fundamentally Augustinian. But there are additional features which make Puritan writing distinctively American. Robert Sayre, in his The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, and Henry James, offers a fine and brief case study of a representative Puritan autobiography -- Edward's Personal Narrative. The striking features of Personal Narrative are its "grim and humble candor," and Edward's "terrifying isolation" -- an isolation which is very much unlike Wordsworthian loneliness:

The American loneliness was more than romantic because it was without the emblems of history and civilization, without the inescapable relics of old manners, classes and values. Among them, while an individual might be away from human company, he still retained some social and traditional identity. In other words, Edwards could and had to seek self-discovery within himself because there were so few avenues to it outside himself.⁶

The Puritans were responsible for a greater American tradition embodied in the works of Franklin, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

Franklin transferred the art of autobiography from self-presentation, which is essentially French, or self-

⁶Robert F. Sayre, The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams and Henry James (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984) 38-39.

interpretation, which is typically English,⁷ into an American autobiography concerned with self-teaching. Franklin's Autobiography was a record of his "errata" enumerated in a confessional manner so that they will be avoided by himself first and then by his posterity. Thus, Franklin broadened the subject that an American autobiography could undertake. It became no longer limited to those spiritual and inward concerns of Jonathan Edwards. It celebrates self-discipline and recounts mundane and intimate confessions based on his deistic orientations. He does not shy away from recounting his "attempted familiarities" with his friend's woman.

In the mean time Ms. T. having on his Account lost her Friends and Business, was often in Distress, and us'd to send for me, and borrow what I could spare to help her out of them. I grew fond of her company, and being at this time under no Religious Restraints, and presuming on my Importance to her, I attempted Familiarities, (another Erratum) which she repuls'd with proper Resentment, and acquainted him with my Behaviour.⁸

Franklin's deistic view of the individual as capable of creating an orderly life without the guidance of religious revelation taught a generation of Americans self-reliance

⁷Linda Peterson, Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 3.

⁸Benjamin Franklin, The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin eds. Leonard W. Labaree and Ralph L. Ketcham and others (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 1964) 99.

and prepared the scene for the great 19th-century myth-makers of the self.

The representation of the self in American literature of the 19th century became more sophisticated and diversified. The self became the subject of scrutiny and examination during the American Renaissance. Jeffrey Steele noticed that "Emerson selected self-consciousness -- the mind's awareness of itself -- as the 'key to the period'."⁹ This self-consciousness became the subject of controversy among the Renaissance writers. While Emerson employs self-consciousness to elicit trust, Melville employs it for distrust. At least two types of thoughts¹⁰ could be detected in this domain. One includes writers such as Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman and another includes Hawthorne, Poe and Melville. Whereas the first is optimistic and views the self as an admirable creation, the second is pessimistic and views "the self as an opaque mask that refracts social demands and refracts unconscious impulses."¹¹

Emerson's treatment of the self in his poetry as well as in his prose anticipated the modern psychology of Freud and Jung. Emerson added to the Puritan piety a reliable

⁹Jeffrey Steele, The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987) 1.

¹⁰In the treatment of these two types I am indebted to Steele's Representation.

¹¹Steele, p. 2.

intuitive imagination which he considered the only tool capable of reaching the depth of human personality -- a depth which is unattainable by mere rational or conscious search. His search for a deeper power ("God-within") upon which the psychology of human beings relies is an innovative measure. F. O. Matthiessen was among the first to recognize this quality in Emerson's work:

Looking back through history, it seemed to him that with the coming of the orator societies first arrived at civilization. A man speaking to men first unlocked their primitive awareness of themselves -- in such a conception of consciousness Emerson broke through the mere intellectualizing with which he was often charged, to at least a glimpse of the deep subconscious forces that remain buried in men unless quickened to life. ¹²

Thus, Emerson had shown his age that self-reliance and self-liberation both depend upon the individual's knowledge of himself, a knowledge consisting of intuitive powers upon which the individual, and the poet is no exception, should rely and let God or nature speak through him.

Whitman is another representative of the optimistic stream in the treatment of the self in 19th century American literature. After the publication of Whitman's Leaves of Grass in 1855, Emerson welcomed the book with much enthusiasm for "it has the best of merits, namely, of

¹²F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (London: Oxford University Press, 1941) 17.

fortifying and encouraging." Emerson must have seen more in Leaves of Grass than that. He must have identified with its self-reliant tone, its unrestrained confessional expression, its exuberant inspiration of readers and, above all, its new form. Emerson wrote to Whitman in July, 1855, commending Leaves of Grass:

I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find courage of treatment, which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire.

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely of fortifying and encouraging.¹³

The two writers represent the optimistic stream in their treatment of the self and consequently respond to similar issues in their treatment of the "corporeal self" (Mathiessen's term) -- the body. Whitman lifts up all repressions of the self that are the result of the accumulation of ethical restrictions. According to Steele, "Whitman's celebration of the body and its power anticipated Freud's later description of the somatic bases of Libido.

¹³Edwin Haviland Miller, ed. A Century of Whitman Criticism (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1969) 1.

By grounding poetic voice in the body, Whitman gives it emotional depth and a sensuality of tone."¹⁴

Whitman not only expressed the psychological motions of the self, but he also uncovered all biological yearnings of the body, breaking away from a tradition which treated the body as a "wicker cage (my corpse)" of the soul.¹⁵ He was praised by confessional poets of the 1960's for his inclusiveness in the treatment of the body as an important part of the self, equal in its importance to the soul. "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul," Whitman declares. He was also praised for his attempts to overcome the brutality within the self by getting closer to his fellow human beings. Several poets of the confessional group paid tribute to him. Allen Ginsberg called him the "Lonely old courage-teacher" in one of his prominent poems, "A Supermarket in California," which I find worth including here in full:

What thoughts I have of you
tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down
the side streets under the trees with a
headache self-conscious looking at the
full moon,

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping
for images, I went into the neon fruit
supermarket, dreaming of your
enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras!
Whole families shopping at night!

¹⁴Steele, p. 68.

¹⁵Edward Taylor, The Poems of Edward Taylor. ed. Donald E. Stanford (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 1965) 18.

Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the
avocados, babies in the tomatoes! --
and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you
doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless,
lonely old grubber, poking among the
meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the
grocery boys.

I heard you asking questions of
each: Who killed the pork chops? What
price bananas? Are you my Angel?

I wandered in and out of the
brilliant stacks of cans following you,
and followed in my imagination by the
store detective.

We strode down the open corridors
together in our solitary fancy tasting
artichokes, possessing every frozen
delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman?
The doors close in an hour. Which way
does your beard point tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our
odyssey in the supermarket and feel
absurd.)

Will we walk all night through
solitary streets? The trees add shade
to shade, lights out in the house, we'll
both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost
America of love past blue automobiles in
driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely
old courage-teacher, what America did
you have when Charon quit poling his
ferry and you got out on a smoking bank
and stood watching the boat disappear on
the black waters of Lethe?¹⁶

Not only does Ginsberg imitate Whitman in form, style
and the use of common language, but he is also attracted to
his courage in exposing himself nakedly without restraint,
his loneliness, and his attempt to reach the foundation of

¹⁶Allen Ginsberg, Collected Poems: 1947-1980 (New
York: Harper and Row, 1984) 136.

human life by searching deeply into it in the manner of Garcia Lorca, the Spanish poet who achieved universality through honest probing of personal and local references. However, Ginsberg sees the realities of the 20th century far removed from Whitman's optimistic preaching of brotherhood and love. "(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd)" The absurdity and frustration of 20th century thinking make Whitman much needed, or rather an alien. Theodore Roethke invokes Whitman's presence for the same reason:

Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues:
 For the world invades me again,
 And once more the tongues begin babbling.
 And the terrible hunger for objects quails me:
 The sill trembles.
 And there on the blind
 A furred caterpillar crawls down a string.
 My symbol!
 For I have moved closer to death, lived with
 death:
 Like a nurse he sat with me for weeks, a sly
 surly attendant,
 Watching my hands, wary.
 Who sent him away?
 I'm no longer a bird dipping a beak into
 rippling water;
 But a mole winding through earth,
 A night-fishing otter.¹⁷

What did not attract 20th century confessional poets in Whitman's work is his pervasive optimism, which is rooted in his transcendental faith in the individual ability to perpetuate happiness through love. He finds in human beings

¹⁷Theodore Roethke, The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966) 220.

admirable and spiritual qualities and he puts his final trust in the individual. He doesn't see chaos and death as central to human existence:

There is that in me -- I do not know what it is --
but I know it is in me.

It is not chaos or death -- it is form, Union,
plan -- it is eternal life -- it is happiness.¹⁸

The confessional poets of the 20th century are haunted by images of death, chaos, frustration, alienation, metaphysical torture, loneliness and existential meaninglessness. Emily Dickinson is invoked for the pervasiveness of such qualities in her poetry and her life. John Berryman considers Dickinson's life traumatic and lists her in one of his poems ("News of God") with other "Lady poets" who led a lonely life or whose marriage became traumatic. Sappho, Marianna Moore, Charlotte Bronte, Miss Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath.

Them Lady poets must not marry, pal.
Miss Dickinson -- fancy in Amherst bedding
her.
Fancy a lark with Sappho,
A tumble in the bushes with Miss Moore,
a spoon with Emily, while Charlotte glare.
Miss Bishop's too noble-O.

That was the Lot, and two of them are here
as yet, and -- Sylvia Plath is not.
She -- She her credentials
has handed in, leaving alone two tots

¹⁸Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry and Collected Prose, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: The Library of America, 1982) 246.

and widower so that he makes of it a surviving guy.¹⁹

Thus, it is Emily Dickinson who completed Walt Whitman's anticipation of 20th century confessional poets. Her poetry has been described as ahistorical since it foreshadows modern consciousness with all its representations. The rage, the rebellion, the honesty and the unhidden passions, the alienation and the uncertainty with which Emily Dickinson struggles in her poetry are in one way anticipations of modern poetry and in another confirmation of the philosophical atmosphere of her time represented by Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe.

The second circle in the treatment of the self in 19th century American literature includes writers such as Poe, Melville and Hawthorne. These writers examined all aspects of Christianity and found it wanting. Their characters, thus, are forced to deal with an ungodly universe where revelations or God's power within are no longer the prime movers of the person's life. Their orientation stems from a gloomy self and runs counter to Emerson's inner power that illuminates personality. Instead they offer a masked personality with an inner abyss. Steele summarizes this theme in one paragraph.

¹⁹John Berryman, The Dream Songs (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1969) 206.

Melville's Ahab and Pierre disastrously complicate their existence by trusting the promptings of inner 'spirit'; Hawthorne's characters live in worlds marked by subterfuge and masquerade, not by the revelation of power within. Similarly, Poe portrays a violent universe marked by power-relations, not the beneficent assimilation of productive energies.²⁰

The American experience in personal literature was influenced by two unique factors: the frontier life and the Puritan experience. Both factors were responsible for creating a literature which was exclusively personal. The autobiographical impulse which originated with the early settlers and pilgrims became more diversified and more sophisticated during the Nineteenth century.

These early treatments of the self, however, should not be confused with the 20th century understanding of confessional poetry of the 1960's. The confessional poets of the 1960's shared a set of rules and influences unique to them as a group. The most important characteristic of their poetry is that it represents the traumatic self torn by 20th century repressions in a systematic way which begins with a stage of existential alienation, moves through a personal trauma and ends in personal failure or psychological liberation.

Emily Dickinson, I believe, anticipated this system of confessions a century earlier. Her work, which I see as a

²⁰Steele, p. 172.

confessional record of her life, characteristically proceeds in three stages. It begins with alienation, develops toward a personal trauma and then ends in personal failure.

CHAPTER III

DICKINSON: A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE AND A PERSONAL ART

Dickinson dissociated her poetry from the political and social issues of her time, and occupied herself with personal and private matters. She excludes from her poems all the major public issues of her time: The Civil War, slavery, the Indian question, the plight of the working class, and so on. Northrop Frye notices that "it would be hard to name another poet in the history of English Language with so little interest in social or political events. The Civil War seemed to her 'oblique,' outside her orbit."¹ Indeed, she did not engage herself in what is "outside her orbit," she was only engaged in what she could grasp or outreach.

Emily Dickinson lived in a confined world with little happenings. Her experience with the outside world was limited. She was the least experienced writer among her contemporaries. Her outside experience doesn't match those of, say, Melville in the South Seas, Whitman as a wound-dresser during the Civil War, or even Hawthorne in the Custom House. Her experience is private, internal, but profound. Her outside experience is limited to her relationship with the people that she had known. Much of

¹Northrop Frye, Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963) 199.

what we know about her personality comes from her correspondence with friends and relatives.

Dickinson was not ignorant of the important issues of her time. Her father's library, which was at her disposal, contained a wide range of sources of ancient and contemporary ideas. The library contained books as various as St. Augustine's Confessions, the Koran, a book on Buddhism and other books by writers such as the Brownings, Tennyson, Carlyle, and Emerson. It contained books about classical thinkers such as Plato, Horace, and Homer, as well as books by and about prominent political and social thinkers of her time.

Dickinson, however, had a philosophical orientation in which she employed the personal as a means to get to the universal and as a unifying vision for all her poems. Her poetry "transcended the personal to become concerned with suffering and frustration as universal themes."² "My Business is Circumference," she wrote to Higginson, "an ignorance, not of Customs, but if caught with Dawn -- or the sunset see me -- myself the only Kangaroo among the Beauty."³

²Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964) 6.

³Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward, eds. The Letters of Emily Dickinson, 3 volumes (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univeristy, 1958) 412.

Dickinson's "Business of Circumference" included only herself in relation to a selected intimate group of relatives and friends:

The soul selects her own Society
Then -- shuts the door --
To her divine Majority --
Present no more

Then close the valves of her attention --
Like Stone -- (303)

Several critics of Emily Dickinson's poetry have seen no unified vision that works through all her poems. They see her poems as fragmented elements, with no strong vision to hold them together. As late as 1981, David Porter wrote in his Dickinson: The Modern Idiom:

She made no pact with her readers, gave them no plan of the whole. Her work lacks architectural dimension to direct the reader's activity within its space. In short, a reader emerges from the most empathetic and pleasurable in the body of poetry quite unable to report its order of knowledge or perception.'

Even Richard Sewall, one of Dickinson's most prominent biographers, suggests in his two-volume biography, The Life of Emily Dickinson, that a unifying vision is lacking in Dickinson's poetry.

Personal themes and private relationships in Dickinson's life became the subject of several studies. Professor William Shurr presents a reconstruction of Dickinson's original fascicles in his The Marriage of Emily

'David Porter, Dickinson: The Modern Idiom
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) 3.

Dickinson: A Study of the Fascicles. By doing so, Professor Shurr shows remarkable unity among Dickinson's poems centered on her love relationship with Reverend Wadsworth. He notices that:

When the poems are read as Dickinson grouped them, and when the groupings are in their original order, what emerges is a remarkable unity. Most of the poems are generated by a single experience or complex of experiences. Each fascicle has a core of poems directly related to Dickinson's love affair and, later, to her anomalous marriage. Other poems radiate from the center or relate to it in some discoverable way. And the fascicles as a whole show many of the characteristics of a suite or a sequence, like Shakespeare's Sonnets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese, or Coventry Patmore's The Angel in the House.⁵

Several other critical works are centered on similar personal and unifying themes. Rebecca Patterson treats the theme of homosexuality in her Emily Dickinson's Imagery; Clark Griffith treats the theme of the father complex in his The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry; and John Cody treats the theme of mother deprivation in his After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson.

Cody's study takes the approach of the psychoanalytical biographer; he investigates Dickinson's relationship with her mother and makes their relationship central to all of Dickinson's work. He also uses this relationship as a key

⁵William Shurr, The Marriage of Emily Dickinson: A study of the Fascicles (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1983) 125.

to understanding her personality which was Dickinson's main subject.

Emily Dickinson took only herself as subject. And, through unaided insight, without benefit of schema or system, she traveled freely in a domain whose shores Freud was not to approach for another half century. All the so-called psychopathology he encountered in his patients she discovered within herself. Her life and work reveal the awful price she paid for such self-knowledge. Freud traveled a relatively safe and, as he said, "royal" road to the unconscious through the analysis of dreams. Emily Dickinson sought no such road; the unconscious came to her, breaking in without warning.⁶

More and more writers nowadays deal with Dickinson's poetry under the assumption that the unifying vision of her poems is the tragic representation of her private or inner self. Dickinson's poetry is occupied with her personal life, her subject is herself -- self discovery and self-exploration. In one of her poems she wrote:

. . . Explore thyself!
Therein thyself shalt find
The "Undiscovered Continent--"
No Settler had the Mind. (832)

And in another poem she wrote "ourself behind Ourselves, concealed --." But while Dickinson had these strong desires for self-expression, she was well aware of the penalties for doing it. The Connecticut River Valley where Dickinson spent her life was a little remote from the liberal thinking

⁶John Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971) 93.

of the Concord and Boston Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. Unitarianism was still abhorred, and Jonathan Edwards' Calvinist spirit was deeply rooted in the Valley. Whitman, who was applauded only by Emerson, was scorned by almost all the literary circles of his time. Higginson was among those who strongly disapproved of Whitman's poetry for its willful themes and uncontrolled rhymes. Higginson, in his turn, warned Dickinson against possible contacts with Whitman. Dickinson, however, must have become acquainted with, and warned against Whitman's poetry (even without reading it) through the media. Boston's Daily Republican, for instance, dismissed the first edition of Leaves of Grass as "befouled with filth," "defaced by vulgarity," "a sea of foul impurities."⁷ The Atlantic Monthly had a less attractive commentary in its March 1860 issue: "We didn't suppose anybody admired them but Emerson, and that was the only really bad thing we ever knew of him."⁸

But, as Albert Gelpi notices in his The Tenth Muse, Emerson's description of the Transcendentalist describes Emily Dickinson's temperament more than Whitman's:

They [Transcendentalists] are lonely;
the spirit of their writing and
conversation is lonely; they repel
influences; they shun general society,
they incline to shut themselves in their

⁷Albert Gelpi, The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of The American Poet (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) 220.

⁸Gelpi, P. 220.

chamber in their town, and to find their tasks and amusements in solitude.'

Thus, Dickinson was not less liberal in her self exposition nor was she less willful in her form than Whitman, but she was only more reticent. She had to change her articulation to fit the scene of 19th century America in general and the Connecticut River Valley in particular. In one of her poems she suggests a "slant" expression of the truth.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant --
 Success in circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As lightening to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 or every man be blind. (1129)

Dickinson told all the truth in her poetry but she told it "slant" and gradual. Since she was told that Whitman's book was "disgraceful," she knew that telling the truth "As lightening to children," could cause "every man to be blind." Thus, as Joanne Dobson noticed, "rather than responding to constraints on personal expression by eliminating the personal from her writing, as many of her contemporaries did, Dickinson withdrew her writing itself from the public eye; she declined to publish. The method

⁹Gelpi, p. 222.

was different, but the result was the same: private experience remained private."¹⁰

All through her life Dickinson resisted all demands for publication. In poem (709) she wrote, "Publication -- is the Auction / of the Mind of man --." With the exception of eight poems none of Dickinson's poems was published during her life time. Of the eight instances, the story of the publication of her poem "Success," is well known. The story is related to Mrs. Helen Hunt Jackson and it shows the degree to which Dickinson resisted publication. It is evident, however, that her resistance to publication became sharper and more consistent after her involvement with Reverend Wadsworth.

Many of Dickinson's poems are centered on two circles of friends whose importance to Dickinson has provoked an endless controversy among historians, and whose presence in her life helped later biographers in accounting for some of the missing links in Dickinson's life. One circle included intimate and romantic friends, such as Reverend Charles Wadsworth, Samuel Bowles, Otis Phillips Lord, Kate Anthon, Susan Gilbert, and George Gold. The second circle included less intimate friends such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Abiah Root, Helen Hunt Jackson, Josiah and Elizabeth Holland, Mabel Loomis Todd and her husband, and some members

¹⁰Joanne Dobson, Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth Century America (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989) xiv.

of Dickinson's immediate family such as Lavinia (her sister) and the Norcross cousins.

There is a wide agreement among Dickinson's biographers that Dickinson had shared a romantic experience of some sort with each or any one member of the first group. Their presence in her life caused biographers to speculate on different assumptions. However, some (such as Northrop Frye) have seen Dickinson's romantic friends as a private audience whom Dickinson had introduced to suit the nature of her lyrical poetry, for the very nature of lyrical poetry demands such audience. "Lyrical poetry," Northrop Frye wrote, "tends to create its own highly selected and intimate audience, like the sonnets and love poems of Shakespeare's day that circulated in manuscript among friends long before they reached print."¹¹

But to say that Dickinson's intimate friends served merely as audience is to dismiss any serious emotional attachment between Dickinson and her admirers, a concept which has been proven by numerous biographers of Emily Dickinson, and to which I have no new background information to contribute.

It is to and about the first group of friends that Dickinson wrote her "tell it slant" poems. In some way, her poems to them were intended as intellectual exercises which

¹¹Frye, Fables, p. 199.

both Dickinson and her addresses seemed to have enjoyed as a game. She once wrote:

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 -- (842)

Dickinson believed that it is best to know, but knowing if not "slant" would cause unnecessary embarrassment and possibly pain to those whom she cared about. The following poem shows how careful Dickinson was when she received a letter from one of her romantic friends.

The way I read a letter's -- this --
'Tis first -- I lock the door. --
And push it with my fingers -- next --
For transport it be sure --

And then I go the furthest off
To counteract a knock --
Then draw my little letter forth
And slowly pick the lock --

Then -- glancing narrow, at the wall --
And narrow at the floor
For firm Conviction of a mouse
Not exorcised before --

Peruse how infinite I am
To no one that You -- know --
And sign for lack of Heaven -- but not
The Heaven God bestow -- (636)

This poem was written in 1862, according to Johnson's dates, the year when things in Dickinson's emotional life had gone downhill. Early in 1861, Kate Anthon wrote Dickinson a letter terminating an intimate relationship of

some importance to Dickinson; Charles Wordsworth accepted a call to Calvary Church in San Francisco, and Samuel Bowles went to Europe for his health. Critics cite this year (1862) as a turning point in Dickinson's life and art. Her art subsequently became more intensely personal and she matured as a poet and as a person. Her production of poetry accelerated. During 1862, according to Johnson's calculations, she had written 366 poems, an average of one poem a day.

After 1862 Dickinson's poetry began to be woven more closely with direct incidents from her life. It is a common belief among critics and biographers of Emily Dickinson that the change in Dickinson's tone and themes after 1862 is due to a decline in her love affair to one man or woman -- the addressee of her poems. However, evidence in general is more in favor of asserting Dickinson's attachment to Reverend Charles Wadsworth. Assumptions of her attachment to other characters are less well-grounded and are based on a small number of evidences in her poems.

Now evocatively transparent, now erotically ambiguous, Dickinson's love poems narrate incidents from her love affair with the addressee of her poems. She speaks of herself as a wife, a bride, a married woman and a queen in anticipation of a relationship with a "master" who fulfills her wants. During her relationship with this Master/Lover,

Dickinson's production of poems accelerated and her desire to tell her story became greatest.

Dickinson's relationship with Wadsworth seems to have caused her much hurt. It was that hurt which caused her to sing. "We tell a hurt to cool it," she once wrote. However, there is evidence in her poetry that she had experienced some luxury, even though her luxury was tainted with the constant threat of separation. At the peak of her love for Wadsworth (1862), Dickinson wrote poems which are sometimes involuntarily transparent, and sometimes willfully confessional of her emotional and sexual needs, on one hand, and of the guilt that she bears over such want on the other. Cody calls this ambivalence "an inner conflict involving the poet's need to conceal herself and unconscious impulse to expose that which is prohibited to view."

"That which is prohibited to view" is most likely her love for Wadsworth. She needed to say what she wanted to say without causing herself or those whom she cared for any embarrassment. Thus Dickinson chose a group of images which she constantly employs in her poem to denote forbidden ideas. These images were basically derived from her surroundings; her everyday experience in the church, at home, or from the natural surroundings. Nature and natural images are dominating in Dickinson's poetry. In one of her transcendental, rather Emersonian poems she recounts her images:

Nature is what we see,
 The Hill, the Afternoon --
 Squirrel, Eclipse, the Bumble-Bee,
 Nay -- Nature is Heaven.

Nature is what we hear,
 The Bobolink, the sea --
 Thunder, the Cricket --
 Nay -- Nature is Harmony.

Nature is what we know
 But have no art to say,
 So impotent our wisdom is
 To her simplicity. (668)

The sea, the sun, the bumblebee, the eclipse, the bobolink, the cricket, and the flower composed a large part of Dickinson's imagery. Her love to the Master/Sir/Lover addressee of her poems is explored in different natural symbols. The most prominent of these symbols are the sun, the flower and the bee.

As I have mentioned earlier, the sun symbol in Dickinson's poetry connotes power and masculine influence -- a sexual one in some cases. On a triangle of symbols which consists of the sun and the bee as representatives of an aggressive and masculine power, and the flower which represents the female receptive and passive qualities, Dickinson builds her erotic imagery.

The sun symbolism begins in a poem in 1862, which starts with a dramatic monologue entertaining the lover's question of "'Why do I love you,' Sir?" After decorating her answer with different images from nature in the manner of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (attraction through the

association of wind with grass and lightening in the eye),
she concludes her poem with a powerful sun image:

"Why do I love" You, Sir?
Because --
The Wind does not require the Grass
To answer -- Wherefore when he pass
She cannot keep Her place.

Because he knows -- and
Do not You --
And We know not --
Enough for Us
The Wisdom it be so --

The Lightening -- never asked an Eye
Wherefore it shut -- when he was by --
Because He knows it cannot speak --
And reasons not contained --
-- Of Talk --
There be -- preferred by Daintier Folk --
The Sunrise -- Sir -- compelleth Me --
Because He's Sunrise -- and I see --
Therefore -- Then --
I love Thee -- (480)

Even when it is highly symbolic, the transparency of Dickinson's poetry is highly revealing. "The Daisy Follows soft the Sun" is another poem which employs the sun symbol, this time in the form of a metaphysical conceit in the manner of John Donne. The conceit runs all through the poem. The Daisy, the female figure, is courted by the sun, the male representation. In their reading of the poem Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar notice that Dickinson in this poem "confesses more openly the depth of her sexual need" for a fiery Master/Lover:"

The Daisy follows soft the Sun --
And when his golden walk is done --
Sits shyly at his feet --
He -- Waking -- finds the flower there --

Wherefore -- Marauder -- art thou here?
 Because, Sir, love is sweet!
 We are the flower -- Thou the Sun!
 Forgive us, if as days decline --
 We nearer steal to Thee!
 Enamored of the parting West --
 The peace -- the flight -- the Amethyst --
 Night's possibility! (106)

The sun image exists in several other poems, its rise and set are the two extremes of passion. When the lover is absent "the sun retire[s] to a cloud," (Poem #1693). His return is a sunrise. Dickinson made this association directly in one of her poems:

The Sun is gay or stark
 According to our Deed.
 If Merry, He is merrier --
 If eager for the Dead
 Or an expanded Day
 He helped to make too bright
 His mighty pleasure suits Us not
 It magnifies our Freight. (878)

In one of the most important poems in her canon, Dickinson equates the lover with the sun; herself with a flower. He is night in the sky, she is low on earth, he travels, she is stable, he gives her life and she withers away without his love.

The Sun, as common, went abroad.
 The flowers, accustomed, below,
 As if no soul the solstice passed
 That maketh all things new -- (878)

Not only does the lover share the qualities of the sun in giving life to the flower, but he also becomes an essential part in the composition of her personality. The poem continues:

Each way to each the Sealed Church
 Permitted to commune this -- time --
 Lest we too awkward show
 At Supper of the Lamb. (322)

In his reading of this poem (322) Gelpi points out that "one's completeness becomes whole by finding the 'other' in one's self, it is not only "safer so, it is necessary."

This sun-flower image in Dickinson's poetry is paralleled by another bee-flower image. In a poem dated by Dickinson's editors c. 1862, Dickinson alludes to her separation from Wadsworth by using the bee-flower analogy.

Auto da Fe -- and Judgement
 Are nothing to the Bee --
 His separation from His Rose --
 To Him -- sums Misery -- (620)

The bee, in Dickinson's analogy, resembles the sun in the transitoriness of its stay; the sun sits and the bee flees, possibly to another flower (in the case of Wadsworth to his wife). The flower awaits compassion from the bee. It is stable and receptive. The following poem is an illustration:

A Bee his Burnished Carriage
 Drove boldly to a Rose --
 Combinedly alighting --
 Himself -- his Carriage was --
 The Rose received his visit
 With frank tranquility
 Withholding not a Crescent
 To his Cupidity --
 Their Moment consummated --
 Remained for him -- to flee --
 Remained for her -- of rapture
 But the humility. (1339)

Dickinson must have associated the bee of her poetry with Wadsworth. She had much reverence for the bee. In

most cases the bee is graceful, religious and meticulous.

In a letter to her nephew, she once wrote: "I have borrowed a little honey for Aunt Mattie's cold of a religious Bee who can be relied on." And in one of her most important poems that employs the bee imagery she pays respect to the bee:

In the name of the Bee
And of the Butterfly
And of the Breeze -- Amen! (18)

In another poem, the bee is described as wearing a "proper coat:"

Because he travels freely
And wears a proper coat
The circumspect are certain
That he is dissolute -- (1685)

and then the bee is described as leading the procession:

It was a short procession --
The Bobolink was there
An aged Bee addressed us --
And then we knelt in prayer -- (18)

Once Dickinson established the analogy between the lover and the bee, she began in more than twenty poems to employ the bee-flower image as a disguise for her passion and a metaphor for sexual situations. In one poem she wrote:

Did the Harebell lose her girdle
To the Lover Bee
Would the Bee the Harebell hallow
Much as formerly?

Did the "Paradise --" persuaded --
Yield her moat of pearl --
Would the Eden be an Eden
Or the Earl -- an Earl? (213)

In other poems Dickinson is less reticent but more ambiguous. She speaks of herself as a wife, a bride, a

queen, and then she speaks of wild nights and an important summer day. The ambiguity of her poems that treat love themes allows for a multiplicity of interpretations. One controversial poem in Dickinson's love poetry is "Wild Nights." The poem is interpreted by Ditsky as a call for "peace, rest, and freedom from upsetting, besetting tribulations," as "an apparent death wish: a personification and apostrophe to Death whose pressure and company are paradoxically exhilarating luxury," by Connolly, and as a projection of erotic love by many critics.

Taken in the context of the rest of her poems of this phase (1860's) that deals with a forbidden love and an uncultivated passion, the poem is best read as a "frankly erotic poem," as one critic puts it.

In "Wild Nights" Dickinson is as direct as any Nineteenth century woman could be. She retires to her lover's luxurious eden disregarding any blame; her heart has "done with the compass" and "Futile [are] the Winds":

Wild Nights -- Wild Nights
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our Luxury!

Futile -- the Winds --
To a Heart in port --
Done with the Compass --
Done with the chart!

Rowing in Eden --
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor -- Tonight --
In Thee! (249)

In Poem #463, she is less daring; she hides. She is ashamed of being a dowerless bride, but she recollects her pride and courage, and emerges as a proud bride refashioned by her love:

I am ashamed -- I hide --
 What right have I to be a Bride --
 So late a Dowerless Girl --
 Nowhere to hide my dazzled face
 No one to teach me that new Grace --
 Nor introduce -- my Soul --

Me to adorn -- How -- tell --
 Trinket -- to make me beautiful --
 Fabrics of Cashmere --
 Never -- Gown of Dun-more --
 Raiment instead of Pompadour --
 For Me -- My soul -- to wear --
 Fingers -- to frame my Round Hair
 Oval -- as Feudal Ladies wore --
 For Fashions -- fair --
 Skill -- to hold my Brow like an Earl --
 Plead -- like a whippoorwill --
 Prove -- like a Pearl --
 Then, for Characters --

Fashion my Spirit quaint-White --
 Quick -- like a liquor --
 Gay -- like Light --
 Bring Me my best Pride --
 No more ashamed --
 No more to hide --
 Meek -- let it be too proud for Pride --
 Baptized -- this Day -- A Bride -- (473)

The courage and the pride exemplified in the previous poem are typical of Dickinson's love poems. In one poem, "I'm Wife," she openly states the end of her girlhood to start as defiant as Czar the stage of womanhood. No "honor" code would deter her decision to become a wife, even if becoming a wife would break the marriage code of her society. She is dowerless, as she mentions in the above

poem, and she has no "right" to become a bride, but the final phrase of "I'm Wife" is final; it ends all chances of a reprisal:

"I'm Wife" -- I've finished that --
That other state --
I'm Czar -- I'm "Woman" now --
It's safer so --

How old the Girl's life looks
Behind this soft Eclipse --
I think that Earth feels so
To folks in Heaven -- now --

This being comfort -- then
That other kind -- Was pain --
But why compare?
I'm "wife" Stop there! (199)

Lacking an external experience comparable to that of the giants of American literature of the time, Dickinson turned to her personal life as a source for her art. She found in her internal life an example that is worth presenting with all its particularities. Of her personal experiences, her love for Reverend Wadsworth inspires a large number of her poems. Through her relationship with Wadsworth, she was faced with a strong ambivalence. Whereas the desire in her to write about her private experiences was great, she wanted to hide her love and lover from the scrutiny of the public eye. In order to do so, Dickinson declined all invitations for publication and disguised her art behind heavy symbols. Now ambiguously confessional and now confessionally reticent, Dickinson managed to preserve her art and to avoid public scrutiny.

CHAPTER IV

CONFESSIONALISM, FEMINISM AND EMILY DICKINSON

It is difficult to deal with the confessional aspects of Dickinson's poetry without dealing with its feminist sides. The two meet on more than one ground: both Feminist and Confessional writers are essentially autobiographical in that they deliberately place the self at the center of their art. The relationship between Feminism and Confessionalism is best described by David Perkins:

The finest poetry by feminists is likely to be in the confessional style, and, conversely, confessional poetry by women is of absorbing interest to Feminist readers. For Confessional poetry renders personal experience or emotion as it actually is, regardless of social conventions. Moreover, Confessional poetry expresses truths and experience so painful that most people would suppress them. If, therefore, a woman resents her children, or feels victimized by a patriarchal society and revengeful toward it, the confessional mode enables her to express such emotions directly.¹

The Feminist writer finds gender a distinguishing factor central to any artistic creation. Hence, any critical approach to feminist literature begins with defining the self in terms of its gender; anonymity and self-denial are rejected. Mitchell Cliff wrote a defining statement on this issue:

¹David Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) 58.

To me that is what it means to be a feminist: not to be anonymous, not to deny the self. To be a feminist is to attempt the rescue of other women in anonymity but the first responsibility is to define the self. To stand separate and alone, saying my woman's self, my matrix, is the source of my identity.²

The confessional treatment of the self, however, is more inclusive. The Confessional writer (male or female) speaks autobiographically of the rage, the rebellion, the hidden passions, and the alienation of the 20th Century individual who is trapped in a self which, according to Snodgrass, "he cannot help being."³

The advent of the Confessional and Feminist movements of the 1960s brought with it a transition in critical perspectives to suit an art which had become consistently and deliberately personal. Emily Dickinson's importance to Confessional and Feminist poetry became more conspicuous after the decreasing popularity of the "New Criticism" school which ignored the use of biographical material in the interpretation of literature, dismissing it as an "intentional fallacy." New Criticism had depended on objectivity and impersonality and timelessness in art.

Both Confessional and Feminist movements responded characteristically to Dickinson's work. With Dickinson, the

²Paula Bennett, My Life a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 253.

³Phillips, Confessional Poets, 46.

demand for a historical approach became most urgent. Dickinson's innovative treatment of gender and her emphasis on the self as the center of her work made biographical material an essential element in the study of her poems. In 1955, after the publication of Thomas Johnson's The Letters of Emily Dickinson and The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, the difficulty and obscurity of Dickinson's poems were facilitated by an easy reference to the biographical material provided in her letters and inferred from the sequence of her poems as presented by Johnson. The availability of such material helped to account for several of the very personal poems in the Dickinson canon. For example, a quick reference to Dickinson's poems would take us to a much-quoted poem, "I Can't Live with You." A New Critical approach to the poem would be futile. The identity of the addressee, the setting of the poem, the images, the importance of dialogue, and the daring confessions could not be accounted for without a reference to some biographical material. Without such reference, the interpretations of the poem varied from seeing it as addressing the "disparity between matter and manner,"⁴ to seeing it as dealing generally with the themes of love and immortality in the manner of Christina Rossetti's poetry. Such interpretations of the poem suffer from their inadequacy in accounting for

⁴Douglas Duncan, Emily Dickinson, Writers and Critics Series (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965) 65.

the very specific references to Dickinson's private and despairing love affair to a specific addressee. References such as "...your face / would put out Jesus" and "For you -- served heaven -- you know," are difficult to account for without linking them to Dickinson's personal history.

By experimenting honestly with the concept of the female self and by transcending her conventional role as a woman, Dickinson became a foremother for Confessional and Feminist literature of the Twentieth Century, and her work became a true example illustrating the reciprocal relationship between Feminist and Confessional interests.

Emily Dickinson wrote in a strain of self-definition. Her writing expressed the bitterness of women writers in Nineteenth Century America: estranged, alienated and dehumanized. Whereas Dickinson was one of the first Americans to think of herself as a woman poet, she was not the first woman to challenge the masculine authority in her poetry. Anne Bradstreet wrote two centuries earlier:

Let Greeks be Greeks, and women what
 they are;
 Men have precedency and still excel,
 It is but vain unjustly to wage war;
 Men can do best, and women know it well,
 Preeminence in all and each is yours;
 Yet grant some small acknowledgement
 of ours.
 And oh ye high flown quills that soar
 the skies,
 An ever with your prey still catch your
 praise,
 If ever you deign these lowly lines your
 eyes,
 Give thyme or parsley wreath, I ask no bays;

This mean and unrefined ore of mine
Will make your glistening gold but more
to shine.⁵

Bradstreet acknowledges a minor status for her poetry, but she strives painstakingly to prove that she could emulate the established male poets. Although she talks in a collective voice, "grant some small acknowledgment of ours," she doesn't think of her self as a woman poet. Her religious attachment made mundane issues, including poetry, trivial matters compared to the everlasting joys of heaven. Bradstreet's call on men to give a chance to women is courteous and doesn't dare to claim equal achievement with men.

Emily Dickinson was the first American who thought of herself as a woman poet writing on equal terms with men. She rejected her subservient status first as an inferior human being, and second as a second class writer. Dickinson began by tracing the progress of female writers of her time: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Brontes, and George Eliot were among the writers whom Dickinson admired and who had the most influence on her. Her awareness of the development of a literature written by women was evident in a letter that she wrote to Higginson:

I didn't read Mr. Miller because I could
not care about him -- Transport is not
urged -- Mrs. Hunt's poems are stronger

⁵Ann Bradstreet, The Work of Anne Bradstreet, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967) 16-17.

than any written by women since Mrs. Browning, with the exception of Mrs. Tewes -- but truth like Ancestor's Brocades can stand alone -- "Bells and Pomegranate" I never saw but have Mrs. Browning's endorsement.⁶

Dickinson admired writers such as Elizabeth Browning and the Brontes because they were capable of using their imaginative power to transform the role of the woman from being "the Angel of the House" (to use Virginia Woolf's term), to a more creative and existential level. In short, they reflected the desire in Dickinson for freedom from domesticity and submissiveness to male authority, and for a sense of literary autonomy and self-definition.

Dickinson's quest for self-definition was a struggle against all the incongruities of her time. She had to challenge all masters whether they were fathers, literary preceptors or religious faithfuls. Male writers of Dickinson's time met these challenges with little rejection from their society. For Dickinson it was doubly difficult. Whitman's idiosyncracies in form and subject matter were welcomed by, at least, some literary figures of his time. Dickinson's poems, however, were left in the attic of her father's house for several years after her death.

Both Dickinson and Whitman were "celebrating" the self. Whitman was licensed (as a male) to write boldly without fear of scolding. Dickinson not only disguised her poems

⁶Letters, p. 491.

behind heavy symbols, but she also withdrew them from the public eye.

In one of her most anthologized poems, "My Life had Stood," Dickinson captures the difficulties that she encountered and the anger at her deprivation, out of which she emerges powerful and unkind:

My Life had stood -- a Loaded Gun --
In Corners -- till a Day
The Owner passed -- identified --
And carried Me away --

And now we roam in Sovereign Woods
And now we hunt the Doe
The Mountains straight reply --

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the valley glow --
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let it's pleasure through --

And when at Night -- Our good Day done --
I guard My Mother's Head --
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillows -- to have shared --

To be of His -- I'm deadly foe --
None stir the second time --
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye --
Or an emphatic Thumb --

Though I than He -- may longer live
He longer must -- than I --
For I have but the power to kill,
Without -- the power to die -- (754)

By employing herself as an example in her poems, Dickinson became a pioneer in offering a liberal vision for the women of later generations. As Paula Bennett puts it, "Dickinson presents herself . . . as everything 'woman' is not: cruel

not pleasant, hard not soft, emphatic not weak, and one who kills not one who nurtures."

Dickinson carries out the effect of her vision through an exact juxtaposition. "My Life had Stood" is juxtaposed by another poem which portrays the other extreme. Had Dickinson not become willfully strong, she would have died "noteless." She recalls:

I was the slightest in the House --
I took the smallest Room -- At night, my little
Lamp, and Book --
And one Geranium --

So stationed I could catch the Mint
That never ceased to fall
And just my Basket --
Let me think -- I'm sure
That this was all --

I never spoke -- unless addressed --
And then 'twas brief and low --
I could not bear to live -- aloud --
The Racket shamed me so --

And if it had not been so far --
And any one I knew
Were going -- I had often thought:
How noteless -- I could die -- (486

The same juxtaposition is echoed by one of the most prominent poets of the 1960's confessional group, Sylvia Plath. In one of her journals of 1959, Plath wrote of the world of ash of which she has become part:

I am part of the world's ash, something
from which nothing can grow, nothing can
flower or come to fruit. In the lovely
words of 20th century medicine, I can't
ovulate . . . I have turned from being
an intellectual, a career woman: all

⁷Bennett, My Life, p. 6.

that is ash to me. And what do I meet
in myself? Ash. Ash and more ash.⁸

Plath's ash-ridden self triggers in her a profound rebellion
in which she shakes the ash off herself and rises in "Lady
Lazarus" to "eat men like air."

Ash, ash --
You poke and stir
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there --

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.⁹

Emily Dickinson's confessional self emerges from her
alienated self as a woman poet in 19th Century America
"victimized by a patriarchal society." She had always
resisted the restrictive definition of the woman's role in
her 19th Century society by freely expressing her emotions
and proposing herself as the spokeswoman for the women of
future generations. In January of 1846, she declared
herself "Eve" in a letter to Abiah Root:

I have lately come to the conclusion
that I am Eve, alias Mrs. Adam. You
know there is no account of her death in

⁸Sylvia Plath, The Journals of Sylvia Plath, ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York: The Dial Press, 1982) 311-312.

⁹Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus," Collected Poems, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) 244.

the Bible, and why am not I Eve? If you find any statements which you think likely to prove the truth of the case, I wish you would send them to me without delay.¹⁰

Dickinson's vision of herself as Eve stems from her critical insight into the women of her time and from her vision of a liberated woman. "She was," as Adrienne Rich once said, "one of the first to dive into the wreck of female life."¹¹

Dickinson's family circumstances, no matter how conservative, facilitated her critical thinking. Unlike many women of her time, Dickinson came from a conservative middle-class home and had the privilege of obtaining some education. She was descended from a family of educated men. Her grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, a graduate of Dartmouth College, in 1814 founded Amherst Academy, which under his direction became Amherst College in 1821. Amherst was devoted to the preservation of the orthodox tradition of the Puritan past. Her father, Edward, was an Amherst student and, later, a graduate of Yale. He was trained to carry on the orthodox tradition handed down to him by his father.

In an atmosphere of religious austerity, Dickinson managed to obtain her education. She attended Amherst Academy for six years and spent one more year at Mount

¹⁰Letters, p. 24.

¹¹David Porter, Dickinson: The Modern Idiom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981) 6.

Holyoke Female Seminary (1847-1848). Whether her education was a curse or a blessing, it certainly helped her shape her critical thinking by exposing her to liberal concepts of the time.

Her family's connections with Amherst College and with the intellectual atmosphere of the period made it possible for her to meet people such as Leonard Humphrey, a young intellectual with whom Dickinson had developed an intimate friendship. Humphrey was an advocate of intellectual and social equality. Josephine Pollitt describes him as a man whose "valedictory was a plea for the supremacy of the intellect, and for the free expression of an honest unborrowed opinion."¹² He belonged to a group of young men who, according to Pollitt,

were the masculine counterparts of Emily, Abiah, Eliza, and Susan. They donned starched, beruffled waistcoats, and Byronesque ties, and took a proud peep into the mirror at their short but fashionable beards. Then they gave an apparently indifferent second glance at Mason's Manual of Rules for Conversation.¹³

The educational and social systems of Dickinson's time allowed little for women to do. Self-denial, subordination, and domesticity were among the commended qualities of a female. Paula Bennett offers an overview of the position of

¹²Josephine Pollitt, Emily Dickinson: The Human Background of her Poetry (New York: Harper and Brother's Publishers, 1930) 60.

¹³Pollitt, p. 58.

the woman of Dickinson's time in her My Life a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics. She observed that women of Dickinson's time were evaluated according to their usefulness in the service of their men. The evangelical educational objective of that time also fostered this goal:

Teachers had to be "firmly established in the faith of the Christian religion." And students were soundly and frequently enjoined to profess Christ... For young women, the primary aim of... education was to help them accommodate themselves spiritually and psychologically to a role that was deemed by nature's and God's law, service oriented, domestic and subordinate to the male.¹⁴

Bennett's study of Mary Lyon's (first president of Mount Holyoke Seminary) biography, The Power of Christian Benevolence Illustrated in the Life and Labors of Mary Lyon (1852), shows even further devotion to the female role of subordination. "The excellence of the female character," according to Lyon,

...consists principally in a preparation to be happy herself in her social and domestic relations, and to make all others happy around her. All her duties, of whatever kind, are in an important sense social and domestic. They are retired and private and not public, like those of the other sex.¹⁵

Within this atmosphere of a religiously endorsed female subordination, Dickinson suffered an alienation from both religious and social circles of the time.

¹⁴Bennett, My Life, p. 9.

¹⁵Bennett, p. 19.

Dickinson's confessions in her letters to some of her intimate friends and relatives revealed her ambivalence toward religion and social norms. Her ambivalence could be detected in the earliest of her letters. Early in childhood Dickinson was critical of male domination. Older women, including her mother, were seen as fulfilling the inferior role drawn for them by men. In one of her poems she scorns the conventional Amherst Lady:

What Soft-Cherubic Creatures --
 These Gentlewomen are --
 One would as soon assault a Plush --
 Or violate a Star --

Such Dimity Convictions --
 A Horror is refined
 Of freckled Human Nature --
 Of Deity -- ashamed --

It's such a common -- Glory --
 A Fisherman's -- Degree --
 Redemption -- Brittle Lady --
 Be so -- ashamed of Thee -- (401)

The emptiness, the Victorian-like life of the Amherst gentlewoman did not attract Dickinson. The Amherst Lady leads a life of "refined horror" marked by a meaningless church-going. For this reason, Dickinson detested their lives and envisioned a different role for the women of her time.

She stated her rejection to the status quo of women in different letters that she wrote to her friends and relatives. In 1849 (when she was only 19), she wrote a letter to Abiah Root in which she describes how she "struggled with great temptation" in religion, which led her

only to a helpless victory. She goes on to describe herself as an outcast and as being in the "same place that Satan hailed from, when God asked him where he'd been." She then tells her about "a golden dream" that seems unattainable and that is shattered by the real world from which she ironically numerates her roles in the household.

I have been at work, providing the "food that perisheth," scaring the timorous dust, and being obedient, and kind. I call it kind obedience in the books the Shadows write in, it may have another name. I am yet the queen of the court, if regalia be dust, and dirt, have three loyal subjects, whom I'd rather relieve from service. Mother is still invalid tho' a partially restored one -- Father and Austin still clamor for food, and I, like a martyr am feeding them. Wouldn't you love to see me in these bonds of great despair, looking around my kitchen, and praying for kind deliverance, and declaring by "Omar's beard" I never was in such plight. My kitchen I think I called it, God forbid that it was, or shall be my own -- God keep me from what they call households, except that bright one of "faith"!¹⁶

Dickinson was as much annoyed by her household duties as she was by the women who accepted such duties on their own. Her alienation from friends and relatives, especially her mother, was extreme. In one of her letters to Colonel Higginson she once wrote that she "never had a mother" and that her mother "does not care for thought." In another letter she wrote "I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled," and in a third letter to Mrs.

¹⁶Letters, 99.

Higginson after the death of Dickinson's father, she wrote, "I have now no father, and scarcely a mother."

Dickinson's alienation from her mother was of course not because Mrs. Dickinson was not what in her time was considered a "good" mother. She loved, she nurtured, and she fulfilled her duties according to the expectations of her society. Dickinson saw her mother as a stereotypical woman of her time who "doesn't care for thought." Every time a mention of her mother occurs in her letters she is described either as invalid or "hurrying around with her hair in a silk pocket handkerchief, on account of dust." Emily didn't want to follow in her mother's steps of self-denial, blind obedience, and submissiveness. Her mother's situation was a source of anxiety and anger to her. She had always felt threatened by the same conditions that reduced her mother to a mere tool, industrious and loving, yet with no thoughts. She expressed her worries in a letter to Jane Humphrey in January of 1850:

Vinnie away -- and my two hands but two hands not four or five as they ought to be -- and so many wants -- and me so very handy -- and my time of so little account -- and my writing so very needless -- and really I came to the conclusion that I should be a villain unparralleled (sic) if I took but an inch of time for so unholy a purpose of writing a friendly letter- for what need had I of sympathy or very much less of affection -- or less than they all -- of friends- mind the house -- and the food -- sweep if the spirits were low... The path of duty looks very ugly indeed -- and the place where I want to go amiable

-- a great deal -- it is so much easier
to do wrong than right -- so much
pleasanter to be evil than good.¹⁷

To Emily Dickinson, the religious circles of her time were no less absurd than the social ones. She had always thought of religion as the preceptor of social inequality. On such account she resisted all invitations for conversion. Among all the students at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, she was the only student who failed to bring herself to a conversion. Accepting religion meant to her accepting the social ideals of Amherst -- the Connecticut Valley settlement with its heavy Puritan roots -- and this was not an easy matter for Dickinson. The incongruity between her society's beliefs and her own isolated her and kept the possibility of a harmonious relationship unattainable. Still, Dickinson wrestled with herself on the issue of faith. She saw in religion some inviting qualities which she yearned to obtain. Religion contains peace, and thoughts, but will these qualities ever outweigh the social inequality that it fosters? For Dickinson it never did. Her ambivalence continued; for she found "no rose without a thorn." In January of 1846, she wrote Abiah Root in response to Abiah's inquiry about Emily's faith:

I have had the same feelings myself dear
A. I was almost persuaded to be a
Christian. I thought I never again
could be thoughtless and worldly -- and
I can say that I never enjoyed such

¹⁷Letters, 82.

perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior. But I soon forgot my morning prayer or else it was irksome to me. One by one my old habits returned and I cared less for religion than ever... When I am most happy there is a sting in every enjoyment. I find no rose without a thorn. There is a aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world never can fill.¹⁸

In another letter she wrote to Abiah Root, she commented again on the same subject. "It is hard for me to give up the world," she wrote. In April of 1850 her anguish climaxes; in her letter to Jane Humphrey, she described her state of rebellion and loneliness, envying others who enjoyed a very tranquil life with Christ:

Christ is calling every one here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless. Abby, Mary, Jane and furthest of all my Vinnie have been seeking, and they all believe they have found; I can't tell you what they have found, but they think it is something precious. I wonder if it is? How strange is this sanctification, that works such a marvelous change, that sows in such corruption, and rises in golden glory, that brings Christ down... They seem so very tranquil, and their voices are kind, and gentle, and the tears fill their eyes so often, I really think I envy them, and the eyes of the disobedient look down, and become ashamed.¹⁹

¹⁸Letters, 27.

¹⁹Letters, 94.

Despite her ambivalence, Dickinson rejected altogether the paths of religion, marriage, and duty that her society chose for her. Instead she followed her intuitions in her search for an identity. Her resolution was to abandon religion in favor of the freedom to write, to imagine, and to be whatever she wanted to be. In 1862, she declared her autonomy by separating herself from religion and all its rituals and institutions.

I'm ceded -- I've stopped being Theirs --
 The name they dropped upon my face
 With water, in the country church
 Is finished using, now,
 And They can put it with my Dolls,
 My childhood, and the string of spools,
 I've finished threading -- too.

Baptized, before, without the choice
 But this time, consciously, of Grace --
 Unto supremest name --
 Called to my Full -- The Crescendo dropped --
 Existence's whole Arc, lifted up,
 With one small Diadem.

My second Rank -- too small the first --
 Crowned -- Crowning -- on my father's breast --
 A half unconscious Queen --
 But this time -- Adequate -- Erect,
 With Will to choose, or to reject,
 And I choose, just a crown -- (508)

Thus her friendship with her childhood friends came to a halt. Their "traditional" interest in men and the domination of religion over the rhythm of their lives was beyond what Dickinson could cope with. By the time Dickinson was in her twenties, her attachment to Abiah Root, Jane Humphrey, Emily Fowler Ford, and Abby Wood became insignificant. After their marriages, Dickinson gave up on

them; she no longer saw in them the confiders to whom she would share her deepest self.

It was in her late twenties that Dickinson became a mature artist with much originality and independence. She began by exploring the emotional side of her personality. Her production of poems and letters reached its peak and her writing became more private and confessional. Her relationship with Sue Gilbert and Kate Anthon are two landmarks on this path of confessions.

Despite the fact that her confessions are disguised behind heavy symbolism and obscure imagery, Dickinson treated a major 20th Century theme: female bonding; a woman's love of a woman -- a theme which has become the concern of female Confessional artists only during the 1960s and later. Several biographers and critics introduced serious studies dealing with Dickinson's alleged lesbian attachment to Kate Scott Anthon and Sue Gilbert, Dickinson's sister-in-law. In 1852, Dickinson wrote a letter to Gilbert that became major evidence on the issue:

Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday, and be my own again, and kiss me as you used to? Shall I indeed behold you, not "darkly, but face to face" or am I fancying so, and dreaming blessed dreams from which the day will wake me? I hope for you so much, and feel so eager for you, feel that I cannot wait, feel that now I must have you -- that the expectation once more to see your face again makes me feel hot and feverish, and my heart beats so fast -- I go to sleep at night, and the first thing I know, I am sitting there wide

awake, and clasping my hands tightly,
and thinking of next Saturday, and
"never a bit" of you. Why, Susie, it
seems to me as if my absent lover was
coming home so soon -- and my heart must
be so busy, making ready for him.²⁰

Other than the erotic attachment that this letter and many others like it may imply, Dickinson was actually attracted to some other qualities in Sue's personality. Sue was an orphan who was as defiant as Dickinson herself was to her subservient position. Furthermore, Sue was an intellectual woman; she was a poet who "with the exception of Shakespeare," according to Dickinson's acknowledgment, "told [Dickinson] of more knowledge than anyone living."²¹ For this reason, the shock of Sue's retreat to religion and marriage was devastating to Dickinson:

Sue -- you can go or stay -- There is
but one alternative -- We differ often
lately, and this must be the last. You
need not fear to leave me lest I should
be alone for I often part with things I
fancy I have loved, -- sometimes to the
grave... Sue -- I have lived by this.
It is the lingering emblem of the Heaven
I once dreamed, and though if this is
taken, I shall remain alone, and though
in that last day, the Jesus Christ you
love, remark he does not know me... We
have walked very pleasantly -- Perhaps
this is the point at which our paths
diverge -- then pass on singing Sue, and
up the distant hill I journey on.²²

²⁰Letters, 215.

²¹Letters, 215.

²²Letters, 305-6.

As early as 1951, Rebecca Patterson introduced a case for Dickinson's romantic attachment to Kate Anthon -- an attachment the termination of which, according to Patterson, left Dickinson "for the rest of her life... never sure whether she herself was mad or sane."²³ Despite the fact that little evidence is available among Dickinson's letters and poems (5 letters and few poems were directly addressed to Kate) to support her thesis, Patterson insists that the addressee of Dickinson's poems is Kate Anthon, and argues that her poems which are addressed to a male lover are only meant to distract the audience and to disguise her real love for Kate Anthon:

There is no man -- no real man --
anywhere in the poems. With an audience
in mind, Emily tried to create a male
lover; that is, she tried to redirect
genuine emotion into an unfamiliar
channel, and the effect is sometimes
odd. Wherever the poems become real,
however, the personality that emerges is
not that of a man. Masculine readers
have spoken of the "intellectual"
quality of her love poems. They have
shown awareness that the poems were not
addressed to them.²⁴

Whether the love relationship that Dickinson's letters and poems show to her female friends is erotic or not, it anticipates 20th Century writers such as Alice Walker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich. Adrienne Rich could write

²³Rebecca Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951) 11.

²⁴Patterson, The Riddle, 7.

"I am Lesbian / My children are themselves / Mother-in-law, before we part / Shall we try again?"²⁵ But Dickinson knew her limitation; she knew when to be reticent and when to be bold. When others were involved she was careful not to cause them embarrassment. In a letter that she wrote to Higginson in 1862, she was willing to write descriptively about her physical unattractiveness:

I had no portrait, now, but am small,
like the wren, and my Hair is bold, like
the Chestnut Bur -- and my eyes, like
the Sherry in the glass, that guest
leaves -Would this do just as well?²⁶

But she was reticent about her emotions:

When I state myself as in the
Representative of the Verse -- it does
not mean -- me -- but a supposed
person.²⁷

This reticence should not surprise us, because even Sylvia Plath distorted her characters in The Bell Jar for the same reason. In the biographical note that is attached to the novel, Lois Ames wrote:

Sylvia Plath had adopted the pen name (Victoria Lucas) for publication of her first novel because she questioned its literary value and did not believe it was a "serious work;" she was also worried about the pain publication might cause to the many people close to her

²⁵Adrienne Rich, A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981) 32.

²⁶Letters, 411.

²⁷Letters, 412.

whose personalities she had distorted
and lightly disguised in the book.²⁸

Emily Dickinson also had the same ambivalence about her poetry. She must have questioned its literary value when she wrote her first letter to Higginson:

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 -- Should you think
it breathed -- and had you the leisure
to tell me, I should feel quick
gratitude.²⁹

To conclude, Dickinson's alienation stems basically from her dissatisfaction with her subservient position as a female in a patriarchal society which allowed little for women to do. Her failure to unite her female friends in a common cause alienated her even further: Her struggle in trying to gain supporters for her call for liberation brought with it a literature which is personal, intimate, and rebelliously feminist.

²⁸Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar with a biographical note by Lois Ames (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 203.

²⁹Letters, 403.

CHAPTER V

EMILY DICKINSON AND SYLVIA PLATH: A BIOGRAPHICAL ANALOGY

Despite the fact that Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath lived almost one century apart, there are striking, consistent and thought-provoking biographical and thematic similarities between them. Their lives are marked by similar events and influences which exerted important effects on their art.

On the artistic level, both Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath began their adult literary careers with a stage of alienation which led to later mental breakdown. Both treat confessional themes such as father/mother-daughter relationship, alienation, loss, death, suicide and mental breakdown. Both shared and revolutionized traditional symbols such as the bee, the sea and the flower, which they used again and again in their poetry.

On the biographical level, both writers came from upper middle class families with good means. They had authoritarian fathers who married domestic and humble women. Both are said to have been sexually attracted to their fathers. Both blamed their fathers for what befell them in their lives, and viewed them as the authors of their personal misery. They resisted the mother bond and dismissed it as a hinderance in their psychological maturity. Both had similar maturing experiences which

exerted important influences on their lives and triggered their attacks on the conventions of their times: Sylvia Plath at the age of twenty one at Smith College, and Emily Dickinson at the age of sixteen during her Mount Holyoke Female Seminary experience.

Both Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath came from patriarchal, conservative Massachusetts families. Plath's father was a well-known professor of German and entomology at Boston University. His fame comes from his well-known book on bees, Bumble Bees and Their Ways. Dickinson's father, Edward Dickinson, was a graduate of Yale College in 1823, and he was admitted to the Bar in 1826. He served as a treasurer of Amherst College, a representative in the General Court of Massachusetts, a delegate to the National Whig Convention in Baltimore in 1852, and as a representative to the Thirty-Third congress, 1853-1855.

Both men married congenial, submissive women who became totally dependent on them. The submissiveness of the mothers bequeathed the daughters with annoying responsibilities which became, later in their lives, devastating to their psychological well-being. Despite the fact that Sylvia suffered the loss of her father when she was eight years old and Emily lost her father when she was forty-four, both women felt betrayed and abandoned upon the death of their fathers. Emily was left with the sole responsibility of taking care of her invalid mother. Plath,

on the other hand, felt betrayed by the death of her father. His early death left her to struggle in life under the erroneous guidance of her mother -- a situation which caused an endless ambivalence towards her father.

The submissiveness, the dependence on masculine directions, and the inferiority complex from which the mothers suffered on the one hand, and the father's superior attitudes towards women on the other generated unhealthy admiration for fathers and failure to identify with their mothers as models of femininity.

John Cody, whose study, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson, appeared in 1971 offers a balanced evaluation of Edward Dickinson's personality:

For Edward Dickinson, women were distinctly inferior beings. He appears to have held the common nineteenth century masculine view that they were incapable of serious thought, could not understand what the world of affairs was all about, and were, except for the performance of a very circumscribed assortment of domestic chores, helplessly dependent on masculine strength, foresight, organization and direction.¹

Cody then proceeds to investigate the sun symbol in Dickinson's poetry in relation to the dominance of her father. In more than one poem, Dickinson uses the sun to identify masculine qualities contrary to the literary

¹John Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971) 93.

tradition of her time which equated the sun with femininity. Of the 221 poems that contain a reference to the sun, Cody found only 32 with an explicit reference to gender. In the 32 poems, however, the analogy between the sun and the male figure (presumably the figure of her father) appears to be most expressive. The sun, Cody asserts, is much like her father's figure in that it enforces his authority on dark earth (a female symbol); the sun rays are also seen as a phallic symbol:

There is often a suggestion of phallic imagery in Emily Dickinson's lines on the sun. Here [poem #1550] the "Disk" is the sun with its shining corona -- the "yellow whip" of poem 1190 that subdues the rebellious.²

Cody concludes that Emily Dickinson's early deprivation from a sound daughter-mother relationship caused some psychological disturbances to her. These disturbances were responsible for erotic and incestuous thoughts towards her father and her brother Austin. In trying to overcome or encounter these incestuous thoughts, Cody believes, Dickinson turned to erotic thoughts about older women and in some cases older men the age of her father, such as Judge Otis Phillips Lord.

If Emily Dickinson had been able to accept her mother as a suitable model of femininity, and thus to accept herself as a female, she would have developed a less conflicted personality. But she rejected her mother as a model for

²Cody, After General Pain, p. 426-427.

identification. Her mother's actual inadequacies may have been only partly to blame for their response. It probably was also encouraged to a significant degree by Edward Dickinson's attitude toward his wife and toward women in general.³

Sylvia Plath's attachment to her father was not unlike that of Emily Dickinson. Robert Phillips suggests in his "The Dark Tunnel: A Reading of Sylvia Plath," that "a pattern of guilt over imagined incest informs all of Plath's prose and poetry."⁴ Otto Plath's early death is interpreted by his daughter as an early betrayal and rejection which she continuously protests in her poetry and prose by recreating him in order to retaliate. Unlike Dickinson, however, Plath encounters her erotic and incestuous thoughts about her father through marriage. Phillips observes:

Naturally, if the sexual libido were to function unchecked in this manner, daughters would go about killing their mothers and sleeping with their fathers, or vice versa. Fortunately, in life, the libido is forced to seek new love objects as Plath did in marriage.⁵

Like Dickinson, however, Plath had an ambivalence which oscillated between admiration and fear of her father. With Plath, though, fear develops into hatred and the desire for revenge. Such feelings are clearly portrayed in her well known poem "Daddy."

³Cody, After Great Pain, p. 93.

⁴Phillips, Confessional Poets, p. 128.

⁵Phillips, p. 132.

Daddy, I have had to kill you
 You died before I had time --
 Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
 Ghastly statue with one gray toe
 Big as a frisco seal

I was ten when they buried you.
 At twenty I tried to die
 And get back, back, back to you.
 I thought even the bones would do

There's a stake in your fat black heart
 And the villagers never liked you
 They are dancing and stamping on you
 They always knew it was you.
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.⁶

Both Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath had the experience of having obsessive and submissive mothers who saw their daughters as extensions of themselves. Plath's mother, Mrs. Otto Plath, was allowed to exercise direct influence on her daughter after the death of Sylvia's father. Mrs. Plath prescribed patterns of behavior for her daughter, drew plans for her for matters related to the personal sides of her life, and chose a career for her. In The Bell Jar, Sylvia recalls:

My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and I hated him for leaving no money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen. She was always on to me to learn shorthand after college, and so I'd have practical skills as well as a college degree. "Even the apostles were

⁶Ted Hughes, ed. The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath (New York: Harper and Row, 1960) 222.

tentmakers," she'd say. "They have to live just the way we do."⁷

To a certain degree, Mrs. Plath succeeded in conditioning her daughter to the way of life that she chose for her, and Sylvia was responsive to a great extent to her mother's expectations. She was careful not to sever the bond between herself and her mother; she married a man of her mother's dream and became a loyal wife and an industrious mother. In doing so, Sylvia was hoping to combine her mother's expectations and her own desires. She wanted to be a woman "who made delectable dinners with one hand while she wrote poems with the other."⁸

As the discrepancy between Sylvia Plath's and her mother's expectations widened, the possibility of any compromise became impossible. Sylvia grew more and more impatient with her mother's view of life. In "The Disquietening Muses" Sylvia wrote:

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
And praised my arabesques and trills,
Although each teacher found my touch
Oddly wooden in spite of scales
And the hours a practicing, my ear
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.
I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere
From muses unhired by you, dear mother.

I woke one day to see you, mother,
Floating above me in bluest air
On a green balloon bright with a million
Flowers and bluebirds that never were

32. ⁷Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar (New York: Bantam, 1972)

⁸Bennett, My Life a Loaded Gun, 104.

But the little planet bobbed away
 Like a soap-bubble as you called, come here!
 And I faced my traveling companions.⁹

And in 1958, five years before Sylvia's death, she wrote in one of her journals:

What do I expect by "love" from her? What is it I don't get that makes me cry?" I think I have always felt she uses me as an extension of herself, that when I commit suicide, or try to, it is a "shame" to her, an accusation: which it was, of course. An accusation that her love was defective. I felt I could not write because she would appropriate it. Is that all? I felt if I didn't write nobody would accept me as a human being.¹⁰

Mrs. Dickinson was not given the chance to practice much influence on her daughter. She was aware of the fact that as long as her husband lived, she had surrendered her rights of "thinking" to him. Dickinson repeatedly alluded to her mother's lack of individuality and disliked her submissiveness and backwardness, and simple mindedness. In a letter to Mrs. Holland she once wrote:

Mother pines for you, and says you were "so social." Mother misses power to ramble to her neighbors -- and stale inflation of the minor news.¹¹

There is no doubt that Emily Dickinson admired educated women and felt closer to them than to her mother. Her mother is of the type who enjoy the "stale inflation of the minor news." Mrs. Holland, on the other hand, belongs to

⁹Plath, Collected Poems; pp. 75-76.

¹⁰Plath, Journals, p. 281

¹¹Emily Dickinson, Letters, p. 593.

the intellectual life that Mrs. Dickinson dismisses as "so social." In another letter to Mrs. Holland, Emily alluded to her mother's faulty conservatism:

Austin and I were talking the other night about the extension of consciousness, after Death, and Mother told Vinnie, afterward, she thought it was "very improper." She forgets that we are past "correction in righteousness."¹²

The biographical parallels between Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson are almost uncanny. Similar episodes in the lives of the two are numerous. Through their adult stage, each of the two writers' rebellions against the idiosyncracies of their times was triggered by one single experience. Emily Dickinson's experience at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary brought her to the realization of the wantonness of religion, and to the people's blind adherence and obedience to traditions and religion. Her dissatisfaction with her surroundings drove her to alienation and self doubt. Johnson comments on Dickinson's experience at Mount Holyoke by saying:

Her Holyoke experience gave her a sense of inadequacy that she never fully overcame. Often in the years that follow she playfully but self-consciously refers to her 'lost' condition.¹³

¹²Emily Dickinson, Letters, p. 667

¹³Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 15.

Plath's experience at Smith College gave her a similar sense of inadequacy to that of Dickinson. "For the first time in my life," she wrote in The Bell Jar, "I felt dreadfully inadequate. The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn't thought about it. The one thing I was good at was winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end."¹⁴

Both Dickinson and Plath turned to writing as an escape from their feeling of inadequacy. For both of them, writing became more than a therapy; it became an existential act related to their being. Both of them were not particular about publishing, they chose mentors at an early stage in their poetic careers. Their mentors helped in encouraging their literary development, offered genuine concern for their emotional as well as literary progress, and served as private audiences who helped in keeping private things private.

According to Johnson, the year 1862 is an important year in the history of American Literature. It is the year when Dickinson wrote her first letter to Higginson seeking advice and guidance.

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my
Verse is alive?
The Mind is near itself, it cannot see,
distinctly -- and I have none to ask --
Should you think it breathed and had you the
leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude

¹⁴Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 62.

-- If I make the mistake -- that you dared to tell
me -- would give me sincere honor -- toward
you --¹⁵

Between the years 1862 and 1886, Dickinson's correspondence with Higginson was motivated by Dickinson's desire to know and to learn. Her letters to Higginson are marked by gratitude and humility. Remarks such as, "Could you teach me now?" (Letters, 403); "would you but guide" (sic) (Letters, 491); "Thank you for the advice" (Letters, 681) are numerous.

Despite Dickinson's gratitude to Higginson, she did not seem to have learned much from him. Her gratitude to him was due to something other than his literary patronage. In one of her letters (June 1889), she wrote to him: "You were not aware that you saved my life. To thank you in person has been since then one of my few requests." In this letter Dickinson is most likely referring to an early experience that she had gone through in September of 1862, the nature of which remains a mystery despite various speculations.

In his criticism of Dickinson's poetry, Higginson was directing her to write poetry that could be published if conformed to the literary standards of the time. But Dickinson's intentions were not in favor of publication. When Higginson suggested that she delay publication, she replied:

¹⁵Dickinson, Letters, p. 40-3.

I smile when you suggest that I delay
 "to publish" -- that being foreign to my
 thought as Firmament to Fin -- ¹⁶

According to the measures of Dickinson's time, her poetry seemed foreign and unpoetic. But to her it represented her private self, which she thought should remain private. Not only did Dickinson reject publication, but she also rejected, repeatedly, Higginson's modifications of her poetry.

The more familiar Dickinson became with Higginson's concept of poetry, the more aware she became of the disparity between her ideas and his. For Dickinson poetry is a mystical and a spontaneous force that cures and purifies; it cures the poet through a therapeutic process and purifies the reader's sense of life. In more than one instance in her letters, Dickinson confirms the therapeutic value of poetry. Poetry, eventually, made life easier for her to live. She wrote different remarks to Higginson concerning this matter. "I felt palsy, here - the Verses just relieve," she once wrote, and "I had a terror. . . and so I sing," she wrote in another letter.

Authentic poetry, according to Dickinson, is that which Emerson described in the Dial as "'The Poetry of the Portfolio;' the work, that is, of persons who wrote for the relief of their own minds, and without thought of publication. Such poetry, when accumulated for years, will

¹⁶Dickinson, Letters, p. 405

have at least the merit of perfect freedom."¹⁷ But more than that, authentic poetry, according to Dickinson is that which influences the reader by creating a dramatic change in his body and mind. She once wrote to Higginson defining poetry:

If I read a book [and] it makes my whole
body so cold no fire can warm me I know
that is poetry. These are the only way
I know it. Is there any other way.
[sic]¹⁸

Higginson, whose definition of poetry is derived from a traditional Victorian perspective, found much interest in Dickinson's poetry but little artistic value. Higginson was attracted basically to the "poet's seclusion and [to] the primitive, Blake-like quality of her verse," as he suggested in his preface to the first volume of her poetry that he published together with Mabel Loomis Todd in 1890.

Dickinson finally realized that she needed Higginson as a friend more than she needed him as a critic. His modifications to Dickinson's poems were rarely adopted. As early as 1862, she wrote in response to his criticism of her poems by saying:

You think my gait "spasmodic" - I am in
danger - Sir - You think me
"uncontrolled" - I have no Tribunal.

¹⁷Willis, J. Buckingham, ed., Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890's: A Documentary History (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989) 3.

¹⁸Dickinson, Letters, pp. 4732-74.

Would you have time to be the friend you should think I need?¹⁹

The relationship between Sylvia Plath and A. Alvarez is similar to that between Dickinson and Higginson. In his study of suicide, The Savage God, Alvarez suggests that Plath never was serious about committing suicide, and that she was always in search of somebody to save her. At the time of her death (Winter 1963), she happened to be alone with nobody to save her. Her loneliness was intensified by a recent divorce, the lack of any help with the children, and by a rough cold winter with frozen pipes, illness and depression. Unlike Dickinson, who found many friends to save her in similar situations, Plath had fewer friends.

Alvarez served as a preceptor to Plath in the same way Higginson did for Dickinson. He recorded in his The Savage God that Plath used to bring him poems frequently and recite them in his presence.

Sylvia dropped in fairly often on her visits to London, always with a batch of new poems to read. This way I first heard, among others, the "Bee" poems, "A Birthday Present," "The Applicant," "Getting There," "Fever 103," "Letter in November," and "Ariel," which I thought extraordinary. I told her it was the best thing she had done, and a few days later she sent me a clean copy of it, carefully written out in her heavy rounded script.²⁰

¹⁹Dickinson, Letters, p. 409

²⁰Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (New York: Random House, 1972) 16.

After the publication of Robert Lowell's Life Studies, the demand for confessional poetry came to its peak. Through his work with The Observer, Alvarez was able to help Plath in publishing some of her poems. Alvarez was critical of Plath's poetry, but almost always he was supportive. For example, he recorded the following situation in which he offered advice:

There was one line I picked on in particular:

Gentlemen Ladies
These are my hands,
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,
I may be Japanese

"Why Japanese?" I niggled away at her.
"Do you just need the rhyme? Or are you trying to hitch an easy lift by dragging in the atomic victims? . . ." She argued back, but later, . . . the line had gone.²¹

The biographical similarities between Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath are reflected in their art. Their art has been described by different critics as highly personal since their world integrates art with life and poetry with prose.

Plath narrates her life story in her novel, The Bell Jar, as well as in her poetry. Dickinson narrates her life in her letters and in her poems. The close relationship between each writer's prose and poetry is a remarkable indication on the authenticity with which their art reflects their life.

²¹Alvarez, A Savage God, p. 17.

Plath wrote The Bell Jar in the middle of her poetic career, before Ariel and after Colossus. The novel captures autobiographical incidents from Plath's life until Ariel, and Ariel picks up where The Bell Jar ends. The Bell Jar narrates incidents from Sylvia Plath's life under the disguise of a fictional character, Easter Greenwood. Different episodes in the novel correlate to others in Plath's poetry. In The Bell Jar, Plath wrote the following recreation of an actual visit she made to a dissecting room in a hospital.

Buddy took me out into the hall where
they had some big glass bottles full of
babies that had died before they were
born. The baby in the first bottle had
a large white head bent over a tiny
curled up body the size of a frog. The
baby in the next bottle was bigger and
the baby next to that one was bigger
still and the baby in the last bottle
was the size of a normal baby and he
seemed to be looking at me and smiling a
little piggy smile.²²

In "Two Views of a Cadaver Room," one of Plath's most anthologized poems, she repeats the same incident.

The day she visited the dissecting room
They had four men laid out, black as
burnt turkey,
Already half unstrung. A vinegary fume
Of the death vats clung to them;
The white-smocked boys started working.
The head of his cadaver had caved in,
And she could scarcely make out anything
In that rubble of skull plates and old
leather.
A sallow piece of string held together.

²²Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 51.

In their jars the snail-nosed babies
 moon and glow. He hands her the
 cut-out heart like a
 cracked heirloom.²³

Examples of this correlation are numerous. "Suicide off Egg Rock," is another poem the idea of which is repeated in chapter thirteen of The Bell Jar.

Dickinson didn't write a novel, but her poetry is actually a narrative poem of her life. The close relation between her poetry and fiction on the one hand, and the close relation between her poetry and her life on the other is best described by Gilbert and Gubar.

Dickinson's life itself . . . became a kind of novel or narrative poem in which, through an extraordinary complex series of maneuvers, aided by costumes that came inevitably to hand, this inventive poet enacted and eventually resolved both her anxieties about her art and her anger at female subordination. Her terse, explosive poems are therefore, in a sense, the speech of a fictional character, for as she told Higginson, "When I state myself, as the Representation of the Verse -- it does not mean -- me -- but a supposed person." Indeed understood as an elaborate set of dramatic monologues, her poems constitute the "dialogue" in an extended fiction whose subject is the life of that supposed person who was originally called Emily Dickinson but who christened herself variously, Emilie, Daisy, Brother Emily, Uncle Emily, and simply Dickinson.²⁴

²³Plath, Collected Poems, p. 115.

²⁴Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, p. 583.

The biographical similarities that I have presented in this chapter between Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson were responsible, to a great extent, for similarities in the thematic aspects of the two writer's works - a theme that I will pursue in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VI

EMILY DICKINSON AND SYLVIA PLATH: A THEMATIC ANALOGY

The thematic similarities between the poetry of Sylvia Plath and that of Emily Dickinson are strikingly numerous and close. As their poetry matured, it moved from the representation of the outside reality to the representation of the inside self. The absurdity that encountered them in the outside world turned their attention to their inner self; external alienation is transformed into an internal one. This movement in their poetry is coupled with a division in their artistic achievements. The first parts of both poets' careers are less eventful and are said to lack artistic maturity of idiom and expression.

Existential suffering in Plath's and Dickinson's poetry proceeds in three distinct stages. In the first stage the writer experiences alienation, both internal and external, loneliness and metaphysical torture. Alienation and suffering lead to the second stage of fortitude and action. Once the writer realizes the extent of her suffering, she tries to put an end to it. The third stage is the stage of personal failure.

The first stage is necessary for the poet's creative faculties. Clark Griffith notices in his The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry that "One clear fact from Miss Dickinson's life is that seclusion was a necessary

condition for creativity, that experience had to be retreated from before it could be written about. If her personal behavior was mad and in some respects it no doubt was, then the madness was at least a productive aberration, very close to genius."¹ Plath also wrote in one of her journals referring to her Ariel poems, "Terrific stuff, as if domesticity choked me." The more intense the suffering, the better the quality of the poetry produced.

Dickinson's personal tragedy, as I have shown in the course of this dissertation, climaxes during the 1860's and precisely during the year 1862. Dickinson wrote the bulk of her poetry between the years 1859 and 1863. After 1863, her production decreased drastically. She did not write more than one thousand poems between the year 1863 and her death. Biographical materials about Dickinson show the period of her hardest times to be the most productive. Dickinson during the year 1862 was responding to a terror, the nature of which is unknown to us and to her preceptor, Higginson, who received her letter that same year. "I had a terror -- since September -- I could tell to none -- and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Grounds because I am afraid."

Plath's most productive years happen also to be her hardest times (1959-1965). During this period, she had gone through two births, a miscarriage, and an appendectomy; and the last period of her life was climaxed by a cold winter in

¹Griffith, p. 9.

England, the coldest winter since 1813, separation from her husband, and a full responsibility for two children with little financial means. It was during this period that she wrote her best poems. In one of her letters while writing Ariel, she shows her awareness of this fact. "I am writing the best poems of my life, they will make my name."² Not only the quality of her poems, but the number was also remarkable. She wrote:

Every morning . . . I am up about five
in my study, with coffee, writing like
mad -- have managed a poem a day before
breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff,
as if domesticity had choked me."³

The hurt in Dickinson's and Plath's poetry is basically metaphysical and existential in its manifestations. The poets' suffering comes from the outside world and is reflected into the inner self. The chaos and the disorder in the outside world are of major concern to the poets who find themselves caught in their cobwebs. By internalizing the conflicts of the outside world within themselves, the poets made of their personal experience a universal one. Plath said in a BBC interview concerning this matter:

I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the

²Sylvia Plath, Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (London: Faber and Faber, 1976) 468.

³Letters Home, p. 466.

larger things, the bigger things, such as Hiroshima and Dachau.⁴

The outside world is a source of anxiety and disorder for the self; it contaminates it with alienation and meaningless suffering that, in most cases, comes from nowhere. Both Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath employ different images and metaphors to describe such an inexplicable suffering. Among these images are sickness, nausea and light/darkness, and other private symbols. Sickness in Plath's poetry transcends the physical, in the manner of Sartre, to become a metaphysical torture. Here is how she describes a nausea case in her novel The Bell Jar:

The sickness rolled through me in great waves. After each wave it would fade away and leave me limp as a wet leaf and shivering all over and then I would feel it rising up in me again and the glittering white torture chamber tiles under my feet and over my head and on all four sides closed in and squeezed me to pieces.⁵

This does not sound like a description of a usual nausea one would experience after a taxi ride. Nausea becomes part of her being in the manner of a Sartre's nauseated character. In Nausea, Sartre describes Roquentin's "sweetish disease" which creeps to him through solid objects in the following words:

⁴The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets, ed. Peter Orr (London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) 170.

⁵Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 36.

Now I see: I recall better than I held
the pebble. It was a sort of sweetish
sickness. How unpleasant it was: It
came from the stone in my hand. Yes,
that's it. That's just it . . . A sort
of nausea in the hands.⁶

In one poem, "Suicide off Egg Rock," Plath describes
the ugliness of our modern civilization and the imperfection
of the landscape as being intermingled with Egg Rock's
bowels:

Behind him the hot dogs split and drizzled
On the public grills, and the ochreous salt flats,
Gas tanks, factory stacks -- that landscape
Of Imperfections in his bowels was part of --
Rippled and pulsed in the glassy updraught.
Sun struck the water like a damnation.
No pit of shadow to crawl into,
And his blood beating the old tattoo
I am, I am, I am . . .⁷

Dickinson's favorite metaphor for this reciprocal
relationship between nature/the outside world and the self
is the light/dark metaphor. In her Lunacy of Light: Emily
Dickinson and the Experience of Metaphor, Wendy Barker
notices that "letters written between 1846 and 1851 show the
youthful poet already developing imagery that expresses her
sense of opposition to the sun. In fact, even this early,
she is not only describing the light of day without painful
ambivalence, but she is also associating the sun's light
with constraints upon her ability to communicate, with

⁶Jean Paul Sartre, Nausea, trans. Lloyd Alexander,
Intro. Hayden Carruth (New York: New Directions, 1964).
6.

⁷Plath, Collected Poems, p. 115.

constraints upon her own use of language, her intellectual freedom."⁸ Her most important poem in this respect is "There's a certain Slant of Light." In this poem the light oppresses us, gives us "Heavenly Hurt," and "internal difference."

There's a certain Slant of Light,
Winter Afternoons --
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes --

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us --
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are --

None may teach it -- Any --
'Tis the Seal Despair
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air --

When it comes, Her Landscape listens --
Shadows -- hold their breath --
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death -- (258)

In "ELM" Plath uses the same metaphor of light/darkness in referring to her internal torture:

I am inhabited by a cry.
Nighty it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings,
its malignity.⁹ (p. 193)

⁸Wendy Barker, Lunacy of Light: Emily Dickinson and the Experience of Metaphor (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987. 3.

⁹Plath, Collected Poems, p. 193.

Both poets use mushrooms as a metaphor for the alienation of man from nature. Mushrooms are prolific yet fragile, and the mushroom images suggest the evanescence of human life, which is parasitical and short-lived. Men think that they will inherit the earth. They, like mushrooms, rise and make space for themselves among other creatures, but they "Diet on Water,/On Crumbs of shadow," and their life "Is Shorter than a Snake's Delay." Plath wrote in "Mushrooms:"

Overnight, very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on
Heaving the needles,
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving
Our hammers, our rams,
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies,
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,
On crumbs of shadow,
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.
So many of us!
So many of us!

We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible.

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiplies:
We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.¹⁰

Dickinson's poem also opens with the same concept that
Plath's poem opens with -- the fast-growing mushroom:

The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants --
At Evening it is not --
At Morning, in a Truffled Hug
It stops upon a spot

As if it tarried always
And yet its whole Career
Is shorter than a Snake's Delay
And Fleeter than a Tare --

'Tis Vegetation's Juggler --
The Germ of Alibi
Doth like a Bubble antedate
And like a Bubble, lie --

I feel as if the Grass was pleased
To have it intermit --
This surreptitious scion
Of Summer's circumspect.

Had Nature any supple face
Or could she one condemn --

Had Nature an Apostate
That Mushroom -- it is Him! (1298)

The second stage in the tragic development of Plath's
and Dickinson's poetic career is the stage of fortitude, the
bedrock of existential philosophy. In this stage the poets

¹⁰Plath, Collected Poems, pp. 139-140.

directed their attack toward religion and society as the two forces binding the free self.

As early as 1846, Dickinson began to show her religious doubts. Her ambivalence towards religion is expressed in different letters to her friends. She was never able to make a final pledge to heaven, and her parting from religion began to increase until she was classified by Mary Lyon, founder of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, among the "no-hope" of salvation group. It seems that upon leaving Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1848, she had come to a final resolution concerning her relationship with God. Her resolution was that she could not "give up the world." In different poems she referred to the world as the Circumference. "My business is Circumference," she once wrote to Higginson. And in one poem she wrote that when she "saw no Way" in Heaven, she "Went out upon Circumference."

I saw no Way -- The Heavens were
 stitched --
 I felt the Columns close --
 The Earth reversed her Hemispheres --
 I touched the Universe --

And back it slid -- and I alone --
 A Speck upon a Ball --
 Went out upon Circumference
 Beyond the Dip of Bell -- (378)

By 1862, Dickinson's estrangement from God became absolute. Her isolation from God and rejection of religion climaxed in the following poem.

I meant to have but modest needs --
 Such as content -- and Heaven --

Within my income -- these could like
And Life and I -- keep even --

But since the Last -- included both --
It would suffice my Prayer
But just for One -- to stipulate
And Grace would grant the Pair --

And so -- upon this wise -- I prayed --
Great Spirit -- Give to me
A Heaven not so large as yours,
But large enough -- for me --
And showed their dimples -- too --

I left the Place, with all my might --
I threw my Prayer away --
The Quiet Ages picked it up --
And Judgement -- twinkled -- too
That one so honest -- be extant
It take the Tale for true --
That "Whatsoever Ye shall ask --
Itself be given you" --

But I, grown shrewder -- scan the Skies
With a suspicious Air --
As Children -- swindled for the first
All Swindler -- be -- infer -- (470)

Dickinson had, then, to deal with an ungodly universe. Her friendships with many of her friends began to deteriorate. She wrote to Abiah Root summarizing the differences between herself and Abiah: The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to Buffet the sea." Dickinson had chosen to "Buffet" the sea and was aware of the consequences. The consequences were estrangement from people and loss of comfort in her past. In different letters to her converted friends she envied the tranquility and peace that they found through Christ. But Dickinson insists that the break up with faith is final in one poem she wrote:

To lose one's faith -- surpass
 The loss of our Estate --
 Because Estates can be
 Replenished -- faith cannot. -- (377)

Tranquillity and peace are the only sources of solace that Dickinson saw in religion -- such things were not enough to entice her into conversion.

Dickinson believed in the existence of God -- a silent God -- whom she addresses in a fashion too alien to the nineteenth century minds of Calvinism and Unitarianism.

I know that He exists.
 Somewhere -- in Silence --
 He has hid his rare life
 From our gross eyes. (338)

In another poem she calls him "Papa above!" and questions his injustice:

Papa above!
 Regard a Mouse
 Overpowered by the Cat!
 Reserve within thy Kingdom
 A "Mansion for the Rat! (16)

In other poems she calls him "Our Old Neighbor -- God," and she calls him "Burglar! Banker! -- Father!" She even becomes more satirical in her defiance:

"Heavenly Father" -- take to three
 The Supreme iniquity
 Fashioned by thy candid hand
 In a moment contraband --
 Though to trust us -- seems to us
 More respectful -- "We are Dust" --
 We apologize to Three
 For thine own Duplicity -- (1461)

Man is doomed to take the burden of Heaven's duplicity, and God's silence -- The image is reinforced in another poem

directed to Jesus, who is viewed as capable of destruction,
but unwilling to extend a helping hand to her.

At least -- to pray -- is left -- is left --
Oh Jesus -- in the Air --
I know now which thy chamber is
I'm knocking -- everywhere --
Thou settest Earthquake in the South --
And Maelstrom, in the Sea --
Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth --
Hast thou no Arm for Me? (502)

God's "Smart" passivity and silence are torturing her,
and she entertains the idea of death as an escape; death is
a seclusion from "this Smart Misery."

Of Course I prayed --
And did God care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird -- had stamped her foot
and cried "Give Me --"
My Reason -- Life --
I had not had -- but for yourself --
'Twere better Charity
To leave me in the Atom's Tomb --
Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb --
Than this smart Misery. (376)

Associating flying with freedom and escape (sometimes
through death) is a common theme in Dickinson's poetry. In
another poem she employs the bird imagery to revoke life and
advocate death.

'Tis not that Dying hurts us so --
'Tis Living -- hurts us more --
But Dying -- is a different way --
A Kind behind the Door --

The Southern Custom -- of the Bird --
That ere the Frosts are due
Accepts a better Latitude --
We -- are the Birds -- that stay.

The shiverers round Farmers' doors --
For whose reluctant Crumb --

We stipulate -- till pitying snows
Persuade Our Feathers Home. (335)

Sylvia Plath experiences a similar rejection of religion. In several of her poems she reinforces Dickinson's idea of a silent, detached and "Chilly God." In "Ouija" she wrote of a "god of shades," who instead of offering practical salvation, "dribbles . . . his words."

It is a chilly god, a god of Shades,
Rises to the glass from his black fathoms.
At the Window, those unborn, those undone
Assemble with the frail paleness of moths,
An envious phosphorescence in their wings.
Vermilions, bronzes, colors of the Sun
In the coal fire will not wholly console them.
Imagine their deep hunger, deep as the dark.
For the blood-heat that would ruddle or reclaim
The glass mouth sucks blood-heat from my
forefinger
The old god dribbles, in return, his words."

Religion for both Plath and Dickinson endorses a male chauvinistic power which they try to end by emulating. By attributing human qualities to God, they ironically reduce his holiness and sacredness. Dickinson calls him "Papa in heaven" and Plath refers to her father as "a bag full of God," whom she wants to kill. Since God represents absolute power in heaven comparable to that of man on earth his death is symbolic of the death of absolute dominance, and if God is a symbol of dominance, the poet might as well become a god. In a dream-like surrealistic image of dominance, Plath compares herself to a god:

"Plath, Collected Poems, p. 77.

And I slept on like a bent finger.
 The first thing I saw was sheer air
 And the locked drops rising in a dew

 I started to bud like a March twig:
 An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg.
 From stone to cloud, so I ascended.
 Now I resemble a sort of god
 Floating through the air in my
 soul-shift
 Pure as a pane of ice. It is a gift.¹²

One quality in God, however, does not attract her --
 eternity. In that, she is unlike God:

O God, I am not like you
 In your valinous black,
 Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti.
 Eternity bores me,
 I never wanted it.¹³

In similar poems Dickinson equates her creative powers with
 those of God, and equates God's will with that of man:

To be alive -- in itself --
 Without a further function --
 Omnipotence -- Enough --

 To be alive -- and Will!
 'Tis able as a God --
 The Maker -- of Ourselves -- be what --
 Such being Finitude! (877)

In another poem, Dickinson entertains the "death of
 God" (a Twentieth century theme) in an image comparing the
 Eternity of God with the eternity of truth. The image
 suggests that both will not die, but the corpse of "A
 Lifeless Deity" is shocking:

¹²Plath, Collected Poems, p. 147.

¹³Plath, Collected Poems, p. 235.

Truth -- is as old as God --
 His Twin identity
 And will endure as long as He
 A Co-Eternity --

And perish on the Day
 Himself is borne away
 From Mansion of the Universe
 A Lifeless Deity. (836)

Plath found religion inadequate since it does not offer any solution for the dilemma of human existence, nor does it allow one to end his life and rid himself of the burden of being. In The Bell Jar, she wrote:

I knew the Catholics thought killing yourself was an awful sin. But perhaps, if this was so, they might have a good way to persuade me out of it. Of course I didn't believe in life after death or the virgin birth or the Inquisition or the infallibility of that little monkey-faced Pope or anything."

In their reaction to society both poets wrote as female writers in a predominantly male literary tradition. They began their poetic careers in a vein of self-definition. "The male confessional poet," Sandra Gilbert notices, "writes in the certainty that he is the inheritor of major tradition, the grandson of history, whose very anxieties, as Harold Bloom has noted, are defined by the ambiguities of the past that has shaped him as it shaped his fathers. The female poet, however, even when she is not consciously

¹⁴Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 134.

confessional like Plath or Sexton, writes in the hope of discovering or defining a self, a certainty, a tradition."¹⁵

Whereas Whitman could write with much confidence, "I celebrate myself," both Plath and Dickinson wrote, "I am no body." From such a subservient position, both poets began their search for a self-definition. The following statements are taken out of context from Plath's and Dickinson's poems, but they are representative of their search for self-definition. Plath wrote:

"I am no body." ("Tulips")
 "I am a miner." ("Nick and the Candlestick")
 "I think I may Well be a Jew." ("Daddy")
 "I am no source of honey." ("The Arrival of the Bee Box")
 "O God, I am not like you . . ." ("Years")
 "I am not a Caesar." ("The Arrival of the Bee Box")
 "I am the arrow" ("Ariel")

Dickinson also wrote:

"I am no body, who are you?" (288)
 "I am Czar -- I'm 'Woman' now --" (199)
 "I am a Rose!" (19)
 "I'm Midnight . . ." (420)
 "I am Lost." (256)
 "I am Eve, alias Mrs. Adam" (Letters, p. 94)
 "I'm scarce Accounted" (397)
 "I'm Wife" (199)

Both Plath and Dickinson wrote with the awareness that they are women poets. Dickinson allied herself to contemporary poets of the Victorian period whom she admired such as Elizabeth B. Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Emily

¹⁵Paul Mariani and George Murph, Poetics: Essays on the Art of Poetry, An Anthology from Tendvil Magazine (New York: Tendvil, Inc., 1984) 100.

Bronte. A century later Plath enlarged the list and added Dickinson to it. In one of her journals she wrote:

Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay all dead. Now: Edith Sitwell and Marianne Moore, the aging giantesses, and poetic god mother Phyllis McGinley is out -- light verse: she's sold herself. Rather: May Swenson, Isabelle Gardner, and most close, Adrienne Rich.¹⁶

All female writers in Plath's list saw in domesticity an unbearable burden for women, and they saw that it is their responsibility to lift it up. Plath who, had experienced motherhood, found it as much enslaving as it had been a century earlier. During the time of Dickinson, women were allowed to do little, and during Plath's time women became even more enslaved; they had to fulfill their house-duties and engage themselves with an outside job to make a living. In The Bell Jar, Plath records some of her ideas about what it meant to get married:

I tried to imagine what it would be like if Constantin were my husband. It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curlers after he'd left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he'd expect a big dinner, and I'd spend the evening washing up more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted. This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's. But I know that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's

¹⁶Sylvia Plath, The Journals of Sylvia Plath, ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York: Ballantine, 1982) 211.

mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself.¹⁷

Plath's rejection of domesticity was anticipated a century earlier in Dickinson's letters and poems. In one of her poems, Dickinson wrote complaining of the inferiority of women and of their subservient position:

She rose to His Requirement -- dropt
The Playthings of Her Life
To take the honorable Work
Of Woman, and of Wife --

If ought She missed in Her new Day,
Of Amplitude, or Awe --
Or first Prospective -- Or the Gold
In using, wear away.

It lay unmentioned -- as the Sea
Develop Pearl, and Weed,
But only to Himself -- be known
The Fathoms they abide -- (732)

Dickinson's choice of words in this poem is not accidental. Words such as "His Requirement" and "Playthings of Her Life" are carefully chosen. They juxtapose the state of maidenhood with the playthings with married life with its masculine, one-sided and unpleasant requirements. The word "honorable" in the first stanza is ironic, for it highlights not only the role of the wife, but also the role of the woman. Paul Ferlazzo reads the poem in a feminist context: "Dickinson is clearly contemptuous of the enforced inferiority of women and of the fact that their value and

¹⁷Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 68.

individuality are recognized only in terms of the men they marry.¹⁸

Dickinson's and Plath's poetry is characterized by a fluctuation between depression and aggression. At one moment Dickinson feels defenseless and weak and would exchange her state with a toad or a gnat:

It would have starved a Gnat
To live so small as I --
And yet I was a living Child
With Food's necessity

Upon me -- like a Claw --
I could no more remove
Than I could Coax a Leech away --
Or make a Dragon -- move --

Nor like the Gnat -- had I --
The privilege to fly
And seek a Dinner to myself --
How mightier He -- than I --

Nor like Himself -- the Art
Upon the window Pane
To gad my little Being out --
And not begin -- again -- (612)

At another moment, she is brave:

Afraid: Of whom am I afraid?
Not Death -- for Who is He?
The Porter of my Father's Lodge
As much abasheth me!

Of Life? 'Twere odd I fear [a] thing
That comprehendeth me
In one or two existences --
As Deity decree. (608)

and in a third poem she becomes defiant, with the "power to kill."

¹⁸Paul J. Ferlazzo, Emily Dickinson (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976) 75.

Plath, experiences a similar oscillation between depression and aggression. In "Lady Lazarus" Plath addresses an audience who believes that she is less than a human being. The passive "peanut-crunching crowd" contribute to her torture through their passivity:

The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap my hand and foot.
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees
I may be skin and bone¹⁹

Nevertheless, I am the same identical woman.

Plath's rage climaxes with a warning.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And eat men like air. (247)

The third of the stages I am treating in this chapter is that of withdrawal. Dickinson's and Plath's careers as poets are marked by attempts of self definition which failed to materialize. Their rage and aggression are futile, they only lead to further alienation and loneliness.

By the mid-1860's, Emily began to wear white and settled permanently in her house. She did not appear to strangers and her seclusion became absolute toward the last

¹⁹Plath, Collected Poems, p. 245

years of her life. Plath's withdrawal was accomplished by her successful suicide in 1963.

This stage in the poet's lives and works is marked by some of their most distinguishing themes. They treated themes such as suicide, mental breakdown, the divided self and death. Their ultimate goal at this stage is to rid themselves of the dilemma of being through death. Death for them is what Johnson called "a welcome relief from mortal ills . . . the blessed means to eternal happiness."

The theme of death is countered by the theme of birth. Whereas Dickinson refrained from marriage and having children, Plath experienced both. For Plath, birth is a frightening thing. Her favorite anecdote is that of a fig tree. In The Bell Jar, she tells a story of a nun and a Jewish priest who frequented a fig tree every day to pick up some figs. The day they parted was the day when they saw a bird hatching. The presence of life alienated them. Plath relates the story to her experience of watching the birth of a baby after which her relationship with Billard ended. The scene of babies in bottles and jars is also threatening and gives a suffocating image. Sometimes she sees herself in a bottle -- the "Bottle in which I live," she wrote in "Medusa."

Death, for both poets, becomes a romantic quest which the poets strive to obtain. It is a romantic quest in which one finds refuge from the deformities of life. Even though

death is an ugly presence, it is desired more than life. Dickinson wrote several poems about death and dying and about the nature and reason of dying. In some poems, she places herself among the dead and tells about her experience of dying. In her best poems about death, death is personified, usually as a gentleman, who, according to Griffith, is "motivated by honorable intentions, and concerned only with carrying the Lady to her bridal rooms."²⁰ Her most famous poem in this respect is the following:

Because I could not stop for Death --
 He kindly stopped for me --
 The carriage held but just ourselves
 And Immortality.

We slowly drove -- He knew no haste
 And I had put away
 My labor and my leisure too,
 For His Civility --

We passed the school, where children strove
 At Recess -- in the Ring --
 We passed the fields of Gazing Grain --
 We passed the Setting Sun --
 Or rather -- He passed Us --
 The Dews drew quivering and chill --
 For only Gossamer, my Gown
 My Tippet -- Only Tulle --

We passed before a House that seemed
 A swelling of the Ground --
 The Roof was scarcely visible --
 The Cornice -- in the Ground --

Since then -- 'tis Centuries -- and yet
 Feels shorter than the Day
 I first surmised the Horses Heads
 Were toward Eternity -- (712)

²⁰Griffith, Long Shadow, p. 129.

The dead are also seen as "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers --" with a romantic surrounding away from the burdens of life and time:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers --
 Untouched by Morning
 And untouched by Noon --
 Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection --
 Rafter of Satin,
 And Roof of stone.
 Light laughs the breeze
 In her Castle above them --
 Bubbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
 Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence --
 Ah, what sagacity perished here! (216)

Plath carries on Dickinson's image of death-as-a-lover adding to it a twentieth century touch; the lover is less romanticized; it is more real and attainable. In "Three Women," Plath wrote:

Again, this is a death. It is the air,
 The particles of destruction I suck up?
 Am I a pulse
 That wanes and wanes, facing the cold angel?
 Is this my lover then? This death, this death?
 As a child I loved a lichen -- bitter name.
 Is this the one sin then, this old dead love of
 death?²¹

Both poets contemplate suicide to speed up death and obtain security and freedom. Dying is also romanticized; it becomes an art. Plath wrote in "Lady Lazarus:"

Dying
 Is an art, like everything else.
 I do it exceptionally well.

²¹Plath, Collected Poems, p. 177.

I do it so it feels like hell.
 I do it so it feels real.
 I guess you could say I've a call.²²

Plath's suicide poems are numerous. It is a dominating impulse and a recurring theme in her poetry. She herself attempted suicide several times, before her suicidal death in 1963. In 1962, a few months before her death she wrote:

I am only thirty.
 And like the cat I have nine times to die.
 This is Number Three.
 What a trash
 To annihilate each decade.²³

Dickinson's suicide poems are less numerous, however, and in one of her poems, she shows a repetitive suicidal impulse similar to that of Plath's:

Three times -- we parted -- Breath -- and I --
 Three times -- He would not go --
 But strove to stir the lifeless Fan
 The Waters -- strove to stay.

Three Times -- The Billows tossed me up --
 Then caught me -- like a Ball --
 Then made Blue faces in my face
 And pushed away a sail

That crawled League off -- I liked to see --
 For thinking -- While I die --
 How pleasant to behold a Thing
 Where Human faces -- be --

The Waves grew sleepy -- Breath -- did not --
 The Winds -- like Children -- lulled --
 Then Sunrise kissed my Chrysalis --
 And I stood up -- and lived -- (598)

The suicidal impulse in Dickinson's and Plath's poetry is accompanied by a mental breakdown, which is manifested in

²²Plath, Collected Poems, p. 245.

²³Plath, p. 245.

a divided self, a split personality, a split mind or a haunted mind. Plath's split personality is portrayed in both her novel, The Bell Jar, and her poetry through the ugly presence of a Yellow lady "-- a subdivision of Plath's personality." In "In Plaster," she wrote:

I shall never get out of this! There are two of
me now:
This new absolutely white person and the old
yellow one,
And the white person is certainly the superior
one.
She doesn't need food, she is one of the real
saints
At the beginning I hated her, she had no
personality --
She lay in bed with me like a dead body
And I was scared, because she was shaped just the
way I was.²⁴

In Dickinson's terminology, the self is expressed by a proliferation of terms. Mind and soul are two of the most important terms which refer to the inner self. Thus a division or a split in her mind is also understood as a split in personality. In one of her poems about mental breakdown, she wrote:

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind
As if my Brain had split --
I tried to match it -- Seam by Seam --
But could not make them fit.

Plath's career as a woman poet is a milestone in Confessional poetry of the twentieth century. Comparing her poetry with that of Dickinson's one finds a great deal of influence. The thematic similarities between the two poets

²⁴Plath, Collected Poems, p. 158.

are numerous, and in most cases, identical. Both poets made of their personal experience a universal example of human suffering. Their suffering is both internal and external. It is existentially metaphysical and it is a necessary condition for their creativity. Their poetic career proceeds, as I have shown in this chapter, in three stages: alienation, fortitude and personal failure. These stages are portrayed in their poetry by a proliferation of inter-related themes.

CONCLUSION

Recent studies of Plath's poetry tend to see her poems more than just confessional. Her poetry is seen not as an "exposure of autobiographical material,"¹ but as "consciously dedicated to fusing biography with poetry to create an enduring legend."² Many critics have dismissed the term "confessional" when applied to some of Plath's poems as irrelevant. Jon Rosenblatt argues in favor of this point of view:

To treat 'Ariel' as a confessional poem is to suggest that its actual importance lies in the horseride taken by its author, or in its position within the biological development of the author. None of these issues is as significant as the imagistic and thematic developments rendered by the poem itself.³

Such reading of "Ariel" is based on a very narrow definition of confessional poetry. A poem does not need to be devoid of images to be confessional; some of the best confessional poems are imagistic. On this ground much of the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath meet. They wrote similar themes with much attention to images, symbols and irony.

¹Jon Rosenblatt, Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of an Initiation (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979) 23.

²Edward Butcher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976) XI.

³Rosenblatt, p. 16.

Both Dickinson and Plath fuse biography with poetry to create an enduring legend. The legend is their lives portrayed with all levels of development. Their lives begin with alienation and suffering which lead to a state of fortitude and end with a state of depression. Their depression, however, is not always passive, there is much aggression in their poetry against all sources of suffering. Two sources of suffering are of most importance to Dickinson and Plath as well as other confessional poets of the twentieth century: religion and society.

The representation of the self in earlier literature is characterized by a persisting religious impulse. All the trauma of the self are resolved through an unconditional acceptance of a metaphysical saving force in the person of Christ or any other deity. In Plath's and Dickinson's poetry, the self became the central informing force, thus charging the term "confessional" with a new meaning asserting the strains of self definition and constantly bringing the whole idea of being into question. The ultimate goal of religious confessions is divine forgiveness, and the ultimate goal of the twentieth century confessional poets is self therapy.

In social aspects Plath and Dickinson wrote in the strain of self definition as women and poets. Plath had the economic independence of a twentieth century woman which Dickinson utterly lacked. Despite the fact that Dickinson

came from a middle class genteel family with good means, she consistently reiterates her economic and spiritual poverty. In several poems she asserts that she is a "beggar" with little means. Her economic status is associated with her being a female, and her religious alienation is associated with her existence as a human being. The two dilemmas were never resolved neither in the two poets' lives nor in their poetry. Finally, Plath defied her oppression through her suicide in 1963, and Dickinson through her complete withdrawal from the society and all its institutions.

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