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Emily Dickinson and popular culture

e=enter a scholarly conversation
T= They say
I=I say
c=concession

Although the myth of Dickinson's alienation from her society is slowly dissolving, it has not been sufficiently recognized just how open she was to forces within her surrounding culture. In some ways, of course, Dickinson was the quintessentially *private* poet. It is also important to note, however, that she had a keen eye on American popular culture and drew poetic sustenance from it.

Indeed, there is evidence that she had a deep, frustrated desire for popularity. As a family acquaintance, Mrs. Ford, wrote to Mabel Todd, "I think in spite of her seclusion, she was longing for poetic sympathy and renown, and that some of her later habit of life originated in this suppressed and ungratified desire for distinction." Dickinson herself did at times express this desire for fame, as when she remarked to her sister-in-law Sue, "Could I make you and Austin – proud – sometime – a great way off – 'twould give me taller feet –'" (*LED*, p. 378). She once recalled that she and her cousin Louise Norcross had "in the dining-room decided to be distinguished. It's a great thing to be great, 'Loo,'" she remarked. Although she could adopt a pose of literary shyness before the *Atlantic Monthly* editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, writing to him that publication was as "foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin," the fact remains that she sent this leading man of letters six poems in response to his call for pieces from "new or obscure contributors" (*LED*, pp. 378, 539). Her thirst for fame and popularity sometimes surfaces in her poems, as when she writes that her "Holiday" will be "That They remember me," and her "Paradise" will be "the fame – / That They – pronounce my name –" (J 431).

gl=glue (evidence that supports my thesis about E D's interest in popular culture.)

transition

If fame was the "Paradise" she fantasized about, then she was destined for paradise. Time would prove that her poetry could have strong appeal for the mass audience. When her *Poems* were posthumously published in 1890, the first edition went through six printings in as many months and eleven editions in the first two years, a remarkable sale for a poetry volume, then or now. While it is true that this volume's strong sale is partly explained by the editors'

careful tailoring of her poetry for the masses – by regularizing its punctuation and so forth – the later rediscovery and reprinting of the original fascicles, in all their awkward glory, in no way diminished Dickinson's popularity, among critics as well as general readers.

transition

A major reason for her enduring popularity is that she was extraordinarily receptive to the popular literature and culture of her own time. She was thoroughly familiar not only with classic literary sources – especially the Bible, Shakespeare, Keats, the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emerson, and Thoreau – but also with many popular contemporaries that have since fallen from view. Her poems and letters reveal that she was a highly receptive witness of many phenomena in nineteenth-century popular culture, including imaginative sermons, reform movements, penny newspapers, best-selling novels, and women's literature. She was unique among American women of her day in the breadth of her awareness of the most experimental tendencies in contemporary American culture. Much of her poetry can be viewed as an individualistic adaptation of popular literary strategies.

For example, she felt the impact of the widespread shift in popular religious discourse from the doctrinal to the imaginative. Between 1800 and 1860, popular sermon style, which had in Puritan times been characterized primarily by theological rigor and restraint of the imagination, came to be dominated by diverting narrative, extensive illustrations, and even colloquial humor.

Many of the central tensions in Dickinson's poetry result from the collision between the old and the new sermon styles.[1] She was well positioned to feel every tremor produced by the collision. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was an avowed devotee of the old-style doctrinal preaching: he typically called a well-reasoned sermon by the conservative David Aiken "an intellectual feast," while he branded an imaginative sermon by the more liberal Martin Leland as "Unclean-unclean!" (*YH* 1, p. 53; L 11:251–2). Edward Dickinson also had a puritanical distaste for light literature. Emily recalled that her father read "lonely & rigorous books" and advised his children to read only the Bible (L 11:475).

She had a particularly vivid memory of her brother Austin coming home one day with Longfellow's novel *Kavanagh,* hiding it under the piano cover, and making hand signs to Emily about the book. When the children later read the novel, their father was incensed. While it may seem strange that so apparently innocent a novel as *Kavanagh* should provoke such a storm, we should recognize how revolutionary the novel was, given the strict doctrinal standards of Edward Dickinson. Longfellow's novel dramatizes the collapse of theological preaching, represented by the departing Rev. Pendexter, and the ascendancy of imaginative religion, embodied in the handsome

1. here I discuss the new religious style

young preacher Arthur Kavanagh. Kavanagh's piquant pulpit illustrations and stories lead one character to exclaim, "Such sermons! So beautifully written, so different from old Mr. Pendexter's."[1] Emily Dickinson mentioned the novel often in her letters and felt a special kinship with the novel's heroine, Alice Archer, a gloomy, dreamy girl who sublimates her hopeless infatuation for Kavanagh in poetic visions – in much the same way that Emily herself may have been driven to a kind of poetic frenzy by her unrequited passion for a real-life Kavanagh, the Rev. Charles Wadsworth.

Notice that each of my paragraphs has a topic sentence & that the sentences & paragraphs flow into each other through my use of transitions & connective words or phrases.

Critics have long pondered the Wadsworth-Dickinson relationship, hard evidence of which is frustratingly slim. It is known that while visiting Philadelphia in 1855, during her only trip outside of Massachusetts, Emily most likely was taken to hear Wadsworth preach at Arch Street Presbyterian Church. It is also known that Wadsworth later visited her at least twice in Amherst, that two volumes of his sermons were given to her, that she probably read many of his other sermons in newspaper reprintings, and that she developed strong feelings toward him. Some believe that Emily's great "terror" in 1862 and her incredible poetic productivity that year was a response to Wadsworth's removal to Calvary Church in San Francisco (hence the double pun involved in Emily's description of herself as "the Empress of Calvary"). Intriguing as the relationship is, the much-debated issue of Emily's feelings for Wadsworth is perhaps less relevant than the fact that in the mid-1850s, just at the moment when she was beginning to write serious poetry, she was deeply moved by a preacher who must be regarded as one of the antebellum period's foremost innovators in American sermon style.

Her response to Wadsworth had been prepared for by her increasing preference for imaginative preaching, often against her father's wishes. In 1851 she probably went to hear the popular Henry Ward Beecher, who was visiting Amherst giving a lecture, significantly, on "Imagination." By 1853 she could go into raptures over a notably anecdotal sermon on Judas and Jesus given by the visiting preacher Edwards A. Park, a sermon whose secular emphasis she later described: "It was like a mortal story of intimate young men" (*YH* 1, p. 287). The Martin Leland sermon that her father dismissed as "unclean" was imaginatively liberating for her, as she mimicked Leland's theatrical manner and repeated sections of the sermon aloud. Also in the early 1850s, she befriended the popular author and editor Josiah G. Holland, whose liberal religious views were criticized by one conservative paper as "creedless, churchless, ministerless Christianity" (*YH* 1, p. 296). By aligning herself with several of the most progressive religious stylists of the day, Emily Dickinson was launching a silent but major rebellion against the doctrinal tradition valued by her father.

Her excitement about Wadsworth, therefore, can be viewed as a natural outgrowth of her increasing attraction to the new religious style. One newspaper compared Wadsworth to an earlier pulpit innovator, John Summerfield, but stressed that "Wadsworth's style . . . is vastly bolder, his fancy more vivid, and his action more violent . . . [His topics are] peculiar, and quite out of the usual line"; he is typically "rapid, unique and original, often startling his audience . . . with a seeming paradox."[2] Mark Twain would also be struck by the uniqueness of Wadsworth's pulpit manner, noting that he would often "get off a first-rate joke" (*YH* II, p. 112) and then frown when people started laughing. In short, Wadsworth's style was adventurous, anecdotal, and very imaginative, with a tendency to the startling and paradoxical. Emily Dickinson once praised his "inscrutable roguery" and seemed to copy his impish style in many poems and in her message to J. G. Holland: "Unless we become as Rogues, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (L II:901, 703). The jocular familiarity with which she generally treats divine and biblical images doubtless owes much to the new sermon style that Wadsworth perfected.

It is helpful to know that such imaginative revisions of religion were going on around Dickinson and that she was extraordinarily responsive to them. By her own confession, she came to detest theological preaching ("I hate doctrines!" she declared after one old-fashioned sermon), and she devoured every example of the new religious style that came within her rather limited purview. She once commented that the only way to tell if a poem is good is to ask whether, after reading it, you feel like the top of your head has been taken off. She seemed to apply the same rule to the sermons she attended and the books she read. A religious work, in her eyes, must possess both striking imagery and a sense of ultimacy; theology or moralizing is secondary to the work's *effect* upon the imagination. For instance, she disdained three Baptist tracts about "pure little lives, loving God, and their parents, and obeying the laws of the land" – purely secular pious stories that, in her words, "dont *bewitch* me any" (L I:144). In contrast, even though she was skeptical about Christian doctrines, she could revel in the Rev. Aaron Colton's "enlivening preaching, . . . his earnest look and gesture, his calls of *now today*" (L I:120). Similarly, she could be totally captivated by "a splendid sermon" from Edwards A. Park, which left the congregation "so still, the buzzing of a fly would have boomed out like a cannon. And when it was all over, and that wonderful man sat down, people stared at each other, and looked as wan and wild, as if they had seen a spirit, and wondered they had not died" (L I:272). The combined imagery here of the fly, death, and religion seems to anticipate Dickinson's famous poem "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died." At any rate, we should note that in

both the poem and her letter describing Park's sermon, it is not theology or Christianity that counts but rather the existential impact of a momentous situation.

What new religious stylists like Wadsworth and Park had finally taught Emily Dickinson is that religion could be freely applied to many secular situations and expressed through startling imagery. Because of Dickinson's extensive use of witty conceits, many critics have likened her to the metaphysical poets of the Renaissance or to the American Puritan poet Edward Taylor. There is, however, a crucial difference between the metaphysicals and Dickinson: all their creative flights are finally confined by Christian doctrine, whereas she soars adventurously beyond doctrine by mixing the sacred and the secular, the Christian and the pagan. And she had been taught how to achieve this mixture by her popular religious culture.

One of her poetic responses to the new religious style was the redefinition of church, sermons, and worship along totally secular lines. Witness the reduction of religious images to the world in the following stanzas:

> Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
> I keep it, staying at Home –
> With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
> And an Orchard, for a Dome –
> ...
> God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
> And the sermon is never long
> So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
> I'm going, all along. (J 324)

This poem may be regarded as a clever adaptation of the antebellum religious style: not only does it shift worship from the church to nature and sing praise to short sermons, but it actually converts God into an entertaining preacher obviously trained in the new sermon style. A similar fusion of the sacred and the secular is visible in the poem that begins "To hear an Oriole sing / May be a common thing – / Or only a divine" (J 526), in which the last phrase arrests the reader with its offhandedly casual treatment of the holy. Sometimes this casualness is taken to playful extremes, as when she refers to God as "Papa above!" watching down upon a "mouse," who asks for the privilege of living forever "Snug in seraphic Cupboards" (J 61). Among the many other Dickinson poems that daringly reapply sacred imagery are: "These are the days when Birds come back – " (J 130), "There's a certain Slant of light" (J 258), and "Mine – by the Right of the White Election!" (J 528). In these poems such images as Holy Communion, sacrament, hymns, and the doctrine of election are detached totally from their sacred referents and fused with either nature or the human psyche. In still other poems she displays a jaunty

freedom with the Bible, as in "The Bible is an antique Volume" (J 1545), which includes a series of secular re-enactments of sacred imagery, such as calling Eden "the ancient Homestead," Satan "the Brigadier," and sin "a distinguished Precipice/Others must resist."

Another fertile seedbed of imagery for Dickinson was temperance literature, which also stimulated many other writers of the American Renaissance, including Whitman, Melville, Thoreau, and Poe. No reform movement had as widespread an influence in antebellum America as temperance. To combat America's extraordinarily high alcohol consumption, which by 1830 reached the staggering amount of around ten gallons of absolute alcohol per adult citizen annually, waves of temperance orators and writers swept the country between 1835 and 1860.

2. Here I discuss a major reform movement: temperance reform.

Although much temperance literature was didactic in a straightforward way, an increasing proportion of it, capitalizing on the popularity of sensational fiction, was lurid and violent in its renderings of alcohol's ravages. With the rise of the Washingtonians, an organization of reformed drunkards who thrilled the public with their graphic anecdotes about battles with the bottle, the temperance movement became riddled with contradictions and ambiguities. Notorious instances of backsliding – particularly that of the Washingtonian leader John Bartholomew Gough, who in 1845 disappeared for a week and then was found in a whorehouse recovering from an alcoholic binge – gave rise to the oxymoronic character of the "intemperate temperance advocate," a staple figure of ridicule in subversive popular fiction. George Lippard in his best-selling reform novel *The Quaker City* sneered at "intemperate Temperance lecturers," caricaturing them in his portrait of the Rev. F. A. T. Pyne, who snickers, "We temperance folks must have some little excitement after we have forsworn intemperance. When we leave off alcohol, we indulge our systems with a little Opium."[3] Likewise, George Thompson in *Life in Boston and New York* presents the hypocritical temperance reformer Bob Towline, who boasts that "for over a year I lectured in public, and got drunk in private – glorious times!"[4] In fiction, the intemperate temperance stereotype eventually produced Mark Twain's Dauphin, the bald-pated con artist who runs temperance revivals in order to raise funds to buy whiskey.

In verse, this popular character was creatively reworked in the persona of one of Dickinson's most famous poems, J 214 ("I taste a liquor never brewed – "), which shows the poet adopting and transforming images and themes of popular temperance reform. This transforming process is visible in the opening verse, where she presents an "I" who is a wonderfully fresh avatar of the intemperate temperance advocate. The speaker is both completely drunk and completely temperate. She can exult in her drunkenness

because hers is a liquor "never brewed," filling tankards "scooped in Pearl," an image suggesting the pearl-like whiteness of the air she loves and the extreme preciousness of her love of nature.

Having immediately revised the ironic trope of the intemperate temperance advocate, in the next two verses Dickinson gambols with it, revising several other popular images in the process:

> Inebriate of Air – am I –
> And Debauchee of Dew –
> Reeling – thro endless summer days –
> From inns of Molten Blue –
>
> When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
> Out of Foxglove's door –
> When Butterflies – renounce their "drams" –
> I shall but drink the more!

This speaker is not the hypocritical intemperate temperance advocate, publicly sober but privately debauched, but the exultantly open one, proclaiming a debauchery that is allied with the highest form of temperance. Dickinson, who was fully aware of antebellum popular culture in all its dimensions, seems to be intentionally playing on well-known temperance images. A central sequence in Timothy Shay Arthur's 1854 temperance best-seller *Ten Nights in a Bar-room* involves a landlord, Simon Slade, who kicks out of his saloon the drunken Joe Morgan, who later renounces alcohol due to the ministrations of his dying daughter. Dickinson uses similar imagery in her references to "'Landlords'" who turn drunks out their doors and to alcoholics who "renounce their 'drams.'" Her use of quotation marks underscores the fact that she is "quoting," or borrowing, images from others – specifically, from temperance writers like Arthur. But she uses these images only to transform them. The drunkard being dismissed here is a bee that has extracted nectar from a flower. The renouncers of drams are butterflies that are leaving their resting places and fluttering through the air. And the "I" watching this beautiful spectacle only gets more and more drunk for having enjoyed it.

Dickinson has carried popular temperance images to a truly new, transcendent space, a fact she enforces in the poem's closing conceit of seraphs and saints celebrating the "little Tippler" for her intoxication over nature's bounty emphasizes the poem's metaphysical dimension. The playful oddity of the hat-swinging angels, the gaping saints, and the girl leaning against the sun gives the poem a metaphorical energy that leaves the reader intoxicated, as it were, with the poet's imaginativeness.

Dickinson's creative toying with temperance images continues in poem J 230 ("We – Bee and I – live by the quaffing – "). Once again, the "I" is the

transformed intemperate temperance advocate, who can openly say that she lives "by quaffing" since her drinking companion is the bee and her "ale" and "burgundy" are beautiful things of nature. When Dickinson writes, 'Tisn't *all Hock* – with us – /Life has its *Ale* – ," she is again adopting a popular trope: the italicized "*all Hock*" was a common phrase used at temperance meetings to urge all present to pledge ("hock") themselves to sobriety. When the "I" says that she and the bee don't use the "*all Hock*" prompt, she is saying that pledges against alcohol are unnecessary for those who understand that life itself "has its *Ale*."

Dickinson's adaptation of popular sources continues to the end of the poem:

> Do we "get drunk"?
> Ask the jolly Clovers!
> Do we "beat" our "Wife"?
> I – never wed –
> Bee – pledges *his* – in minute flagons –
> Dainty – as the tress – on her deft Head –
>
> While runs the Rhine –
> He and I – revel –
> First – at the vat – and latest at the Vine –
> Noon – our last Cup –
> "Found dead" – "of Nectar" –
> By a humming Coroner –
> In a By-Thyme!

The quotation marks used around several phrases are strategic, for Dickinson is quoting extensively from popular culture. The common temperance trope of the drunken husband who brutalizes his wife is cited in the rhetorical questions "Do we 'get drunk'?" and "Do we 'beat' our 'Wife'?" The sensationalists' association of alcohol with death is repeated in the reference to the drunkard "'Found dead'" by a coroner. The taking of the temperance pledge is recalled in the phrase about one who "pledges *his*."

But all of these standard temperance images are couched in paeans to ordinary natural phenomena – bees, clover, nectar, and noontime – that redirect temperance rhetoric toward an affirmation of life itself. The bee and the persona get drunk in their mutual enjoyment of clovers. They revel in "the Rhine," a pun that associates drinking famous German wine with a love of beautiful landscapes like that of the River Rhine. The standard image in temperance literature of destructive all-day binges is recreated in the persona's boast of being "First – at the vat – and latest at the Vine – ," while another

popular theme, the deadly effects of alcohol, is redirected in the images of drinking the "last Cup" of noon, being killed by "Nectar," and being found by a "humming Coroner," the bee. By manipulating popular temperance imagery, Dickinson joyously expresses her sense of the intoxicating nature of common experience.

Another popular genre that influenced Dickinson was popular sensational literature, ranging from the crime-filled penny newspapers that arose in the 1830s to the sensational pamphlet fiction that flooded America in the 1840s and 1850s. The antebellum public was fed on an increasingly spicy diet of horror, gore, and perversity in both mass newspapers and the closely allied genres of trial pamphlets and paper-covered adventure novels. Emerson complained that his countrymen spent their time "reading all day murders & railroad accidents" in newspapers.[5] Thoreau, similarly, spoke of the "startling and monstrous events as fill the daily papers."[6] Although sensational literature was not uniquely indigenous, American sensationalists gained a worldwide reputation for special nastiness and grossness. Whitman noted, "Scurrility – the truth may as well be told – is a sin of the American newspaper press."[7] In 1842 a British journalist wrote, "*Our* press is bad enough . . . But its violence is meekness and even its atrocities are virtues, compared with the system of *brutal and ferocious outrage* which distinguished the press of America," a sentiment echoed by the British traveler Emily Faithfull, who declared that "the American newspaper very often startles its more cultured readers with extraordinary sensational headings and the prominence it gives to horrors of all kinds – murders, elopements, divorces, and wickednesses in general."[8]

3. Here I discuss penny newspapers and other sensational genres.

Competing with the penny newspapers were sensational pamphlet novels (often called "romances") featuring rollicking adventure and outcasts such as pirates, freebooters, and all kinds of criminals. Frequently published in garish yellow covers emblazoned with melodramatic woodcuts and eye-catching black lettering, this action-filled pamphlet fiction, priced cheaply and hawked in street book stalls, caused increasing alarm among conservative commentators. Surveying the sudden popularity of "Yellow Jacket Literature," one author complained in 1855 that "the popular press is teeming with works of vapid or unhallowed fiction, or grossly immoral books and prints," noting that in this fiction "the murderer, robber, pirate, swindler, the grog-shop tippler, the lady of fashion, the accomplished rake and libertine, are meritorious characters, held up in a spirit of pride and levity, and surrounded by a 'halo of emulation.'"[9]

Dickinson was profoundly aware of these darker dimensions of the American popular mind. It is notable that when she wrote poetry about

popular culture, she was inevitably preoccupied with its violent, disorienting elements, as in poem J 1226 ("The Popular Heart is a Cannon first"). Dickinson recognizes that the "Popular Heart" can be best described in violent images pertaining to war, weapons, drinking, ditches, and prison. The popular culture she perceives is fluid and ever changing, having been torn from both the future ("Not a Tomorrow to know it's name") and from historical memory ("Nor a Past to stare"). It is associated with the muddy realm of ditches, and it thrives on diverting crime ("Ditches for Realm and a Trip to Jail/For a Souvenir").

Her letters of the 1850–3 period show that she was fascinated by sensational literature. The increasing space given in American newspapers to crimes and tragedies was a great source of amused interest to her. In an 1853 letter to Josiah Holland of the *Springfield Republican*, she declared that the lurid contents of his paper had changed her into a quirky disturber of the peace. "One glimpse of *The Republican*," she wrote, "makes me break things again – I read in it every night. Who writes those funny accidents, where railroads meet each other unexpectedly and gentlemen in factories get their heads cut off quite informally? The author, too, relates them in such a sprightly way, that they are quite attractive" (L 1:264). Always hungry for sensational news, she elsewhere thanked her brother Austin for a juicy news clipping about a manslaughter and asked him to send "anything else that's *startling* which you may chance to know – I dont think deaths or murders can ever come amiss in a young woman's journal" (L 1:114). Her tone in these letters captures precisely the combined grossness and offhand levity of sensational newspaper reporting.

The open admission into her consciousness of several popular sensational elements prepared the way for the haunted themes and broken style of her poetry. In a poem written around 1858 (J 8), she creates a horrific atmosphere by describing a wooded road haunted by banditti, a wolf, an owl, a serpent, screaming vultures, and beckoning "satyrs fingers." A similarly straightforward, monovocal use of sensational images occurs in these verses:

> I never hear the word "escape"
> Without a quicker blood.
> (J 77)

or,

> Had I a mighty gun
> I think I'd shoot the human race
> And then to glory run! (J 118)

or,

We like a Hairbreadth 'scape
It tingles in the Mind . . .
Like paragraphs of Wind
(J 1175)

Such poems barely rise above the pedestrian sensationalism of penny papers and pamphlet novels. They are full of standard sensational images, including hairbreadth escapes, war, guns, murder, and accidents. Although they bear witness to Dickinson's fertile imagination, as when she compares the tingling effect of an escape to that of "paragraphs of Wind," they resemble popular pamphlet fiction in that they revel in action and adventure without pretending to probe deeper meanings.

4. Here I transition to popular sensational novels.

More characteristically, Dickinson does with sensational literature what she did with religious and temperance rhetoric: she radically personalizes it by redirecting it toward quotidian experience and private emotion. Innovatively, she points out that all of us carry within ourselves narratives more exciting than the most sensational popular romances:

No romance sold unto
Could so enthrall a Man
As perusal of
His Individual One –
(J 669)

She regularly uses the sensational to freshly illuminate themes related to nature, human psychology, and the poetic process. For instance, poem J 11 is a kind of "yellow novel in verse," featuring sensational images of pirates, buried treasure, and murder threats. Dickinson utilizes these common images not to concoct some adventurous plot but to sing praise to the beauty of a sunset:

I never told the buried gold
Upon the hill – that lies –
I saw the sun – his plunder done
Crouch low to guard his prize.

In this poem the sun is presented as a pirate who leaves on a hill plundered treasure enjoyed by the first person speaker, who assumes the persona of a hidden onlooker. To sustain the mood of excitement, Dickinson develops the pirate conceit over five verses. After shaking off a momentary fear of being killed by the pirate-sun, the onlooker marvels over the pirate's "wondrous booty" (the sunlight on the hill), consisting of "the fairest ingots / That ever kissed the spade!" Playfully, the onlooker wonders whether to "keep the secret" of the pirate treasure or reveal it, worrying that, as she tries to decide,

"Kidd will sudden sail" (the sun will depart). She ends by trying to come up with a suitable division of the spoils between herself and Kidd, the more famous pirate:

Could a shrewd advise me
We might e'en divide –
Should a shrewd betray me –
Atropos decide!

If here her persona is that of a pirate's co-conspirator, elsewhere it is that of a criminal. In poem J 23, she poses as a thief:

I robbed the Woods –
The trusting Woods. . . .
I scanned their trinkets curious –
I grasped – I bore away!

Through such pointed redirection of sensational images, Dickinson suggests that criminality is exciting not for its own sake, as a source of mere diversion or fantasy, but for its usefulness as a vehicle for wresting beauty and meaning from everyday experience. If here she "robs" nature, elsewhere she poses as the victim, rather than the perpetrator, of crime. In poem J 42, for instance, nature is the invasive criminal threatening the speaker, who cries, "A Day! Help! Help! Another Day!"

Dickinson's most successful applications of sensational images occur where she directs such images inward, using them as metaphors for the recesses of the psyche. If popular novelists terrified readers with vividly described horrific settings, she took the new step of reminding readers that the scariest rooms lay within. "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted – ," she writes. "The Brain has Corridors – surpassing/ Material place" (J 670). It's far safer, she continues, to meet at midnight an "External Ghost" or to be chased galloping through an abbey by some would-be assassin than to confront "That Cooler Host, . . . one's a'self." The most appalling terrors spring from the fantasies and aggressions lurking within:

Ourself behind ourself, concealed –
Should startle most –
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least.

This theme of the horror within the mind is echoed in several other Dickinson poems, as when she describes "The Loneliness whose worst alarm / Is lest itself shall see" (J 777). Internalizing adventure imagery, she writes elsewhere,

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be –
Attended by a single Hound
It's own identity. (J 822)

By finding psychological equivalents of sensationalism, Dickinson fashions vistas more horrifying than anything in popular fiction. This becomes clear when we compare a gory image in sensational fiction with a similar one in Dickinson's poetry. In the quintessential sensation novel, George Lippard's 1845 best-seller *The Quaker City*, the villainous protagonist, Devil Bug, gleefully dashes out the brains of an old woman by swinging her body like a hammer on a brass andiron. The scene is described in typically graphic fashion. "The brains of the old woman," Lippard writes, "lay scattered over the hearth, and the body which Devil-Bug raised in the air, was a headless trunk, with the bleeding fragments of a face and skull, clinging to the quivering neck" (p. 241). As ghastly as this scene is, it lacks the resonant painfulness of Dickinson's poem "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind" (J 937).

In Lippard's handling, the dashing out of brains is external to the reader's consciousness, because it results from the perverse criminality of a murderous character. Dickinson converts the dashing out of brains into a metaphor for losing one's mind. Recalling a bewildering psychological episode, the speaker describes a "Cleaving" in her mind, "As if my Brain had split." The unclear referent of "I tried to match it – Seam by Seam – ," where "it" could refer both to the mind and the brain, casts ambiguity over the remaining lines, in which the mind's unraveling, "Like Balls – upon a floor," has gory overtones of a brain being splattered. But the image of the splattered brain is far more excruciating in Dickinson than in Lippard, since it connotes severe mental trauma, not just aberrant criminal activity.

A similar psychological reinterpretation of sensational images occurs in the famous poem that begins, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (J 280). Again, a comparison with Lippard's *The Quaker City* reveals Dickinson's improvements on the sensational mode. Lippard had taken sensationalism to new extremes of irrationalism, going beyond even his friend Poe in his exploration of the distortions of time and space caused by the excited fancy. For example, his description of Devil-Bug's dystopic dream of the future of Philadelphia begins with a nightmarish vision of "a hazy atmosphere, with coffins floating slowly past, and the stars shining through the eyes of skulls, and the sun pouring his livid light straight downward into a wilderness of new-made graves which extended yawning and dismal over the surface of a boundless plain." Next Devil-Bug sees the sun assume the shape of a skeleton-head, surrounded by stars, "each star gleaming through the orbless

socket of a skull, and the blood-red moon went sailing by, her crescent face, rising above a huge coffin which floated through the livid air like a barque from hell" (p. 370). Pre-surrealistic in its oddness, Lippard's novel resembles its main setting, Monk Hall, a labyrinthine structure riddled with trap doors that are always opening beneath the reader's feet, sending him tumbling "down, down, down" (in Devil-Bug's oft-repeated words) into another dimension.

Dickinson experiments with a similar range of imagery, involving death, coffins, time/space distortion, and headlong plunges into other dimensions. But by gathering all these Lippardian phenomena into the consciousness of a first-person speaker, she gives them entirely fresh connotations. The fact that the speaker "*felt* a Funeral, in my *Brain*" [my italics] points the poem in two directions simultaneously: first, toward a delineation of an actual funeral service, followed by passage into the after-life; and second, toward a description of a descent into madness, followed by the collapse of reason. The "I" of the poem, like the personae of several other Dickinson poems, could be recalling her own funeral, with mourners "treading – treading –," sitting down at a service, and finally carrying out the coffin, at which point the speaker's soul passes alone into the silent, infinite other world described in the last two verses. At the same time, the "I" could be reliving a terrifying time when it felt as though she were losing her mind. This psychological interpretation is reinforced by a succession of phrases – "in my Brain," "My Mind was going numb –," "creak across my Soul" – that point to the possibility that the "Funeral" here signifies the death of the speaker's rationality and normalcy. In this light, the last two verses, in which the speaker feels "Wrecked, solitary" as "a Plank in Reason, broke," point to the utter alienation and confusion of the insane person.

The last three lines,

> And I dropped down, and down –
> And hit a World, at every plunge,
> And Finished knowing – then –

bring the poem's two major themes to apt culmination. As a conclusion to a death poem, these lines portray the soul, cast into the unknowable after-life, hurtling into infinite space and time. As an end to a psychological poem, they suggest the mind plunging without direction toward chaos, until the speaker has "Finished knowing" – i.e., lost the ability to understand anything. On both levels of meaning, the image of dropping "down, and down" and hitting "a World, at every plunge" has far more resonance than does Lippard's account of people falling "down, down, down" through the trap doors of the

multilayered Monk Hall. For Lippard, the arch-sensationalist, the downward plunge of the murder victim is one more bloody plot twist designed to amuse thrillseekers. For Dickinson, the explorer of death and the human mind, the downward plunge of the speaker is a frightening tumble into ineffable mysteries.

Having surveyed a number of the cultural elements that fed into Dickinson's poetry, it is fitting to conclude by considering her in light of other American women writers, whose best works constituted a real literary flowering between 1858 and 1866, the very years that were by far her most productive as a poet. These years saw, on the one hand, the temporary diminution of the organized women's rights activity that had begun at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848 and, simultaneously, a search for more literary ways of expressing women's rage and fantasies. It was a period of extreme self-consciousness about the proliferation of varied women's roles in American culture. Mary Louise Hankins's *Women of New York* (1860) described no fewer than thirty-two kinds of American women – including, significantly, the confidence woman, who could playfully act out all the other women's roles with devilish ease. The variability Hankins perceived was enacted by women writers who took pride in literary acts of self-transformation and manipulation. In characterization, this pride was projected in characters like Medora Fielding in Lillie Devereux Blake's *Southwold* (1859) or Jean Muir of Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask* (1866), canny heroines who avenge women's wrongs by feigning virtue. In plot, it produced broken narrative patterns. In theme, it was evidenced by a growing preoccupation with doubt and negativity. In style, it gave rise to minimalism, ellipsis, and compaction. Intrinsic to this women's literature was a belief in the tormented but dauntless core self of the woman artist, lying below all gender roles and regulating them at will, asserting its power through waspish imagery and daring to tackle universal themes that lay beyond myth or gender. Given the extreme fertility of this historical moment in American women's culture, it is perhaps understandable that fully sixty-two percent of the almost 1,800 poems Dickinson was to write in her lifetime were produced in the 1858–66 period.

5. Here I discuss women's literature of the time.

Dickinson had special affinities with the authors of the so-called "literature of misery," the genre named and described by Samuel Bowles, the energetic editor she knew well.[10] If the women authors of the literature of misery sought to establish an artistic middle ground between the effetely conventional and the openly feminist, so Emily Dickinson explicitly rejected the "Dimity Convictions" of traditionalists and the public methods of women's rights activists, while she made the era's boldest quest for specifically artistic exhibitions of woman's power. If other women writers typically hid

behind shifting literary masks, Dickinson played so many roles, from the childlike "Daisy" to the regal "Empress," that it becomes difficult to identify her actual, biographical self. If they often shifted tone and perspective in successive sketches or chapters, Dickinson regularly did so in successive verses, lines, and even words. If their experimental style was attacked as crude and formless, so was Dickinson's, as is most famously evidenced by Thomas Wentworth Higginson's complaint about her "spasmodic" style. If their work grew principally from the severe inward pain that gave the literature of misery its name, some of Dickinson's best poetry had a similar source, as suggested by verses in which she describes grief or pain as exhilarating: one thinks especially of the poem "I can wade Grief – / Whole pools of it – "(J 252). If along with this pain went a heady confidence in the creative act as the American woman's surest means of self-assertion, Dickinson too was nourished by this confidence, inherited partly from her father (an advocate of women's education and an outspoken admirer of the pioneering woman writer Catharine Sedgwick) and manifested continually by Dickinson's unparalleled poetic innovations. If they had redirected radical-democrat energies toward a search for a gender-free literary reality, Dickinson consummated this search in poetry that strains always toward the universal, poetry that reflects her great radical-democrat declaration: "My Country is Truth . . . It is a very free Democracy."[11]

In addition to these overall affinities between Emily Dickinson and other American women writers, there are more specific connections in the area of imagery and themes. Her repeated use of volcano imagery, for instance, is very much in the vein of the literature of misery. A basic assumption of this literature is that since women's energies were allowed no viable outlet, they gathered in upon themselves and lay burning inwardly, always threatening to erupt through a placid exterior. The heroines of the literature of misery often looked like sweet moral exemplars but raged inwardly with the ferocity of women victims bent on revenge. This fusion of docile and fiery qualities is summed up by a character in Sara Parton's *Ruth Hall* (1856), who generalizes, "Whenever – you – see – a – blue-eyed – soft-voiced – gentle – woman, – look – out – for a hurricane. I tell you that placid Ruth is a smouldering volcano."[12] In Blake's *Southwold*, the author describes Medora Fielding in a typical moment: "No one could have guessed that the calm indifference of her manner concealed a volcano of rage and scorn."[13] The heroine of another novel, *L'eoline*, declares, "A woman made reckless by wrongs, is without compassion," since beneath her gentle exterior lies "a spirit fearless and relentless as the untamed tigress."[14] Even the style of the literature of misery was a kind of dormant volcano, frequently muted and quietly imagistic but always with explosive implications.

Dickinson brought a full self-consciousness to the use of volcano imagery, recognizing that it applied both to women's lives and to women's literary style. Her sensitivity to these interrelated levels of meaning is powerfully captured in the first lines of the successive verses of poem J 601:

A still – Volcano – Life –
...
A quiet – Earthquake Style –
...
The Solemn – Torrid – Symbol –

These lines are a highly compressed, self-reflexive enactment of the thematic and stylistic polarities of American women's literature. Dickinson's irregular prosody, with its ubiquitous dashes and caesurae, shows rhythm and structure being shattered by the pressure of vehement emotion brought under severe restraint, a stylistic feature common in the literature of misery (witness, for example, the pre-Dickinsonian pauses in the above-quoted passage from *Ruth Hall* on "a – blue-eyed – soft-voiced – gentle – woman, – "). In Dickinson's case, there is evidence that confirms the connection between volcano imagery and women's issues. At a key moment in the longest of her three "Master" letters she communicates the extreme tensions created by her buried feelings as follows: "Vesuvius dont talk – Etna – don't – " (L II:374). Although most generalizations about her character and personal life are tentative at best, the one that certainly holds true is that her extraordinary passional and intellectual powers were inevitably repressed and deflected, gaining full expression only in cryptic, loaded metaphors. It appears, therefore, that there is personal and gender-specific import in such famous Dickinson images as "Vesuvius at Home" (J 1705), "the reticent volcano" (J 1748), and "On my volcano grows the grass" (J 1677). We might be tempted to look for specific biographical sources for Dickinson's volcano imagery (such as the much discussed issue of a possible homoerotic attraction to her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson), but more significant than such psychoanalytic guesswork is the realization that, whatever the personal motivations behind individual poems, Dickinson frequently discovered new applications for the volcano, one of the most common images in American women's writings.

Those who focus narrowly on a few Dickinson poems that seem directly feminist or on particular personality quirks that make Dickinson appear to be a nineteenth-century madwoman do not truly account for her stature as a paradigmatic American woman writer. Her real representativeness lies in her incomparable flexibility, her ability to be, by turns, coy, fierce, domestic, romantic, protofeminist, antifeminist, prudish, and erotic. She militantly

asserted her creativity through ingenious metaphorical play and through brash imaginings of a gender-free literary reality. In this sense, of course, she was much like other authors of the American Women's Renaissance who evaded simple gender categories by freely combining the stereotypes generated by their culture, just as she shared their philosophical adventurousness and devotion to technique. But in Dickinson these common principles are so greatly exaggerated and intensified that they produce a wholly new kind of literature. Other women writers' manipulations of female stereotypes pale beside her endless adaptations and truly innovative fusions of these stereotypes. Their questions about religion and philosophy seem timid next to her leaps into an indefinite realm beyond all religion and philosophy. Their affirmations of women's creativity through stylistic experimentation are tentative when compared with her unremitting quest for the startling metaphor, the unusual rhyme, the odd caesura.

Even when she deals directly with gender issues, clear statement on these issues is abrogated on behalf of jaunty stylistic gamesmanship, signaled by tonal fusions and shocking images. Take the poem "I'm 'wife' – I've finished that" (J 199; c. 1860). Some critics have interpreted this as a wry, anti-marriage poem extremely unusual in a day when marriage was extolled as the highest good. The fact is that American women's wrongs literature had long portrayed the suffering of wives. Indeed, the year before Dickinson wrote the above poem there had appeared a dark women's novel, *The Autobiography of a Married Woman,* whose heroine becomes so disillusioned with marriage that she exclaims, "O, mothers! Train your daughters to self-reliance, and not to feel that they are to marry simply because everybody does marry. . . . There are very few happy marriages; there can be but few, where interest and self-love form the tie."[15]

Dickinson's poem stands out not for any new statement about marriage it might contain but for its playful fusion of the opposing views on marriage that were circulating in American culture. One view, related to the conventional ethos of domestic fiction, was that marriage was a state of heavenly bliss and of remarkable power for women. In Dickinson's own life, this idealization of domesticity was reflected in her well-known enjoyment of housekeeping activities and in certain statements in her letters, such as her 1851 message to Susan Gilbert: "Home is a holy thing – nothing of doubt or distrust can enter it's blessed portals" (L 1:150). In the poem, this view is enforced by the images of the home as heaven and the wife as "Czar" and "Woman" – images that invest the marriage relation with both bliss and power for women. The contrasting view, related to the outlook on marriage held by many suffragists and women's wrongs authors, saw marriage as an unequal state in which women suffered a range of ills, from economic

deprivation to loss of independence. In Dickinson's life, this hostility to marriage was reflected in her indomitable spinsterhood and in direct cries of protest in letters, such as her exclamatory note to Abiah Root, "God keep me from what they call *households*," or her early comment to Susan Gilbert that their unmarried state must seem enviable to "the *wife*, . . . sometimes the *wife forgotten*" (L 1:99, 210). In the poem above, the anti-marriage view is crystallized in subtle images, such as "soft Eclipse" and "Stop there!" suggesting the termination of a woman's independence in marriage.

Dickinson was not the first American writer to incorporate both positive and negative views of marriage. Sara Parton, the author whose "spicey passages" Dickinson had read to her father,[16] had done this in successive sketches in *Fern Leaves*, and many women writers of the 1850s had studied tensions between womanly independence and heterosexual love. Dickinson was perhaps the first, however, to fuse contrasting views in a single text and in individual metaphors. The literary fusion enables her to achieve a far more complete view of marriage than was advanced by either the pro-marriage or anti-marriage groups. The message, if any can be gleaned, is that marriage is a heavenly state of power in which women gain safety and comfort but, at the same time, lose the painful but exhilarating self-sufficiency of maidenhood. More important than the poem's message, however, is its stylistic power. How concisely Dickinson communicates the treatment of wife as the husband's objective possession through the quotation marks around "wife" and "Woman"! How subtle are the tonal shifts in the poem, as the persona wavers between enthusiasm and skepticism about marriage! How potently does the phrase "soft Eclipse" communicate that cushioned banality she envisages in marriage! As always in Dickinson's poetry, the greatest triumphs here are stylistic.

Given Dickinson's literary aims, it is not surprising that she directly rejected women's rights and was notably inconsistent on women's issues. In the course of her close relationship with Thomas Wentworth Higginson she never showed interest in one of his favorite reforms, women's rights, and when the progressive popular novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote to her in 1872 asking for her aid in the women's cause, she burned Phelps's letter and mailed her a flat refusal. This indifference to political feminism was part and parcel of serious authorship during the American Women's Renaissance. It is no accident that Dickinson's most productive literary period was in the early 1860s, for this was the moment when all women's rights activity was suspended. As early as 1858, outside opposition and internal dissension had created a notable diminution of suffrage activity, and the Civil War brought a complete cessation of women's conventions between February 1861 and May 1866. Dickinson's earliest (and many of her best) poems were written

between 1858 and 1866, precisely the years that produced some of the finest works of Lillie Devereux Blake, Elizabeth Stoddard, Rebecca Harding Davis, Louisa May Alcott, Alice and Phoebe Cary, and Harriet Prescott Spofford. Was Dickinson conscious that she was a member of this pioneering literary sisterhood? Little evidence survives to give us a sure answer, but her comments about one of these authors – Harriet Prescott Spofford – show that she was more moved by contemporary American women's writing than by any other favorite classic authors, even Shakespeare. After she finished the last installment of Spofford's story "The Amber Gods" (in the February 1860 issue of the *Atlantic)* she begged her sister-in-law to send her everything Spofford wrote. "The Amber Gods," an imaginative tale involving mysterious amber beads and frustrated love, elicited this high compliment from Dickinson: "It is the only thing I ever read in my life that I didn't think I could have imagined myself" (*YH* 11, p. 6) She was even more affected by Spofford's "Circumstance" (1860), a story about a woman alone in the Maine woods who fends off a half-human "Indian beast" by singing to him. Dickinson was so haunted by the story that she wrote to Higginson in 1862: "I read Miss Prescott's 'Circumstance,' but it followed me, in the Dark – so I avoided her –" (L 11:404). Coming from a woman who believed that literature should be bewitching and devastating, this was high praise.

Whatever cross-influences between Dickinson and the other women writers may have existed, it is certain that she absorbed their overall goal of depoliticizing women's discourse and shifting creative energy away from monolithic expression toward flexible impersonation. She took to a new extreme the liberating manipulation of female stereotypes. In successive poems she assumed with ease an array of shifting personae: the abandoned woman ("Heart! We will forget him!" J 47); the loving wife ("Forever at His side to walk – " J 246); the fantasist of erotic ecstasy ("Wild Nights – Wild Nights!" J 49); the acerbic satirist of conventional women ("What Soft – Cherubic Creatures – / These Gentlewomen are – ,"J 401); the expectant bride on the eve of her wedding ("A Wife – at Daybreak I shall be – ," J 461); the sullen rejecter of a lover ("I cannot live with You," J 40).

This is, of course, only a small sampling of other countless poses. We should not be concerned that these poses frequently contradict each other and that several of them seem far more conservative or obsequious to males than might be expected from the strongest woman poet in the English language. Instead, we should recognize her elusiveness as the major ingredient of her artistry and of her representativeness as a writer of the American Women's Renaissance. If Sara Parton's "Floy" showed her power by sending impossibly mixed signals to baffled male reviewers, if Blake's Medora Fielding and Alcott's Jean Muir took vindictive pride in never showing a true face to men,

if the "confidence woman" in Hankins's *Women of New York* proudly impersonated every female stereotype, Dickinson outdid them all by donning an unparalleled variety of masks behind which the core self lay as an ever-present but always invisible manipulator. Even in letters to confidants, Dickinson was quick to hide behind personae and to point up the totally fictive nature of other poetic poses. As she wrote to Higginson in 1862, "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean me – " (L II:412). For Dickinson, all women's stereotypes become matters of literary theater and metaphorical play.

A result of this endless capacity for manipulation was her unusual fusion of female stereotypes, which is particularly visible in "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun – " (J 754). A common stereotype in popular fiction was the adventure feminist, the tough woman who could survive extreme physical peril and outbrave men in battle. We have seen that another image associated with women, the volcano, was commonly used in the literature of misery to represent the quiet but inwardly explosive woman who was denied a viable outlet for her energies. The first stereotype enacted fantasies of power; the second reflected the realities of repression and powerlessness. In her poem Dickinson takes the wholly original step of fusing these contrary images. On the one hand, the "I" of the poem is the ultimate adventure feminist, the omnipotent aggressor who does all the hunting and speaking for her master and always guards him from danger. On the other hand, she has a "Vesuvian face" that signals the total repression of her aggressions in deference to him. Whether or not the man here referred to as "Owner" is the intended recipient of Dickinson's pained "Master" letters, the poem makes it clear that Dickinson is conjuring up an adventure-feminist fantasy and, simultaneously, suggesting the suspicion that this imagined power is an illusion. A loaded gun is not useful until it is fired, just as the "I" of the poem gains power only when carried off by her master. The fantasies and frustrations the "I" embodies, however, are secondary to the potency of the poem itself. This ingenious fusion of contradictory female stereotypes sets off a string of lively metaphorical associations that themselves constitute the aggressiveness of the woman writer.

Dickinson's most sophisticated poems are those in which she permits imagery from radically different cultural arenas to come together in an explosive metaphorical center. In some other women's writings of the 1850s, such as Parton's *Ruth Hall* and Cary's *Married, Not Mated*,[17] disparate cultural images are *juxtaposed* in single texts, creating a certain density and stylistic innovativeness. In Dickinson's poetry, such contrasting images are consistently *fused* in single stanzas, even in single words, so that they radiate with fresh suggestions – and create intriguing puzzles for would-be interpreters.

Notice the poetic fusions in the famously cryptic poem "Mine – by the Right of the White Election!" (J 528). In this poem, negative images reminiscent of sensational literature ("Scarlet prison," "Bars," "Veto," "Grave's Repeal") are fused with affirmative, ecstatic religious imagery ("White Election," "Vision," "Confirmed," "Delirious Charter!"). The lack of a clear referent for "Mine" points up the radical open-endedness of meaning that results from the creative fusion of opposing cultural elements. Dickinson had profited immensely from her earlier awareness of different progressive phenomena in popular culture: on the one hand, the sensational writings that had featured prisons, death, and blood; on the other hand, relaxed religious discourse, which suddenly became available for creative recombination with secular imagery. Dickinson grafts together the two kinds of imagery and retains the ultimacy of vision that had long governed her ponderings of large issues. Dickinson's wholly original fusion of contrasting types of images in dense poetry truly distinguishes her. If, as many critics believe, "Mine" refers to the poetic gift, it may be said that Dickinson is fully justified for the boasting, assertive tone of this poem. Through reconstructive fusion, she had managed to create a poem that salvages both the sensational and the religious by bringing them together and infusing them with a new emotional intensity and metaphysical resonance.

A similar intensification through poetic fusion occurs in one of her most famous love poems, "Wild Nights – Wild Nights!" (J 249). It is not known whether Dickinson had read any of the erotic literature of the day or if she knew of the stereotype of the sensual woman.[18] Given her fascination with sensational journalism and with popular literature in general, it is hard to believe she would not have had at least some exposure to erotic literature. At any rate, her treatment of the daring theme of woman's sexual fantasy in this deservedly famous poem bears comparison with erotic themes as they appeared in popular sensational writings. The first stanza of the poem provides an uplifting or purification of sexual fantasy not distant from the effect of Walt Whitman's cleansing rhetoric, which was consciously designed to counteract the prurience of what he called the "love plot" of much popular fiction. Dickinson's repeated phrase "Wild Nights" is a simple but dazzling metaphor that communicates wild passion – even lust – but simultaneously lifts sexual desire out of the scabrous by fusing it with the natural image of the night. The second verse introduces a second nature image, the turbulent sea and the contrasting quiet port, which at once universalizes the passion and purifies it further through abstract metaphor. Also, the second verse makes clear that this is not a poem of sexual consummation but rather of pure fantasy and sexual impossibility. Unlike popular erotic literature, the poem portrays neither a consummated seduction nor the heartless deception that it involves.

There is instead a pure, fervent fantasy whose frustration is figured forth in the contrasting images of the ocean (the longed-for-but-never-achieved consummation) and the port (the reality of the poet's isolation). The third verse begins with an image, "Rowing in Eden," that further uplifts sexual passion by yoking it with a religious archetype. Here, as elsewhere, Dickinson capitalizes nicely on the new religious style, which made possible such fusions of the divine and the earthly. The persona's concluding wish to "moor" in the sea expresses the sustained intense sexual longing and the simultaneous frustration of that longing. In the course of the poem, Dickinson has communicated great erotic passion, and yet, by effectively projecting this passion through unusual images of nature and religion, has rid it of even the tiniest residue of sensationalism.

It is fair to generalize from these and other letters that Dickinson was unique among American women of her day in the breadth of her awareness of the most experimental tendencies in contemporary American culture. Her excitement over press reports of tragedies, her attraction to the new religious style, and her interest in women's writing all reveal a sensibility that was absorbing various kinds of popular images. Dickinson recognized the need for an artistic form that would serve to control and fuse these often contradictory elements. She appropriated the iambic rhythms and simple verse patterns of English hymnody, which had been famously utilized in the Isaac Watts hymns she knew from childhood, as controlling devices to lend structure and resonance to these disparate themes.

In her poetry, therefore, Dickinson was both inscribing her culture and personalizing it. She was that rare oxymoronic being, a *private-public* poet.

NOTES

1 *Kavanagh* (1849; rpt., *Hyperion and Kavanagh* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886]), pp. 325–6.
2 *Springfield Republican*, October 22, 1850; reprinted from the *New York Evening Post*.
3 Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall*, ed. David S. Reynolds (1845; rpt., Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp. 201, 291.
4 Thompson, *City Crimes; or, Life in Boston and New York* (New York: William Berry, 1849), p. 121.
5 *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 433.
6 *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (New York: Dover, 1962), vol. IV, p. 267.
7 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 26 February 1847.
8 *Foreign Quarterly Review* (London), October 1842, and E. Faithfull, *Three Visits to America* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1884), p. 336.

9 Anonymous, *Confessions and Experience of a Novel Reader* (Chicago: William Stacy, 1855), p. 73.
10 *Springfield Republican*, 7 July 1860.
11 Quoted in Richard B. Sewall, *The Lyman Letters: New Light on Emily Dickinson and her Poetry* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1965), p. 71.
12 Sara Parton, *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1855), p. 133.
13 L. D. Blake, *Southwold: A Novel* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), p. 47.
14 *The Una*, June 1855.
15 Anonymous, *The Autobiography of a Married Woman. No Girlhood* (New York: S. A. Rollo & Co., 1859), p. 155.
16 Millicent Todd Bingham (ed.), *Emily Dickinson's Home: Letters of Edward Dickinson and his Family* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), pp. 312–13.
17 Phoebe Cary, *Married, Not Mated, or, How They Lived at Woodside and Throckmorton Hall* (New York, 1856).
18 See David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), ch. 7.

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