

Some seek in Art – the Art of Peace

The Theme of Solitude in the Life and Words of Emily Dickinson

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Abstract

This work explores the theme of solitude in the life and words of Emily Dickinson through a chronological examination of her poems and letters. It principally interacts with these primary texts by way of close, contextualized readings, drawing also from secondary sources, both biographical and critical, in an analysis of the motivations behind and consequences of Dickinson's seclusion.

It breaks her life into three eras: 1830-1860, 1860-1870, and 1870-1886, representing the development of her solitude from her early years rejecting organised religion, to her lifelong insistence on the importance of self. It traces her fear of loss and her hope for immortality, assessing all elements in their contribution to her isolated state. Most significantly this thesis exposes the regrets that haunted Emily Dickinson in her final years, accustomed to her solitude but also anxious that she had not appreciated the sanctity of life in her preoccupation with her secluded search for self-knowledge

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INTRODUCTION

It might be lonelier Without the Loneliness –

The following work will examine the theme of solitude in the life and words of Emily Dickinson. It will explore her writing chronologically, breaking her life into three eras, 1830-1860, 1860-1870, and 1870-1886, in order to trace the development of solitude through her adolescence and adulthood. It will explore how solitude is represented in her poetry alongside the motivations behind her seclusion.

This study of solitude is driven by the absence of an existing chronological examination of the theme. While critics such as R. C. Allen¹ and Maryanne M. Garbowsky² have explored the theme textually and biographically, this work will focus on the evolution of Dickinson's solitude as her life progressed and its presence in her letters and verse.

This work draws primarily from the texts of Dickinson's poetry and letters, and due to the chronological nature of this study, I have worked from one source for each, both being editions put together by Thomas H. Johnson. Where undated, the manuscripts have been chronologised³ through contextualisation and graphology and I will take Johnson's dates as accurate though it is important to remain, as always when studying Dickinson, aware of the element of conjecture in assigning dates. Likewise while reviewing her letters allows us an invaluable insight into her life and mind away from her poetry, they are also open to

¹ R. C. Allen (2005) *Solitary Prowess – The Transcendentalist Poetry of Emily Dickinson*. San Francisco, CA: SARU Press International.

² Maryanne M. Garbowsky (1989) *The House without the Door: A Study of Emily Dickinson and the Illness of Agoraphobia*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc.

³ Thomas H Johnson (ed.) (1958) *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, xxiii.

wide interpretation. Reading her letters and poems chronologically, alongside several biographical aids, most notably Richard B. Sewall's detailed work, I will follow the key themes of loss, immortality and the individual which first become apparent in her adolescent letters and were consequently enhanced by the heightened solitude she experiences in the 1860s.

I shall explore how Dickinson's motivation for embracing solitude essentially stemmed from two key elements. The first was her desire to protect her own identity and the significance that she placed on the pursuit of self-knowledge, ideas that were prominent in nineteenth-century America as we will explore in the opening chapter. This aspiration towards introspection sprung also from her distrust of the indoctrination of both church and community. The second key stimulus was her fear of loss. I will argue that the depth of her grief led her away from social situations where new bonds could be created. She sought to conquer the concept of death through her verse, fanatical on the subject of immortality through which she sought some guarantee that would alleviate her crippling sense of loss.

The opening chapter will review the theme of solitude in literature preceding and during Dickinson's lifetime, highlighting key writers that appear to have influenced Dickinson's writing and mind-set, most importantly dwelling on the alignment of her thinking, notably on the subject of the individual, with that of American philosopher-poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. Her determined drive towards complete self-knowledge reflects, and perhaps responds to, Emerson's insistence that 'energy does not descend into individual life on any

other condition than entire possession'.⁴ While the focus of this work is Dickinson's primary texts, this reflection on the correlation of her ideas with her contemporaries allows us to fully appreciate Dickinson's breadth of reading and knowledge.

Following this contextualisation of the theme of solitude in contemporary American literature and philosophy, the second chapter will examine her early writing as a young adult growing to resent the rigid pressures of society. As she grew, she began to consciously refrain from social interaction and the third chapter will explore this heightened isolation, initially instigated by illness, and the effect this had on her poetry. This study will follow the preoccupation with death that is evident in her early years as it develops into an obsession leading to further engagement with the idea of eternal life. Exploring Dickinson's final decades, the fourth chapter presents the idea that Dickinson began to confront her own mortality in her later years and emit a tone of regret that she missed out on the magnitude of life while examining the outside world from afar. Dickinson's decision not to publish indicates the privacy of her verse and each chapter will also touch on her inclination toward publication and the adverse, and its relationship with her solitude.

I am aware that by focussing upon Dickinson's treatment of solitude in relation to her faith and personal philosophy, I am side-lining discussions concerning her gender and her sexuality. While these are both important elements of criticism of Dickinson, my justification for not pursuing these lines relies upon the sheer complexity and volume of

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841) 'The Over-Soul' in *Essays: First Series* [online] <http://www.emersoncentral.com/oversoul.htm>, Date accessed: 02 September 2010.

Dickinson's poetry. Pressure of space means I have determined to focus on the elements of faith and the individual as motivations behind her isolation.

Dickinson continuously observed the world despite her apparent distance and isolation from it. Through her reflections we can see that her withdrawal was very much a conscious decision on her part, and not a state she mindlessly entered or which was forced upon her.

In 1864 Dickinson writes:

It might be lonelier
Without the Loneliness –

While she was not immune to 'Loneliness' in her isolated state, she was adamant that a life in society 'might be lonelier' in the lacking of self-awareness and the pressure to follow pre-ordained ideals. She continues:

I'm so accustomed to my Fate –
Perhaps the Other – Peace –

Would interrupt the Dark –
And crowd the little Room –
Too scant – by Cubits – to contain
The Sacrament – of Him –

I am not used to Hope –
It might intrude upon –
Its sweet parade – blaspheme the place –
Ordained to Suffering –

It might be easier
To fail – with Land in Sight –
Than gain – My Blue Peninsula –
To Perish – of Delight –⁵

(#450, c.1864)

⁵ Thomas H. Johnson (ed.) (1961) *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Little, Brown & Company, 193.

While she still recognises the loneliness of her solitude, by her mid-thirties she is now 'accustomed' to it. She also sees it as her 'Fate', her path to understanding. However while it seems she has found meaning in this existence, she also depicts her life as 'Dark' and lacking in 'Hope', both words being capitalised in Dickinson's trademark fashion to draw attention to these antithetical ideals. In the opening stanzas alone Dickinson's questioning nature is evident as while she is at first convinced that her 'loneliness' affords her protection from being alone in a dominating society, she then contradicts that positive assessment in professing the darkness of her life.

This darkness comes as the opposite of the light of Christ indicating that faith remained a constant debate throughout Dickinson's life. In the second stanza, she seems to blame her inability to fully convert on the weight of society's pressures. The outside world 'crowd[s]' her mind and prevents her from having the space to form her own beliefs. In the third stanza, she references her struggle with loss as the room in which she now resides which is 'ordained to Suffering'. Her 'loneliness' has become a haven, allowing her time to manage her grief and confront her depth of feeling. In the final stanza of this insightful poem, Dickinson admits that her way of life is not easy – she concedes that it may be easier to continue in society, with 'Land in Sight', than to isolate herself in a search of understanding. However she sees it as failure to move as part of society and prioritises the 'Delight' that will come with self-awareness. It is interesting to note that it is a 'Peninsula' she is gaining rather than an island, suggesting that while she seeks solace in solitude she does not want to be completely cut off, adding extra significance to her volume of correspondence, which allowed her to maintain links with the mainland, as it were.

The previous poem demonstrates the conflicted mind of Dickinson and presents the themes of loss, faith and self-knowledge that haunt a lifetime of writing, ultimately contributing to her seclusion from society. In her solitude, Emily Dickinson spent a lifetime examining her inner consciousness and observing the outside world, leaving behind a legacy of intricate lyrics and intimate letters. This essay will draw from these to contend that she consciously withdrew from the outside world motivated primarily, as in the above poem, by her driving desire – almost desperation – for self-knowledge.

The Theme of Solitude in 19th Century American Literature

Emily Dickinson was writing at a time when solitude was a noticeable theme in American culture and literature. Before looking in closer detail at Dickinson's personal isolation, this chapter will briefly contextualise her within this contemporary theme, examining and highlighting existing parallels between Dickinson and her contemporaries in order to establish key literary and philosophical influences. Through her letters, we gain a precious, if precarious, insight into Dickinson's thoughts, and most usefully they allude to her reading habits with recommendations to correspondents, and references to a diverse range of writers and works.

In his examination of the American Renaissance, F.O. Matthiessen explores the theme of solitude and most importantly, the trend of the solitary author. He presents the autobiographical suggestions within Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Fragments from a Journal of a Solitary Man*, about a young writer who existed removed from the exterior world and hence died feeling he had never lived. These are ideas that we will see crop up in Dickinson's later writing when she appears to fear she may have wasted life. In Hawthorne's *The Devil in Manuscript*, Oberon, the protagonist (and also the nickname by which Hawthorne was known to his close friends, suggesting slight autobiographical insight) exclaims:

Would you have me a damned author? You cannot conceive what an effect the composition of these tales has on me... [it draws] me aside from the beaten part of the world, and led me into a strange sort of solitude, - a solitude in the midst of men.⁶

⁶ Hawthorne quoted in F. O. Matthiessen (1969), *American Renaissance – Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 226.

Therein lies a suggestion of the anguish and solitude that faced authors and these thoughts are reflected in the isolated existence of Emily Dickinson. She withdrew, seeking solace in her writing and faced her own sacrifices as a result of shunning the outside world.

Throughout Dickinson's lifetime, much of America remained newly-broken land or as yet undiscovered territory. In an examination of nature and solitude in nineteenth century American literature, Wilson Ober Clough places emphasis on the nature of the American as a pilgrim, as man looking to break new ground. Through their search for new lives, men began to 'encounter in its solitudes a new discipline, the discipline of self-reliance and dependence on self'.⁷ These pioneers had to embrace a solitary existence, and as a result of this innate exploration, solitude became a theme that ran side by side with nature, regularly depicted as a wild, sparse landscape with little, if any, civilisation. Cazir focuses on this, commenting that:

Inherent in the American experience, and certainly a subject central in American letters, is the willingness to embrace the wilderness, to accept solitude and loneliness, perhaps even to welcome them, as a means of searching for self⁸.

Key texts of the time, such as Melville's *Moby Dick* and Defoe's earlier *Robinson Crusoe*, centre on men left open and vulnerable to the wilds of nature, engaging with danger and loneliness, but also hope and possibility. Melville wrote that 'all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea... in

⁷ Wilson Ober Clough (1964) *The Necessary Earth: nature and solitude in 19th century American Literature*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 8.

⁸ Linda Costanzo Cahir (1999) *Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, xiii.

landlessness alone resides the highest truth⁹. Here Melville voices the idea that society hinders one from knowing their true soul, while the isolation found in nature allows one to confront their inner-self.

It is interesting here to note that Dickinson's nature is unlike that which came before her in American Literature, reflecting her place as a female writer tied to her homestead rather than as a male writer out exploring the rambling wilds. The nature depicted in Dickinson's poetry reflects the domestic and tamed nature of her own experiences:

... Carnations – tip their spice –
And Bees – pick up –
A Hyacinth – I hid –
Puts out a Ruffled Head –
And odors fall
From flasks – so small-
You marvel how they held – ...¹⁰

(#339, c.1862)

These lines demonstrate the awe Dickinson held for the 'marvel' of the natural world. However while her portrayal of the outside world differed from male writers due to the difference in their lifestyles and while she never left her hometown in exploration, she was far from content with accepting that which was put before her. Indeed like these men before her, she strove to discover her own landscape:

Soto! Explore thyself!
Therein thyself shalt find
The "Undiscovered Continent" –
No Settler had the Mind.¹¹

(#832, 1864)

⁹ Herman Melville (2008), *Moby Dick*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 94-95.

¹⁰ Johnson (1961), 160-161.

¹¹ Johnson (1961), 403.

As a woman she was limited in she could physically discover, given the gender constraints placed upon middle class females at this time, and so in her own mind, in her own world, she began to explore ideas and realms that no one else could claim before her. One should not merely settle and follow the path that others had set because one would consequently have no 'Mind'. 'Soto!' she exclaims, referencing the Japanese school of Zen Buddhism, one that encouraged solitary meditation for enlightenment. Such a reference demonstrates not only her depth of knowledge but also her interest in different beliefs, which corroborates the idea that she was engaging with the growing trend of transcendentalism developing in America at the time.

R.C. Allen writes that transcendentalism is predicated on the same attitude as Zen Buddhism; that 'enlightenment springs directly from the mind'¹². He examines Dickinson's alignment with transcendental principles, focussing primarily on the idea of being in possession of one's own mind and not being constrained by surrounding beliefs. He explores how Dickinson's way of life seemed to follow the transcendentalists 'notion [that] existential fulfilment is ego-transcendence'¹³. In isolating herself from the demands of society, Dickinson gave herself the opportunity to embrace her own mind:

Growth of Man – like Growth of Nature –
Gravitates within –
Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it –
But it stir – alone –

Each – its difficult Ideal
Must achieve – Itself –
Through the solitary prowess
Of a Silent Life – ...¹⁴

¹² Allen (2005), 15.

¹³ Allen, 14.

¹⁴ Johnson (1961), 367.

(#750, 1863)

Dickinson demonstrates her connection with the outside world; how ‘Atmosphere’ and ‘Sun’ are both key to her personal growth, their impact emphasised by capitalisation. She is aware that one must advance through life ‘alone’ in order to ‘achieve Itself’. Dickinson saw ‘the solitary prowess/ Of a Silent Life’ as the key to being able to grow as a person and know herself. This idea mirrors transcendental beliefs and she will have encountered these concepts in the works of contemporary philosophers, most prominently Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson was a key essayist on the themes of literature and nature during the nineteenth century. His ideas on the individual are said to resonate through much contemporary literature, having a ‘great immediate impact on the cultural life of New England’¹⁵. Indeed, copies of *Solitude and Society* and *Essays*, amidst other writings by Emerson were found among Dickinson’s books¹⁶. In closer examination of these surviving tomes, Farr notes:

In [Emily Dickinson’s] copy of Emerson’s ‘Self Reliance’, now in the Harvard collection, a page is turned down at the following passage, which is also marked at the right: “My life is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it should be glittering and unsteady.” Again, “What I must do concerns me, not what people think”¹⁷

Such annotations demonstrate Dickinson’s active mind and her determination to preserve her own identity. In December 1857 it is recorded that Emerson came to Amherst to speak¹⁸, and following his lecture he stayed with Emily’s brother Austin. She is not noted

¹⁵ Brian Harding (1982) *American Literature in Context II*. London: Methuen & Co., 40.

¹⁶ Sewall, 678.

¹⁷ Judith Farr (1992) *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 43.

¹⁸ Sewall, 115.

to have met him but it is claimed that she wrote to Sue after his visit that ‘It must have been as if he had come from where dreams are born!’¹⁹ insinuating that his ideas did indeed align with her own. She read his poetry and encouraged Jane Humphreys, in a letter in 1850²⁰ to read it, while thirty-five years later, including a reference to Emerson’s poem ‘The Humble Bee’ in a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd in 1885²¹ indicating how Emerson’s influence remained present throughout her life. As Jane Donahue Eberwein writes, ‘Dickinson’s poems bear witness to the stimulus she found in this philosopher-poet’²².

In his essay ‘The Poet’, Emerson writes that the poet ‘is isolated among his contemporaries, by truth and by his art’²³. He placed great importance on self-introspection and individualism and in ‘Self Reliance’ exclaims: ‘Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind’²⁴ and ‘Individual is the World’.²⁵ Clough writes that ‘Emerson had... advised the American scholar to turn from old World traditions and seek out his own genius, his own certainties, to rely on himself and not to be dismayed if the world made noises in unison to the contrary’²⁶. These thoughts resonate through Dickinson’s writing and her growing desperation to know and nurture her own mind.

At the core of Transcendentalism is the idea of being at one with self and nature rather than society, and this nineteenth century American concept sprung from the growth in

¹⁹ Johnson (1958), 913, PF 10.

²⁰ Johnson (1958), 84, Letter 30.

²¹ Johnson (1958), 882, Letter 1004.

²² Jane Donahue Eberwein, ‘Is Immortality True?’ in Vivian R. Pollak (ed.) (2004) *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Oxford University Press, 87-88.

²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1844) ‘The Poet’ in *Essays: Second Series* [online] www.emersoncentral.com/poet.htm, Date accessed: 24 August 2010.

²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841) ‘Self Reliance’ in *Essays: First Series* [online] www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm, Date accessed: 24 August 2010.

²⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, (1841) ‘Self Reliance’ [online].

²⁶ Clough, 17.

German romanticism that spread through Europe and resulted in a generation of nature-observers like Wordsworth who drew up ideas of serenity in the natural world. Poirier notes that there was a parallel striving for ‘an environment of “freedom”’²⁷ in the literary worlds of both continents, a search for ‘hitherto unexpressed dimensions of the self into space where it would encounter none of the antagonistic social systems which stifle it’²⁸. It is this oppression that Dickinson strove to avoid as she grew older. We will explore how she came to view the Amherst community as repressing her true identity, and how this was a key catalyst of her increased seclusion in her early twenties.

Gellner writes in his exploration of solitude and Wittgenstein, how the solitary theme in literature and society stemmed from Europe. He writes that ‘the society which emerged in the course of the nineteenth century was... individualist and egalitarian’²⁹. He talks of how Descartes had influenced a generation of artists: ‘The solitary Crusoe-like individual faces the world, or rather, assembles the world out of the accumulated bits of experience by the pre-judgments, the prejudices of his social milieu’³⁰. As we begin to see how solitude was not a whim of Dickinson, but a literary theme across the continents, it becomes evident that the depiction of her as an eccentric recluse is unfair. She was by contrast an intellectual mind that drew inspiration from surrounding literature and philosophy, and was determined to know herself and to reflect her identity truthfully through her writing. As Thoreau writes in 1854, during Dickinson’s earlier writing years, of the freedom that solitude affords:

²⁷ Richard Poirier (1968) *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 5.

²⁸ Poirier, 40.

²⁹ Ernest Gellner (1998), *Language and Solitude – Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 27.

³⁰ Gellner, 17.

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers.³¹

It is evident from her letters and poetry that Dickinson was eternally concerned with building and maintaining her own identity, seeking out an isolated state in which she could confront her own ideals and beliefs. She pulled away from organised religion because of her striving for individual thought and her reluctance to be dictated to. Alik Barnstone writes:

In the mid-nineteenth century, transcendental romanticism and the other religious movements of the day attenuated the power of orthodox Calvinism. This co-habitation of belief systems is reflected in Emily Dickinson's poetry, which develops from a rewriting of Calvinist self-annihilation and despair to a rewriting of the romantic, exalted discovery of the self.³²

As Barnstone notes, it becomes apparent in exploring Dickinson's poetry chronologically that as she aged, she became irrevocably concerned with the state of her own mind, influenced in some part by a rebellion against the indoctrinating church of her youth.

In a special edition focussing on Dickinson's reading in early 2010, the editors of the *Emily Dickinson journal* state that 'critics are still debating Dickinson's relationship to romanticism and transcendentalism'³³. This represents how current the debate remains, though Dickinson's attraction to transcendentalism is largely irrefutable as she essentially

³¹ Henry D. Thoreau and William Rossi (ed.) (2008) *Walden, Civil Disobedience and Other Writings*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 95.

³² Alik Barnstone (2006) *Changing Rapture: Emily Dickinson's Poetic Development*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 76-77.

³³ Daniel L. Manheim and Marianne Noble (eds.) (2010) 'Anything but the Bible'. *The Emily Dickinson Journal: Special Issue on Emily Dickinson's Reading*, vol. XIX, no.1: vii-xiv.

came to align with two key traits by prioritising the individual and revering the natural world. Any discussion truly lies in how consciously she engaged with transcendentalism, as she rarely mentions it in her writing and never defines herself as a transcendentalist. Following her retreat from organised religion, it would seem that while she was willing to admire and adopt beliefs, she would never define herself by anything other than her own thinking.

Dickinson may never have strived to be a solitary author in the mould of Melville or Hawthorne but she was unquestionably influenced by the themes of solitude present in contemporary literature. As Vivian R. Pollak writes, ‘Dickinson represents the rebellious antinomian strain in American culture and the courage to be oneself’³⁴. This is evident in the following poem, written early in her middle decade and confirming her mindful decision to withdraw from society and seek solace in her own company and through her writing:

I reckon – when I count them all –
First – Poets – then the Sun
Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God
And then – the List is done –³⁵

(#569, 1862)

The word ‘Poets’ highlights the importance of the literature that Dickinson read, the influence of which is visible in her letters and poems, as examined above. It also suggests that she sees her status as a poet as key to her own identity as her way of reining and demonstrating her individuality. Following poets, she exults in the magnitude of nature though again her depiction is delicately in comparison to the wild frontiers portrayed in

³⁴ Pollak (2004), 5.

³⁵ Johnson (1961), 277.

American Literature before her. Finally it is noteworthy how she refers to the 'Heaven of God' over God himself. She has reservations about God but is determined to believe in immortality, in the hope that she will be reunited with lost loved ones. The poem opens with 'I reckon', confident in herself and representative of the importance she is beginning to place on her own mind. She continues:

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

She has reached the conclusion that it is 'Poets' who harness the most power because they are able to capture the other three and explore them through their words, rendering the others 'needless'. Written in 1862, at the beginning of her most productive period, this poem confirms that she was no longer solely writing creatively but was using her poetry as an outlet for her innermost contemplations. With a determination to forge her own path and know her own mind, she searched out solitude in the manner of writers before her to allow herself time to contemplate the world, uninterrupted.

1830-1860

A darting fear – a pomp – a tear –

The first thirty years of Emily Dickinson's life were the most formative, shaped by the influence of family, society and church. In examining her writing from these years, when she was largely still a part of the Amherst community, this chapter will explore how distance from her loved ones while away at school, and a growing restlessness towards religion catalysed her retreat into solitude.

The earliest Dickinson poem is dated to 1850 but given her fondness for writing, with correspondence existing from the early 1840s, it would not appear presumptuous to believe that her creative writing probably began earlier than we have evidence. However from what does remain, only 153 of the 1883 existing poems have been conclusively dated before 1860³⁶. During this time Dickinson wrote many more letters than she did poems, corresponding with family and friends on a regular basis. As she grew older, the emotions and thoughts she originally conveyed in her letters began to consume her poetry and her correspondence dwindled as her poetry output soared.

Much of her childhood correspondence sprung from her close relationship with her brother Austin who was away at school. Her early letters to him and Abiah Root, a childhood friend and close correspondent, are deep in personal reflections and untendered opinions. They already demonstrate Dickinson's habit of expressing her emotions through writing to remain connected to faraway loved ones which is an early indicator of the unease with distance and loss that would remain present in her writing throughout her life. She writes

³⁶ Johnson (1961), 3-71.

to Austin that she was ‘very lonely without [him]’³⁷, signifying her discomfort at being apart from those she loved.

While Dickinson was a keen correspondent even before she was sent away to school at Mount Holyoke Seminary, it is in letters during this time away from Amherst that we can clearly see the importance to her of both her home and her education. While she thrived on her schooling, Dickinson found it difficult to be apart from her childhood home – and when she left for Mount Holyoke Seminary she wrote to Abiah: ‘I was very homesick... but I am now contented & quite happy, if I can be happy when absent from my dear home & friends’³⁸. This separation anxiety from all she knew and loved could be recognised as the preceding emotion for her continual battle with losing loved ones to death, and her desire to believe in immortality. It could also be seen as the initial root of her remaining at home throughout her adult life. She was happy where she was among the comforting presence of her family and childhood memories, and was hesitant to sever such ties.

While she did settle down at Mount Holyoke³⁹, home was always on her mind and she writes effusively to Abiah that when Austin came to fetch her home for Thanksgiving ‘never did Amherst look more lovely to me & gratitude rose in my heart to God, for granting me such a safe return to my *own* dear HOME’.⁴⁰

³⁷ Johnson (1958), 4-5, Letter 2.

³⁸ Johnson (1958), 53, Letter 15.

³⁹ Sewall, 363- 368.

⁴⁰ Johnson (1958), 58, Letter 20.

In 1846, the year before she left for the seminary, Dickinson was suffering from weak health and was forced to withdraw from the Amherst Academy⁴¹ for some weeks and in a letter to Abiah she writes:

[I] was so unwell as to be obliged to leave school. It cost me many a severe struggle to leave my studies & to be considered an invalid... but I made the sacrifice.⁴²

Her enthusiasm for schooling is apparent here and is also present in her letters to Austin, making it clear that despite her initial faltering at being away from home, she was now embracing the opportunities that such an education presented:

I must give you a word of advice too. Cultivate your other powers in proportion as you allow Imagination to captivate you! Am not I a very wise *young lady*? I had almost forgotten to tell you what my studies are now...⁴³

Her effervescent tone above demonstrates the enjoyment she derived from school but it is the style that is the most interesting as in the word 'Imagination' we see the beginnings of her poetic style with her employment of capitalisation to place emphasis on a word that may otherwise have rested un-noted in prose or poetry. She encourages her brother to embrace his imagination and put it above other priorities in life. Her time away from home has allowed her to recognise the power of individual thought. As early as 17, Dickinson is embracing her own mind – and the power that can be gained from exploring it.

Emily Dickinson's early life in Amherst, Massachusetts was one of community and rules, being the daughter of a key local figure⁴⁴ brought with it expectations. It seems inevitable

⁴¹ Johnson (1958), 36, Letter 13.

⁴² Johnson (1958), 36, Letter 13.

⁴³ Johnson (1958), 57, Letter 19.

⁴⁴ Sewall, 44-73.

that these early social pressures contributed to her need to assert her own individuality. In her time away at school, Dickinson was able to shape her own beliefs, no longer restrained by the alignments of her father who had a hefty presence in both the town and the homestead. As her confidant Higginson later reflected, Edward Dickinson was ‘that strong Puritan father who had communicated to her so much of the vigour of his own nature’⁴⁵. This projection of his own values would be something Dickinson later rejected and Sewall observes that ‘by the time she was twenty she recognised the profound differences between them and began to carve out for herself a separate domain in which she could live her own life intact’⁴⁶.

In 1851 she writes of this conscious separation to Austin noting that ‘Father’s real life and *mine* sometimes come into collision, but as yet, escape unhurt!’⁴⁷ She was desperate to form her own thoughts and while she remained attached to her father throughout her life, she was eager to know her own mind and not be overly influenced by him.

While her time away at school gave her freedom from the expectations of the Amherst community, she still faced pressure to conform, and convert, at Mount Holyoke. She writes to Abiah of ‘the great deal of religious interest’⁴⁸ and her apprehension about it. She cannot join the ‘many flocking towards the ark of safety’⁴⁹ because ‘it is hard for [her] to give up the world’⁵⁰. She feared religious conversion would suffocate her own views of that world. Later, on her return to Amherst, she writes incredulously to Abiah that ‘Christ is calling

⁴⁵ Thomas Wentworth Higginson (October 1891), *Emily Dickinson’s Letters*. Atlantic Monthly http://www.earlywomenmasters.net/essays/authors/higginson/twh_dickinson.html. Date accessed: June 25th 2010.

⁴⁶ Sewall, 56.

⁴⁷ Johnson (1958), 161, Letter 65.

⁴⁸ Johnson (1958), 60, Letter 20.

⁴⁹ Johnson (1958), 60, Letter 20.

⁵⁰ Johnson (1958), 67, Letter 23.

everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion'⁵¹. It is important to note her incredulity that Vinnie 'trusts him' and also that she depicts herself as 'alone in rebellion', seeking out solitude rather than conformity.

Dickinson's initial hesitance towards conversion began even before she headed to the seminary when at the age of 16 she begins to examine her inability to convert, writing:

I was almost persuaded to be a Christian... I can say that I have never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my saviour...

However in the same paragraph she is aghast to report that she could not stay the course:

One by one my old habits returned and I cared less for religion than ever...I hope you are a Christian for I feel that it is impossible for any one to be happy without a treasure in heaven. I feel that I shall never be happy without love of Christ.⁵²

She is already certain that she will never be able to overcome her doubts, despite her conviction that life with faith is more content than life without 'a treasure in heaven'. Her struggle between desire for faith and unwillingness to follow a prescribed set of beliefs became a constant theme in her writing. James McIntosh writes of her difficulty in extracting herself from the beliefs of society, noting that 'as a child of her culture, the fixed positions of her local Calvinism are inscribed on her mind and heart, while at the

⁵¹ Johnson (1958), 94, Letter 35.

⁵² Johnson (1958), 27, Letter 10.

same time she distrusts them and seeks an alternative faith that will be truer to her moral conceptions⁵³.

Dickinson yearned for faith but feared that the indoctrination of the church would stifle her own individuality. As Allen writes, she ‘could not become a churchgoer or accept Christ as her Saviour, because her powerful sense of self, her autonomy, precluded her from becoming a sheep, a member of the flock’⁵⁴. Her unwillingness to unquestioningly follow the crowd shaped her life and her writing, causing her to search out her own space in order to find her own person. She writes in 1859 that in church she found the preacher too overbearing: ‘I do not respect “doctrines”, and did not listen to him’⁵⁵.

This letter also demonstrates how she began to integrate verses of her poetry into her letters to soothe the recipient, and also to express thoughts that she did not have the words for in prose:

A darting fear – a pomp – a tear –
A waking on a morn
To find that what one waked for,
Inhales the different dawn.⁵⁶

(#87, 1859)

This verse is inserted at the end of a letter in which she discusses how she and her family are missing the recipient’s presence in Amherst. It speaks of the loss that haunts Dickinson’s consciousness and how she fears losing touch with her loved ones. She is not just referring to the ‘different dawn’ of separate states but also the ‘different dawn’ of

⁵³ James McIntosh (2004) *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 35.

⁵⁴ Allen, 21.

⁵⁵ Johnson (1958), 347, Letter 200.

⁵⁶ Johnson (1961), 44.

death. Her childhood anxiety of leaving her family home and her adolescent ‘darting fear’ of lost connections grew into a lifelong struggle with loss and death.

The first key loss that Emily suffered was the death of her friend Sophia Holland in 1844⁵⁷. At the age of only 14 she encountered the conundrum of life and death, and took it very much to heart. Indeed two years later she wrote to Abiah Root that it had drawn her into ‘a fixed melancholy’⁵⁸, so much so that her parents sent her away to her aunt in the hope that she would recover with a change of scene⁵⁹. In the same letter to Abiah, Dickinson wrote that ‘I told no one the cause of my grief, though it was gnawing at my very heartstrings’⁶⁰. At 14 years old, she was already in the habit of expressing her emotions through the written, rather than spoken, word.

Her early poems are haunted by lost loved ones, and they are often young characters⁶¹, confirming that Dickinson was already using her verse to confront her inner torment:

Her little figure at the gate
The Angels must have spied⁶²

(#150, 1859)

Elizabeth A. Petrino notes that odes on the deaths of infants were a common trend in poetry of this era, but she also observes how Dickinson’s response differed from other

⁵⁷ Sewall, 341.

⁵⁸ Johnson (1958), 32, Letter 11.

⁵⁹ Sewall, 341.

⁶⁰ Johnson (1958), 32, Letter 11.

⁶¹ Johnson (1961), Poems 14, 25, 72, 75, 82, 144, 146, 149, 150.

⁶² Johnson (1961), 71.

poets as she never turned her verse into elegies, but instead explored the ‘pain and anxiety that both parents and children suffer’.⁶³

Dickinson’s fear of loss causes her to become overly attached to all around her and anxious of their health. She is often imploring her brother: ‘take care of *yourself*’⁶⁴, and instructs him: ‘Don’t get sick these cool days when fevers are around!’⁶⁵ Even a simple delay in correspondence would make Emily fret about their relationship and whether they were growing apart, writing on one occasion that she ‘really can’t help thinking she has forgotten the many hours we spent together and though I try to banish the idea from my mind, for it is painful to me, I am Afraid she has forgotten us, but I hope not’.⁶⁶ These words sprung merely from a friend’s silence and it is clear that she took even this loss to heart with the capitalisation of ‘Afraid’ drawing our attention to her fear of separation. As she grew, her fear of loss stopped her from seeking out new acquaintances, though she was desperate to maintain the relationships that she already treasured. As a needy correspondent she often mentioned the length of a reply or apologised herself for not writing sooner. She desperately clung to her correspondents for human connection and she signed off to Abiah: ‘Do write me soon, for as I cannot see you, I must hear from you often, very often’.⁶⁷

Her withdrawal from society stemmed in part from this fear of loss and did result in loneliness in her earlier years:

⁶³ Elizabeth A. Petrino (1998) *Emily Dickinson and her Contemporaries*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

⁶⁴ Johnson (1958), 151, Letter 59.

⁶⁵ Johnson (1961), 143, Letter 55.

⁶⁶ Johnson (1958), 21, Letter 8.

⁶⁷ Johnson (1958), 22, Letter 8.

I am feeling lonely; some of my friends are gone, and some of my friends are sleeping – sleeping the churchyard sleep –⁶⁸

Here in 1850 she writes with melancholic tone and childlike allusion to death as the ‘churchyard sleep’. It is clear how she took death to heart and this early preoccupation with loss increased her distrust of God and contributed to her retreat into solitude. When her sister was ill in 1857, Dickinson wrote to Mrs. Holland of her fear that God would take her away from her. She wrote that the loss she had already suffered made it difficult for her to trust Him: ‘God was penurious with me, which makes me shrewd with him’.⁶⁹ She wrote of her struggle with a greater power:

I had some things that I called mine –
And God, that he called his⁷⁰

(#55, 1858)

If, as the church stated, he was in charge of life and death then she saw him as the enemy:

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the cod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the doors of God!

Angels – twice descending
Reimbursed my store –
Burglar! Banker – Father!
I am poor once more!⁷¹

(#49, 1858)

⁶⁸ Johnson(1958), 102, Letter 39.

⁶⁹ Johnson(1958), 355, Letter 207.

⁷⁰ Johnson (1961), 55, Poem 116.

⁷¹ Johnson (1961), 27.

The tone of the above relatively early poem is confrontational and emotional. ‘Burglar! Banker – Father!’ she cries as she accuses God of taking her loved ones from her.

‘Burglar’ because he has stolen from her, ‘Banker – ’ with a tone of hesitancy, because she hopes he will be keeping them safe for her in heaven, ‘Father!’ with a tone of derision at the idea that a paternal figure would cause such suffering. She resented the power that he held over humanity and as she continued to suffer more loss she found herself withdrawing even further from religion. As Roger Lundin writes, Dickinson ‘wrestled with God the Father, questioning not so much His existence as much as His presence and justice’.⁷²

She was willing to suffer loss, if it could only be guaranteed that she would meet her loved ones again in immortal paradise:

... Fast in a safer hand
Held in a truer Land
Are mine –
And though they now depart,
Tell I my doubting heart
They’re thine.

In a serener Bright,
In a more golden light
I see
Each little doubt and fear
Each little discord here
Removed...⁷³

(#5, 1854)

Dickinson cannot ignore her ‘doubting heart’ but she tries to overpower her doubts and believe that her lost ones are in a better place, ‘a truer Land’. The following stanza suggests that certainty will only be hers when she too has reached heaven and then ‘in a

⁷² Roger Lundin, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, (Michigan: Wm. B. Erdman’s Publishing Co., 1998), 4.

⁷³ Johnson (1961), 7.

more golden light' she will be able to release her fears. The isolation of 'Removed' demonstrates her desire for her doubts to disappear and her deep desperation to ascertain that heaven is a reality. She yearns desperately to believe that those she had lost are safe and awaiting an eternal reunion with her.

Dickinson spent her life searching for the reason why some pass on, and others remain and her ever-questioning nature is present in her poetry:

Where I have lost, I softer tread – ...

Whom I have lost, I pious guard...

When I have lost, you'll know by this – ...

Why, I have lost, the people know
Who dressed in frocks of purest snow
Went home a century ago
Next Bliss!⁷⁴

(#104, c.1859)

In opening each stanza with a question word she indicates her search for understanding, and by most poignantly inserting a comma after 'Why' in the final stanza she intimates that this is the most significant question in her mind. She does not know the answer to that final question but she hopes it lies in those who have passed on to a more blissful land. She 'pious[ly] guards' those she has lost because she is hopeful that she will be reunited with them in the 'Next Bliss'.

⁷⁴ Johnson (1961), 51.

Looking at her earliest poems, it is clear that Dickinson's all-consuming preoccupation with the possibility of Immortality and Heaven stemmed from enduring these early losses.

A poem dated to 1853 ends thus:

...Land Ho! Eternity!
Ashore at last!⁷⁵

(#4, 1853)

Into her early twenties, Dickinson continues to search for a solution to life and death. She seeks assurance that when she weathered the 'storm' she would find 'land' and 'eternity', bringing peace and tranquillity to her turbulent emotions. In her letters, she writes of her battle with religion and her heartbreak at loss but she does not expand on her desperation for immortality in detail. The latter was so close to her heart, so integral to her existence that she dared not share it with another. This corroborates the idea that her poetry became an output for thoughts that she could not bear sharing with another soul. As her life progressed, her correspondence began to take a secondary role to her poetry as she treasured the privacy of confronting her fears in verse.

Before 1860 Dickinson demonstrated no fear of her own death. She was concerned with the passing of others but did not dwell on her own mortality. As we explore how her poetry developed over the decades, we will note how this changed as she approached her final years and she began to reflect back on her own life. In her early years however, she was convinced that it was much harder to be left behind than to be the one to go on:

'If I should die,
And you should live –

⁷⁵ Johnson (1961), 6.

And time should gurgle on – ⁷⁶

(#54, 1858)

Her life with loss is merely ‘gurgling’ on at this time (1858), moving uncomfortably at a spluttering pace. She sees dying as a far more ‘pleasing scene’⁷⁷; to go first would be preferable to being left behind, suffering the loss of others.

Throughout her lifetime, only ten poems and one short prose piece were published by or through friends⁷⁸, and there has been much debate about Dickinson’s view on publication. Even at this stage in her life she had begun to take care in preserving certain pieces of her writing, bundling the poems together into what we now refer to as her fascicles. However scholarly debate continues on whether she was binding her poems in a particular sequence and what significance these compilations hold regarding her intent to publish⁷⁹. Whatever Dickinson’s purpose, these intricately bound booklets, the first of which is dated 1858 certainly suggest that it was at the end of her twenties that she begins to put more energy into her poems and perhaps begins to view poetry as her vocation. Early in the next decade she would contact Thomas Wentworth Higginson to seek his counsel on her poetry, suggesting that her verse was not merely a pastime but something she valued and sought to improve.

Her letters in youth contained reports on visits and social calls, but as she grew they became consumed by her thoughts and reflections on life and the outside world. As she began to withdraw into her own world, she writes in 1856 that: ‘It is Sunday – now... and

⁷⁶ Johnson (1961), 29.

⁷⁷ Johnson (1961), 29, Poem 54.

⁷⁸ Jonathon Morse ‘Bibliographical Essay’ in Pollak (2004), 255.

⁷⁹ Sharon Cameron (1992) *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson’s Fascicles*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3-29.

all have gone to church – the wagons have done passing, and I have come out in the new grass to listen to the anthems’⁸⁰. Not only is she seeking time by herself, but she is also avoiding church services and choosing instead to surround herself by the beauty of nature.

She emerges from her early years as a young woman already haunted by questions of self and faith, both themes that continue to resonate through the rest of her life in her correspondence and poetry. What might have been originally thought of as a juvenile affection for her childhood home would become a lifelong attachment:

I don’t go from home, unless emergency leads me by the hand, and then I do it obstinately, and draw back if I can...⁸¹

It was a conscious decision on her part to remain in Amherst and in her parents’ home. Maryanne Garbowsky writes that ‘Dickinson... was not equipped to be independent. Her ‘sense of self’ was embedded in the intimate context of home life’⁸². It is true that she evidently gained a physical security in being close to loved ones but while she felt herself tied to the homestead, her ‘sense of self’ was certainly not ‘embedded’ in it. If anything she had fought consciously to extract herself from the constraints of familial and social duty and in retreating into her own space, she gained the freedom to challenge social concepts of faith and open her own mind away from the pressures of social and familial expectations.

Through the examination of these early years, we have seen how her attachment to her family home, and its occupants tied her to Amherst. Her fear of loss would appear to be the earliest motivation as she struggled to be apart from those she loved, fearing they would be

⁸⁰ Johnson (1958), 327, Letter 184.

⁸¹ Johnson (1958), 297-299, Letter 166.

⁸² Garbowsky (1989), 40.

taken from her. This in turn led to a struggle with God and organised religion yielding the beginning of a lifelong battle to protect her own identity. In examining her writing preceding 1860, we have followed Dickinson through her adolescence, emerging from a close-knit family upbringing and oppressive education as a young woman with deep questions of immortality and faith on her mind.

In these early years, Dickinson begins to claim her own identity, seeking refuge in solitude where she finds space to confront her thoughts without the pressures of the outside world. At the end of this era in her life she remains conflicted, writing in 1859 about her volatile thoughts and emotions:

A darting fear – a pomp – a tear –⁸³

Fear was the key catalyst behind her solitude and despite the ‘pomp’ of life, she could never fully elude death and loss which brought with it tears and pain. In the 1860s, as she withdraws more acutely into her own company, we shall examine her written reactions to the heightened solitude and what drew her to such extreme isolation.

⁸³ Johnson (1961), 44.

1860-1870

Elder, Today, a session wiser

The start of this new decade sees Emily Dickinson's poetry become the dominant outlet for her many questions on life and death. She wrote to her cousins: 'Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray'⁸⁴, expressing how she sought relief in her verse just as others did in prayer. At this point in her poetic evolution she initially withdrew into her homestead seeking comfort and security in its familiarity, and also space to examine her own mind. The importance of the self that first took seed in her twenties now became the dominating reason for her continued solitude. As Barnstone writes, 'from the mid-60s on, the poetry reveals an understanding that through its own destitution the self achieves freedom'⁸⁵. This independence through seclusion brought with it challenges of its own and this chapter will examine the loneliness and isolation that Dickinson faced while striving to preserve her own identity and protect herself from further pain through loss.

From what remains of her verse, it is evident that the volume of Dickinson's poetic output peaked during the 1860s. Far fewer of her letters remain, whether because they were destroyed by her sister's initial destruction of Dickinson's personal documents⁸⁶ or because her creative writing overtook her correspondence as her emotional output, we shall never know. The latter seems truthful though as she writes in 1862 of her immersion in poetry:

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose...⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Johnson (1958), 421, Letter 278.

⁸⁵ Barnstone, 93.

⁸⁶ Millicent Todd Bingham (1945) *Ancestor's Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Harper Brothers, 16-17.

⁸⁷ Johnson (1961), 327, Poem 657.

She found the opportunity for unflinching expression through her poetry, perhaps explaining why it so outweighed her correspondence from that era. She found it easier to confront her own thoughts in poetry than express them to others in prose.

In 1863 she was isolated by doctor's order in Boston and in his anthology of her letters, Johnson comments that 'such a change must have been for her, in both her conscious and unconscious relations, a taxing experience which reflected itself in the pace of her living'.⁸⁸ This lowered 'pace of living' helps account for the fecundity of her poetry in this era and also her heightened introspective state. Ryan Cull observes that these years comprised 'the pivotal period in her life, [when] Dickinson obsessively analyzed social interaction'.⁸⁹ From her seclusion she could begin to assess the impact that others had on an individual's identity and this growing awareness of their influence no doubt stemmed her need to put her innermost thoughts in letters, instead preferring to express them in verse.

Despite her reduced correspondence in this decade, it was also the era during which she began what was arguably her most significant epistolary relationship, with Thomas Wentworth Higginson to whom she first wrote in 1862, posing the question:

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—⁹⁰

She enclosed four poems and desired that he send feedback. Frustratingly, we do not have his reply which would have allowed us to consider whether she truly welcomed the

⁸⁸ Johnson (1958), 448.

⁸⁹ Ryan Cull (June 2010) 'Beyond the Cheated Eye: Dickinson's Lyric Sociality'. *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol.65, no.1, 39.

⁹⁰ Johnson (1958), 403, Letter 260.

critique and adhered to his suggested improvements, and also whether he considered himself in a position to comment on her work. Whatever his reply, it began an exchange of letters which span Dickinson's lifetime and document her poetic ambition.

Her search for a mentor suggests that she was beginning to view poetry as her vocation. She responds to his first letter: 'You ask how old I was? I made no verse – but one of two – until this winter – Sir –'⁹¹, insinuating that she considered any poems written before 1861 as precursors to her real poetry; the earlier years simply a time to hone her skills through childish rhyming. Now that she was no longer hindered by the outside world, she could focus anew on her poetry.

Only three examples of his side of their textual relationship have survived and it is clear from his tone that he was intrigued by Dickinson and her writing, informing her in one letter of the 'strange power'⁹² of her verse. He confronts her about her solitary existence, indicating his own investment in their correspondence and also their familiarity, as she evidently shared with him details of her personal existence. He writes:

... It is hard [for me] to understand how you can live s[o alo]ne, with thoughts of such quality coming up in you... Yet it isolates one anywhere to think beyond a certain point or have such luminous flashes as come to you – so perhaps the place does not make much difference...⁹³

This particular exchange occurs in 1869, at the end of a decade of productivity but also deep isolation. Higginson acknowledges that her inspiration does not come from what is

⁹¹ Johnson (1958), 404, Letter 261.

⁹² Johnson (1958), 461, Letter 330a.

⁹³ Johnson (1958), 461 Letter 330a.

around her but from within and voices that while it is hard for him to understand, he has seen the ‘luminous flashes’ of genius that she has uncovered through her solitude.

Her correspondence with Higginson was instigated by an article he wrote for *Atlantic Monthly* addressing future contributors to the journal⁹⁴. He opened with ‘My dear young gentleman or young lady’⁹⁵ and Dickinson was no doubt drawn to this inclusion of women writers in his introduction. In her first letter to Higginson, Dickinson voices her growing disenchantment with the outside world through the insertion of the following poem:

We play at Paste –
Till qualified, for Pearl –
Then, drop the Paste –
And deem ourself a fool –

The Shapes – though – were similar –
And our new Hands
Learned Gem-Tactics
Practicing Sands –

(# 320, c.1862)

It is girls whom she depicts above, playing with costume jewellery before old enough to be trusted with ‘Pearl[s]’ and then she notes their dismissal of such games in a flurry as they enter the real world, forgetting the simple pleasures of youth. Sand may not be as glamorous as gems but they are essentially one and the same, different only by circumstance. Dickinson can be read as observing how women were being moulded by society to fit different strands and that in the race to adulthood and pearls they lose part of themselves. By enclosing this verse in her first letter to him, she could be seen as thanking Higginson for acknowledging writers of both genders as equal in his article. Higginson

⁹⁴ Benjamin Lease (1990) *Emily Dickinson's Readings of Men and Books*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 75.

⁹⁵ Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1871) *Letter to a Young Contributor in Atlantic Essays*. Boston: James R Osgood and Company, 71.

also wrote an article for *Atlantic Monthly* championing the need for equal education opportunities for both genders⁹⁶ and knowing Dickinson's enthusiasm for her own schooling we can see that this might also have contributed to her decision seek him out.

From the outset, their relationship is one of teacher and student. Indeed she refers to herself as his 'Scholar'⁹⁷ demonstrating the deference she shows to his superior intellectual capacity, whilst also acknowledging her love of education that we have seen in evidence from an early age. She always remains respectful and reverent in tone but in later letters she becomes needy and petulant, traits we recognise from her earlier letters to her friends when they took too long to reply and she feared she may have been forgotten. In one instance she is so troubled by his lack of response that she implores, or even challenges Higginson to respond:

Did I displease you, Mr Higginson?
But won't you tell me how?⁹⁸

Through this we can see her growing attachment to Higginson, and her growing reliance on his insight into her verse. As she ages, she retains a desperate fear of abandonment that we saw traces of in her earlier letters and which was heightened by the early losses she suffered in childhood. She rarely sought new acquaintances in the 1860s, Higginson an exception, again demonstrating the importance she placed on her poetry, but she clung anxiously to those around her, an anxiety seemingly driven by her fear of them dying. Suzanne Juhasz writes insightfully that 'Control and Possession are Dickinson's goals,

⁹⁶ Alfred Habegger (2002) *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The life of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Modern Library, 452.

⁹⁷ Johnson (1958), 412, Letter 268.

⁹⁸ Johnson (1958), 417, Letter 274.

power her achievement, loss her terror⁹⁹. By embracing solitude she was able to exact control over her life, yet she spent a lifetime trying to conquer her fear of loss. A fear of which she was fully aware, made evident in a letter to Higginson in 1863:

Perhaps death gave me awe for friends, striking sharp and early, for I held them since in a brittle love, of more alarm than peace...¹⁰⁰

These lines verify the idea that by the mid-1860s she was very much in control of her withdrawal from society and even aware of her motivations behind it. She held her loved ones closely with a love that she was aware could shatter at any moment should death strike. In this same letter, she enclosed the following poem, evaluating her solitary nature and highlighting the importance she placed on the individual:

The Soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend –
Or the most agonizing Spy –
An Enemy – could send –

Secure against its own –
No reason it can fear –
Itself – its Sovereign – of itself
The Soul should stand in Awe –¹⁰¹

(#683, c.1862)

She is aware of both the sanctity of the soul, its ‘imperial’ status, but also the idea that self-awareness brings with it anxieties of its own. For examining your soul is ‘agonizing’ in the resulting revelation of truths hidden even from your own consciousness. Alone, there is nothing to fear because a soul cannot be damaged if it is not exposed to outside influences. It is ‘secure against its own’ but when open

⁹⁹Suzanne Juhasz (1983) *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of Mind*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 173.

¹⁰⁰Johnson (1958), 423, Letter 280.

¹⁰¹Johnson (1961), 338.

to others, can become fragile just as Dickinson's love became 'brittle' as a result of the loss she found heart-breaking. Dickinson is full of 'Awe' at the depths of the soul and believes that bowing to the importance of the 'Soul' will result in a complete understanding of oneself.

Not only did she see her solitary existence as a way to protect herself from more loss but also as a manner by which to further herself. She believed that one could not grow if they were impinged by society and its constraints. She writes of how completeness comes from within:

Growth of Man – like Growth of Nature –
Gravitates within –
Atmosphere and Sun endorse it –
But it stir – alone –¹⁰²

(#750, c.1862)

Here Dickinson acknowledges the importance of Nature, also evident in imagery throughout her poetry. While she accepts sole responsibility for her own 'Growth', her development as a person and writer, she also concedes that the natural world inspires and 'endorse[s]' her on this journey. She writes to Higginson in 1862 of her growing reliance on the surrounding landscape:

You ask of my Companions. Hills – Sir – and the Sundown – and a
Dog... They are better than Beings – because they know – but do not
tell¹⁰³

These words suggest that as she limits her interaction with the human world, she begins to seek companionship and solace in the natural world. It is interesting how she also admits a

¹⁰² Johnson (1961), 367.

¹⁰³ Johnson (1958), 404, Letter 26.

fear of humankind, of their constant need to interact and communicate. She does not want to share her innermost thoughts with people who would 'tell' her secrets. It appears that these were the years she considered publication and surely this fear of human gossip was a key motivation in her decision not to share her poetry publically in her lifetime.

As we have seen in the above poems, she was appreciative of the time that she could dedicate to discovering herself and improving her poetry, yet there is also evidence that suggests she initially found it difficult to settle down completely in isolation and the above declarations of the power of the individual and the majesty of the soul are a far cry from the words of the lonely woman who wrote in October 1863, shortly after being taken ill and relocated to 'Boston, for a Physician's care'¹⁰⁴ that 'nothing has happened but loneliness'.¹⁰⁵ While she had begun retreating into her own space during the previous decade, the displacement from her family and home in Amherst caused her fear of abandonment to momentarily blind her to all that this enforced isolation would eventually come to offer. While she grew to recognise the merits of her solitude, Dickinson was never immune to the threat of loneliness. The silence 'sanctifies the Mind',¹⁰⁶ but also incites 'a lonesome Glee',¹⁰⁷ both extracts taken from the same poem (c.1863) which voices Dickinson's initial struggle to embrace her secluded state and remain content within her own company. As her creative output soared, so her loneliness lessened and her appreciation of seclusion grew. The initial loneliness became a 'solitary prowess'¹⁰⁸ giving her a powerful insight into herself.

¹⁰⁴ Johnson (1958), 431, Letter 290.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson (1958), 427, Letter 285.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson (1961), 378, Poem 774.

¹⁰⁷ Johnson (1961), 378, Poem 774.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson (1961), 367, Poem 750.

Away from home, in isolation, was where her poetical output peaked, despite her doctor being ‘not willing [she] should write’,¹⁰⁹ as Emily told her sister in a letter. Luckily for us she did not heed his advice and sought solace in her poetry. During this sanctioned isolation, she shared with Higginson that ‘[the doctor] does not let me go, yet I work in my Prison, and make Guests for myself –’.¹¹⁰ She is beginning to fully embrace her mind and unleash her imagination finding companionship in her conjured-up ‘Guests’. The below poem was written upon her transition to Boston as she began to fill the unsettling unfamiliarity with a heightened focus on her writing:

The Loneliness One dare not sound –
And would as soon surmise
As in its Grave go plumbing
To ascertain the size –

The Loneliness whose worst alarm
Is lest itself should see –
And perish from before itself
For just a scrutiny –

The Horror not to be surveyed –
But skirted in the Dark –
With Consciousness suspended –
And being under Lock –

I fear me this – is Loneliness –
The Maker of the soul
Its Caverns and its Corridors
Illuminate or seal –¹¹¹

(#777, 1863)

This poem allows an insight into Dickinson’s solitary state of mind as she acclimatises to a more secluded state. In the opening stanza she doesn’t only capitalise ‘Loneliness’ but also

¹⁰⁹ Johnson (1958), 430, Letter 289

¹¹⁰ Johnson (1958), 431, Letter 290.

¹¹¹ Johnson (1961), 379.

chooses to emphasise 'One', signifying the importance she placed on the individual. She has identified that loneliness is 'The Maker of the soul', a state within which one can come to know their own self. However she is also aware of the double-edged sword of such a state – 'its Caverns and its Corridors'. She is surrounded by the ordered corridors of both her homestead and, at this time, the place in which she is hospitalised, but contrary to that domesticated order lay the darkness of the caverns of her mind, a darkness that comes from being alone with her thoughts and having to confront her obsessions of loss and immortality. Dickinson could also be insinuating that she is stifled both by nature, having been born a woman: 'caverns', and also by humanity, which laid down boundaries for her gender and stifled her individuality: 'corridors'.

Such is the depth of Dickinson's thinking that her poems have left us with riddles to unravel, resulting in a wide scope of interpretation. Another reading to the above poem could be that she is not only observing her own fate but that of women in society. She could be inferring that her gender cannot voice their loneliness because they are not given the scope of mind to recognise it. She capitalises 'Consciousness', another nod to the importance of the individual and suggests that loneliness is an idea 'skirted in the Dark', avoided by women lest they recognise the inequality in the world (note the blatant reference to the sexist divide with 'skirted'). Dickinson suggests that many women's identity might be found 'under Lock' as they remain unaware of the possibilities outside the limitation of their current existence.

The final line has the air of an unfinished thought, a question to the world. There remains the choice of whether to embrace a new world and explore one's own mind, or to conform

to society and remain in darkness. 'Illuminate' is stretched out by the dash and emits an air of hope. However it is 'seal' that emanates a sense of finality. While Dickinson left the poem open-ended it does not read like an open-ending of hope but one of resignation, suggesting that to seal one's mind and not question society is the easier choice and one that many will follow. Again it could be suggested that she is referring to women and their refusal to recognise their repression.

This is reflective of the Amherst community in which she grew but on a national scope, women's suffrage in America was well under way by the 1860s with the first National Women's Rights Convention in 1850. Throughout the country women were beginning to fight for their rights. While it does not appear that Dickinson's solitude was primarily a reaction to patriarchal oppression, she was by no means oblivious to it:

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 –¹¹²

She may describe it as 'honorable' but Dickinson sees the attachment of oneself to a man as 'Work'. She depicts married women as voiceless and bereft of all they've left behind as

¹¹² Johnson (1961), 359.

even the gold of the wedding band is eventually tarnished by marriage. While she recognises that both good and bad, ‘Pearl, and weed’ can be born of a union, her tone is one of sadness that so many enter the tradition and leave themselves behind. The final two lines of this poem suggest that it is only ‘Himself’, referring either to the husband or God, who will know the struggles with which they engage, and hinting at the isolation that marriage brings, cutting the wife off from all but her husband. In scathing tones, she writes of the death of oneself in being tied to another:

Born – Bridalled – Shrouded –
In a Day –¹¹³

(#1072, c.1862)

Despite her own refusal to be a wife to man’s dominance, her letters and verse do not suggest that she spent a great deal of time dwelling on her gender’s repression. While she sees the idea of marriage as repressive and destructive of her own individuality, the subject does not consume her correspondence. She appears to have viewed such an attachment as intrusive; once again the importance of knowing her mind and living her own life removes her from marriage, as it removed her from religion. Surely if it had been her key desire to further the stance of women, she would have pushed for publication of her poems just as other women at the time were being published in America, letting their voices be heard. Shawn Thomson writes that ‘Emily Dickinson exploits the Crusoe topos as a mirror of her own aesthetic integrity and isolation as an unsentimental woman poet in the nineteenth century’¹¹⁴. She withdrew in ‘Crusoe tradition’ to enable her writing to reflect just herself and not her place as a repressed woman in nineteenth century New England.

¹¹³ Johnson (1961), 487.

¹¹⁴ Shawn Thomson (2009) *The Fortress of American Solitude: Robinson Crusoe and Antebellum Culture*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 25.

Although she was reluctant to engage in society, it is evident that she was not ignorant of contemporary issues. As Juhasz observes, ‘Dickinson is solitary, but she is no solipsist. She does not disavow the existence of the outer world to live within’.¹¹⁵ We see this in her above comments on the place of women in society and we also see it through glimpses in her poetry of the surrounding war.

It can be no coincidence that her poetic output increased throughout the Civil War years. As Shira Wolosky writes, ‘Dickinson’s own writing career remarkably aligns with the enormous and traumatic political events surrounding her’.¹¹⁶ From 1861-1865 she becomes more aware that the echoes of death were not haunting solely her but an entire nation:

‘It feels a shame to be Alive –
When Men so brave – are dead –’¹¹⁷

Despite interacting with national events, her verse remains powerfully personal. In the below poem Dickinson poignantly voices the story of a soldier in battle as his ‘Comrades’ fall but he survives. She feels she can associate with his plight because she has spent her whole life watching loved ones shift ‘like the Flakes’ while she remains behind to confront the agony of her loss:

He fought like those Who’ve nought to lose –
Bestowed himself to Balls
As One who for a further Life
Had not a further Use –

Invited Death – with bold attempt –
But Death was Coy of Him
As Other Men, were Coy of Death –

¹¹⁵ Juhasz, 176.

¹¹⁶ Shira Wolosky, ‘Public and Private in Dickinson’s War Poetry’ in Pollak (2004), 107.

¹¹⁷ Johnson (1961), 213, Poem 444.

To Him – to live – was Doom –

His Comrades, shifted like the Flakes
When Gusts reverse the Snow –
But He – was left alive Because
Of Greediness to die – ¹¹⁸

(#759, c.1863)

In this poem she depicts Death as manipulative – ‘Death was Coy of Him’ because of the soldier’s ‘Greediness to die’. Dickinson employs a bitter tone in depicting the ‘Doom’ of living with loss, with death the preferable option. As she has voiced before, she shows an aspiration towards death in the hope that she will be reunited with her loved ones.

In 1864, Dickinson wrote to her cousins on the subject of war, stating that ‘Sorrow seems more general... since the war begun... ‘Tis dangerous to value for only the precious can alarm’¹¹⁹. We see again her reluctance to build up new relationships as she sees them ending only in sadness. She shares with them that she ‘in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps’ with her poetry now even more motivated by death and loss, and that her verse comes in some part from the steps to a tomb, to the next life. This shows an awareness of the impact that the war and the growing presence of death and grief in the outer world is having on her poetry.

However while she engages with contemporary issues, her physical detachment from society causes Betsy Erkkila to note that: ‘even when Dickinson does appear to address the social problems of her time, in her poems... she seems removed from the subject’.¹²⁰ Her

¹¹⁸ Johnson (1961), 372.

¹¹⁹ Johnson (1958), 436, Letter 298.

¹²⁰ Betsy Erkkila (Spring 1992) ‘Emily Dickinson and Class’. *American Literary History*, vol.4, no.1: 1-27, 11.

isolation has created a divide between her and the rest of society, causing her writing to always feel principally like personal insights despite her contemplation on current events. As we saw in the above poem, she felt she could empathise with those suffering and through her poetry gave voice to their grief as well as her own. While in context this poem is a reflection on the devastation of the Civil War, the issues encountered within resonate with Dickinson's personal lifelong battles concerning death and loss.

This demonstrates Dickinson's inability to write impersonal poems, or make detached observations. As the following poem illustrates, she remains essentially restricted by her own pain:

I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes –
I wonder if It weighs like Mine –
Or has an Easier size.

I wonder if They bore it long –
Or did it just begin –
I could not tell the Date of Mine –
It feels so old a pain –

I wonder if it hurts to love –
And if They have to try –
And whether- could They choose between –
It would not be – to die... ¹²¹

(#561, c.1863)

She capitalises 'Grief' and evokes the magnitude of her own struggle through her certainty that she must be alone in the pain. Through her capitalisation of 'They' in opposition with 'I' she depicts herself further as a lone entity and through her 'narrow, probing Eyes' we see her distrust and fear of interacting with humanity. The weight of her grief was a key

¹²¹ Johnson (1961), 272.

motivation behind her seclusion and the third stanza indicates that it was this pain that led to both her fear of loss and her obsession with immortality. It also refers to Dickinson's belief that the pain of loss was greater than the pain of death, a belief seen in a letter to her cousins in which she offers comfort on hearing of the death of their only living parent though enclosing a poem opening:

It is not dying hurts us so, -
'Tis living hurts us more...¹²²

It is unclear how much comfort her young cousins would have taken from this intimation that the pain of loss remains always present, but it is clear that Dickinson herself found solace in the idea that those that have passed on are in no pain, and that it is the burden of those still living to weather life until death comes for them too:

You'll find – it when you try to die –
The Easier to let go –
For recollecting such as went –
You could not spare –you know.

And though their places somewhat filled –
As did their Marble names
With Moss – they never grew so full –
You choose the newer names

And when this World – sets further back –
And Dying – says it does –
The former love – distincter grows –
And supersedes the fresh –

And thought of them – so fair invites –
It looks too tawdry Grace
To stay behind – with just the Toys
We bought – to ease their place –¹²³

(#610, c.1862)

¹²² Johnson (1958), 420, Letter 278.

¹²³ Johnson (1961), 300.

The unsettling opening line 'when you try to die' speaks of the discomfort Dickinson found in living while those she loved were no longer with her on earth. Whether this is an insinuation of suicidal thoughts that follow loss or anticipation of her eventual deathbed, Dickinson is sure of the necessity of remembering those that they have lost that they 'could not spare'. This poem is written a year before 'I measure every Grief I meet' and I think demonstrates the shift that occurred during her doctor-ordered isolation in 1863-4. In this earlier poem she writes companionably and compassionately, engaging with the reader, the placement of the conversational 'you know' at the end of the first stanza allowing us to see that she empathises with others who have suffered loss. She is not trapped by the self-pitying magnitude of her own loss as we see in the later verse but is aware of the universal ache of grief. In the second stanza we can see why she began to withdraw and stop entertaining new acquaintances, as she writes that new faces never replace the old ones completely, just as the names on 'marble' tombstones may be covered up but will never disappear. There is beautiful imagery in the idea that the man-manipulated 'Marble' will eventually be dominated by the ruthless nature of 'Moss', that nature will ultimately prevail over man, and death over life.

The outside world becomes less and less relevant as 'Dying' sets in, and it is the lost loves that come to mind while the 'Toys we bought – to ease their place' become irrelevant in the shadow of the 'former love'. This poem is full of sadness and reluctance to re-engage with the world. Written before she had been sanctioned to a sickbed, it is an early sign that Dickinson would always have begun to withdraw regardless of her health because she saw nothing but pale imitations of her former happiness awaiting her in the future. As Lyndall

B. Gordon observes, ‘stillness, for [Dickinson], was not a retreat from life but a form of control’.¹²⁴ She sought protection from further loss and grief.

In the above poem we see her attributing emotions to death, and as her obsession death develops she personifies ‘him’ more and more, in the hope of gaining some control over the phenomenon. Not only does she personify death, but she also begins to employ a posthumous perspective¹²⁵, imagining her own self in death:

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.¹²⁶

(#712, c. 1863)

There is a difference in tone now that she is the one in death’s carriage – she is no longer a bitter observer of death but is grateful to him for allowing her to move on and join her loved ones ahead. She no longer employs a hostile tone, but emits surprise at the genial transition from life to death. She sees death as an eventual blessing, though there is an insistence on ‘Immortality’ in the above opening stanza that suggests it is not the end of her mortal life that she craves but the beginning of her eternal existence. At another time, she boldly states that the dead lie ‘Safe in their Alabaster chambers’¹²⁷, depicting death as a comforting phenomenon because it is the end of the uncertainty of life. She awaits the safety that the finality of a tomb will bring.

¹²⁴ Lyndall B. Gordon (2010) *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and her family’s feuds*. London: Virago Press, 16.

¹²⁵ Johnson (1961), Poems 465, 692.

¹²⁶ Johnson (1961), 350.

¹²⁷ Johnson (1961), 100, Poem 216.

We have examined Dickinson's obsession with Death, and it is her constant hope for immortality that appears to drive this. So driven by this concept was she that in 1866 she wrote to Higginson: 'You mention Immortality/ That is the Flood subject'.¹²⁸ It is the 'Flood subject' because it consumes Dickinson's every thought and shapes her views on both God and Death. She will forgive the former for inflicting the latter if he will only redeem himself through the eternal promise of immortality. This could also be a biblical reference to the Old Testament flood where God was so appalled by 'wickedness of the human race'¹²⁹ that he rid the earth of all creatures save two of each species and Noah's family. When the flood is over the Lord sighs and says in his heart 'never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done'.¹³⁰ In calling immortality the 'Flood subject', Dickinson could be summing up ideas of God's promise not to destroy living creatures, suggesting that he will treasure them in death as well as in life. Despite her ever-wavering faith, she could never fully reject the idea of God's existence because of her desperate need to be assured of eternal life.

In the following two poems we can see the importance of her time in Boston again. They were only written a year apart but demonstrate a distinct shift in her relationship with God. In 1862 she is not merely distant from religion but antagonistic towards God:

Of Course – I prayed –
 And did God Care?
 He cared as much as on the Air
 A Bird – had stamped her foot –¹³¹

(#376, c.1862)

¹²⁸ Johnson (1958), 454, Letter 319.

¹²⁹ Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (eds.) (1997) *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6, Genesis 6:5.

¹³⁰ Carroll and Prickett, 9, Genesis 8:21.

¹³¹ Johnson (1961), 179.

She writes that ‘of course’ she prayed – because that is what she has been brought up to do in times of crisis but the analogy that follows suggests her belligerence towards God, exclaiming that just as the Air will not feel a bird stamp her foot, so too does God not hear her prayers. This poem concludes with Dickinson stating that it would be kinder if she could view the world unquestioningly:

... Twere better Charity
To leave me in the Atom’s Tomb –
Merry, and Nought and gay, and numb –
Than this smart Misery.

The ‘smart Misery’ has arrived as she becomes ever more doubtful of God’s presence and ever more aware of her own mind. The penultimate line reflects how she sees merriment as an emotion tied with being ‘numb’ to the world, whereas being ‘smart’ and opening your eyes will end in ‘Misery’. While she has fought for the space to confront her own thoughts, she finds that she would have preferred to exist ‘numb’ and unaware of the ambiguity of faith so that she could believe in something without doubt.

A year later, through the heightened seclusion of being removed from her home, she has become certain of the power of faith, a certainty that she will retain in her later years.

You taught me Waiting with Myself –
Appointment strictly kept –
You taught me fortitude of Fate –
This – also – I have learnt –¹³²

(#740, c.1863)

¹³² Johnson (1961), 363.

This does not mean she has become trustful of God, or accepting of religion but her isolation seems to have instilled in her again a desire for faith, a need that we first saw at the seminary when all were converting and she could not. Many years on, with time to reflect on her life and the world, she has come back to the ‘fortitude of Fate’ and is insistent on believing in immortality and the existence of some power or plan greater than herself.

In the above extract we see how she has embraced ‘waiting with [herself]’ and the power that self-knowledge brings. As Dickinson ages we see more allusions to transcendental ideals in her work, not just through the evident importance of the individual but also her engagement with the natural world:

My Faith is larger than the Hills –
So when the Hills decay –
My Faith must take the Purple Wheel
To show the Sun the way –...

And if His Yellow feet should miss
The Bird would not arise -
The flowers would slumber on their Stems –
No Bells have paradise¹³³

(#766, c.1863)

She sees the ‘Sun’ as governing all of nature, without whom birds would not rise and flowers would fail to blossom. In a world that she sees as haunted by death and loss, nature brings beauty and light. However in the final line of this poem, we can see that Dickinson did not find it easy to rid her mind of the wish for immortality. While she is admiring the

¹³³ Johnson (1961), 375.

beauty of the living, she cannot help but cast her mind to the luxury of ‘paradise’ and eternal life, a luxury that will always bring her back to the importance of Faith.

As she endures more loss, this dependence on Immortality continues to consume her; a need to be certain that she will be recompensed for all the pain in her mortal life:

Joy to have merited the Pain –
To merit the Release –
Joy to have perished every step –
To Compass Paradise –¹³⁴

(#788, 1863)

There is an edge to the certainty of this poem, with the dashes insinuating question marks; will there in the end be Joy to have merited the Pain? There is a tone of longing for confirmation that she will soon be free from the pain of loss and joyful in ‘Paradise’. Dickinson may have never been able to fully commit to a God that she did not trust, but she was now reluctant to cast him aside as her need for immortality grew stronger with the years. She writes to her sister on the death of a dear Aunt:

Well, she is safer now than “we know or even think”. Tired little aunt,
sleeping ne’er so peaceful!¹³⁵

There is an attempted tone of conviction here, both to comfort her sister and herself. While Dickinson is aware of her doubts in God, she truly believes that her aunt is safer than she knows. She cannot let go of a trust in a higher meaning and so consumed does she remain by the idea of leaving behind the pain of mortal life that she writes in 1869, at the end of a decade consumed with these questions of faith and immortality:

¹³⁴ Johnson (1961), 384.

¹³⁵ Johnson (1958), 362, Letter 217.

In thy long Paradise of Light
No moment will there be
When I shall long for Earthly Play
And mortal Company – ¹³⁶

(#1145, c.1869)

There is no hesitation here in this later poem. She has decided that she must believe in ‘Paradise’ to allow her to weather earthly turmoil and ‘mortal Company’ neither for which she will long when she is finally content on a higher plain. To say, as Peter Balaam does, that ‘Dickinson rejects the idea of compensation [of immortality] on grounds not of its failure to be sufficient but of its failure to be possible’¹³⁷ is to show ignorance of her growth in this decade. It was in this time that she realised the importance of faith and never stopped searching for assurance of the immortality that she so craved. For Dickinson to reject immortality would have been impossible for, as we have seen, her entire existence was held together by this promise of reunion with her lost loved ones.

As she matures, she claims any certitude that will help her combat her fears and continue on with the lonesome battle of life. Examining her poems chronologically it appears that she was able to overcome these, to some level, with her insistence on the importance of faith, regardless of what one has faith in. It also seems that all these struggles stem from her fear of loss and her ever-growing desperation for immortality. At the end of the decade, in June 1869, Dickinson wrote to Higginson that ‘a letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend’¹³⁸. She treasures her power over words because of their lasting poignancy and ability to last forever, unlike the

¹³⁶ Johnson (1961), 512-13.

¹³⁷ Peter Balaam (2009) *Misery's Mathematics: Mourning, Compensation, and Reality in Antebellum American Literature*. Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, 150.

¹³⁸ Johnson (1958), 460, Letter 330.

human body. Perhaps her growing need to share and improve her poetry was to be a stepping-stone to publication that would give her the immortality that she so craved.

Even before Dickinson penned her missive seeking counsel from Higginson, she sought advice closer to home, writing to her sister-in-law Susan in 1861, enclosing a second version of 'Safe in Alabaster chambers' and stating 'Perhaps this verse would please you better'¹³⁹, suggesting that Dickinson was already actively striving to improve her verse. Perhaps it was this relationship that instigated her need for feedback and inspired her to find further feedback and perhaps more academic terms. In responding to Higginson's article encouraging future authors, we can assume that she was considering publication, but if so, it is interesting that this initial urge came to no fruition.

Indeed a decade full of introspection and grief appear to have resulted in dampening Dickinson's inferred plans to publish. It seems that her correspondence with Higginson did more to stop Dickinson labelling herself a poet than it did to convince her of her calling. One could assume that Higginson's response to her poetry was that she had a long way to go as she writes in only her second letter to him: 'I smile when you suggest that I delay "to publish" – that being foreign to my thought as Firmament to Fin'¹⁴⁰. It is ironic that she hid herself away to protect her identity, yet in Higginson she appears to seek a mentor to validate her poetry and help her see its merits or errors. This demonstrates the importance of her poetry to her but also a continued show of deference to patriarchal knowledge, reflective of the values of the society in which she had grown up.

¹³⁹ Johnson (1958), 379, Letter 238.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson (1958), 408, Letter 265.

By seeking Higginson's guidance and also taking Sue's advice on her poetry, it would appear that Dickinson was considering publication. However she makes it clear in several poems that she won't head down that route. Whether this is because of lacklustre responses from her two correspondents or because she wanted to maintain the privacy of her thoughts we shall never fully know. The following poem suggests the latter as she denounces publication as 'so foul a thing'¹⁴¹, seeing it as selling one's identity:

Publication – is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man –¹⁴²

Knowing as we do her insistence on her own mind, it is understandable that she did not want to allow strangers access to her innermost thoughts. Pollak reflects on this poem, noting that Dickinson saw 'publication [as] automatically [destroying] the integrity of any writer'¹⁴³ due to the eventual erosion of poetic identity by the outside world.

While she often included them in letters to her loved ones to offer solace and advice where she could otherwise not find the words, she retained a power over what information she sent and who would conceivably read them. She was unsure that the eventual audience of a published poet would be appreciative and was reluctant to become the subject of public discussion:

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!¹⁴⁴

(#288, 1861)

¹⁴¹ Johnson (1961), 348, Poem 709.

¹⁴² Johnson (1961), 348, Poem 709.

¹⁴³ Vivian R. Pollak (1984) *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender*. London: Cornell University Press, 230.

¹⁴⁴ Johnson (1961), 133.

She is fearful of being discussed by an ‘admiring’ yet unknowledgeable audience with ‘Bog’ suggesting that it is the nature of these eventual readers that she doubts. As Domhall Mitchell writes, ‘we do need to accept... her figurative and self-conscious privatisation of the literary self’¹⁴⁵ as it is a reflection of her desire to preserve her identity.

In the previous chapter we examined Dickinson’s early leaning towards solitude and credited it principally to her conflicted thoughts of faith growing up and her fear of loss. As she grows, her seclusion centres on discovering and protecting her identity. As she embraced her isolated state, heightened by her doctor’s instruction, she harnessed the time for introspection and her poetry output soared. The following poem reflects her conquering of the initial loneliness and an acceptance of the rewards that such solitude brings:

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
The Stones a’ chase –
Than Unarmed, one’s a’ self encounter –
In lonesome Place -

Ourself behind ourself, concealed –
Should startle most¹⁴⁶

(#670, c. 1863)

She is not oblivious to the sacrifices that accompany solitude and she understands the startling nature of knowing oneself but she believes that this is preferable to never knowing oneself. Juhasz writes that ‘to live in the mind, an actual and occupied place, was for Dickinson the key to solving the problem of how to be a poet, of how to achieve the self-knowledge, the self-awareness, the self-fulfilment

¹⁴⁵ Domhnall Mitchell (2000) *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception*. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 298.

¹⁴⁶ Johnson (1961), 333.

that her vocation demanded'.¹⁴⁷ In isolation with the opportunity for introspection, one can find their true self 'behind [themselves] concealed'.

Throughout this decade the emergence of the importance of self drives Dickinson to further introspection, resulting in her withdrawal from the physical world. Indeed in 1869, she wrote to Higginson, stating: 'You notice my dwelling alone... I do not cross my Father's ground for any House or town'¹⁴⁸, signifying her awareness of her hesitance to interact with society. At the end of this decade she even refuses several invitations from Higginson to join him in Boston and does not confirm that she will see him in Amherst if he visits. Through this remarkably productive decade Dickinson has built up a key relationship through her writing but has largely cut herself off from the physical outside world.

Dickinson acknowledges the growth that her solitude has afforded her, writing:

...Elder, Today, a session wiser
And fainter, too, as Wiseness is – ...¹⁴⁹

(#959, c. 1864)

She recognises the wisdom that experience has brought, yet this 'Wiseness' is fainter than she would have envisaged. While this decade has reignited her desire for faith and cemented her attachment to individual thought, the world is 'fainter' than it was before she withdrew further into her own space.

¹⁴⁷ Juhasz, 11.

¹⁴⁸ Johnson (1958), 460, Letter 330.

¹⁴⁹ Johnson (1961), 448, Poem 959.

A self-imposed solitude that began as self-preservation against loss and pain was transformed by mandatory confinement in Boston that afforded Dickinson time to place an even higher importance on the individual. Before 1860 she sought solace in solitude and poetry as a means of escapism, but during this decade she was no longer escaping the outside world, but conversely discovering her own mind in her own space. As she conquered loneliness, she entered the later years of her life accustomed to her solitude and content in the self-awareness that such seclusion offered her.

1870 – 1886

**But will the secret compensate
For climbing it alone?**

The 1860s were Dickinson's most productive years, during which she focussed on harnessing her power as a poet. By contrast, her later years saw a renewed level of correspondence and the production of fewer poems. Reflective of her emergence from the heightened solitude of the preceding decade was her meeting with one of her key correspondents, for it was on August 16 1870 that Thomas Wentworth Higginson finally met with Emily Dickinson at her home in Amherst. The article that resulted is a fascinating record of that day, written with great insight but without bias. Higginson states:

I have tried to describe her just as she was, with the aid of notes taken at the time; but this interview left our relation very much what it was before; -- on my side an interest that was strong and even affectionate, but not based on any thorough comprehension; and on her side a hope, always rather baffled, that I should afford some aid in solving her abstruse problem of life.¹⁵⁰

These observations are held to be invaluable to Dickinson scholars because while not impartial, Higginson's record of their meeting does confirm her desperation for answers and her lifelong struggle with the questions of life and death. Upon arriving at the Dickinson homestead, Higginson was, according to his account, greeted by a childlike creature that offered him two day-lilies, and said: "Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers and hardly know what I say".¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Wentworth Higginson (October 1891), *Emily Dickinson's Letters*. Atlantic Monthly http://www.earlywomenmasters.net/essays/authors/higginson/twh_dickinson.html, Date accessed: June 25th 2010.

¹⁵¹ Higginson (1891) [online]

The article, published in 1891 following Dickinson's death, reflects on his visit and the enigmatic persona of Dickinson herself. He had always been fascinated by her ability to retreat from everything and everyone and notes that:

When I asked if she never felt want of employment, not going off the grounds and rarely seeing a visitor, she answered, "I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time"¹⁵²

She had reached such a point in her life where she was comfortable in solitude and anxious when faced with human interaction. She continued to write to Higginson following his visit and in her later letters, she reiterates her comfort in her own company and how her 'Cowardice of Strangers'¹⁵³ (1875) kept her in her house and 'ample' grounds.

However while she remained secluded until her death in 1886, her later poems project the idea that following years spent fearing loss and dreading death, Dickinson faced the reality that she may have wasted her own life while worrying about losing others and obsessing about the certainty of immortality. As she approaches her final years her priority shifts away from idealism of the eternal life that will follow to a fear of what she may never experience again:

Sweet hours have perished here;
This is a mighty room;
Within its precincts hopes have played –
Now shadows in the tomb.¹⁵⁴

(#1767, c.1880s)

¹⁵² Higginson (1891) [online]

¹⁵³ Johnson (1958), 716, Letter 735.

¹⁵⁴ Johnson (1961), 714.

The hours of her youth have ‘perished’ while she spent time hoping for a concept that would only be meaningful in death. The ‘mighty room’ of life is now for Dickinson nothing more than a waiting room for death, when the hopes that have consumed her will follow her into the tomb and only there will she finally discover the truth of immortality, despite having allowed it to consume her living thoughts. The above verse rings strongly of regret and a longing to have her time again. Higginson notes that Dickinson said to him in their one interview:

I find ecstasy in living; the mere sense of living is joy enough¹⁵⁵

This is strange comment from a poet who was so fixated on what would follow life, one for whom the ‘mere sense of living’ never seemed enough. She always expressed unease in a world without loved ones and without a certainty of immortality. As she ages and begins to face her own mortality, so she begins to realise that she ought to take more pleasure in earthly joys while she can.

A poem dated from 1883, three years before her death, addresses the act of taking life for granted, and also her ceaseless obsession with immortality:

The Summer that we did not prize,
Her treasures were so easy
Instructs us by departing now
And recognition lazy –

Bestirs itself – puts on its Coat,
And scans with fatal promptness
For trains that moment out of sight,
Unconscious of his smartness.¹⁵⁶

(#1773, c.1883)

¹⁵⁵ Higginson (1891) [\[online\]](#)

¹⁵⁶ Johnson (1961), 715.

She is speaking of life that she did not ‘prize’ before it was too late. With no warning, with ‘fatal promptness’, life can be taken away before one even has a chance to recognise its ‘smartness’. As always Dickinson’s poetry resonates with a search for truthfulness and a sense of anguish as she confronts her own emotions. Life has become in Dickinson’s mind ‘Summer’- a time of possibility and beauty but taken for granted. However unlike summer, life will not come around again and it is not until the end when one realises its wonder. Life is not appreciated by the living who are always looking forward, anxious to discover what will follow. It is only when faced with the inevitable finality of death and the uncertainty of immortality, that we will realise the hope and possibility instilled in us by life. She ends this poem with the finality of a full stop, notable for a poet who, as we have seen so many examples of in this essay alone, had no trouble leaving a poem open-ended or finished with a final dash, indicating uncertainty or hope.

Let us momentarily compare the above poem by a woman in ill-health facing death in reality with one written more than a decade earlier by a woman already looking towards eternity as a greater glory than life:

The Life we have is very great.
The Life that we shall see
Surpasses it, we know, because
It is Infinity.¹⁵⁷

(#1162, 1870)

This stanza illustrates how age, experience and the eventual confrontation with her own mortality changed Dickinson’s perspective. Having spent the majority of her life seeking

¹⁵⁷ Johnson (1961), 518.

assurance that her lost loved ones would find peace in the next life, with 'Infinity' the greater joy than life, by her later years she begins to fear that nothing will compare to the 'treasures' of life in their tangible reality.

In her writing she never voices a fear of her own mortality before her final decade. Even in poems with posthumous personas, Death was never inhospitable or coarse but welcoming and companionable: 'he kindly stopped for me'¹⁵⁸. In these later verses, she continues to write not of a fear of death but still of the fear of the loss that death caused:

So give me back to Death –
The Death I never feared
Except that it deprived of thee –
And now, by Life deprived,
In my own Grave I breathe
And estimate its size –
Its size is all that Hell can guess-
And all that Heaven was –¹⁵⁹

(#1632, c.1884)

It is this fear of deprivation of loved ones that is present throughout her life, as opposed to a fear of her own death. The above verse demonstrates her conflicting emotions as she estimates the size, not just of her Grave but of 'Life deprived'. She reflects back on life and realises that it was heavenly in its magnitude. As with many of Dickinson's poems and their intricate messages, we could also read this as her estimating the magnitude of death. Whatever she is weighing up, she has now come to believe that her time on earth was 'Heaven' too.

¹⁵⁸ Johnson (1961), 350, Poem 712.

¹⁵⁹ Johnson (1961), 670.

As she grows into treasuring her own mortality, she becomes more focused on the blissfulness of life that she so often let be overshadowed by the immensity of her loss:

Of so divine a Loss,
We enter but the Gain,
Indemnity for Loneliness
That such a Bliss has been.¹⁶⁰

(#1179, c.1871)

She states that we can confront loss by remembering the ‘Bliss’ that has come before. It is unusual for her to refer to her solitary state as ‘Loneliness’ – the word crops up very occasionally¹⁶¹ in her many poems, and it is interesting that here it crops up at a time when her poems were becoming more reflective on her narrow life, and seemingly demonstrating regret at her isolated lifestyle. In this instance she states that the loneliness with which she exists is a fair price to pay for the happiness she had experienced in the past. With loss comes the ability to fully appreciate everything that person had brought to her life. This view of loss demonstrates Dickinson’s growth; she may not have arrived at an understanding of death but she has learned to accept it.

Her view of death shifts in the later poems as she becomes less eager to move on to the next life due to her growing sense of regret over her lacklustre existence on earth. Interestingly in her later years, she appears to become more lenient on God as an omnipotent power with her poetry addressing him lacking the anger present in the earlier decades and voicing an acceptance of his position:

¹⁶⁰ Johnson (1961), 523.

¹⁶¹ Johnson (1961), Poems 405, 532, 590, 777, 1116.

God made no act without a cause,
Nor heart without an aim,
Our inference is premature,
Our premises to blame.¹⁶²

(#1163, 1870)

After years of denouncing his thievery of loved ones from her life, she is now proclaiming that it is unfair to round on God when we do not know his motives. She states that it is human nature's instinct to lay blame but in this case she feels such an assumption may be foolhardy as it is too early to know exactly what God's grand plan is. McIntosh states that 'Dickinson continues to be dismayed at God's heartless omnipotence into her last years'¹⁶³, but as the above poem demonstrates she has in fact begun to open her mind to acceptance as age sees her become even more determined to seek refuge in the certainty of immortality.

The above verse is far removed from the poetry of a younger Dickinson who, in 1860, penned in anger:

Christ robs the Nest –
Robin after Robin
Smuggled to Rest!¹⁶⁴

The tone here demonstrates the anger that filters through the 1860 poems; a resentment at death and God. She cannot comprehend or accept the loss that she suffers through death. Let us again contrast it with a later poem in which she presents her continued insistence on faith that we saw develop in the 1860s:

¹⁶² Johnson (1961), 518.

¹⁶³ McIntosh, 46.

¹⁶⁴ Johnson (1961), 72, Poem 154.

To mend each tattered Faith
There is a needle fair
Though no appearance indicate –
Tis threaded in the Air –

And though it do not wear
As if it never Tore
'Tis very comfortable indeed
And spacious as before –¹⁶⁵

(#1442, c.1878)

While she still advocates the need to question faith and not just accept what is stated by society, she is also insistent on the idea that introspection can provide one with a faith that fits. It may not be the prescribed faith instilled by society, but it will be something in which to believe and seek solace, providing a 'spacious' comfort amidst a crowded world. She once again demonstrates her growing maturity, contrasting this poem with one we examined in the third chapter, one written in 1862 when she wrote that she would rather exist in unquestioning ignorance than the 'smart Misery'¹⁶⁶ of her own inquisitive mind. She has now come to realise that while she cannot conform to the boundaries of another's faith, she can 'mend' her own to fit herself.

Dickinson is proclaiming the sanctity of having faith in something – just as in her earlier years at Amherst, she writes to Abiah and proclaims that she wishes she could have found faith as those others around her did. She could not give up on the promise of faith as a young girl and wrote on the subject: 'I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important and serious a subject'¹⁶⁷. This is an extract from a letter written in 1848, thirty years before the above poem and it affirms that

¹⁶⁵ Johnson (1961), 613.

¹⁶⁶ Johnson (1961), 179, Poem 376.

¹⁶⁷ Johnson (1958), 60, Letter 21.

she never did become ‘thoughtless’ on the subject of faith. In these glimpses of her life at three different stages we can see how she transformed from an open-minded girl, to a young woman still hopeful of the comfort of faith but unwilling to accept the restrictive rigours of organised religion, to a grown adult who recognises that faith gives meaning to life and condolence to the living.

As a child she rebelled against structured religion and its threat on individual identity but her desperation for immortality prevented her from ever fully rejecting God. Lundin writes that ‘Dickinson’s adolescent responses to death – alternating between melancholy disenchantment and angry disbelief – would remain throughout her adulthood’¹⁶⁸ referring to her evident anger towards God for those she has lost. However I would argue that while bitterness and distrust do haunt her early years, we have seen how they were eventually usurped by hope; a hope for immortality and as the above poem demonstrates, a hope for faith.

We should not overlook the metaphors within this poem. While it is not about her life as a woman in contemporary society, we should note how she refers to domestic chores of needlework and darning to represent her inner turmoil. Lundin flags up Dickinson’s favour for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, noting how Dickinson had underlined a passage in her copy of *Aurora Leigh*:

The works of women are symbolical.
We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
Producing what?¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Lundin, 29.

¹⁶⁹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, quoted in Lundin, 195.

In the above quotation that she annotated, Browning is frustrated about the futile nature of woman's work; how they spent time producing insignificant items, 'dull[ing their] sight' and not recognising their own short-sightedness. As we examined in previous chapters, Dickinson was not oblivious to the patriarchal domination of society. Here we see the ever-present importance of identity and her insistence on not having her sight dulled by the restrictions of the outside world.

While she did not renounce her solitude in her later years, we have seen how she began to question it. The certainty that she reached in the 1860s about the freedom such isolation gave her becomes less fixed as she approaches the latter stages of her life. She oscillates between being sure that in her isolation she has truly come to understand herself as an individual and being unsure if she missed out on other elements of life. As with so many of her questions, it appears Dickinson could never settle on a definite answer, and the poem below discusses the idea that while she did gain her own space, she eventually recognised the impossibility of completely eradicating outside influence:

How happy is the little Stone
That rambles in the Road alone,
And doesn't care about Careers
And Exigencies never fears –
Whose Coat of elemental Brown
A passing universe put on,
And independent as the Sun
Associates or glows alone,
Fulfilling absolute Decree
In casual simplicity –¹⁷⁰

(#1510, c.1881)

¹⁷⁰ Johnson (1961), 634.

Dickinson included the above poem in letters to more than one acquaintance, Higginson and Sue included, suggesting that she was particularly pleased with it and the message it conveyed of her confrontation of her solitary state. The capitalisation of 'Road' intimates that it is the journey of life that is key, and not how one traverses it. In comparing herself with the independence of the 'Sun' she indicates how she felt her isolation allowed her to illuminate her mind. However despite its independence, the stone is coloured by the outside with 'elemental Brown', blending it in with the surrounding road. Outside in the world, while the stone assumes liberty in choosing its own route, it has unwittingly been influenced by the 'passing universe'. Dickinson is aware that while she has found illumination in following her own path, she has still been influenced by the outside world, whether ideas sown in her early years when she was part of the community or ideas imparted by correspondents.

Dickinson became more isolated than ever following her mother's death in 1882, remaining in her parent's house and seeing fewer outsiders with each passing year. Higginson notes this growing seclusion and writes insightfully about how after the bereavement of her father she wrote to him that 'the inward life of the diminished household became only more concentrated, and the world was held farther and farther away'¹⁷¹. As Dickinson confronted this key loss in her life, she wrote: 'I am glad there is immortality, but would have tested it myself, before entrusting him'¹⁷², insinuating that while her renewed trust in faith and fate allowed her to believe in eternity, her confidence was not wholly true and she remained cautious that she had entrusted her father to a world tied to her precarious belief. Dickinson did not attend the funeral of her father, or

¹⁷¹ Higginson (1891) [online]

¹⁷² Johnson (1961), 528, Letter 418.

participate in any public way in honouring him¹⁷³. Despite her attachment to him, not even this event could inspire her to re-join society. Her fear of community, combined with her dread of death kept her away from such a situation, instead trusting that immortal reunion awaited them.

As I have previously noted, Dickinson's poetry output lessened while her correspondence soared in this era. Indeed in 1877 she wrote to Higginson:

You asked me if I wrote now?
I have no other Playmate -¹⁷⁴

This demonstrates both her attachment to her verse, and also the childlike state of her mind. By removing herself from the outside world, she remained glued to her younger vision of the world; in this case lamenting her lack of 'Playmate[s]'.

It was in her later communications that Dickinson more commonly inserted her poetry. There is sadly a trend in her later letters of her writing to share her condolences with those who have suffered loss and so there appears a direct coalition between her inclusion of poems and these letters of empathy. As Polly Longworth writes, 'in seeking to ease for others the burden of pain caused by death, Dickinson's letters grew more poignant even as they grew more abstract'¹⁷⁵. She could better express the extent of her sympathy through verse, demonstrating the importance she placed on her poetry as her external voice. Most tellingly, in 1885, she wrote about her attachment to correspondence:

¹⁷³ Pollak (2004), 53.

¹⁷⁴ Johnson (1958), 588, Letter 513.

¹⁷⁵ Polly Longworth "The Might of Human Love": Emily Dickinson's letters of Healing' in Cindy Mackenzie and Barbara Dunn (eds.) (2007) *Wider than the Sky: Essays and Meditations on the healing power of Emily Dickinson*. Ohio: Kent State University Press, 5.

A Letter is a joy of Earth –
It is denied the Gods - ¹⁷⁶

Letters allowed her to create a tangible and lasting exchange of thoughts and love between friends and family. She failed to pray because she feared she was not being heard, but through her letters she could build up relationships with others without risking her self. The idea that ‘Gods’ are denied the joy is reflective not only of her continued obsession with heaven but also how, as she ages, she begins to appreciate certain idiosyncrasies of life that will not be claimed again, even in eternal life.

While she became more at ease with sharing her poetry with her correspondents, she still resisted publishing her work. It is perplexing that while she craved eternity, she did not desire immortality in the mortal world – for surely immortality for a poet comes, in large part, through publication. At a time when print culture was rising, it is interesting to note that despite spending so many years striving to discover herself and her voice she still avoided the opportunity to put her stamp on the literary world.

When considering her constant desire to remain unpublished, we should recall the ‘attested legend [that] tells us that Emily had asked her sister to destroy [her poetry]’¹⁷⁷ following her death. So protective was she of the prose and poetry of her innermost thoughts that she dreaded the idea of anyone else reading them, just as she begged Austin as a young girl in 1848: ‘[to] please not... show this letter for its strictly confidential and I should feel badly to have you show it’¹⁷⁸. She feared people forcing their opinions upon her and likewise she

¹⁷⁶ Johnson (1961) 672, Poem 1639.

¹⁷⁷ Morse, 256.

¹⁷⁸ Johnson (1958), 64, Letter 22.

feared that they would misinterpret her writing and make it mean something she had never intended. It is ironic then that the criticism around her is rife with debate for that exact reason – that her poetry is so open to differing interpretations. In her later years, she wrote to her cousin on being urged to publish: ‘I would as soon undress in public, as give my poems to the world’¹⁷⁹. In this strong rebuttal Dickinson demonstrates her privacy and how she sees herself as so separate from ‘the world’ that she would not trust them with her poems.

In the 1860s, Dickinson shied away from publication and this hesitance lasted into her final years. James Guthrie believes the adverse to be true, writing:

As her poetics matured, she turned her attention progressively outwards, not only towards the possibility of publication but also toward the desirability of using her poems to gain ends much more worldly than those of the poet who had envisioned herself handling, as she worked, the substance of heaven.¹⁸⁰

While I agree that her outlook did open out in her closing decades, this did not hint at a desire for publication as Guthrie suggests above. By contrast Dickinson writes that ‘fame is a fickle food... whose crumbs the crows inspect’¹⁸¹ suggesting that her earlier apprehension towards publication remained in place in her later years; a fear that her words would be manipulated away from their true meaning. However Guthrie also touches on the idea that while Dickinson first engaged with poetry to tackle problematic questions of faith and death, she eventually found a purpose in them that was removed from her internal comfort. She sought to offer others relief

¹⁷⁹Jay Leyda (1960) *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson. Vol.2.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 482.

¹⁸⁰James R. Guthrie (1998) *Emily Dickinson's Vision: Illness and Identity in her Poetry.* Florida: University Press of Florida, 152.

¹⁸¹Johnson (1961), 678, Poem 1659.

through her verse and as her correspondence re-ignited in her later years we have seen how she often enclosed poems alongside her letters. As the below poem infers, Dickinson treasured her verse and the messages hidden in them:

To See the Summer Sky
Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie –
True Poems flee – ¹⁸²

(#1472, c.1879)

Here she alludes to the power of verse, how mere words are able to conjure up a visual of the ‘Summer Sky’. Just as she had sought to confirm her identity through her verse, so too had she sought to escape the sadness that threatened to dominate her existence. ‘True Poems flee’ to wherever one wishes to go, leaving reality and its fears far behind, which is the solace she seeks to impart when enclosing poems in her letters.

Perhaps Higginson was nearest to the mark when writing in the preface to the first edition of Dickinson’s poems: ‘The verses belong emphatically to what Emerson long since called “the Poetry of the Portfolio” - something produced absolutely without the thought of publication’¹⁸³. With no resurgence of desire to publish evident in her final years, she phrases how she found sanctuary for her personal turmoil in her poems:

My Wars are laid away in Books –
I have one battle more –
A Foe whom I have never seen
But oft has scanned me o’er –
And hesitated me between
And others at my side
But chose the best – Neglecting me – till
All the rest, have died –

¹⁸² Johnson (1961), 623.

¹⁸³ Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1891) *Emily Dickinson: Collected Poems*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 13.

How sweet if I am not forgot
By Chums that passed away –
Since Playmates at threescore and ten
Are such a scarcity –”

(#1549, c.1882)

She has put down all her troubles and now she simply awaits the fate of death, her ‘Foe’. It is unusual for her to voice him as the enemy, as she has always welcomed her own move into the next life. Yet as we have seen in other poems from these last decades, she has begun to fear what is ahead and treasure what lies on Earth. This poem has a sense of finality, as though she has made peace with life’s plan. Her work is done, her ‘wars’ recorded and she is ready for the final ‘battle’. It is evident that she remains bitter towards the idea that death picked ‘the best’ and left her life deprived of so many loved ones. The capitalisation of ‘Neglecting’ is apt as that is often a feeling she voiced. The overarching feeling here is a calmness radiating from Dickinson in the knowledge that eventually Death will come for her, and she can now look onward to that journey. The final four lines suggest that perhaps she was not as content in her own company as we had always assumed. There lies a sadness in her voice that in the latter years of one’s life, new ‘Playmates’ are scarce. Perhaps this accounts why her correspondence picked up again because she began to miss human interaction, but at that point was too settled at home and unsettled by strangers to venture out again into society.

As we have noted, Dickinson craved a certainty of immortality and spent much of her life confronting this fear in her verse. It seems as though in her later years she then looked up and realised, as we have examined, that she may have let the greatness of life pass her by. She remains suspicious of company into her final years and anxious to protect her own

mind, writing in 1881: ‘Society for me my misery’¹⁸⁴. Yet despite this constant fear of the outside world, Dickinson is no longer content in her own company:

The going from a world we know
To one a wonder still
Is like the child’s adversity
Whose vista is a hill,

Behind the hill is sorcery
And everything unknown,
But will the secret compensate
For climbing it alone?¹⁸⁵

#1603, c. 1884

She opens this poem with recalling a childlike reaction to a hill – a mixture of apprehension and desperation to reach the other side. ‘A wonder still’ reflects Dickinson’s remaining doubts over immortality, but also her continuing need for it to exist. Written in the year before her death following a resurgence in correspondence and a renewed sense of purpose in faith and life, the focus here is her uncertainty over her sheltered life. She has gained so much from her solitude, but in the end she fears whether the secret of immortality that was a key focus of her solitary thought, will in reality compensate for navigating life alone.

¹⁸⁴ Johnson (1961), 641, Poem 1534.

¹⁸⁵ Johnson (1961), 662-663.

CONCLUSION

**A soul admitted to itself
Finite infinity.**

This study of Dickinson's writing in chronological order has allowed us to trace the theme of solitude through her life, particularly her fear of loss and the importance she placed on individual thought and how these motivations shift in emphasis throughout her life. The opening chapter reveals Emerson as an irrefutable presence and influence in her writing and personal philosophy on the self and faith. We have seen how in her earlier years she was drawn away from the community by the pressure to convert and a growing dread of loss. Into the 1860s as her solitude heightened, the significance of the individual becomes the dominant motivation in seeking her own space and her verse overtakes her letters in their volume. The most revelatory element of this study lies in the examination of her later years which suggest that age led her to contemplate her own mortality and regret her sheltered life. Her correspondence increased again as she began to re-connect with the outside world and this is the era I intend to examine further in future study while also focussing closer on the resonance of Emerson's thinking through Dickinson's writing.

Each chapter also explores Dickinson's altering attitude towards publication; a key fascination in Dickinson scholarship being her failure to publish in her own lifetime. This continues to seem contrary to everything she believed, with the importance of the individual and her desire for immortality indicating that she should see publication as cementing her place in the world. However she shied away from eventual publication – despite her openness in sharing verse through correspondence. Despite the limited, and

unsanctioned, poems published during her lifetime, through hoarding them and indeed collating some into fascicles, Dickinson demonstrates her personal need to preserve her writing. In tracing her relationship with the idea of publication through her life, it appears that it was a fear of sharing her innermost thoughts with those she did not know that eventually stemmed any formal publication of her work. Just as her desire for individual thought drew her into her own company, so too was the sanctity of her identity a deciding factor in her failure to make public her verse.

Instead she wrote for her own enlightenment and to offer others comfort, living her life principally through words, be it prose or poetry. She did maintain human connections through her letters yet she found her true contentment came from discovering within:

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be

Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself
Finite infinity.¹⁸⁶

(#1695, c.1870s)

The importance of the individual is again visible here as Dickinson dwells on what it would mean to understand oneself. She has sought out a 'solitude of space', seeking to assert her own individual following a childhood spent in a close-knit community. The following line exults 'a solitude of sea' reflecting the remoteness to be found in nature, a nod to contemporary literary themes and figures as explored in the opening chapter of this

¹⁸⁶ Johnson (1961), 691, Poem 1695.

study. She feels that the loss she has suffered over the years has left her in 'a solitude of death' suggesting anew that her dread of loss was a key instigator in her eventual retreat from the world. The final line in this poem in its oxymoronic form is indicative of Dickinson's constantly revolving thoughts around faith and immortality. 'A soul admitted to itself' is 'finite' in its conclusive state but infinite in the possibilities that lie within such an exploration. It is also interesting to note the final ending with the determined tone of the punctuation stressing the significance of this subject to Dickinson and her determination to admit her soul to herself.

The above poem's insistence on the importance of knowing one's soul is a key reflection of Emerson and the last line 'finite infinity' is seemingly a direct reference to his essay 'The Over-Soul' in which he writes that 'the soul is true to itself, and the man in whom it is shed abroad cannot wander from the present, which is infinite, to a future which would be finite'.¹⁸⁷ In this essay Emerson insists that immortality is indelibly linked to self-knowledge and the understanding of one's soul. These are ideas which we have traced through Dickinson's life and poetry, and which indicate the depth of Emerson's influence on Dickinson.

The previous simple two stanza poem sums up the three key elements of Dickinson's solitude. The first line is a reference to her struggle for her own mind, her own 'polar privacy'. The second line is a linked allusion to the importance of nature to Dickinson, and also a nod to the growing trend of transcendental thoughts of an individual at one with their surroundings. The third line is indicative of Dickinson's lifelong conflict with

¹⁸⁷ Emerson (1841) 'The Over-Soul' [online].

accepting faith and containing the grief of her loss. She is also contrasting 'society' with 'that profounder site' which stands not only as the heightened profundity of a soul at one with itself but also implies the eventual comparison of mortal society with the profound 'infinity' of immortality.

We have observed how Dickinson's eventual retreat into solitude was gradual, slowly drawing away from the world as she began to discover the perimeters of her own mind. She still maintained connections through her correspondence but her physical world was limited to her homestead and her companions were pen and paper. It has become apparent that the key motivation for her solitude was the importance of the individual. In the outside world she had to battle society and its expectations, as well as everyday facing the loneliness of existing in a world emptying of loved ones. By extracting herself from society she took sole control of her own existence and in her own words her solitude made it easier for her to continue as her life 'might be lonelier/Without the Loneliness –'.¹⁸⁸

She found freedom and fulfilment through her verse, expressing her reliance on her art in the following poem:

The Martyr Poets – did not tell –
But wrought their Pang in syllable –
That when their mortal name be numb –
Their mortal fate – encourage Some –

The Martyr Painters – never spoke –
Bequeathing – rather – to their Work –
That when their conscious fingers cease –
Some seek in Art –the Art of Peace –¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Johnson (1961), 193, Poem 405.

¹⁸⁹ Johnson (1961), 265, Poem 544.

(#544, c.1862)

The poem above addresses the two key preoccupations of Dickinson's life; individual identity and loss. She expressed her 'Pang' through verse in an attempt to conquer her inner turmoil and assert her own independence. She also spent her whole life consumed by the pain of loss and sought solace in the promise of immortality and what came after 'conscious fingers cease'. She sought peace in her work, just as the 'Martyr' artists above; peace from the pressures of the outside world, and from the pain of her loss.

As we opened with the importance of the theme of solitude in contemporary literature, it is fitting that we close with reference to Emerson who opens his writing on nature with the observation that 'to go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society'.¹⁹⁰ This idea resonates through Dickinson's work as she seeks the solace of solitude through her poetry, giving her release from the troubles of faith and loss that haunt her physical world.

In her teens she was seeking an escape from pain, loss and the pressures of community. In her twenties she began to prioritise discovering her own mind, a preoccupation that intensified in her thirties. By her forties she was exhibiting signs of regret at what she may have missed in the outside world, while so consumed by her personal fixations. Her obsession with the phenomena of death, faith and immortality spanned all sixty-six years of her life and her thinking oscillated with each loss, poem or letter. The constant in her

¹⁹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1849) *Nature; Addresses and Lectures* [online]
<http://www.emersoncentral.com/nature1.htm>, Date accessed: 30 September 2010.

life was her writing and from her early twenties, her solitude. In both she sought security and privacy; in her own words, she sought in 'Art – the Art of Peace'.

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