LAUNCHED INTO ETERNITY:

AN ESCHATOLOGICAL STUDY OF EMILY DICKINSON'S POEMS AND LETTERS

BY

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Thesis submitted to the University of Dhaka for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English.

THE UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA
JANUARY 1999

ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson is a poet of the end. She owes her sense of the end and ending essentially to Christian eschatology that was passionately and elaborately practised further by her New England Calvinist forbears. They were obsessed with the end of profane time, death, the coming of Messiah, Doomsday, Resurrection, the Last Judgement, the vision of the New Jerusalem, Heaven, Hell and Immortality. In short, the mystery of the hereafter took up their spirit completely, and they would tend to explain the temporal in the light of the eternal. Certain evangelical movements such as the Great Awakenings sustained this spirit of the early New England Puritans down to Dickinson's time, and her pietistic community, education, and family environment infused it into her. She took the subjects of their cosmic eschatology, and then downsized and internalised them into the overarching personal themes of her poems and letters.

Dickinson associates profane time with flux and linear process that terminate in death and dissolution. This time is hierarchical in nature and distorts reality as disjunct categories. She understands that temporal consciousness is steeped in this profane time. By contrast, flux and process are absent in sacred time because here all time is present at once, and hence death cannot occur there. Christian thinkers locate sacred time in the presence of God. But Dickinson achieves it subjectively in the lyric state of her mind. Her idea of eternity is one of the continuous temporal present: it is composed, as she says, of "Nows" (P#624). Hence her eternity is basically a temporal construct. Dickinson conceives and aims to achieve immortality in this framework of temporal eternity. She finds the Christian idea of eternal life as an extension of temporal consciousness and thus preposterous, for this consciousness thwarts the achievement of wholeness that eternal life is by Christian definition. Neither is death complete without the complete annihilation of this time and consciousness. Certain of Dickinson's poems portray death in which temporal consciousness is alive.

Death is the end of profane time and corporeal existence. It intrigues and mystifies Dickinson immeasurably. After the fashion of the Calvinists she shows great interest in the spectacle of dying persons. Her poetic personae keep a deathwatch and observe the deathbed conduct of the dying with a view to coming up with some kind of revelation about the nature of the hereafter. She practises dying herself imaginatively. Its elusive formlessness leads her from one definition to another, and she keeps shifting her angles in order to concretise death's abstraction. Her chief anxiety consists in her ignorance as to whether death would be followed by resurrection, or dissolve this body and mind completely. If resurrection does happen at all, she worries to know if she would be allowed to retain her earthly identity in body and mind. She is scared of the loss of her earthly identity in the afterlife, and is reluctant to accept the new identity that the reconstituted resurrected body would give her according to the Christian doctrine of Resurrection. Dickinson also examines the salutary aspects of death in her letters and poetry. Although it was her lifelong adversary, yet she knows that death is the only way to reunite with her lost loved ones in the hereafter. Paradoxically death connects this world with the next through separation in her view.

Dickinson's approach to the Christian concepts of postmortal judgement, Heaven and Hell is equally sceptical and ambiguous. Judgement becomes a mere formality or a ruse while (and if) the Calvinist Doctrine of Predestination is held as a fact. In the same incredulous mood she questions the objective reality of Heaven and Hell and doubts their physical existence in space. Yet these ideas and terms serve her as models and language for building a private eschatology of her mind.

For
My Beloved Parents
Whom
I miss daily.

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Preface

This study is premised on the belief that Emily Dickinson's creative self was after all, whatever modernist or postmodernist interpretations may have made her out to be, an outgrowth of the Calvinist branch of orthodox Christianity. Her cultural descent from an "eschatological people," as Wilmore calls the seventeenth-century New England Puritans (1982:69),[1] continued some very fundamental spiritual tendencies of her New England forbears in her work. One of those tendencies was to view everything under the shadow of the end. This sense of the end also constitutes the general drift of Dickinson's eschatological sensibility.

Eschatology, a term of Greek derivation meaning literally "discourse about last things," is a division of systematic theology dealing with Death, Resurrection, the Second Coming of Christ, the End of the Age, Divine Judgement and the Future State (such as immortality and eternity). The Old Testament teaches a future resurrection and judgement day. (Job 19:25,26; Isa. 25:6-9; 26:19; Da. 12: 2,3). The New Testament interprets, enlarges, and completes the Old Testament eschatology. It stresses the Second Coming of Christ (1 Cor 15:51,52, the Resurrection Ro 8:11; 1 Cor 15), and the final judgement when the unsaved are cast into hell (Re. 20) and the righteous enter into heaven (Mt. 25: 31-46) (Viening, 1973:258). All in all, eschatology refers to the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the coming of the Kingdom of God and the transformation or transcendence/ end of history. The distinction between transformation and transcendence reflects the difference between Old Testament messianism, which looked for the coming of the kingdom of God within a historical framework, and New Testament apocalypticism, which expected the total dissolution of the world at the Last Judgement. Figuratively it could be stretched to study any idea or subject related to terminality.

Emily Dickinson was descended from the New England Puritan tradition which was extraordinarily preoccupied with the Last Things mentioned above. Viewed against this background Dickinson does not seem too strange when she continually muses on death and the afterlife. She does

not, however, stop at this terminus of life. Her imagination starts out on a quester's journey for the beyond. This atypical element in her has long been a chief interest of her writings for those who are used to looking upon death as morbidity. But it should look perfectly consistent and normal when her New England Puritan lineage is considered.

By the mid-17th century Oliver Cromwell kept reminding his countrymen that they were to be the core of the "new Israel." The migrating Puritans who were sure that America was to be the best refuge of the holiest remainders of God's elect carried this idea to New England. John Winthrop viewed New England as a place chosen by God for those of His elect who had escaped from sin and God's wrath. The Puritans were fond of imagining themselves as "riding the crest of the final great tidal wave that was to bring with it the Apocalypse. To the bearers of this sense of destiny, all past history paled in significance." Although they were thus confident of their collective salvation, as an individual each Puritan was hag-ridden with agonising insecurity about the end (Stannard, 1977:40-41).

Emily Dickinson shows certain spiritual tendencies which might look a late version or an atavistic manifestation of seventeenth-century New England Puritanism with its great expectation of the Messiah, the Revelation[2] of a New Jerusalem, and the beginning of the Kingdom of God on earth. Despite Dickinson's conscious rejection of certain illogicalities of her religion and, particularly of the Calvinist sect, the eschatological thoughts and heightened emotions and feelings remain at the heart of her writings. They leak through whenever her soul encounters extreme circumstances in her life and spirit. Constantly jostled by the passion of the Great Awakenings, evangelism of Jonathan Edwards' brand and the zealous nurturing of Valley Calvinism, she understandably felt the full impact of this fanatical *furore*. It became individualised and internalised in Dickinson, and there got transformed into her imaginative constructs.

Because of the Calvinist background of her sense of the end and ending, it is necessary that her eschatological sensiblity be put in the general perspective of New England eschatological culture in the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries to which the first chapter is devoted. The decline of that culture in nineteenth-century New England gave rise to certain sentimentalist tendencies that led to the shaping of her private eschatology. The second chapter attempts to trace their impact on her resultant attitude to death and the hereafter. The most important condition for the occurrence of the Apocalypse is the abolition of profane time and the process of history. The Christian mind associates this time and process with the negative circumstances of earthly life and aspires to the condition of sacred time. Dickinson's acute perception of loss of friends and relatives in her personal life and the development of her general idea of time and immortality are the subjects of the third chapter. Death is the end of profane time for the individual dead that constitutes also the apocalyptic moment for them. This subject has been discussed so much so far since early days of Dickinson criticism that it can be broached again only at the risk of repetition. Death as release from the corporeal form and revelation of the ultimate is the theme of the fourth chapter. But death is only one and the first of the Four Last Things in Christian eschatology. It would by no means complete an eschatological study without a follow-up study of the other three, namely Judgement, Heaven and Hell. Therefore the fifth chapter addresses them in order to explore their implications in Dickinson's writings. She appropriates a great deal of eschatological language in this respect to express her emotional extremes and turn them into her idiom of agony and ecstasy. All these finally add up to the making of her private eschatology.

As for the primary material of this study, I had at my disposal all the 1,775 poems and /or poetic fragments in Thomas H. Johnson's 1960-one-volume-edition, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Little, Brown and Company), and over one thousand letters in the three-volume-edition, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by the same Johnson along with Theodora Ward. This huge primary material gave me both a wide-ranging freedom as well as a most difficult task to perform. Just as I never lacked for material to attempt to drive my points home, I was bewildered and befuddled by the staggering number of poems and letters, too. Besides it was often difficult for me to make a choice of both inclusion and exclusion. But all in all it was a

rewarding experience to cut my way a through such a wilderness of untitled poems (which have for their names their editor's puzzling numbers) and too private letters and to look into a deceptively silent heart that hid "smouldering anguish" and "appalling Ordnance"(P#175), and that Adrienne Rich called "Visuvius at Home."

My gratitude would freely range from man to machine. First of all my gratitude is due to my teacher and research supervisor Professor Niaz Zaman whose academic tutelage has nourished my intellectual growth since I was a sophomore of the English Department at Dhaka University way back in 1972. The high watermark of our relationship was the undertaking of this work about eight years ago. Since then she has kept me steady on slippery track by her judicious guidance, necessary admonition and constant encouragement. I am grateful to her for keeping me on a short leash and sorry to have caused her endless worries. This dissertation owes most of its present shape to her close and disciplined supervision. On the other hand, her motherly indulgences helped keep alive my human element and made this soul-searing drudgery less painful. My grateful acknowledgements are also due to Professor John Carey of Merton College, Oxford, and Dr. Joseph Allard of the University of Essex, under whose guidance I collected critical materials from those institutions during my visit to the UK in 1989, and I thank The British Council, Dhaka, for obliging me with a research grant for this "scavenger hunt." Professor Emory Elliott of the University of California at Riverside, USA, deserves all-out gratitude for his generosity with books and ideas on Calvinism and its relevance to modern American culture, and I am truly grateful to the USIS, Dhaka, for creating an opportunity for me to meet this angel of light at the 1998 Winter Institute held at the University of Delaware, Newark, USA, during January-March last year. The USIS deserves my thanks once again for arranging for me another scavenger hunt at ASRC, India, in August of 1992. My colleague, Mr. Tapan Jyoti Barua, Associate Professor of English, Chittagong University, has obliged me eternally with his valuable time in tightening and tuning my language wherever it slackened and jarred. Dr. Mahabubul Huq of the Department of Bengali, Chittagong University, had always been on offer to do

anything for me and to see my work come to completion soon. Among other things, I am grateful to him for giving the getup a facelift. My infinite gratitude is to Professor Abul Mansur and Professor Nazli Mansur for their munificence in allowing me to use their printer besides their many more warm hospitalities. My sincere thanks are due to Mr. Somen Das whose help and advice were invaluable at the bibliogonic stages. Ms. Shukla Iftekhar will also have a share in my acknowledgements for her generosity to allow me to use her personal library. I am grateful to the authorities and the Department of English of Chittagong University for a year's study leave to carry out this research.

My family bore the real brunt of the work. My wife Nasima suffered a great deal to help me, as far as possible, maintain a hermetic distance from household chores in the interest of the research. My study being my bedroom too, she suffered the hard ceiling light or the haze of my table lamp, the noise of the computer and screams of the printer night after night, and had hardly had a good night's sleep for the last eight years. My son Pantha and daughter Purna missed my company and sometimes even suffered my tantrums. I do not know whether to return their sacrifices with apologies or gratitude.

Lastly I must say thanks to my wonk, the computer, without whose search engine it would have been quite impossible for me to surface after the frequent dives that I had to take for appropriate and timely phrases from a pile of about two thousand poems and one thousand letters. Besides, I take my hat off to its extraordinary organising genius.

Notes

[1] Gayraud S. Wilmore defines the New England Puritans of the 17th century as eschatological, and notes some of the fundamental tendencies, such as the belief in Christ's Second Coming as imminent, a strong conviction in self as God's elect and a strong belief in one's own self-righteousness and the belief that the Second Coming can be hastened by practising integrity in personal life.

[2] What the Catholics call Apocalypse is Revelation in the Protestant idiom. But whatever the terminological difference, the books of the Bible – the Book of Ezikiel (OT), the Book of Daniel (OT) and the Book of Revelation or Apocalypse (NT) – are regarded as eschatological books by the Christians.

ABBREVIATIONS

L – Letter number in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (3 vols.) edited by Thomas H. Johnson with Theodora Ward. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965.

LL. – Indicates reference to more than one letter in the above volumes.

PF – Prose fragment in the third volume of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson with Theodora Ward. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965.

P# – Poem number in Thomas H. Johnson's one-volume edition *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.* Boston.Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1960.

Books of the Bible

Books of the Old Testament

Genesis	Ge.
Exodus	Ex.
Leviticus	Le.
Numbers	Nu.
Deutronomy	De.
Joshua	Jos.
Judges	Jud.
Ruth	Ru.
I Samuel	1 S.
II Samuel	2 S.
I Kings	1 K.
II Kings	2 K.
I Chronicles	1 Chr.
II Chronicles	2 Chr.
Ezra	Ezr.
Nehemia	Ne.
Esther	Est.
Job	Jb.
Psalms	Ps.
Proverbs	Pr.
Ecclesiastes	Ec.
The Song of Solomon	Song
Isaiah	Is.
Jeremiah	Je.
Lamentations	Lam.
Ezekiel	Eze.
Daniel	Da.
Hosea	Ho.
Joel	Jl.
Amos	Am.
Obadiah	Obad.
Jonah	Jona.
Micah	Mi.
Nahum	Na.
Habakkuk	Hab.
Zephaniah	Zep.
Haggai	Hag.
Zechariah	Zec.
Malachi	Mal.

Books of the New Testament

Mathew	Mt.
Mark	Mk.
Luke	Lu.
John	Jn.
The Acts	Ac.
Epistle to the Romans	Ro.
I Corinthians	1 Cor.
II Corinthians	2 Cor.
Galatians	Ga.
Ephesians	Ep.
Philippians	Ph.
Colossians	Col.
I Thessalonians	1Th.
II Thessalonians	2 Th.
I Timothy	1 Ti.
II Timothy	2 Ti.
Titus	Tit.
Philomen	Phm.
To the Hebrews	He.
The Epistle of James	Ja.
I Peter	1 Pe.
II Peter	2 Pe.
I John	Jn.
II John	2 Jn.
III John	3 Jn.
Jude	Jude
Revelation	Re.

CHAPTER I

Aspects of New England Eschatology

The early English settlers in New England were Protestants. England had become a Protestant country when Henry VIII broke away from the Roman Catholic church. Some Englishmen, however, felt that the break was not complete. They wanted to "purify" the church of Catholic features; they were therefore known as Puritans. Another group, the Separatists, wanted to separate, or break away entirely, from the Church of England. These were the Pilgrims. Both groups came to the New World in order to worship God in their own way and to escape persecution by English authorities. They felt that they had a divine mission to fulfil. It was the will of God, they believed, that they establish a religious society in the wilderness. This belief must have helped them endure the hard life they faced as colonists.[1]

The Pilgrims founded Plymouth Colony in 1620. Ten years later, under the auspices of the Massachusetts Bay Company, the first major Puritan migration to New England took place.[2] Most of these men held ideas in the mainstream of Calvinistic thought. John Calvin set forth a stern doctrine. All people, he taught, were damned by the original sin of Adam, but the sacrifice of Christ made possible their redemption by faith. The experience of faith, however, was open only to those who had been elected by God and thus predestined to salvation from the beginning of time. The following are the so-called Five Points of Calvinism formulated by Dutch Reformed theologians at the Synod of Dort (1618-19) that might as well epitomise Calvinistic theology:

1. **Total depravity**. This asserts the sinfulness of man through the fall of Adam, and the utter inability of man to work out his own salvation. God is all; man is nothing, and is the source of all evil. God meant all things to be in harmony; man, by his sinful nature, creates disharmony, and deserves nothing but to be cast away.
2. **Unconditional election**. God, under no obligation to save anyone, saves, or "elects" whom he will, with no reference to faith or good works. Since all things are present in the mind of God at once, He knows beforehand who will be saved; and thus election or reprobation is predestined. But no man can share in this foreknowledge, and all must assent to the Divine Will.
3. **Limited atonement**. Christ did not die for all, but only for those who are to be saved.; and thus we have another evidence of God's love towards mankind.
4. **Irresistible grace**. God's grace is freely given, and can neither be earned nor refused. Grace is defined as the saving and transfiguring power of God., offering newness of life, forgiveness of sins, the power to resist temptation, and a wonderful peace of mind and heart. It is Augustine's concept of the "restless soul having found rest in God," and is akin to Luther's insistence on a sense of spiritual union with Christ as the prime requisite to salvation.
5. **Perseverance of the Saints**. Those whom God has chosen have thenceforth full power to do the will of God, and to live up rightly to the end. It is the logical and necessary conclusion

> to the absolute Sovereignty of God. If man could later reject the gift of grace after having once felt its power in his life, he would be asserting his power over that of God, and in Calvinism this is impossible (qtd. in Horton, 1974:24-25).

In addition to believing in the absolute sovereignty of God, the total depravity of human beings, and their complete dependence on arbitrary divine grace for salvation, the Puritans stressed upon the importance of personal religious experience. They became fatalistic owing to a strong belief in predestination and the inalterability of fate by human action. This belief would in turn make them wait for the revelation of destiny till the occurrence of apocalypse in the form of death in individual cases or the Day of Last Judgement following the ultimate destruction of the world. So in the last analysis the fundamentals of Calvinism contained stimulants for apocalyptic thinking and embodied the essentials of Puritan eschatology in general.

The Puritans insisted that they could achieve their ideal on the basis of those fundamentals and that they, as God's elect, had the duty to direct national affairs according to God's will as revealed in the Bible. This union of church and state to form a holy commonwealth gave Puritanism direct and exclusive control over most colonial activity until commercial and political changes forced them to relinquish it at the end of the 17th century. During the whole colonial period Puritanism had direct impact on both religious thought and cultural patterns in America. In the nineteenth century its influence was indirect, but it can still be seen at work emphasising the importance of education in religious leadership and demanding that religious motivations be tested by applying them to practical situations.

The early New England Puritans brought into the New World the vision of a holy commonwealth in which eternal and temporal power would be ideally amalgamated, and thought of themselves as "an eschatological people in quest of the New Jerusalem" (Wilmore, 1982:69). A definition of the traits of eschatological people might be a little in order here. Eschatological people grapple with the present world in one of the two ways: either they harden themselves stoically against the vicissitudes of earthly life and withdraw into a cocoon of mysticism and transcendence where they experience something of the Kingdom of God in their life of strict moral integrity and emotional intensity; or they crusade against the worldly agencies that thwart the process of the Apocalypse. As noted by Wilmore, when the *Eschaton* fails to come along supernaturally it is a typical strategy of the eschatological mind to fall back upon its moral strength and inner resources in order to live the Kingdom of God imaginatively, behaving as though it had come (1982:67-68). Eschatological people view earthly time as profane, corrupt and corrupting, and they think that the presence of this time obstructs the occurrence of Revelation. So they strongly desire the abolition of earthly time.

The New England Puritans were quite convinced that they were God's New Israel under the second dispensation of grace and that it was in New England that the Kingdom of God would be revealed soon. They looked upon themselves as a covenanted people. "As Israel witnessed to God's active involvement with nations in ancient times and brought forth the Christ, so New England's experience confirmed God's continuing involvement with nations that would persist until Christ's return to earth, when history itself would cease and be swallowed up in eternity" (Stout:1986:7). Apart from this similarity with the ancient Israelites in their

millennial quest for the new Jerusalem, the early New Englanders would also bear comparison with the ancient prototypes in other respects too: they remind one of the fierce Judaic spirit in their austere life style, religious zeal and militancy. They turned to the earliest source of Christianity – the Old Testament – for one of their basic models by which they decided to live. But they did not follow it to the letter, however; they interpreted and modified certain models of some traditions of the Old Testament so as to suit their seventeenth-century spiritual needs. Despite their internal sectarian differences, they are called Hebraic. "However," writes Fingerhut, "their goals were so distinctly anti-Catholic/ Anglican and Puritanically Christian that if they are considered to be anything but militant Protestants they are grossly misunderstood" (1967:522).

In his Gospel (the fourth in The New Testament), three Epistles, and the Book of Revelation, the apostle John continually prophesies that a new heavenly kingdom for God's New Israel is going to be established soon. It is known as the Johannine prophecy. The New Englanders were the adherents of this prophecy. In their unspeakable misery, they sustained themselves by the strong faith that God had removed them from England to this wilderness (New England) for building His Kingdom by setting up a new heaven and a new earth in new churches and a new commonwealth together there through the agency of His covenant people. This sentiment resounds throughout the literature of both Protestant and Roman Catholic settlers of the New World, but nowhere with so much fervour, piety, and erudition as in the sermons of the Puritan divines who were immersed in the history of the Old Testament. They held as doctrine the belief that they were involved in a binding contract or "covenant" with God which entailed upon them a special sense of duty: that is, they had been singled out above

all the other peoples of the world to perform great deeds for the Lord in accordance with a covenant theory that was, says the American historian Perry Miller, "the intelligible medium between the absolute and indecipherable mystery of God's original purposes and His ultimate performance, between the beginning and the end of time" (qtd. by Wilmore, 1982:70).

In the next century, Jonathan Edwards, America's first prominent theologian, helped to make the vision of the millennium the cornerstone of mainline revivalism. The eighteenth-century revival of religion known as the First Great Awakening which Edwards helped to start reinforced the contention of William Bradford and John Winthrop that America was destined not only to purify the Church of England but to become the centre of the Kingdom of God. Edwards' eschatological writings added a touch of nation-building to revivalism by emphasising the establishment of the Kingdom through the progressive use of human "means," albeit, to the greater glory of God. Human initiative and activity in this great new land would bring on the millennium and the Kingdom. Edwards represents the spirit and sense of purpose of this new eschatological people called Americans when he writes:

> Thus Christ teaches us that it becomes his disciples to seek this above all other things, and make it the first and last in their prayers, and that every petition should be put up in a subordination to the advancement of God's kingdom and glory in the world (qtd. by Wilmore, 1982:70).

Edwards was one of the Congregationalists who preached that the millennium was at hand and therefore the Christians had need to prepare for it (Wilmore,1982:71). His prediction carried within it the logical suggestion that the end of history was forthcoming and the Apocalypse was in the offing, for time (whether understood as earthly, profane or historical)

must, of necessity, terminate on the Day of Last Judgement and the revelation of God's master plan. Hence, the riddance of time was a condition the early New England Puritans sought to achieve as an eschatological people.

The Puritans regarded history as one long descent into ever-deepening depravity ever since the Fall of Man. Christ's self-sacrifice had paved the way for reformation, and they thought of themselves as the vanguard of the movement now in progress in all Christendom to bring God's kingdom home. Christ's Second Coming was looked forward to as the beginning of the end of the historical process (that is, profane time) leading to the Apocalypse (that is, the herald of sacred time). But when the Second Coming seemed too far off to them, or at least not at hand in the objective order of things, they tried to internalise the apocalyptic conditions emotionally and force their spirit to the cosmic climax inwardly. Their individual selves were carefully prepared for private apocalypses by prayers and meditation in personal life and social services in public affairs. The private apocalypses were felt to be the lyric moments of the spirit wiped of the taint of time.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, Oliver Cromwell urged his countrymen to wait and witness the emergence of England as God's "elect nation."[3] He reminded them that the Puritans constituted the core of the "new Israel." Stannard writes:

> But the same idea had by then been carried to New England and there transplanted by the shiploads of Puritans who had decided America was now the best refuge for the holiest remnant of God's people. The failure of the Puritans to effect total reformation of the English church had led some of them to believe, in John Winthorp's words, that in the same way that "all other Churches of Europe are brought to desolation . . . our sins . . . doe threatene evill times be cominge upon us, and whoe

> knowes, but that God hath provided this place [New England] to be a refuge for many whom he meanes to save out of the general callamity." In the sea of history the Puritans saw themselves riding the crest of final great tidal wave that was to bring with it the Apocalypse (1977:40-41).

These Puritans were driven by a great sense of immediacy. The vision of the *Eschaton* was not only a crucial focus for them; more importantly, it was also deemed the only goal of their spiritual career. Although mostly followers of John Calvin, they had rather stronger emotions about the imminent *Eschaton* than perhaps their mentor himself would have welcomed and far less indulged. Calvin's eschatological conception was not chiliastic.[4] He regarded the Kingdom of God as a growing and improving entity occurring *in* history through the agency of human beings and dismissed it, unlike Luther, as being a supernatural phenomenon.[5] In fact this conviction is so strong in the Hebraic tradition that ". . . any Judeo-Christian expectation of an end to the world would obviously have to come *in* history, even if it would mean the end of time and of history" (May, 1972:12). The rather un-Calvinistic hurry among the New England Puritans about the end of the world was spurred by chiliastic expectations of the millennium. They regarded their new world as the beginning of the world's end (McGiffert, 1970:54) which would be best vindicated by chiliastic assumptions. So at the core of the Puritan migration to the American wilderness were apocalyptic expectations, and the migrants broadcast their identity as God's chosen people.

This apocalyptic interpretation of history can be found in abundance in New England literature from the founding of Massachusetts Bay to the waning of the theocratic ardour.[6] After the waning of the initial *furore* of 17th-century Puritanism the apocalyptic fervour was again revived in the mid-thirties of the century and pursued with a crusading zeal

up until the mid-forties (1736-1746) of the eighteenth century by the Great Awakening of Jonathan Edwards who projected the revival as the beginning of the millennial age and viewed the New World as the typological culmination of the Old Testament prophecies.[7] Its reverberations continued down to Dickinson's time in the nineteenth century when the expectations of the *Eschaton* and the millennium contributed a great deal to the zealous mood of American optimism:

> Millennial speculation was particularly intense in America: many could not help associating the birth of this new nation with more general and religious possibilities of regeneration. Jonathan Edwards was not alone in hoping that America might be the chosen site of the millennial rule (Douglas, 1978:265).

This universal ethos deeply affected Emily Dickinson, too.[8] She responded to this phenomenon partly in the fashion of her age and partly in her unique manner – by way of private musings, monastic transport of the mind and imaginative apocalypses experienced in the white heat of her soul.

There is no denying the fact that the millennial kernel of New England Puritan zeal was to be largely responsible for the subsequent apocalyptic strains in American thought (Gilmore, 1980:1-4).[9] The Puritan colonists were firmly convinced that the New Jerusalem was going to be established in America.[10] This conviction had been the result of the typological reading of the Scriptures, which viewed the Bible as history and interpreted this history as a process by which God was gradually revealing His grand plan to His chosen people. The climax of history for these people was the end of time, which is a major aspect of the Christian apocalypse.[11]

In Emily Dickinson's time the fervour of this Puritanism dwindled everywhere but in the Connecticut River Valley. Its values wielded a

decisive and far-reaching impact on the rural New England mind with its rigour of morality, its stern commandments and its commitment not only to fulfilling the divine purpose but also to playing a social role no less sacred. In a way, the Amherst community of the time could give the idea of model theocratic life with which the early American Puritan patriarchs had come to the New World. While the earlier institutions were discarding the orthodox tradition, Amherst – particularly its most inspired institution, Amherst College – zealously retained, nourished, cultivated and disseminated that tradition with a missionary zeal with which the devout settlers had started their life in the New World. Thomas LeDuc describes the Amherst of Dickinson's day as "still relatively isolated and self-contained," and the people as "conservative in religion as in politics" (1946:2).

By 1820 the hold of Puritan orthodoxy on the growing mercantile centres such as New Haven, Hartford and Springfield had considerably weakened under the impact of certain secular movements like Transcendentalism and become distinctively urbane in the northern Valley towns. But Amherst and its populace still grudgingly clung to the original vision of the first settlers of the New World as the New Jerusalem and of themselves as God's chosen people and, out of this vigorous conviction, zealously pressed forward with their sacred vision. Despite the decline of Puritanism and the subsequent rise of secularisation the church yet occupied the centre-stage of the life of the majority of the Amherst populace who were kept in focus of the enduring concern of regular preaching of sermons – the salvation of the soul.[12] This spirit was largely sustained by vigorous revivalist campaigns like the Great Awakenings. These movements became enormously successful and remained immensely

influential in the rural Connecticut Valley in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century under the spiritual leadership of Solomon Stoddard and his grandson Jonathan Edwards (Ludwig, 1966:38). The sole purpose of these "revival harvests" (Johnson,1955:11) was to clap the eyes of the laity on the End of the world[13] and the dire consequences of their backsliding. Around this ultimate event the Calvinistic Puritan divines would often organise their pictures of the hereafter.

Thomas Hooker exhorted his flock in the following words: "Look at the soul in respect of the end for which it was created . . ." (Miller, 1939:3). Like him the Puritan divines always kept up the view of the grand finale – Doomsday and Last Judgement – ever before the eyes of their flocks and garnished their sermons with eschatological imagery from the eschatological books of the Bible. The rhetoric of the sermons on the Day of the Last Judgement would often combine both glory and terror of the Day as in the following excerpt from Thomas Hooker's sermon:

> Imagine thou sawest the Lord Jesus coming in the clouds, and heardest the last trump blow, *Arise ye dead, and come to judgment:* Imagine thou sawest the Judge of all the World sitting upon the Throne, thousands of Angels before him, and ten thousands ministring unto him, the Sheep standing on his right hand, and the Goats at the left: Suppose thou heardest that dreadful Sentence, and final Doom pass from the Lord of Life (whose Word made Heaven and Earth, and will shake both) *Depart from me ye cursed;* How would thy heart shake and sink, and die within thee in the thought thereof, wert thou really perswaded it was thy portion? Know, that by thy dayly continuance in sin, thou dost to the utmost of thy power execute that Sentence upon thy soul: It's thy life, thy labor, the desire of thy heart, and thy dayly practice to depart away from the God of all Grace and Peace, and turn the Tomb-stone of everlasting destruction upon thine own soul (Miller, 1938: I, 298).

Thus the Puritan divines kept their sinful flocks in constant graphic view of what reward or punishment awaited them at the end. They held their listeners in terror and ensured their moral and spiritual discipline. Like the

ideas of the creed, the dogmas of original sin, divine grace and predestination, those of the here-after in the sermons "were not preached as doctrines, or contentions, or theories, but as vivid facts" (Miller, 1963: I, 281). Their sermons would often be charged with the prospect of the fire and brimstone of God's wrath and the conjuration of the vision of hell. They were directed against the wayward. Their literature, too, ensured moral edification in the first place by reference to the grim visions of the Day of Last Judgement.[14] This practice appears to have been fairly alive in Dickinson's own time, and she could not have been unaware of the orthodox Calvinistic doctrines of the Last Things preached from the pulpits in Amherst which was, according to Thomas Le Duc, "the last frontier of Connecticut Puritanism . . . [where] the teachings of Thomas Hooker and Jonathan Edwards still furnished the rule of life" (1946:2). The impact of these sermons and religious revivals on Emily Dickinson was one of distancing the future from the everyday world and projecting it on to a vision of the end. In all this Scripture remained the source of doctrine, and hence her eschatological thoughts, howsoever conspicuously her own, often have those of the Bible as the point of reference.

The Puritan sermon was the principal ritual of social order and control (Stout:1986:3) employed also for moral and spiritual admonition and chastisement. More often than not the sermon was so strong and fierce for the young that it would traumatise the tender and young listeners, sometimes permanently. The revivalist sermons were often pure sensationalism in particular, as Charles Chauncy would like to suggest about the emotional extravagance of the terrifying preaching of eternal

damnation in one of the Reverend James Davenport's (a revivalist priest) sermons:

> At length, he turn's his Discourse to others, and with the *utmost Strength* of his Lungs addrest himself to the Congregation, under these and such-like Expressions; viz. You poor unconverted Creatures, in the Seats, in the Pews, in the Galleries, I wonder you don't drop into Hell! It would not surprise me, I should not wonder at it, if I should see you drop down *now, this Minute* into Hell. You Pharisees, Hypocrites, *now, now, now*, you are going right into the Bottom of Hell. I wonder you don't drop into Hell by *Scores*, and *Hundreds*, etc. . . . Then he came out of the Pulpit, and stripped off his upper Garments, and got into the Seats, and leapt up and down some time, and clapt his Hands, and *cried out* in those Words, the War goes on, the Fight goes on, the Devil goes down, the Devil goes down; and then betook himself to *stamping* and *screaming* most dreadfully (1743:98-99).

Charles Chauncy also records the impact of those sermons on their audiences: there would be spectacles of utter confusion – "*swooning away* and *falling to the Ground* . . . bitter *shriekings* and *Screamings; Convulsion-like Tremblings* and *Agitations*, *Strugglings* and *Tumblings*" (Chauncy, 1743:77). The evangelist's rhetoric would build upon what the listener would think of himself, of death and upon the image of the world to follow upon demise: he was convinced that he was a despicable sinner unredeemably heading for the eternal fire of hell, and that he would have to meet death in a terrible manner.

Death is recognised as a typically New England subject (Flinn, 1981:63), and a fit one at that for an eschatological people. It is because the early New Englanders confronted its presence as bearing down heavily on their daily lives and all too often taking a toll on them. As eschatological subjects, death and damnation in particular would quite frequently receive special attention and their explication would rise to concert pitch in the evangelical sermons. Every Puritan would be severely exhorted to keep

the thought of death uppermost in the mind, and the preachers, too, availed themselves of every opportunity – religious and social – to keep their flocks in the strait jacket of moral pressure by reminding them of what reward or punishment awaited them on death and thus, to a large extent, controlled the discipline of their social life. The tenor of this art of intimidation was impending doom and the threat of destruction with fire and brimstone.[15] They would hammer away to their flocks to "remember Death; think much of death; think how it will be on a death bed" (Green, 1943:204). The early New England gravestones had images of separation, darkness and hopeless dissolution which would evidently serve to admonish the living mortals of death's imminency and all-pervasiveness. Cotton Mather urged his reader to remember "that he is to die shortly. Let us look upon everything as a sort of Death's-Head set before us, with *Memento mortis* written upon it" (1701:94). However death was not welcome in itself but as an unavoidable and necessary means of exit from this world of festering corruption into the life of eternal glory and beatitude. The eighteenth-century English graveyard poet Robert Blair's *The Grave* contains a view of the world that might be cited to elucidate this most death-obsessed mind of the early New England Puritans:

> . . .What is this world?
> What but a spacious burial- field unwalled,
> Strewed with death's spoils, the spoils of animals
> Savage and tame, and full of dead men's bones?
> The very turf on which we tread, once lived:
> And we that live must lend our carcasses
> To cover our own offspring; in their turns
> They too must cover theirs. . . .
>
> (Peacock, 1963:205)

Death was all too familiar a thing in the trying frontier conditions of the early New England settlements. The high mortality rate owing to

unhygienic circumstances and frequent epidemics during the early years of New England settlements made the inhabitants particularly sensitive to the physical presence of death.[16] Sometimes it would approximate overestimation and exaggeration of death's presence. The prominent New England divines and patriarchs such as Increase Mather, Joshua Moody, Samuel Willard and Cotton Mather continually made their fiery evangelical speeches on the imminence and suddenness of death. "A prudent man", wrote Cotton Mather, "will *Dy Daily*; and this is one thing in our doing too: 'Tis to *live* daily under the power of such Impressions, as we shall have upon us, when we come to Dy . . . Every Time the *Clock* Strikes, it may *Strike* upon our Hearts, to think, *thus I am one Hour nearer to my last!* But, O mark what I say; That *Hour* is probably *Nearer* to None than to such as *Least* Think of it" (Mather, 1697:38-39).

The New England divine's harangue on the close connection between the flight of time and the imminence of death with a fixed gaze, so to speak, on the clock only typifies a Puritan bent of mind. In general the Puritan mind found time irksome, and was particularly watchful of its flight. Milton, for instance, was deeply disturbed by it. He describes time as a thief of age in his sonnet, "On His Arriving at the Age of Twenty- three." In fact this consciousness of passing time and the sense of ending and death co-existed in the New England Puritan mind. This consciousness is to be met with in Dickinson's writings all too often. Joshua Moody (1633-1697) similarly pointed to the fleeting nature of time and the sudden raid of death: "Know, that *Death our Enemy* is upon a *swift* and *speedy march* towards us, and we are hastening toward him, therefore must necessarily meet quickly, between this and that the Time is but short, over a few dayes (*moments* it may be) the day will discover what we have been, and done. . .

. Death will try us all, *Death*, (I say) which among men of all *Ages* and *Sexes* takes *promiscuously* according to the *Commission* which the *Lord of Life and Death* hath given it . . ." Therefore Moody exhorts his flock to do their best when there is still time: "Let all our *Care* and *motion* through-out our whole Life tend to the fitting us for a *safe, Honourable, and comfortable Exit* at last, that when we come to look *Death* in the *Face*, or to *look back*, (and we should often *look back*) upon our *Life past*, we may neither be *afraid*, nor *ashamed to die*" (qtd. in Miller, 1963: I, 368-369). The passing time was a double reminder to the Puritan: on the one hand it sounded the knell of death; on the other it insisted that he take stock of the useful employment of time so that he could account for his earthly life to his creator as a prayerful devotion.

The two Testaments of the Bible hold two diametrically opposite views of death: the one of persecution, terror and damnation, and the other of forgiveness and love (Stannard, 1977:75-77).[17] The second one puts more emphasis on the non-biological, figurative and spiritual meaning of death: it is all sweetness, glory and light. It does not focus attention on the fate of the body in the grave such as putrefaction and disintegration. But the other one stresses on the physical miseries of the sinner in the grave. The difference in attitude to death between the early New England Puritans and those in Dickinson's time is comparable with the two different attitudes of the two Testaments. In the Old Testament death figures as the wages of sin: "Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all men sinned" (Rom. 5.12). The physical proximity of death was too real in the early days of the New England settlements owing to the adverse frontier conditions. Death was a terror to them. The stark death's-head, the most

common image to appear on the early New England gravestones, embodied the early Puritan idea of death: the dreadful skull reminded the forgetful sinner of the frightful consequence of a fully contented worldly life. It represented the Old Testament attitude to death. By contrast, the New Testament views death as the soul's longing to leave the sinful body and reunite with its long-absent Lord (2 Cor. 5.6-8). This outlook holds death as "a blessing . . . as it were a little wicket or doore whereby we passe out of this world and enter into heaven" (Perkins, 1597:5). Increase Mather said that the thought of the soul's flight to heaven "should make the Believer long for death" (1721:iv). All this is evidence that a dual concept of death as both punishment and reward at once did exist in early Puritan discourse and that an ambivalence to death swung the early New England Puritan psyche, obviously with a stronger leaning towards death's dark prospects under their bleak unhygienic conditions of life. Although there were occasional glimmers of emotionality in the elegies and sermons of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the overwhelming tendency was to resist such sentiments (Henson, 1960-61:11-27). Death was the most dreaded frequenter among God's New Israel. As will be seen, Dickinson's attitude to death is also characterised by a similar ambivalence.

A gradual change in the New England Puritan attitude to death from one of terror and repulsion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to one of eagerness and attraction in the nineteenth is traceable in New England mortuary culture developed over two hundred years or so. The hard face of death that characterised the early New England image of death had mellowed into a soft, sentimental one in the nineteenth century during this period. It was not so much recorded in the prose or poetry of the period as in the gravestones. While the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-

century tombstones bore more or less the same familiar death's-head carving, the heavenly cherub image and the urn-and-willow motif began to dominate the headstone iconography from the 1730s onwards (Dethlefsen, 1966:505). To be sure, it marked an ongoing decadence of gloomy and heavy-going Puritan culture in New England and the dawning of a new cheerful mood. Stannard says:

> In death, as in life, Puritan culture had lost its grip. The elegies and sermons, the journals and wills, the poetry and prose on death all suggest the dramatic changes that overtook the world of the Holy Remnant during the middle of the eighteenth century. But no testimony was more eloquent, incongruous though it may seem, than the unkempt, overgrown, occasionally bone-littered cemeteries of that era, studded with gravestones depicting an optimistic and sentimentalized vision of the afterlife (1977:161).

Consequently an extraordinary fondness for romancing with death developed into a fad in the nineteenth century. Stannard measures the change of attitude in terms of difference in the moral and spiritual upbringing of the 17th-century Puritan child and its nineteenth-century counterpart:

> The Puritan child . . . was immersed in death at the earliest age possible: his spiritual well-being required the contemplation of mortality and terrifying prospects of separation and damnation. The child of the nineteenth century was also taught about death virtually turn, but rather than being taught to fear it, he was instructed to desire it, to see death as a glorious removal to a better world and as reunion with departed and soon-to-depart loved ones. These were very different, in fact reverse treatments of the same theme, but in a most basic way they were the same: the child was introduced to death very early in life, was familiarized with it, and was given good reason to believe that he or she could be the victim or beneficiary of it at any moment - children were no more immune to death's sting than was anyone else, including the very old (1977:188-89).

The Puritans exhibited their humanity in their genuine fear of death; though at the same time their rhetoric eulogised death as liberation

and respite for the earth–bound soul. They would deem the dying moment the most crucial and the climax of his spiritual career on earth. It was a moment of possible revelation for the living, and for the dying it was in addition passing into the next world to which he had looked forward all his life. Yet it was a time of great uncertainty, fear and psychological turmoil on the count of his spiritual achievements on earth:

> The Puritan looked upon himself an undone man without an interest in Jesus Christ; yet he was not without some hope that he was at peace with God in him, yet not without fears, bemoaning himself in respect of his hardness of heart and blindness of minde, and that he had been no more thoroughly wrought upon by the Means that he had formerly enjoyed. O Sirs, Dying times are Trying times (Samuel Wakeman qtd in Stannard, 1977:81).

They closely watched and meticulously recorded the deathbed behaviour of the dying person and tried to make out thereof the soul's prospects after death. While the deathbed agony was experienced as intense and painful, its rhetorical interpretation by the living attendants would be impressive and positive. In early New England Calvinistic theology constantly reminding the individual of the ultimate fate would add to the menace of death from their immediate unfriendly environment: ". . . frequent deathbed anxiety among godly Puritans – death itself was being called 'the King of Terrors' – seems rooted in a combination of the Puritan's theology and their everyday sense of reality" (Stannard, 1977:83). While expatiating upon deathbed anxiety, Jonathan Edwards presents death to his laity as a wholesale onrushing deluge of pains and agonies that defeats all human effort and rational defence against its violent seizure:

> For death, with the pains and agonies with which it is usually brought on, is not merely a limiting of existence, but is a most terrible calamity; and to such a creature as man, capable of conceiving of immortality, and made with so earnest a desire after it, and capable of foresight and of

> reflection on approaching death, and that has such an extreme dread of it, is a calamity above all others terrible, to such as are able to reflect upon it . . . (1881:372).

In fact the doctrine of eternal torment for the damned found its staunch believers among the early New England Puritans who were meticulous cultivators of deathbed neuroses. The terrifying image of what awaited the damned beyond the grave and the fact that they could not change their lot hereafter because of the unalterable predestination sharpened their sense of the End and made their deathbed anxiety so much excruciating. Therefore every ideal Puritan's earthly tenure was devoted to the intensive preparation of the soul to meet death appropriately.

Preparing the soul for Christ and divine communings always remained a most crucial spiritual exercise for the Puritan. It was also one of the sticking points among the Puritan divines in their doctrinal colloquy. In *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* Perry Miller shows that a fundamental issue in the notorious Antinomian Controversy in 1637 was the issue of the preparation: Does grace take the sinner by surprise, requiring neither preparation nor knowledge, or does the sinner have to perform certain preparatory steps before s/he can receive Christ? John Cotton insisted that "to works of creation there needeth no preparation" (qtd. in Miller, 1981:60). Thomas Hooker, on the contrary, consistently insisted in his sermons on the preparation of the soul before receiving Saving Grace: "The soule must be broken and humbled before the Lord Jesus Christ can or will dwell therein, and before faith can be wrought therein" (1637:5). At Mary Lyon's Holyoke Female Seminary Dickinson participated in such preparatory exercises particularly during religious revivals in Amherst which left deep scars on her psyche (L10).

In nineteenth-century New England death was still one of the staples of Puritan thought and deathbed behaviour drew a great deal of popular attention. But now death was made into an object of romantic desire and glorious achievement. The icons of death on the gravestones, too, changed from frightful skulls, scythes and hourglasses to imagery of transcendence into a world of empyrean light and rarefied spirits. This new mood was so pervasive that it even led to the dressing of the old burial grounds as God's acres and consecrated places, as Stannard writes:

> Even the older burial grounds, though not themselves tourist attractions, began sprouting gravestones marked with imagery appropriate to the new national mood: urns and vases and weeping willows appeared . . . followed by doves, fingers pointing heavenward, and butterflies emerging from cocoons. Cast as it was against the grim skulls and scythes and hourglasses that were reminders of the Puritan past, this new funerary art was all the more striking. In at least one case a Puritan design was maintained on into the nineteenth century, but with one crucial change. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, laurel wreaths – symbols of victory – were sometimes found crowning the ominous visage of death; in the nineteenth century the same wreaths could be found encircling upward-pointing fingers and other symbols of the "victory" of the soul. (1977:180-181)

Thus the face of death softened and the afterlife grew more and more attractive and desirable. Corpses increasingly received veneration and cosmetic treatments: dead bodies were embalmed as precious objects and coffins were shaped with the suggestion that the mortal remains were jewellery (Stannard, 1977:187-88). This nineteenth-century sentimental attitude to death and the hereafter deeply coloured Dickinson's eschatological imagination (St. Armand, 1984:26, 59-77).

The otherworldliness of these Puritans led to a progressive insistence on the insubstantiality of earthly life. The Puritan view of life is embedded in that of death. They looked upon this life as but a "vapour," a

fleeting "pilgrimage,"[18] and saw death as a privilege to go out of sin and misery into eternal glory and happiness. The brevity of life is compared to a vanishing vapour in the New Testament: "Whereas ye know not what *shall be* on the morrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (Ja 4:14). Calvin was not contemptuous of the world from which the godly should absolutely withdraw. It being God's handiwork, they should engage in it, of course, with rigorous self-control and continence (Stannard,1977:25). The reference to human life and to this world in terms of a passing vision may be found in Calvin who refers to earthly life as " only a show or phantom that passes away" (Calvin, 1851:138) and to the whole world as "a form which quickly vanishes away . . . as evanescent as smoke" (Calvin, 1851:121), for "the shape of this world passeth away and all the things therein do glide and vanish away" (Calvin, 1577:31.). Commenting on St.Paul's teaching that men should "use this world as not abusing it, for the fashion of this world passeth away," Calvin writes:

> By these words the Apostle excellently noteth the vanity of this world. Nothing, sayeth he, is firm or sure, for it is only a vision or outward show. But he seemeth to have alluded to pavilions or halls, in the which when the tapestry and costly hangings are pulled down, and wrapped up in a moment, there appeareth another show : and those things which pleased the eyes of the beholders, are by and by taken from their sight" (1677:folio 87).

In consonance with Calvin's attitude to life and death the New England Puritans were trained to the facts of the transitoriness of life, the inevitability of death and the terrifying visions of Last Judgement from their very early childhood, and usually the children were the target of the severest priestly admonition. Their primers at school, too, were filled with the chilling lessons based on eschatological ideas such as the brevity of life,

the futility of earthly glory and achievement and the imminence of death. James Janeway's *A Token for Children* meant for their edification constantly reminds them of death's ever-nearness and possible consequences. *The New England Primer* (1727) teaches the English alphabet in the eschatological line, such as follows: "G - As runs the Glass/ Man's life doth pass"; "T - Time cuts down all/ Both great and small"; "X - Xerexes the great did die,/ And so must you & I"; "Y - Youth forward slips/ Death soonest nips." Cotton Mather advised the young children who had failed to make the grade at the Grammar school in the following words: "Go into Burying-place, CHILDREN; you will there see Graves as short as yourselves. Yea, you may be at Play one Hour; Dead, Dead, the next" (qtd. Stannard, 1977:65). Another 17th-century New England Puritan writer Samuel Wakeman reminded: "Death is oftentimes as near the young man's back as it is the old man's face" (1673:41). Once Jonathan Edwards warned a group of small children of the imminence of death in this manner: "I know you will die in a little time, some sooner than others. 'Tis not likely that you will all live to grow up" (qtd. in Flemming, 1933:100). In order to make their sermons and writings more effective to their audience, the New England Puritan divines would compound the imminence of death with the visions of burning on the Day of Last Judgement. Understandably such threats would bear down heavily upon the tender mind of the Puritan child.[19]

Puritan childhood was fraught with references to terrors of separation from parents and dear ones, mortality and damnation. These fears in adulthood would be compounded with "the disquieting complexities of Puritan theology and Christian tradition to produce a culture permeated by fear and confusion in the face of death" (Stannard,

1977:69). Especially the threat of separation from their parents and their playmates on the Day of Judgement would indeed be too frightful for the tender children, although such was the favourite practice of many New England ministers in their declamatory sermons (Morgan, 1966:178-179). It was thus that death was pictured to the New England laymen by their evangelical divines. Exhortation to remember death all the time, terrors of hell–fire and venomous infernal creatures and the image of loneliness on the day of Judgement instilled a deep–seated fear of death that the Puritan child would carry over into the adult life. Emily Dickinson, too, received the same picture which is reflected in the reference in an early letter to the cold, frigid pit infested with deathless worms and other horrid infernal creatures (L10). The writings of Benjamin Wadsworth, Solomon Stoddard, Joseph Green and Samuel Sewall bear ample testimony to this fact. Chapter 24 of *Isaiah* is typical of the chapters of the Bible the New England Puritans would train their minds on:

> Therefore hath the curse devoured the earth, and they that dwell therein are desolate: therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left . . . Fear, and the pit, and the snare, are upon thee, O inhabitant of the earth. And it shall come to pass, that he who fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit; and he that cometh up out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare: for the windows on high are opened, and the foundations of the earth do shake (6, 17-18).

Consequently all sensitivities and kinks of emotional waywardness got ironed out from their psychological fabric. Yet it was standard with most Puritan sires in so far as young ones were concerned. It was not however done without reason: while moral rectitude (Wilmore, 1982:68) was the only the guarantee of an early *Eschaton* and revelation, individual peculiarities would have to be done away with. Stannard records the clerical castigation of children with reference to bleak and chilling

eschatological prospects in default of strict and proper moral conduct (1977:61-71). They were reminded "how filthy, guilty, odious, abominable they are both by nature and practice" (Wadsworth, 1721:15). They were terrorised with condemnation to hell where "the Worm dyeth not . . . [and] the Fire is not quenched" (Stoddard, 1713:24). The image of death developed in the young mind, then, was a combination of loneliness owing to separation from the parents and dear ones, and removal from a familiar, protective environment of love and affection to an alien, inclement one of cruelty, terror and misery. All this scathing rhetoric must have scored every kind of dreadful image of the afterlife into their tender minds.

Along with it went the refrain of the probationary nature of earthly life in the Puritan sermons. It was constantly exhorted in strong terms from the pulpits that this world was not to be fallen in love with and that, instead, it should be got through and over with as quickly as possible. "Men huddle up their lives here," wrote a visitor to Boston from England in 1686, "as a thing of no use, and wear it out like an old suit, the faster the better" (qtd. in Miller 1938: II, 414). Reverend Charles Wadsworth, the eminent Philadelphia divine in Emily Dickinson's time and her "dearest earthly friend" to have influenced her most, also described this earthly life as a period of probation (1888:184). Generally speaking, the average Puritan devoted a great deal of his life to elucidating this terminal vision, the afterlife and the manner of the passage from this world to the next. Although this is true of any intensely religious community that believes in the hereafter, obsession with death was pushed still a bit too far in the Puritan scheme of things according to Stannard:[20]

> But in the Puritan scheme something was wrong, as though an improper 'fit' was made between the vision of death and the manner of

> encountering it. The resulting tension, I will argue, haunted the devout Puritan throughout his life and grew particularly intense as death approached . . . (1973:1305-1306.).

But given the fact that the Puritan's real life was predicated upon his or her postmortal judgement on the basis of an unknowable predestination, this tension was genuine enough. It was a situation in which the Puritan could only fearfully wait for the execution at death of something which was unalterable forever. According to Calvin, writes Stannard, ". . . an individual's fate was sealed long before his death, so that one's expected postmortem condition involved merely waiting for the formality of Judgement (1977:99). The Christians believe in the double judgement of the dead: the first when the individual dies and the Last Judgement on Doomsday. Fears regarding both had profoundly affected the Christian *Weltanschauung* in the earlier ages of the Christian religion anyway (Brandon, 1967:98-135); but they were again revived and intensified in the death-oriented culture of New England Calvinism.

Judgement Day is the climax of Christian eschatology, and the Puritans would point to it as the moment of consummation of the three great works of God – creation, new creation or redemption, and providence in a final, all-encompassing revelation of God's might and majesty. "The Works of Creation and the Mystery of Redemption, and the strange Mysteries of Providence, and Wisdom, and Righteousness of God in all, will then be revealed to the Admiration of men and Angels for ever" (Mather, 1686:71). What is more it was not only the crowning occasion for God's master plan but also for the disclosure of its mysterious purpose which gripped them in continual brooding. Every Puritan would readily admit that the works of God in the world and history were shrouded in

mystery. Yet they believed that, if the world as it was inexplicable, the world to come was not; and the eager expectation that God's mysteries would be clear one day was their constant sustenance in their otherwise miserable earthly life amidst the maze of puzzling signs. In the vein of apocalyptic literature they believed the future to be "the solution to the past and the present. . ." (May, 1972:13).

Postmortal issues are importantly interrelated in orthodox Calvinistic Congregationalism to which the Amherst community and Dickinson's family were affiliated. Predestination signified God's initial choice or election without which in the first place God's grace was impossible (Shedd, 1863:71). And grace in turn would lead human beings on to faith in God. Justification is another crucial term for the Christians which means acquittal from the indictment of "indwelling sin" (Shedd,1863:256). Christ obtained justification for sinful mankind through His atonement. But before human beings can have justification they must have sanctification, that is, the acceptance of Christ in his life as absolute presence. When sanctification occurs to a human being, it is evidenced by his or her separation from sin in everyday life. Sanctification is a subjective experience mediated by conversion and church membership, and effected by a continual effort of inward purification of the quester. The Calvinists rejected the Catholic doctrines of purgatory and of the efficacy of the sacraments and redemption through "works." But they believed in predestination and in the continuous progress of the soul from the moment of death until the final day of the Last Judgement, and church membership and attendance as the outward manifestations of inner sanctification (Finney, 1960:450-55). The idea of free choice is clearly nullified by the

deterministic core of Calvinism's belief in the unalterable fate of every human being.

The principal aim of apocalyptic literature is to relate the succession of natural phenomena and worldly events as moving towards an inevitable and irreversible conclusion and validate those events and phenomena by reference to an impeccable divine plan –"His Perturbless Plan," in Dickinson's words (P# 724). In outlining the tendencies of Judeo-Christian apocalyptic literature, R. H. Charles says that this literature seeks

> . . . to get behind the surface and penetrate to the essence of the events, the spiritual purposes and forces that underlie and give them their real significance. With this end in view apocalyptic sketched in outline the history of the world and of mankind, the origin of evil, its course, and inevitable overthrow, the ultimate triumph of righteousness, and the final consummation of all things"(1963:183).

In accordance with this tendency of apocalyptic literature Dickinson's heuristics are directed towards this end of getting behind the shifting scene of worldly illusions and beneath the surface of events in order to uncover the mystery of time and death and the overall enigma of the divine plans.

Dickinson remained well in touch with the original orthodox spirit of first-generation New England Puritanism in her formative years through periodic evangelical preaching and the traditional practices of Valley Calvinism in Amherst, suggests St.Armand:

> . . . her [Dickinson's] birth in Amherst and her inheritance of the traditions of the Connecticut River Valley ensured an ongoing contact with a conservative culture as expressed in village rituals, local customs, and communal liturgical practices. The spectre of Jonathan Edwards ruled her early life, for the valley had been the sight of the First Great Awakening in America and had been periodically burned over since 1743 by various religious revivals that the pious called "refreshings." These served only to reaffirm the old ways and the old values; Amherst College – which Dickinson's grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, had bankrupted himself in helping to found – was a voice in the

> wilderness crying out against the defections of Yale and Harvard from Puritan orthodoxy (1984:21).

These "refreshings" were the campaigns vigorously pushed forward by resentful evangelists, resentful because their millenarian campaigns had really failed them . These revivals were their struggle to keep alive the tapering vision. Their sermons were directed towards securing their listeners' faith in the vision by the talk of hell-fire and other infernal torments for the defaulters and of beatific life for the obedient. Dickinson was traumatised by them, for the thought of dire consequences of her incorrigible recusancy troubled her unspeakably.

Besides, a great many of the Puritan eschatological concerns – such as the riddance of profane time, keeping a neurotic vigil against hovering death (and the ceaseless anxiety of death thereof) and indefatigably asking questions to learn about the life after death – made for what is now recognised as the most distinguishing mark of Emily Dickinson's creative mind: a continual sense of the End and an obsessive interest in the process of ending in life and nature. Now it remains to be seen how the New England eschatological tradition is manifested in her individual self turning her into an eschatological poet in her own right.

NOTES

[1] But this view of colonists as sufferers is now being widely disputed. Edward Said, for instance, shows in *Orientalism* (1978) how the colonists grabbed foreign land and in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) how they exterminated the cultures of the colonised by imposing their own culture on them. Although these Puritans had undoubtedly a hard life, it is true on the other hand that they were colonisers usurping the land of indigenous people and Christianising their culture, and gave them no less a hard life.

[2] The mass exodus of Puritans to the New World 1630-40 is known as the Great Migration in English history.

[3] See William Haller, *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's "Book of Martyrs*. (New York : Harper & Row, 1963); *J.H. Plumb, The Death of the Past*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin., 1971), ch.2, pp.83-85.

[4] Chiliasm is the belief in the coming of the millennium, in Christian theology the period of 1,000 years during which Christ will reign on earth (Rev. 20:1-5). It constitutes the Christian expectation about the occurrence of the Apocalypse. Strictly speaking, the word "millennialist" refers to one who is a pre-millennialist (chiliast), i.e., one who believes that the millennium will be inaugurated by the personal appearance of Christ to judge the world. For him, it is a supernatural, extra-historical irruption of the other world into this one. This belief is often associated with fanatic action "anticipating" Christ's appearance. The opposite of this belief is post-millennialism, i.e., the belief that the millennium will gradually develop within history and that Christ will appear only after the thousand years has ended. The line between them was not, however, sharply drawn. Calvin, of course, is best described as a-millennial, since the millennium as such had no place in his theology. Though he himself made every effort to resist expectation of a hasty millennium, his followers in the 16th century and the early 17th century entertained the idea that they were caught in the struggle in what was indisputably the world's last age: the historical struggle between good and evil had entered into its ultimate stage – howsoever long these might be (Gilsdorf, 1965:11).

[5] Calvin deferred the Apocalypse to an uncertain future, thus minimizing the apocalyptic element in his interpretation of eschatology. He put such a stricture in his theology on the speculations about the Second Coming that it was thought inordinate even to make any query about it (Gilsdorf, 1965:10). Calvin dismissively pointed to such silly expectations: "It is far from the Lord to appoint a fixed day as though the Last Judgement were necessarily imminent . . . He wills rather to educate His disciples in patient waiting: they must take heart and realize that still many a long stretch must be traversed before the day of complete salvation" (qtd. in Heinrich Quistorp, 1955:27).

[6] John Winthrop was absolutely convinced that "the God of Israel is among us" and that they would be "a city upon a hill" revered by the rest of the world. The New England historian Edward Johnson was similarly intent on the vision of "a New Heaven, and a New Earth" being imminent. Half a century later Cotton Mather was to say "the *Thousand Years* is not very *Far Off*" (Gilmore, 1980:2).

[7] The dreamers of the American Revolution like Thomas Paine envisioned the "birthday of a new world" and its success reinforced the belief of America as "a redeemer nation" and the profusion of apocalyptic phrases in the romantic writings of the Revolutionary years would bear testimony to it (Gilmore, 1980:3). Lawrence talks of the enduring power of the American millennial creed in his *American Classics* and Melville's *White-Jacket* refers to the peculiar status of the American people as "the Israel of our time," the bearer of "the ark of the liberties of the world." Thoreau in *Walden* speaks in the accent of the early New England patriarchs when he undertakes to awaken the reader to the "morning star," the phrase by which Christ in his second coming is addressed in the Book of Revelation. Poe is also affected by motifs from the last apocalyptic book of the Bible: the slaying of the dragon in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is connected up with Lady Madeleine's rising from the tomb.

[8] New England's literary Renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century was largely facilitated by the theological liberalism of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, and the orthodoxy of mainstream Calvinism could hardly make headway there. (Buell, 1978:119-20) At this time Second Awakening Calvinism was in progress under the leadership of Jonathan Edwards' successors – Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, the Younger Edwards, Timothy Dwight (himself a good poet, too), Nathaniel Emmons, and N.W.Taylor. Among the region's major literary figures who matured before the Civil War, only Emily Dickinson and Harriet Beecher Stowe were reared under Calvinistic influences.

[9] It is in fact also the tenor of Gayraud S. Wilmore's *Last Things First*(1982).

[10] In Hebraic and later Judaic prophecies Zion will be re-built after the destruction by Yahweh's wrath. Then it will "become the spiritual metropolis of the earth, and immovable city and a quiet habitation, established at the top of the mountains: and to it shall all nations flow (Is 2:2, 4:5, 33:20, 40, 65:18; Mic 4:1f; Jer 30:18; Zec 2; Ezk 40:1f). Once they had typologically identified with the children of Israel in the Bible the New England Puritans had no difficulty in reading their own destiny into this prophecy: they were God's chosen people; America was the second Zion on the hill where they passionately waited for the Apocalypse to come about. John Winthrop reminded his fellow passengers that their mission was not to erect a permanent, isolated utopia, but rather to build such a community "that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us." *Winthrop Papers*. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929 - 47. Vol.II. p.295.

[11] Apocalyptic references were heavily used in the New England sermons. References to the future, prophetic visions and the haunting sense of ending usually indicate apocalyptic propensities.

[12] The average weekly churchgoer in New England would be exposed to seven thousand sermons and around fifteen thousand hours of concentrated listening in a lifetime (Stout:1986:4).

[13] Throughout this work, the word "End" with the uppercase "E" refers to Doomsday while the one with the lower case is used in its usual sense.

[14] Michael Wigglesworth's (1631-1705) in *The Day of Doom* (1662), a 224-stanza account in verse of the Last Judgement, is an outstanding example of Puritan literary moralism. Based on the Puritan religious belief in Calvinism, the poem presents in dramatic terms the divine judgement of those condemned to eternal torment in hell and also of those who, by God's grace, are elected to gain eternal salvation in the world to come. Many Puritans, both the young and the old, committed *The Day of Doom* to memory.

[15] The Puritan divines would depend for their rhetoric on the following Biblical sources: Ge 19:24; De 4:24;32:22; Lu 17:29; Job 18:15; Ps 11:6; Isa 30:33; 33:14; Jer 23:29; Eze 38:22; Re 9:2,167,18;14:10; 19:20; 20:9; 21:8; M't 13:42, 50; 25; 41; M'k 9:48.

[16] Stannard writes: "In the seventeenth century, the devastating smallpox epidemic of 1677-78, in conjunction with the normal death rate, probably killed off more than

one-fifth of Boston's entire population. 'Boston burying-places never filled so fast,' wrote a young Cotton Mather." (1977:53)

[17] Two principal kinds of imagery are found in *ars moriendi*: one is realistic being concerned with physical dissolution and the other idealistic relating the experience of death to immortality and eternity (Hoffman: 1964:3).

[18] The latter word is taken from the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, where it is applied to Abraham and his descendants (Stannard, 1977:75).

[19] Gerhard T. Alexis discusses the subject of infant damnation in the Calvinist tradition in "Wigglesworth's 'Easiest Room'" (1969: 573-583).

[20] The charge of a little overdoing of the subject is usually levelled against Dickinson, too, but the point is that her obsession is not an individual case of morbidity but the typical expression of a cultural ethos.

CHAPTER II

The Shaping Circumstances

> But we see now through a glass darkly, and the truth, before it is revealed to all, face to face, we see in fragments (alas, how illegible) in the error of the world, so we must spell out its faithful signals even when they seem obscure to us and as if amalgamated with a will wholly bent on evil.
>
> – Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose.*

A strong eschatological case may well be made out for Emily Dickinson: she is a poet of endings rather than beginnings (Weischbuch,1972:78; Sewall,1976:445; Rashid,1985). Endgames of every manifestation in human life and nature – departure, death, funeral, burial in human life, seasonal transitions, passage of time, sunsets and diurnal endings – constitute the staple of her writings, whether it is poetry or prose. Like the daisy of P#106 she is "Enamored of the parting West –" and is as inevitably drawn to the "sunset" issues of life as the daisy is to the setting sun. (She was fond of imagining herself and all her loved ones as delicate flowers at the mercy of brute despotic powers). The daisy's humble reply to the sun's angry fulmination – "Wherefore – Marauder – art thou here?" – could as well serve as the poet's apology for her inclination for terminal themes:

> We are the Flower – Thou the Sun!
> Forgive us, if as days decline –
> We nearer steal to Thee!
> Enamored of the parting West –
> The peace – the flight – the Amethyst –
> Night's possibility!

(Dickinson may have intended an irony here that the truly tyrannical forces such as the sun should address the fragile, helpless and unprotected

ephemera such as the daisy as "Marauder"!) It is a confession to an obsession. In a sense both the daisy and the poet have a common fate: they are automatically and even fatalistically drawn to their end and the end of things without a choice under the given circumstances – the daisy as a flower and the poet with her acute perception of mortality. Metaphorically night is the beyond that follows the sunset (death). She wonders about the noumenal mysteries that lie behind and beyond this last scene. Not being contented with the consolation of the Bible, Dickinson launches her own heuristic search[1] for those mysteries even in mortal life. When viewed against her religious culture this extremely subjective quest is found to have an objective basis in the general assumptions and practices of traditional Calvinistic Puritanism as well as certain New England cultural movements centred on death and the after-life during her own time.

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 into an orthodox Puritan family of Calvinistic that attended the Congregationalist church in Amherst, Massachusetts. Amherst was a sparsely populated 19th-century farming settlement of the Connecticut River Valley with a cultural line going back to the Puritan beginnings of seventeenth-century America. It is true that no actual Puritan theocracy existed there during Emily Dickinson's time; yet it was still a small God-fearing community immured in conservative values, largely unfamiliar with the ways of the outside world, and was not yet in a mood to welcome substantial change in outlook or life-style from the outside world. For that matter the Amherst populace was the least repentant. Rather one might recall Emily Dickinson's amusing sarcasm after visiting Boston in September of 1851: "... we were rich in disdain for Bostonians and Boston and a coffer fuller of *scorn, pity, commiseration*, a miser hardly had" (L54). This scornful utterance could be taken as an

expression of the general mood of the Amherst community towards to secular changes in the outside world.

The six generations of Dickinsons from Nathaniel to Samuel Fowler, Emily's grandfather, had sustained or, to put it more modestly, did not make much of a departure from the basic Puritan pieties. An account of the time says of Dickinson's grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson's bearing that "he reminded one of the early Puritans" (Sewall,1976:35). This might mean that Emily Dickinson had breathed in the heavy religious atmosphere of early Puritan orthodoxy in the house itself in spite of ongoing liberal changes outside. Eleanor Wilner contends: "For Emily Dickinson, the theology of her evangelical forbears and the disintegrating concepts and constraints of her society are imaginatively realized and heavy with emotion . . ." (1971:130). At least the heaviness of soul and seriousness of her pursuit can be reasonably attributed to the Puritan continuities in her family circle and in her immediate environment.

For Dickinson they were represented in the stern figure of her father Edward Dickinson in the household whose Cromwellian bearing was a reminder of old-world Puritanism. Dickinson wrote to her Norcross cousins amusedly:"Father steps like Cromwell when he gets the kindlings" (L339). But the joke apart, the seriousness of Puritan character was instantly felt in his personality with his commitment to public service and strict moral conduct in private life. Although she had poked fun at her father's Puritan streak before his death (LL 63 & 200), her remembrance of him after his death (with her allusion to Jonathan Edwards) is a memorial to his Puritan evangelism: "When I think of his firm Light – quenched so causelessly, it fritters the worth of much that shines. . . . 'I say unto you,' Father would read at Prayers, with a militant Accent that would startle one"

(L432). He preached a stern morality based on his Puritan past and was to his daughter the living symbol of a tradition to which she was drawn, yet against which she rebelled. Edward Dickinson stood for Puritanism to Emily, and her feelings about him were like her attitudes towards her Puritan heritage and the orthodox religion of her time. Ford decisively says: "His [Edward Dickinson's] presence served to aggravate her anxiety and apprehension over the prospect of death and what might await the soul of the departed" (1966:46). Two other sources that kept her in touch with the ethos of early New England Puritanism were Mount Holyoke Female Seminary and the traditional pieties practised in rural New England (St.Armand,1984:80), particularly in the Dickinson household.

Now to turn to other probable family sources of Emily Dickinson's eschatological inclinations. Mother Emily Norcross Dickinson is said to have developed hypochondria and fear of death following some early deaths in her immediate family. Hence she may be singled out as a probable source of Emily Dickinson's death-obsession and so-called neuroses. Millicent Todd Bingham says that Mrs. Dickinson had a "tremulous fear of death" (1955: 4) which John Cody follows up with further arguments to the conclusion that she had been a lifelong hypochondriac affecting her children with fears of death. Cody makes her out as an abjectly dependent wife, a fussy, compulsive housekeeper, an unsuccessful mother who failed to satisfy Emily's "voracious love-hunger." Therefore the sensitive daughter felt rejected and grew up as an embittered person resentful of being female, rebellious against religious submission and all male authority in the figure of her father, reading voraciously and sublimating her "love-needs" in her writings (1971:2, 101). Hence the persistent themes of death, anxiety, and suffering in her poems and letters.

Cody even finds in her poetry an unconscious wish to have all those of her friends and relatives dead that had failed her one way or another. He attributes it all to her mother's failure to provide her daughter with proper care and attention, and thereby filling her mind with fear and insecurity.[2] There are other similarities between mother and daughter in their mortuary interests. Like Emily Dickinson, her mother, too, would enthusiastically respond to deaths and funerals. Her voice similarly deepened when there was a death in her known circle and displayed her talent in translating the goings-on around in funerary terms (Sewall,1976:84). Another trait was common to mother and daughter: they both would express themselves through gifts of flowers, fruits, locks of hair, and the like expecting them to be reminders when they were gone.

Aunt Elisabeth, on her father's side, was a considerable feeding source of Dickinson's eschatological propensities. When she had produced the verse history of the family at a family reunion in 1883 (in fifty-seven quatrains with an introduction of forty-six lines in tetrameter couplets), she touched upon the theme of passing time, the ultimate fate of all worldly life and the biblical promise of resurrection. While remembering the achievements of Samuel Fowler Dickinson - Elisabeth's father and Emily's grandfather - she says: "He sleeps, beneath the churchyard green,/ Which from this place is plainly seen;/ The Words upon his marble plain -/ 'A man though dead, shall live again.'" Here Elisabeth expresses certain common Puritan obsessions in general which are also Emily Dickinson's flood subjects: death, the ultimate end of life, the fate of the soul after death, resurrection and overcoming all worries through the sustenance of Christian hope. Dickinson's father Edward showed similar bent of mind in a Yale student reunion composition (Sewall,1976:46). This

Weltanchauung was not peculiar to the Dickinsons alone; the New England Puritans, too, held this view and their profound spiritual questions and answers were also shaped by them.

Dickinson's inheritances from the New England Puritan tradition combined much of her immediate environment of home and orthodox Amherst community and her own personal circumstances to create her complex end-oriented consciousness. In the second quarter of the 19th century – during Emily Dickinson's childhood and adolescence – the domestic atmosphere of every Amherst family was heavily charged with deep religious fervour such as the morning devotions, compulsory church attendance twice on Sunday with the whole family, frequent readings from the Bible and exhortations administered to the children from the lives of prophets and saints. Dickinson's religious education was rigidly Calvinistic and highly evangelical, and it supplied her with brilliant poetic images of a God any Transcendentalist could have told her did not exist (Wells,1964:374). During her studentship at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary which she attended one year (1847-48) she had the harrowing experience of intensive and relentless evangelical exhortations and grilling under the guidance of the Seminary's principal Mary Lyon. It was a time when all Amherst was seething with the high fever of evangelical revivals. Emily Dickinson was deeply affected by their persistent reference to the frightful consequences of religious delinquency at Last Judgement.

Emily Dickinson was deeply affected by the waves of evangelical revivalism that renewed the rigidly Calvinistic spirit of Amherst from time to time. As many as eight such waves swept Amherst roughly between 1840 and 1862, covering the formative as well as the most creative period of Dickinson's life. She refers to such a revival in a letter:

> Last winter there was a revival here. The meetings were thronged by people old and young. It seemed as if those who sneered loudest ant serious things were soonest brought to see their power, and to make Christ their portion. Many who felt there was nothing in religion determined to go once & see if there was anything in it, and they were melted at once (L10).

Again she refers to the revival in L11 and its melting impact on the respondents: "There is now a revival in College & many hearts have given way to the claims of God." In L389, too, there is a mention of "an 'awakening' in the church." Dickinson weathered these revivals but suffered from a bad conscience for not being able to respond to them positively.

In her early letters Dickinson talks a great deal about attending the intensive religious meetings aimed at converting the impenitent and not being able to surrender to Christ completely and her guilt-feeling thereof. She considered herself "one of the lingering *bad* ones" (L36). In two letters (LL.154 & 175) she seems to find it difficult to reconcile the dreadful declamations of the Puritan sermons about the sinner and the happy and the familiar circumstances of life. But she responded equally passionately to both and perhaps even tried to keep the two worlds well apart, understandably at a psychological cost. She gives different names for these two planes of existence:

> She lived in a familiar world that was vulnerable to incursions of the strange and she was awed and thrilled by the contradiction of the meeting. As religious revivals swept Amherst and, at Mount Holyoke, as she was asked to place herself either amongst those who 'had hope' or those who were 'without hope' one unintended effect of the preaching which she heard would be to distance the future in its scale and importance and drawn from the humdrum mundane (Robinson, 1986:39-40).

George Frisbie Whicher also notes the heavy pietistic atmosphere in Mary Lyon's Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, particularly during the revivals, and their psychological impact on Emily Dickinson (1938:69-76). Mary Lyon attached great importance to the spiritual health of her pupils as she believed that ". . . good citizenship in a Christian nation must be patterned on citizenship in a spiritual kingdom" (*ibid.*,75). However it was not that she had been "positively" influenced by those "refreshings" to any extent; it was rather that she had responded to the evangelist's clarion call by resisting the revivals of her time and her education at the evangelical Mount Holyoke Seminary (Barnstone,1997:146). [3]

Possibly Dickinson's idea of the hereafter was formed early by the ranting sermons of the Amherst pulpit in which the wrath of God against sinners, especially young sinners, eternal punishment in an unquenchable hell, fire and brimstone figured prominently. She was told of hell as "the dark realms of wo [*sic*], where is the never dying worm and the fire which no water can quench . . ." (L10). Once she felt her brother Austin and herself targeted by clerical condemnation as she writes of the experience in a letter (L175) :

> The minister to-day, not our own minister, preached about death and judgment, and what would become of those, meaning Austin and me, who behaved improperly – and somehow the sermon scared me, and father and Vinnie looked very solemn as if the whole was true, and I would not for worlds have them know that it troubled me, but I longed to come to you, and tell you all about it, and learn how to be better. He preached such an awful sermon though, that I didn't much think I should ever see you again until the Judgment Day, and then you would not speak to me, according to his story. The subject of perdition seemed to please him, somehow. It seems very solemn to me.

It is apparent from the letter that the priest had threatened Austin and her for their delinquent conduct, as the Puritan divines were wont to do, with

dire consequences after death and on the Day of Last Judgement – namely, separation from their dear ones – for their "wickedness and depravity." In the poem (incorporated in L712) Dickinson deplores evangelical "terrorism" and suggests that Christ's method is superior to the evangelist's:

> "All Liars shall have their part" –
> Jonathan Edwards –
> "And let him that is athirst come" –
> Jesus –

"The Bumble Bee's Religion" – that is, the evangelist's way – is associated with the "Hearse," "Dirge," cold morality and the threat of perdition. She juxtaposes Christ's call of love and Jonathan Edwards' grim reminder to the sinner as if to let the readers judge for themselves as to which of the two is the more attractive as a call. Although Dickinson visibly bore the sermonic pressures too hard in her childhood (L175), the clerical rhetoric stood her in good stead in course of time by serving as a vehicle for expressing her sunnier and lighter moods. In an earlier letter she gave the sombre and grim biblical rhetoric a comic turn to admonish a "backsliding" uncle (L29). But, again, it must be admitted that periodic evangelical fervour fostered and perpetuated the image of the *Eschaton* and helped the apocalyptic and millennial visions to reach the nineteenth-century generation of the Connecticut River Valley.

Dickinson accepts the Bible for its message of love which can work better magic with its soothing salve than the caustic condemnation of the fiery evangelist: "Orpheus' Sermon captivated – / It did not condemn -" (P#1545). If she does not state it so directly as an act of prudence she does make it quite clear that she prefers Christ-centred faith (that loves and comforts, and is near and human) to God-centred faith that is distant and

cold, and threatens, accuses and condemns. It is this human core of her faith that is the springhead of her consolatory writings: the fallen human being is in a distressingly exilic state. So what s/he needs is compassion, love, comfort and company as long as s/he stays on earth. In this mood her Puritan self comes out in its most characteristic form: she is saddened by the thought of the human being's prelapsarian state in heaven lost through the Fall. Therefore sometimes she mystically refers to heaven as home with a touch of nostalgia (LL 10, 39 & 161). But generally home in Dickinson's figurative language tends to signify the final home, whether heaven or tomb (McNeil, 1986:114). When she looks upon the human being's earthly habitation as exile, the wretched creature appears as being pitiably away from his real home, that is, heaven. Under these circumstances he needs love and comforting words rather than the evangelist's castigation. In a letter of her twenties she wrote: ". . . the voice of affliction is louder, more earnest, and needs it's friends, and they know this need, and put on their wings of affection, and fly towards the lone one, and sing, sing sad music, but there's something sustaining in it" (L35).

Dickinson's spiritual affinity with New England Puritanism is reflected in her view of earthly life as a passing vision. Emily Dickinson appears to have been aware not only of life's brevity but also of its momentary gifts and pleasures in the typically Puritan way (Calvinistic, to be precise) when she speaks of renouncing the lures of earthly comforts in favour of immortality:

> Perhaps you have exchanged the fleeting pleasures of time for a crown of immortality. Perhaps the shining company above have tuned their golden harps to the song of one more redeemed sinner (L10).

In a poem (incorporated in L33) too, Dickinson produces the fragile, ephemeral, fleeting and insubstantial qualities of life in a multiplicity of metaphors (though she was not the first in New England Puritan poetry to have thought so):[4]

> Life is but a strife –
> Tis a bubble –
> Tis a dream –
> And man is but a little boat
> Which paddles down the stream.

While she calls disillusionment "a bubble burst" (L173) the metaphor perfectly serves to capture the suddenness of disappointment. Incidentally, it happens to have been one of the recurrent favourites of the Puritans as an emblem of the brevity of earthly life. Perhaps Dickinson's Puritan upbringing had built this metaphor into her psyche.

Dickinson's obsessive interest in death resulted in over one-third of her total number of poems on the subject, besides numerous others suggesting it. Seldom is there a letter that does not call attention to time and transience. Yet it is important to note that she does not treat death merely as a subject, and is then done with it. Rather death and its aftermath form the psychic raw material of her writings that continue to be present in all her utterances. Her cogitation on any subject is inevitably streaked with her speculations about death and the hereafter which ultimately constitute the typical texture of all her thought. This inclination is the drift of the essential New England eschatological mind. The death's-head kept staring out at her all her life. In a letter of her thirties she wrote: "That *bareheaded life* – under the grass – worries one like a Wasp" (L220). This edginess – the characteristic overworriedness of the Puritan psyche – persists throughout her writings. But sometimes she can also see death in the imaginary world of children's romance as a dragon carrying off the

hapless victim to "his high mountain" (L70) while parting "bells toll" to announce the event (L269).

This dual attitude to death only proves the continuity of the Puritan psyche in Dickinson. A common consciousness appears to have bound the 17th-century predecessors and the nineteenth-century descendant: mortality as an obsession with both was due to their similar experience of encountering the physical presence of death much too much in their everyday life.[5] What is often viewed as rather too obsessive in her treatment of death would appear to be only too natural when this similarity of circumstances between her and the New England Puritans is recognised. In discussing some of her poems in 1891, William Dean Howells wrote:

> Such things [death, immortality and the afterlife] could have come from a woman's heart to which the experiences in a New England Town have brought more knowledge of death than of life. Terribly unsparing many of these strange poems are, but true as the grave and certain as mortality (1891:319).

The disease-ravaged New England of Dickinson's time did certainly contribute a great deal to her acute consciousness of death's triumphant presence in life. Smallpox and cholera were on the rampage. There was an outbreak in nearby Shutesbury in August, 1851, and one died from cholera in Amherst on August 21, 1849 (Bingham, 1945:178). The death rate of youth was astronomical in Amherst.[6] According to Millicent Todd Bingham, there was among New Englanders at this time great apprehension of illness:

> Brain fever, scarlet fever, typhoid fever, "ulceration of the bowels" and developing into "lung fever" and other "pulmonary complaints," took a heavy toll in Amherst throughout the winter. Little was known about preventive medicine. People died without warning, especially young people, of whom the majority succumbed to consumption (1945:176).

Under the circumstances, it is quite usual for one to think of death and death alone. And in Dickinson's case, the thought of death found much natural and fertile soil owing to the eschatological background of her religious culture. Her imagination processed it into an indispensable psychic material for her poetry and thinking.

Death is the closest ever and the only visible crossing-point into the obstinately enigmatic beyond. She needs to crack some opening in it to view and verify the End as promised in Scripture and have the experience of revelation. In view of her obsession with death, and her rather strange interest in themes of mortality and her tireless delving into the subject Conrad Aiken remarks: "She seems to have thought of it constantly – she died all her life, she probed death daily" (Sewall, 1963:14-15). Dickinson herself confirms this fixation with mortuary themes and anxieties in a letter to her friend Jane Humphrey when she was twenty-two years old: "I think of the grave very often, and how much it has got of mine, and whether I can ever stop it from carrying off what I love; that makes me sometimes speak of it when I don't [*sic*] intend" (L86). In this same letter she explains why she often declined invitations even for a week out, expressing her apprehension that one of her dear ones might be carried off by death in her absence. Fear of loss turned her into an ever-vigilant sentinel of her dear home against death:

> I'm afraid I'm growing *selfish* in my dear home, but I do love it so, and when some pleasant friend invites me to pass a week with her, I look at my father and Vinnie, and all my friends, and I say no – no, can't leave them, what if they die when I'm gone; Kind Friend – "I pray thee have me excused!" . . . It does not seem one bit as if *my* friends would die, for I do love them so, that even should death come after them, it dont [*sic*] seem as if they'd go; yet there is Abbie, and Mr. Humphrey, and many and many a dear one, whom I loved just as dearly, and *they* are not upon Earth, this lovely Sabbath evening.

Love is the only shield she has. But it ultimately proves to be a very fragile and pathetic defence against death's steely, decisive assault. A similar anxiety of losing friends to death in her absence is the staple of a poem of her early thirties:

I should not dare to leave my friend,
Because – because if she should die
While I was gone – and I – too late –
Should reach the Heart that wanted me –

If I should disappoint the eyes
That hunted – hunted so – to see –
And could not bear to shut until
They "noticed" me – they noticed me –

If I should stab the patient faith
So sure I'd come – so sure I'd come –
It *listening* – listening went to sleep –
Telling my tardy name –

My Heart would wish it broke before –
Since breaking then – since breaking then –
Were useless as next morning's sun –
Where midnight's frosts – had lain !
(P# 205)

Thus death's treacherous and despotic ways kept her on neurotic alert. There is another biographical reason for her preoccupation with death and the grave. The Dickinson home on Pleasant Street (1840-1855) was close by the village cemetery. The fact that nearly all the funeral processions passed her house must have aroused in her a frequent consciousness of mortality and the afterlife. This cemetery view would also provide her with ample opportunity of studying at first hand the ceremonies and trappings connected with funerals.

Dickinson not only worried about the death of his friends and relatives; she was also often horrified to visualise her own death. As will be

seen, in several poems, too, she practises dying in her imagination. When Dickinson was about sixteen years old, she wrote to her friend Abiah Root:

> I dont know why it is but it does not seem to me that I shall ever cease to live on earth - I cannot imagine with the farthest stretch of my imagination my own death scene - It does not seem to me that I shall ever close my eyes in death. I cannot realize that the grave will be my last home - that friends will weep over my coffin and that my name will be mentioned, as one who has ceased to be among the haunts of the living, and it will be wondered where my disembodied spirit has flown. I cannot realize that the friends I have seen pass from my sight in the prime of their days like dew before the sun will not again walk the streets and act their parts in the great drama of life, nor can I realize that when I again meet them it will be in another & a far different world from this....I wonder if we shall know each other in heaven ,and whether we shall be a chosen band as we are here (L10).

Six years later she returned to the theme once again in L86 but with more calm and resignation. The letter portrays her more sentimental self-image in death than the preceding one; but her horror at the thought of her own death persists as usual:

> The other day I tried to think how I should look with my eyes shut, and a little white gown on, and a snowdrop on my breast; and I fancied I heard the neighbors stealing in so softly to look down in my face – so fast asleep – so still – Oh Jennie, will you and I really become like this?

In visualising her own death-scene Dickinson constructs it with certain usual things that happen in the house of the dead: friends visiting the house, weeping over the coffin and wondering about the destination of the departed. These are due to the absence of the missing individual. Dickinson's query about the possibility of a reunion with the dead in heaven is a refrain in her questionnaire for the priests. In order to visualise the end of things it is also necessary to imagine and visualise one's own death. But Dickinson's attempt to do so has provoked the charge of fraudulence (Winters, 1963:31-32).

Death, Dickinson's all-out desperation to "forestall his [death's] advances" (L311), ultimately the sad realisation of the futility of such attempts, the spectacle of dying, burials and the grave engaged her both intellectually and emotionally in life. They were her total engagements, and deeply affected her creativity. A quiet helpless rage against death is sometimes only too apparent in her, and she would effusively greet every hint of opposition to this marauder (L181). She would even congratulate one who, in her opinion, had triumphed over death (L181). Sometimes she entertained the idea that a state of permanence and fulfilment immune to the laws of process, transience and decline could somehow be achieved for the persons and things she loved. Once she desperately asked Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland: "Say, is he [death] everywhere? Where shall I hide my things?" (L195).

All her life the outstanding question addressed to God (that remained, needless to say, equally unanswered) was: "Oh God / Why give if Thou must take away / The Loved?" (P#882). This personal question gradually leads her to further questions of general nature about death and the afterlife and constitutes the biographical genesis of her eschatological poems. She would like to be around not because she could forestall death's ravages by constant vigilance but because the pains of her heartbreak would be reduced and meaningful if she did not fail the dying. She told her so-called literary mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson: "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" (L280). Her earliest firsthand knowledge of death came at the age of thirteen when she witnessed the death of her friend Sophia Holland. Two years following the actual incident she wrote to her friend Abiah Root:

> My friend was Sophia Holland . . . . I visited her often in sickness & watched over her bed. But at length Reason fled and the physician forbid any but the nurse to go into her room. . . . At length the doctor said she must die & allowed me to look at her a moment through the open door. I took off my shoes and stole softly to the sick room.
>
> There she lay mild & beautiful . . . & her pale features lit up with an unearthly smile. I looked as long as friends would permit . . . . I shed no tear . . . but after she was laid in her coffin . . . I gave way to a fixed melancholy (L11).

Ever afterwards she reacted very sensitively to every death among her near and dear ones. Each one was a tremendous blow to her which provided her with the "sharpest of the theme" (P# 509) and from which she would recover with a fresh experience of adjustment with, and insight into the nature of mortality and post-mortality. If a portrait of Dickinson in her typical posture were to be drawn perhaps it would shape up as a mourning maiden keeping vigil at some deathbed. It is important to remember that her eschatological consciousness was not merely the result of an objective intellectual inheritance from the New England tradition in the form of mortuary ideas and a handful of religious rituals; it was also, to a great extent, shaped by a deep personal and emotional factor owing to a large number of deaths in her family and friend circles. Therefore a strong subjective element is felt in her eschatology. The shadows that haunt her personal life also flicker upon her subjects of general nature It is one of the principal reasons why she was obsessed with death-centred subjects and the afterlife.

Dickinson is perpetually absorbed in things and occurrences ephemeral and terminal in human life and vegetable nature, and looks down the road to the journey's end. The perspective of her religious faith leads her eye farther on beyond this point into a metaphysical domain. Such a view of the end is apocalyptically significant and optimistic in religious

terms as it understands the mortal end not as a conclusion but as a cataclysm preluding the revelation of the ultimate and a beatific state.[7] The soul is worked up to this flash-point gradually and, as soon as this height is reached, the experience is like that of a stunning blow on the scalp. What the soul acquires by this epiphanous event is God's grace described as "a holy kind of violence" by Thomas Hooker which is wrought not "by morall perswasion" but by "his powerfull operation, and omnipotent hand put forth for such a purpose" (qtd. by Perry Miller, 1939:28). Perhaps Dickinson is at her Puritan best when she tracks the soul to its final moment as in Poem #315 ("He fumbles at your Soul"). She shows the Puritan's habit of meticulously keeping a logbook of the soul's progress and its rigorous spiritual transactions. Perry Miller says: "Almost every Puritan kept a diary, not so much because he was infatuated with himself but because he needed a strict account of God's dealings with him, so that at any moment, and above all at the moment of death, he could review he long transaction" (1956:225-26).

Before the final revelation that death is expected to make, the soul is prepared gradually as Dickinson closely watches the final approach in P#315: "Prepares your brittle Nature/ For the Ethereal Blow." The final moment comes in the form of a violent impact: "Deals - One - imperial - Thunderbolt - / That scalps your naked Soul -" The poem describes the slow dramatic build-up to a spiritual climax. Another similar poem with Christ as a caller at the door of the soul is 'Just so - Jesus - raps -'(P#317) As in P#315, in this poem too, the divine call gets louder and louder and the tempo gradually rises to a final thunder fit of revelation or seizure. In reading Dickinson one senses precisely the workings of the Puritan psyche preparing itself for the final hour, when there will be neither morally

humiliating fear of death nor any particular effusion. The ideal encounter with death from the perspective of a pious Christian is one of perfect civility and decency. There should not be any hurry or flurry. In the poem "I read my sentence – steadily" (P# 412), the speaker makes her soul "familiar" with death, so that death does not take her by surprise when it comes. "Acquainted" with each other, her soul and death "Meet tranquilly, as friends – / Salute, and pass, without a Hint" – without the soul, the self's immortal part, being seized or laid hold of by death.[8]

The eschatological consciousness always assumes that there exists another life superior to this but invisible to the mortal eye. It is charged with the strong conviction that "This World is not Conclusion" and that "A Species stands beyond – / Invisible, as Music – / But positive, as Sound – " (P#501). She was herself aware of her particularly prophetic propensity quite early in her life. To her girlhood friend Abiah Root she said: ". . . it is my nature always to anticipate more than I realize . . ." (L12). Her imagination hinges on death because the phenomenon of ending does not come out better or more definitively in any other mundane acts of completion. Moreover it serves as an impeccable model for the conclusion of all mortal and earthly activity and existence. Off and on she returns to the subject of death also because it brings her, if tantalisingly, closer to glimpsing what she calls "Night's possibility" (P#106) and occasions her reflections on the after-life.

With her reticences and intense private musings on the fate of the earthly and human, and the nature of the divine, Emily Dickinson seems to fit into the eschatological type that withdraws into the inner self where the Kingdom of God is privately realised and experienced (Wilmore,

1982:67). Her choice of isolation from society was made in favour of her intimacy with, and full attention to the soul's "divine Majority" (P#303). The poem "The Soul Selects her own society" is a quiet but a definitive rejection of the world after making a stringent selection of company which is but itself. Her choice of self-quarantine is in perfect accord with the eschatological requirement that she renounce all material comforts and gaudiness (symbolised by chariots), relinquish all earthly power (symbolised by royalty and all regalia, and so forth) and wait ever vigilantly to receive immortality and revelation into the pure condition of her soul in solitude. Understandably Dickinson always keeps herself in such readiness for "Bulletins all Day / From Immortality" (P#827): she opens her soul out to the prospects of the eternal :

> The Soul should always stand ajar
> That if the Heaven inquire
> He will not be obliged to wait
> Or shy of troubling Her
>
> Depart, before the Host have slid
> The Bolt unto the Door –
> To search for the accomplished Guest,
> Her visitor, no more – (P#1055)

For her (as for every Puritan) immortality is too sensitive and too delicate a guest. She wrote to Mrs. Samuel Bowles after her husband's death: "Immortality as a guest is sacred, but when it becomes as with you and with us, a member of the family, the tie is more vivid . . ." (L644). Therefore it is natural for her to wait at the door of her soul so intently and in such readiness. Dickinson's isolation was not only striking to people around her; she was also aware of it herself. She asked Susan Gilbert Dickinson to keep her posted on worldly matters because "You stand nearer the world than I do, Susan" (Bianchi, 1932:28).

In death's bewildering presence her reactions and moods are varied and changing[9]: by turns she is coy, impudent, terrified, respectful, friendly, tender and resentful. It is an indication that she puzzles over this phenomenon endlessly with conclusions as diverse as feelings and sensations in the face of it. This very fact makes the subject of death a poetic rather than a philosophical matter for Emily Dickinson. In a poem she agrees to accept death in so far as it is the only way to explore the true identity of death:

Good night, because we must,
How intricate the dust!
I would go, to know!
Oh incognito!
Saucy, Saucy Seraph
To elude me so!
Father! they won't tell me,
Won't you tell them to?
(P#114)

Curiously she does not seek or wait for a reply from the Heavenly Father; she knows Him to be an eternally silent one but He has immense authority by which He can enforce His orders. The light mood of the verse is only skin-deep; the real concern with the "intricate" dust keeps bothering her. The human condition is a choice without option: "Good night, because we must." Figuratively, parting *for* the night signifies departure into darkness. (She pauses in the middle of the third verse to lay down her proviso before accepting the final departure.) Dickinson chides death as "Saucy Seraph," in a rather irreverent Donnesque idiom – perhaps jestingly, but it is clear that she desperately seeks to unmask the "incognito" (indicated by her impatient childlike pleading in the last two lines) and know its real identity. In her obsession with human mortality and the afterlife Dickinson recapitulates the eschatological interests of the

early New England Puritans; but her pursuance of death as a personal quest is perhaps extraordinary because she did so at a time when the understanding of the human being's mortal condition as a corporate investigation of the New England Puritan community (as in its early days) had virtually ceased to exist.

Dickinson's thoughts about death are intellectually refined. They have no stink of the grave or corporeal putrefaction. The point would be clearer if her handling of the subject or theme is contrasted with that of the medieval *ars moriendi* artists and writers, who, as Huizinga says, were possessed by the dance of the dead rather than that of death (Huizinga, 1955:147). The rise of Victorian culture in nineteenth-century New England might well account for such a deodorising treatment of the mortuary subject. Ann Douglas's study explores the nineteenth-century tendency of romanticising death and this insight may well be applied to the purple aura around Emily Dickinson's attitude to death.[10] Her worries are more of an intellectual and spiritual nature. She has hardly any interest in corporeal disintegration in the grave which captivated the medieval imagination both clerical and lay; as though the poet's constant speculation had removed the physicalities of the grave making for abstraction, and the grave thereby had assumed deeper metaphorical significance!

Over time Emily Dickinson settled down to a permanent mood of obsession with the idea of death. One might be tempted to call her an American graveyard poet. Yet she is unlike the 18th-century English Graveyard poets in the respect that her exalted imagination reaches beyond the grave in search of a beatific vision and immortality in corporeal forms, as it were, while a chronic morbidity is the mark of her English counter-parts. The imagination of the English Graveyard poets generally remained

effective up to the grave for all practical purposes; but Dickinson's object is to skip or bypass this yawning gap and continue the earthly life into the next: "For thee to bloom, I'll skip the tomb/ And row my blossoms over!" (P#31). Some of Emily Dickinson's contemporaries such as Hamlin Garland, William Dean Howells, and Sara Whitman actually expressed this extreme desire (Ford, 1966:21).

It is not only a trite and commonplace recognition of death being the end of life with Dickinson; it is also an awareness of life itself being the process of dying. As Gelpi puts it: "Synthesis and dissolution run parallel courses – run, in fact, the same course" (1966:5). So, paradoxically living and ending/ dying are simultaneous, and whatever is activity in life is ultimately doomed for an end. Death is the climax of an ongoing all-pervasive process and an easily recognisable form of ending that also puts a face of completion on every mortal life and earthly activity. P#934 insists on the solemnity of the subject of ending for her, no matter where, or in what form it occurs, whether sombre or gleeful:

> That is solemn we have ended
> Be it but a Play
> Or a Glee among the Garret
> Or a Holiday
>
> Or leaving Home, or later,
> Parting with a World
> We have understood for better
> Still to be explained.

Apparently all actions are subject to a common fate – ending, regardless of what their worldly statuses are. So concluding is all that really matters seriously, and is common to all activities. By insisting on conclusion as the ultimate, Dickinson shows deterministic inclinations

which were conspicuous among the Puritans. The Puritan universe was a teleological one in which the divine *telos* was hidden, fixed, irreversible and unrevisable, and the human being was required to perform certain set actions in absolutely abject fealty to God. If the individual obeyed his or her God without questioning His decrees, he would serve God's End rather than his own, and in the Puritan's teleological universe, it was a natural expectation (Miller, 1967:76-7). As a reward he would be blessed with eternal life. This would bring God's and the human being's spiritual end into concurrence. The earthly end is, however, merely an ending from the Christian point of view, a temporary pause before the real End occurs without any more endings. The word "later" in the final stanza of the above poem marks the climax of all earthly endings.

As a Christian, however, Dickinson could not remain contented with the thought of death as the end of all concern, though it certainly presented to her the most compelling spectacle of the human condition, – that is, mortality – giving rise to questions about the destination of the departed soul. Her religion provided her with ready answers which she found difficult to accept without putting them to the acid test of her perception and ratiocination.[11] Dickinson turns the ready-made answers over in her mind and builds up her idea of an alternate (and for her an alternative, certainly!) after-life. Given the fact that whatever Dickinson talks about in her poems or letters contains a mention of death, she can be easily misunderstood as a morbid poet. But the ultimate locus of all her thinking is oriented towards the life after death; and death and its aftermath do not occur in her writings "so much as a theme with assignable topics of rational discourse . . . as a raw material for speculations . . . ." (Weisbuch, 1975:79). That is, whatever is her narrative of rational discourse has

speculation on death in it as an essential component, but not as a subject written about and left behind. References to death occur in her poems and letters so often because her imagination encounters death as often in conceiving of an afterlife. Death cuts across all subject categories in her writings.[12] The mystery of death is a problem to be cleared; but it is not to it that she looked forward as the climax of her speculation. Like any pious Christian she wanted to be assured of the existence of the after-life and immortality her religion promised her. Reticent as she was she did not hesitate to approach the Congregational clergyman Washington Gladden in desperation for reassurance. Gladden's is presumably a reply to Emily Dickinson's possible query about the fact of immortality, and Johnson suggests that she may have asked this question with the death of Reverand Charles Wadsworth and the illness of Judge Otis P. Lord in mind (note to L752). By the tone of his letter Gladden appears to have been a fervent believer. He could strongly affirm that "there is life beyond the grave" but could not show her any solid evidence. Possibly Dickinson pressed him for absolutely ocular proof of it for fear of delusion, to which he replied:

> Absolute demonstration there can be none of this truth; but a thousand lines of evidence converge toward it; and I believe. It is all I can say. God forbid that I should flatter one who is dying with any illusive hope; but this hope is not illusive. May God's spirit gently lead this hope into the heart of your friend, and make it at home there, so that in the last days it shall be an anchor to the soul, sure and steadfast – (L752a).

Death might be an implacable villain but Dickinson recognises its metonymic value: "Death, but our rapt attention/ To Immortality" (P#7). Mortality is thus understood in terms of immortality and *vice versa*. In Ford's opinion death is important to Emily Dickinson in so far as it is a one-way pointer to immortality (1966:75). But, hermeneutically understood, immortality, too, becomes a referent of death in its turn. Her

religion tells of a permanent post-mortem existence in terms of supernal fantasy. As a Christian Dickinson believes in it but she wants to be certain about it. She squeezes those terms of the divine promise to shape a here-after on a human scale.

Growing up in the late declining orthodox Calvinist culture of New England Puritanism, Emily Dickinson had inherited from it the tendency of her Puritan culture to view everything under the shadow of the end and the world of the living as part of the domain of the dead. Her consciousness of mortality is so poignant that she projects the image of this life into the next. Richards Francis writes:

> . . . few writers can have died so often in the course of their own poems. In a way her [Dickinson's] life can be regarded as an attempt to see what the world looked like when she wasn't in it. Her preoccupation with 'that bareheaded life under the grass' was undoubtedly morbid but her values were those of life and, in their way, oddly practical – it was precisely because she was clamped with empirical fixity to what she knew that she tended to see death as *a grotesque extension of life* (1977:66) [italics mine].

Coming as she did from a background bemused with death and the end of the world, she could not have done otherwise than what she does with the choice of eschatological subjects in her numerous correspondence and poems. Despite her quiet rebellion against this orthodox culture, she could no more escape it, for better or for worse, than she could escape breathing the air of Amherst. Again, that culture informs not only her choice of subject but also the entire body of her writings – the imagery, the rhetoric and the general mood. On reading her, one can well discern a strong Puritan streak in her. A pure line of continuity from the Puritan past did reach her, but not so much through her family as through her contact with her immediate God-fearing Amherst community. Sewall says:

> In the course of the generations, when Puritanism reached Emily as a part of her family tradition, it was a checkered affair, much Dickinsonized. What she got of the real thing, 'pure' Puritanism, came from her reading, from the Amherst pulpit, from hymns and prayers. It was her distinction that she perceived its central meaning in spite of the cloud of accretions that obscured it in mid-nineteenth-century America.(1976:22).[13]

In Dickinson's writings, parting is a common spectacle. Parting, leave-taking and going away continually happen in her letters, and every instance reminds her of death. In her early twenties she wrote to Susan Gilbert Dickinson about her growing familiarity with this constant universal phenomenon of earthly existence and her slow and painful adjustment with it over time: she wept herself dry watching deaths as departures and departures as deaths, or suffering amnesia about the loved ones, which is as good as suffering death. Therefore, instead of being wet and soft with pathos and pity, her inner landscape becomes flinty and is poised at the flash-point:

> . . . I often part with things I fancy I have loved, – sometimes to the grave, and sometimes to an oblivion rather bitterer than death – thus my heart bleeds so frequently that I shant mind the hemorrhage. . . .
>
> Such incidents would grieve me when I was but a child, and perhaps I could have wept when little feet hard by mine, stood still in the coffin, but eyes grow dry sometimes, and hearts get crisp and cinder, and had as lief burn.
>
> Sue – I have lived by this. It is the lingering emblem of the Heaven I once dreamed . . .(L173).

It reflects a frame of mind that views everything as being inextricably caught in a fatalistic web set up by a dark, inscrutable Providence and accommodates itself in this given situation with stoic resignation and extraordinary self-denial.[14] Evidently this mind grew steadily from her childhood and she brought it to the full articulation of her experience, emotion and feeling. It is not true of her creative life alone; as

is apparent in her letters, her daily life and even its humdrum business, too, were deeply affected by an overwhelming awareness of continual parting and departing, passage, loss and separation. A plaintive note of farewell to the world continually soughs through her work like a moan; she dwells on the scenarios of sad endings – whether human or natural – whenever she finds occasion. Her painful perception of the fleeting and shadowy nature of earthly life is one strong and unmistakable Calvinistic propensity in her. Sometimes she reacts to this human condition with defiance and rage; and sometimes she looks for alternatives in an effort to go far around the path of death to no avail though at last. Hence her fractured lyrics with their disjointed syntax are the perfect vehicle for expressing the world in which continual fragmentation in relationships go on as a fatalistic process.

Dickinson's constant endeavour is to thwart the processes of transience and loss and bring solace to the victims of decay and death. She attempts to achieve a state free from the conditions of profane time which will be in the nature of sacred time. But, then, there is the sad recognition that it is impossible (Rashid, 1985:23). However, in a characteristically eschatological manner, she believes that the *raison d'être* of temporal miseries would stand revealed in the condition of sacred time when earthly time comes to an end through the Apocalypse, as in the following poem (P#193):

I shall know why – when Time is over –
And I have ceased to wonder why –
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky –

He will tell me what "Peter" promised –
And I – for wonder at his woe –
I shall forget the drop of Anguish
That scalds me now – that scalds me now!

This hope is the sustenance of her tormented spirit, as of any eschatological being. Not everything is clear to the purblind mortal in the present state of sinfulness. When Simon Peter asked Jesus at Last Supper why the latter was washing his desciples' feet, " Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not; but *thou shalt know hereafter*" (Jn 13.7. Emphasis added). Christ's words contain the eschatological model of knowledge: true and total knowledge is not to be known here on earth but is deferred to the Apocalypse and the end of this life, for it lies with God in the hereafter. Thus Dickinson's long wait for the end of time for the full knowledge of the divine purpose of existential sufferings in mortal life is a routine exercise in Christian patience for the ultimate to show in the round.

Dickinson had a remarkable talent for consolation and obituaries. In fact she took a strange delight in acting the mourner. St.Armand suggests that she was the sweet singer of Amherst (1984:26). She used to keep a file of obituary clippings and, if there was a death in her known circle, she would readily send funerary scraps along with her flower-decked condolences to the bereaved. It became second nature to her: "It is almost involuntary with me to send my Note to that Home in the Grass where your many lie -" (L775). Tears are the principal salve for heartbreak in the consolation tradition. She proudly says: "Tears are my angels" (L36), and would spontaneously "patter as the rain" (L180) She implies that her tears have the divine magic of healing. It might be important to consider the element of consolation as a characteristic mark of Dickinson's eschatological imagination, for it presents her with an opportunity to fondle her central obsession with the end. She felt the physical presence of death no less in her life, as noted earlier; and therefore she could spontaneously adopt the traditional strategy of response to the facts of mortality with her

consolatory writings.[15] The elegiac strains in Dickinson are traceable to this feature of early New England verse which had pre-eminently sprung out of an obsessive eschatological consciousness and poured out in prodigious quantities in the form of elegies, funeral sermons, obituaries, epitaphs, anagrams, and marmoreal structures on graves. Perhaps it could even be argued that consolation literature which had been so popular in her time (Douglas, 1977:242) and held her interest was but a flowering of the garden that the early New England Puritan writers had planted.

In the conditions of continual farewell she thinks it the most appropriate and important to comfort the afflicted as a mourner and elegist. It remains an essential part of her creative instinct. She understands that loneliness in suffering in the face of the mysterious beyond into which the human being disappears is her or his essential predicament. In a letter to Jane Humphrey she wrote: "...the voice of affliction is louder, more earnest, and needs it's friends, and they know this need, and put on their wings of affection, and fly towards the lone one, and sing, sing sad music, but there's something sustaining in it" (L35). Her condolences are very often an expression of joy rather than sorrow. She once wrote, in a rather congratulatory tone of voice, to the recently widowed Mrs. J.G.Holland whose daughter Anne was to be married soon: "Few daughters have the Immortality of a Father for a bridal gift. Could there be one more costly!"(L740).

The Augustinian piety which created the most inexpressible subjective mood in the Puritan and which thereby forced upon him a painful individualism subjected him continually to an overwhelming anguish. Apparently Dickinson recognises this essential loneliness of the individual and the necessity of consolation. She praises her friend Abby

for attending on the dying: "...she shuts the eye of the dying . . ."(L39). As Dickinson does, it was deemed a very important social function by a Puritan. St.Armand puts this tendency of hers in the perspective of a unique nineteenth-century topical phenomenon called consolation literature in his exhaustive work.[16] He contends that Dickinson's love of death as a major subject of her poetry is a result of her enthusiastic response to certain graveyard movements and popular necrological interests of her time such as the Rural Cemetery and Mount Auburn School movements. Mount Auburn inaugurated in 1831 pioneered the rural cemetery movement that gave rise to a series of romantic and landscaped graveyards in America in the mid-nineteenth century.[17] Rural cemetery denoted a burial ground located on the outskirts of a city that was designed according to the romantic conventions of English landscape gardening. It indicates a tendency among people in Dickinson's time to head off the processes of nature even if it meant introduction of something artificial into the natural order with a view to showing that "man has interposed in some way to improve the processes of nature" (qtd. in Bender, 1974:199). A lively letter to her friend Abiah Root from Boston after her visit to the landscaped cemetery of Mount Auburn is an example of her enthusiasm over this topical interest of her time:

> Have you ever been to Mount Auburn? If not you can form but slight conception – of the "City of the dead." It seems as if Nature had formed the spot with a distinct idea in view of its being a resting place for her children, where wearied & disappointed they might stretch themselves beneath the spreading cypress & close their eyes "calmly as to a nights repose or flowers at set of sun" (L13).

The graveyard releases her most pure and tender feelings: her rhetoric breaks into lilting lyric.

Dickinson's keen perception of transience is closely connected with her sense of loss. Time passes, and she perceives the ensuing changes in terms of deaths and funerals. She wrote to Abiah Root: "There have been many changes in Amherst since you was [*sic*] there. Many who were then in their bloom have gone to their last account & 'the mourners go about the streets'"(L13). All this keeps happening in her world continually, quietly and almost imperceptibly. She can see only the results of change but not the cause. Time is an agent of this invisible, malignant cause. She does not care if time is invisible, too: her imagination can body it forth in the figurative language. The clock is an enigma; it intrigues Dickinson with its innocent façade and its mysterious work. She may gaze and gaze at it but it would not yield a single clue to the mystery of time, whence it comes and whither it goes: "As I just glanced at the clock and saw how smoothly the little hands glide over the surface, I could scarcely believe that those self-same little hands had eloped with so many precious moments since I received your affectionate letter . . ." (L8).

Dickinson's means of knowing the other world is her perception. In fact the chief tension in her sensibility is between the empirically verifiable and the suggestive and symbolic in the visible world (Johnson,1985:4). She observes the natural world with microscopic accuracy and concentration in order to make out the spiritual implications of its phenomena to which she assigns metaphorical values. This recourse to metaphor is but a strategy to grasp the transcendent and ineffable. In this respect she is a true descendant of the early New England Puritans who regarded every phenomenon as a purposeful enigma concealing the ultimate, and tried to interpret it as a metaphor concealing divinity. Death is crucial to Dickinson's perception because it marks the passage from the worldly

seeing into an otherworldly perception of the unknown which holds in secret either extinction or a full revelation. Dickinson looks forward to that moment of final revelation when the relativity of perception and point of view would settle down to the absolute: "I shall know why – when Time is over –" (P#193). Time is the villain that creates the phenomena of nature and hides the face of the non-protean.

Dickinson's ultimate quest is to witness revelation, and in search of it, she stretches herself imaginatively beyond the mortal limits into the realm of the dead and the other world. However hypothetical and even objectionable may be her claim to the authenticity of such experience of the hereafter (Sewall, 1963:33) it no doubt gauges the intensity of her pursuit of the unknown in its totality. Dickinson refuses to take anything short of the total which only Revelation can make possible. Death is functional and serviceable in this respect. It advances the quester of totality towards a possibility of that beatitude. Totality exists in heaven and appears as fragments on earth. She gives up all her hope of achieving totality on earth: "This is but a fragment, but wholes are not below" (L656). The organising force that can achieve any worthwhile unity is explosive by nature. She tried it and found it to be causing fission rather than fusion in earthly conditions. She wrote to Higginson in her most creative time: "... when I try to organize - my little Force explodes - and leaves me bare and charred -" (L271). Yet she feels driven towards achieving an impeccable and unimpeachable entirety: "I could not care – to gain/ A lesser than the Whole –" (P#655) It is not so much arrogance as compulsion. It is the quest for organising all time and experience around a permanent and timeless centre which can yield the vision of all at once and in true perspective, and where types of the future and antitypes of the past enter into agreeable

relation. Dickinson's idea of totality could bear comparison with the one afforded by the biblical type of eschatology, inasmuch as the latter envisions completion and, – before the final moment is reached – holds all events and activities as fragmentary, albeit co-existent, and as an ongoing process of complementary actions which are to coalesce and come to rest in the final moment of apocalyptic revelation – the grand Omega. Termination of time is essential to revelation as the fragmentary nature of temporal time impedes the emergence or crystallisation of the whole.

In many poems and letters Dickinson seems to skirt human seeing – and, in her spirit-like conduct, human life itself – in favour of a mode of perception that enables her to be considered in the mystical tradition (Johnson, 1985:61). Paradoxically she says: "What I see not, I better see" (P#939). Although she is aware of the limitations of her natural being in sighting the unseen realm she exerts her intuition to visualise its landscape and its inhabitants. Dickinson invests her rhetorical resources wholeheartedly in order to give a concrete shape to this distant glimmering world of intensely private perception but uncertain location. She trains her intuitive eye ruthlessly in sad recognition of the handicaps of physical eyesight. In terms of strategy it is to keep the door of the soul ajar: "The Soul should always stand ajar" (P#1055) which might give a chance to let in a glimpse of "A Species stands beyond –" (P# 501).

Dickinson turns over every type of perception before she chooses the one that can comprehend the whole, namely the poetic one. In terms of category it is the poet who is the most capable of all in doing so:

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

But, looking back – the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole –
The Others look a needless Show –
So I write – Poets – All –
(P#569)

All other categories become superfluous as "the First" – poets - can do the essential duty of all the rest, that is, comprehending the "the Whole," which is the objective of Dickinson's eschatological sensibility.

The eschatological values of the early New England Puritans remained considerably alive in Dickinson's Amherst in spite of waves of secularisation that had been going on under the aegis of transcendentalism (which was particularly influential among the elitistic section of the community while evangelical fervour was still a rage among the rural masses.) and the American Civil War. Her reclusive life and her "flood" subjects – her overwhelming sense of transience, loss, the end (particularly death), and her natural curiosity about the after-life – would only confirm her lineal descent from this Puritan tradition. Emily Dickinson created a self-enclosed other world not necessarily an exact replica of the next world that Christianity envisions, though it provides her with the conceptual framework for her own. She adjusted herself to it in her white cassock and lived in constant readiness to be called away. Her position on the boundary between the two worlds gives her poetry a curious uncanniness that talks in familiar terms of what Yvor Winters calls "purely theoretic experience" (Sewall, 1963:31).

Emily Dickinson may have consciously rejected the Calvinistic dogmas but she certainly inherited its quintessential tendency of viewing things in terms of the end and of regarding death as a portal to modal change from the mutability of time and space to the permanence of eternity and infinity – a rite of passage, so to say. Emily Dickinson in a poem of

1864 (P#816) expresses a fundamental paradox and conviction that had been the tenor of many New England Puritan sermons: *this* life means death and *this* death ushers us into another real life, imperishable and permanent:

> A Death blow is a Life blow to some
> Who till they died, did not alive become –
> Who had they lived, had died but when
> They died, Vitality begun.

But this strong faith in the "vital"[18] life in the next world had shaped up apparently almost a decade earlier, as is apparent from her letter to Susan Gilbert Dickinson: "Not all of life to live, is it, nor all of death to die" (L176). She expresses her amazement in yet another poem (P#1017) where the life-death and death-life paradox is "the hardest Miracle/ Propounded to Belief." She prefers death to life because death is a conclusive, once-for-all affair ("The Dying, is a trifle, past"- P#1013) while living is the most awful because:

> . . .this include
> The dying multifold – without
> The Respite to be dead.
> (P#1013)

The last line speaks volumes about her disgust of dying many deaths before real death. This world is a valley of death. Her anguished spirit cries out for an exit: "I can't stay any longer in a world of death" (L195). It is not particularly the thought of one's own death that gives her concern. Rather it is life in death that is unbearably tormenting because it is to be "dying multifold" by watching others die: "Sharper than dying is the death for the dying's sake" (L311).

Despite her preoccupation with the invincible processes of physical dissolution Emily Dickinson is not a poet of earthly endings; rather it

would be more appropriate to call her a poet of *the End*, where lie the hope and assurance of immortality and endless happiness against annihilation like any believing Christian. Her religion supplies her with the bare idea of what the afterlife should be like, and then she creates it herself to her own specifications. It is a construct of her own imagination. Camille Paglia explains Dickinson's obsession with the last things and terminal phenomena as "her Decadent variation on Christian apocalypse" (1991:638). Yet the adapted paradigm fulfils her most private and subjective craving for the after-life, for it is thus that the hereafter filters into her in the most personal way. This appropriation of Christian apocalypse signals decadence for Paglia because Dickinson individualises the most cosmic event in the Bible and makes it no bigger than her two human arms can put around comfortably.

However it is not her yearning that distinguishes Dickinson from a regular mystic who longs to be in the next world. What sets her apart is the sense of immediacy with which she feels the presence of the life after death here and now. But her "Codicil of Doubt" (P#1012) casts a shadow upon and obscures the traditional vision of the End now and then.[19] Her writings bear the impress of an imagination compulsively ending- and end-oriented. In this respect she conducts herself as a typical traditional Christian whose consolation for all earthly futility stems from the biblical promise of another life. Her sense of the end is so pervasive in her poems and letters that it would be termed "obsession" in psychological parlance if it were not understood against the background of her New England Puritan culture in which the assumptions about the terminal facts such as mortality and immortality, resurrection and redemption, heaven and hell, time and

eternity and the like co-exist as opposites and shape and control life as *donneés* of culture; all these remain as an unconscious presence in her complex sensibility. Writing off Dickinson's alleged apostasy, Sewall says:

> Over, behind, and through it all, of course, were the Puritan conceptions of Divine immanence, providential history, the Whole Duty of Man; the sense of being Chosen, or Elected; the idea of Redemption. All these were at work, I think, in her complicated consciousness, if not as theological convictions, at least as fixed points in her spiritual navigation – sometimes vividly seen, more often suffused in fog or mist, sometimes lost in the blackness of night (1976:25).

Thus it is not an idiosyncrasy with her and it might not be adequate to seek reasons in the immediate circumstances of her social or private life. Rather it needs historical knowledge about the origins of her whole culture which had behind it a long tradition of eschatological preoccupations. The first and foremost of these preoccupations was time that haunted the Puritans all the way to the grave, as the image of the hour glass on their gravestones amply testifies (Ludwig, 1966:263). The keen sense of death's immediacy with which Emily Dickinson's sensibility continually registers life's transience and transitoriness and constructs the complex perspective of time, consciousness and death in her poetry is particularly reminiscent of the gloomy attitude of her Puritan eschatological forbears towards time.

NOTES

[1] Helen McNeil terms Dickinson a heuristic poet, a poet with an incisive investigative intellect (1986:6). Chapter One "Dickinson and Knowledge" is devoted to this aspect in Dickinson.

[2] It is too simplistic to derive arguments for the entire growth of Dickinson's eschatological mind from such psychological premises alone, though they may have had a share in it. A rounder view requires an exhaustive reference to more objective conditions such as her religious and cultural background, for she looks upon death as

an existential problem and a central religious mystery which requires clinical and objective investigation (Sewall, 1976: 75,80).

[3] Karl Keller writes that Dickinson's

> is one of the most remarkable bodies of protest literature we have against New England religion. To the resurgence of Puritanism in her time, her poetry is a formidable veto. . . . Yet she could not escape it. She indeed had what she called "An Ancient fashioned Heart."
>
> But this alternating defense and offense creates a tense ambiguity in our understanding of her Puritan origins. She stamps her foot at what she stands on. She yells at the voice she yells with. Like the Brahma, it is with Puritan wings that she has the power to flee the Puritan past (1979:67-68).

So her creative work is a constant reminder of her as one "standing alone in rebellion" (L35).

[4] Much earlier Ann Bradstreet had thus viewed earthly life: she described this volatile life "like as a bubble, or the brittle glass" (1967:236).

[5] The death-rate in Emily's time rose up owing to the American Civil War. The early trying years of Puritan settlement in New England saw a similar high toll of death owing to unhygienic conditions, starvation and battles with the native Indians. This could be a reason, small but considerable, why eschatological culture in New England became so pervasive and deep-rooted. As happened in medieval Europe during the 14th and 15th centuries as a result of the Great Plague, death added a few features to New England culture owing to death's palpable presence (Stannard, 1977:52-57).

[6] Millicent Todd Bingham records the following statistics for Amherst: in 1851 there eleven deaths of persons ranging in age from thirteen to thirty-three; in 1852, four, from ages eight to twenty-four; 1853, twelve, from ages eleven to thirty-two; and in 1854, six, from ages seventeen to thirty-one (1945:179-80).

[7] The cataclysmic end is paradigmatic in religious contexts. In the Bible as well as many pre-Christian religions, the appearance of the ultimate is heralded by cataclysms in nature: "This conception of Nature convulsed at Yahweh's appearing is connected with the idea that, behind the great phenomena of Nature - earthquake, fire, flood, storm, lightning - are His power and presence. These are manifestations of Him (Ps 18:7f; Hab 3; Jg 5:4f). This idea is rooted in the old Nature religion, which had its storm-, thunder-, and earthquake-gods, or personified these phenomena themselves" (Hastings,1967:377). It can be stretched to serve the typological interpretation of any terminal action or event occurring in a religious framework with a strong conviction in the after-world.

[8] Here Dickinson uses the word "Hint" in the etymological sense provided by Webster's 1841 edition of *American Dictionary of the English Language* (later on revised by Chauncy A. Goodrich). The word is shown there to have been derived from *hent (hentan)* meaning "to seize, or lay hold of"; that is, take by force (Benvunto, 1983:46).

[9] Thomas H. Johnson can classify Dickinson's death poems into three broad categories (1955:203-204); but such classification would be always misleading in view of myriad feelings and states of mind that keep glimmering in those poems.

[10] Ann Douglas very impressively documents the Victorian form of secular culture that emerged as fiery evangelical Edwardseanism waned in her *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: A Discuss Book/ Published by Avon Books, 1978). She takes a negative stance towards the writers of both orthodox and liberal backgrounds who contributed significantly to the groundswell of sentimental literature in nineteenth-century New England, as doctrinal structures of orthodoxies in general and Calvinism in particular began to erode (chs.1-4, appendices, and *passim.*). Also Stannard, 1977:167-196. Using the insights of Ann Douglas and Stannard, Barton Levi St.Armand's cultural study, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*, explores the impact of American Victorianism on Emily Dickinson and her immediate environment that romanticised the issues of death and the afterlife.

[11] The relentless practice of logic was the mark of New England Puritans. One could remember the development of Ramsist logic. Dickinson's questioning such as follows could serve to exemplify the backlash undoing the Puritan assumptions: "Our Pastor says we are 'Worm.' How is that reconciled? 'Vain – sinful Worm is possibly of another species'" (L193).

[12] Dickinson's freedom from the publishing world is sometimes linked up with her liberation from the obligations of categorising subjects. Weisbuch says: "Freed from the pressures of a public career, Dickinson was freed from ordering her imagination in terms of subjects" (1972:22).

[13] Barton Levi St. Armand similarly identifies this source of Dickinson's Puritan values in her writings (1984:20-21).

[14] Buell terms Dickinson's self-denial "the romance of repression" and, instead of viewing it as tragic, he explains her self-abnegation as a strategy to divert the suspicious eye of the predominantly male society from her "infinite passion concealed beneath innocuous surface" (1986:119).

[15] As a result – as may be apparent from Harold S. Jantz's *The First Century of American Verse* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962) – elegy emerged as a dominant literary form of the early New Englanders. See also Larzer Ziff, *Puritanism in America: New Culture in a New World* (New York: A Viking Compass Book, The Viking Press, 1973:119).

[16] Emi*ly Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society* (1984).

[17] Following its example Philadelphia established Laurel Hill Cemetery in 1836, and New York City opened Greenwood in 1838. By 1842 New England had several rural cemeteries, including the one opened in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1841. In 1842 there were also rural cemeteries in Salem, Worcester, Springfield, and Plymouth, Massachusetts, New Haven, Connecticut, and Nashua and Portsmouth, New Hamphshire.

[18] She uses the word in the Latin sense of *vita* meaning "life."

[19] Among her other poems of doubt are P#s.1012, 1144, 1503, 1557 where she takes a skeptical position on the traditional issues of death and the after-life.

CHAPTER III

"Degreeless Noon"

A physician can sometimes parry the scythe of death, but has no power over the sand in the hourglass.

- Hester Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)

It haunts me, the passage of time. I think time is a merciless thing. I think life is a process of burning oneself out and time is the fire that burns you. But I think the spirit of man is a good adversary.

- Tennessee Williams

"The ceaseless flight of the seasons," wrote Emily Dickinson, "is to me a very solemn thought, & yet Why do we not strive to make a better improvement of them?" (L13). The gnawing compunction about fleeting and ill-spent time is inflicted by her sharp Puritan moral conscience that constantly competed with the fact of life's transience and transitoriness. The Puritan mind understood that time was profane, and could not be improved upon. Yet any reward or punishment in the afterlife would, for sure, depend *wholly* on the quality of life lived during this "unholy" tenure of existence. The sooner it comes to an end the better for mankind. But it cannot, however, be hurried by any human effort or will, though, it is true, no sustained revelation of either the divine or the most personal kind is to be expected until and unless it occurs. Anyway the pious Puritan would try to ameliorate the present circumstances by spending his or her life in public and religious engagements with an eye to otherworldly gains. Dickinson's consolation to the late Dr. J. G. Holland's widow was based on this conviction: "Heaven is but a little way to one who gave it, here"(L729).

A life of extreme wariness, rigorous self-examination, unflagging self-control and selfless devotion to public life was deemed time well-spent, and a sort of insurance[1]: "Sobriety and rectitude in public, scrupulous

examination of conscience in private were the indispensable requirements of a life that was preparing itself for the appalling rigour of Last Judgment" (Robinson, 1986:36). But, according to the doctrine of predestination, there was very little that the individual could do to tip the balance of the scales in his or her favour. Yet it was a common moral worry of the devout Puritan to put every moment of worldly life to the best use with a view to spiritual perfection. It created an ambivalence, however, in the Puritan psyche towards time: on the one hand, time was unholy and corrupting; but it had, on the other, the potential to provide the only chance of redemption for the sinner in this world in preparation for the next. In the above letter Dickinson's awareness of temporal flux and the urgent need to make the most of it in anticipation of some kind of moral judgement in the hereafter are undoubtedly symptomatic of her eschatological mind that seeks release from the toils of fretful time and thirsts for eternal fixity. There is continual vindication in her poems and letters that time is an obstinate deterrent to any kind of permanence or totality which she is denied by her human, and to be more specific, by her temporal condition but which she makes desperate imaginative effort to achieve (L656; P# 655). She feels that there is something eerie about time's ubiquitousness. It shadows, hovers around and worries her like a phantom bee that keeps postponing its assault upon its victim.: "It goads me, like the Goblin Bee – / That will not state – its sting" (P#511). Her life is constantly overcast with its wings. It appears that time impinges on her as the shadow of something that has no substance of its own.

The discussion of time is inevitable and, even, legitimate in any eschatological discourse, and it is more so in the context of Dickinson's writings because – as it is often argued – the chief object of her quest is

not so much the deliverance of the soul from the body (the common goal of mysticism) as the liberation of the mind from the bondage of time. Charles R. Anderson identifies time-locked mind rather than the domination of the spirit by the flesh in her writings as the chief handicap of mortal existence in experiencing epiphanies: ". . . the essence of the human condition, limiting man's ability to understand ultimate truths, is the imprisonment of his mind in time rather than the imprisonment of his spirit in a body" (1959b:402). E. Miller Budick traces the displacement of supernatural entities from their traditional *loci* in Dickinson and remarks that Dickinson's ideas about God and heaven are less a matter of location than of temporality (1986:198). Besides the insightful work of Anderson and Budick, time is treated as a central issue in several other studies of Dickinson's poetry. For instance, E.M. Tilma-Dekkers agrees with Anderson that in Dickinson's view the human being's main handicap is not that the soul is locked up in the flesh but that s/he is confined in time (1978:167). It would, however, be a mistake to underestimate Dickinson's emphasis on the soul's suffering in the condition of the body. In this respect her response is in the vein of traditional mysticism: "I am constantly more astonished that the Body contains the Spirit - Except for overmastering work it could not be borne -" (L643). According to Sharon Cameron, Dickinson's poems achieve "atemporality" in what she calls "lyric time" (1979: 171-173, 196-197). Hughes argues that the threat of death in Dickinson's poetry can best be understood by reference to time: "Time itself becomes the limited medium through which one attempts to understand the meaning of its limits" (1978:28).

If the essential propensity of the eschatological mind is to be liberated from time, Dickinson shows the tendency to a remarkable degree.

Her contempt for time is quite often as pronounced as her *contemptu mundi*. In both cases she exerts her inner resources to the utmost to achieve transcendence when no supernatural event intervenes to deliver her from profane time (i.e. earthly or historical time) into sacred time.[2] Sacred time is not fragmented by categories of past, present and future. It is *the* eternal present without flux in which the supreme divinity resides. Dickinson wishes to attain to the state of this sacred time. Within the framework of religion, it prevails in the *post-mortem* state of heaven; and in mortal life, she glimpses it in the "Degreeless Noon" (P#283) of the mind.

Dickinson's antipathy towards the activities of time in human life is noticeable from her teens. In fact all her life Dickinson remained preoccupied with the problem of time which never quite ceased to be a handful for her. Time figures as a personage in her letters written between her early life and her fifties.[3] Now and again she complained of "naughty time" (L86) and even attempted - rather too self-confidently - "to teach it a few of the proprieties of life" (L103). But apparently she found time a handful and obviously all her endeavour to discipline it went in vain. Time seemed to her to have its own rules and its own course to follow. It confronted her with an enigma that caused her more harassment and distress than excitement and joy. It is so much bewilderingly entangled with life; and yet so much antagonistic to existence! Human life and time are locked in an unmitigable and ineluctable antagonism, as it were. In an early letter Dickinson makes her annoyance with time's pervasive presence quite explicit: "I was so vexed with him for it [causing change] that I ran after him and made out to get near enough to him to put some salt on his tail, when he fled and left me to run home alone . . ." (L6). This childish sally and wild-goose chase after time might seem an amusing pleasantry of

juvenile piquancy; but, as she grew up, the light mood was to darken into a grim lifelong grudge against time. All her life she sought after liberation from time and its degenerative accompaniments – decay and death. These are intertwined terms designating a destructive process in which mortal life is caught up and from whose arbitrariness it continually suffers. She could never bring herself to terms with this capriciousness of time.

Dickinson's early letters are full of disdain for "Old Father Time." This trite epithet, which she uses more than once in the letters of this period rather in disparagement than out of reverence (but never in her poems), suits her idea of time well as a degenerative, deformative and sinister presence in life.[4] Ostentatiously respectful, sometimes she would not even spare a chance to taunt "so reverend a personage" (L8). It appears from her correspondence of this period with her friend Abiah Root that time provided them with an opportunity to indulge in sentimental philosophical speculation or spin a yarn. But it is not the flippant mood in which these early exchanges were made on the subject that counts here; more importantly, it is the recurrence of the subject in these letters that deserves attention as a clear indication of her interest in the problems of time since her early years. Time intruded on her senses so often and so poignantly that she became all too familiar with its arbitrary ways – now swift, now slow but always unsympathetically indifferent to the human condition and prodigiously wasteful of life.

Time is a phenomenon of this world and eternity is of the next, and it is in terms of the latter that Christianity talks of perpetual joy or unremitting sorrow and pain in the hereafter. (In "Because I could not stop for Death –," eternity is a *post-mortem*, transcendental occurrence.) Faulting time and praising eternity is a conventional practice in popular

religious traditions. As a rule every devout Christian mystic complains against the shortcomings of time, agonizes, and searches for ways of deliverance. St.Augustine wrestles with the problem of time in his *Confessions*[5] and his explication of time and eternity is typical of the attitude of Christian mysticism in general:

> . . . time derives its length only from a great number of movements constantly following one another into the past, because they cannot continue at once. But in eternity nothing moves into the past: all is present. Time, on the other hand, is never all present at once. The past is always driven on by the future, the future always on the heels of the past, and both the past and the future have their beginning and their end in the eternal present. If only men's minds could be seized and held still! They would see how eternity, in which there is neither past nor future, determines both past and future time (1961:261-262).

Motion and change are characteristic of temporality while stasis and steadfastness are of eternity. Besides, time consists of divisions hierarchically sequenced. By contrast, eternity is one undifferentiated simultaneity. The saint describes eternity as "a never-ending present" (263) that stands still, never moves backward into the past nor forward into the future (264). It is a concourse of all time. Eternity is also a vantage ground from which the whys and wherefores of temporal categories can be best viewed, judged and understood. St.Augustine's God resides there. Thus He is both in time and out of time, and immanent and transcendent at once.

Dickinson's perception of time and eternity bears comparison with Augustine's. Her repugnant attitude to earthly time is typically Christian. Although she uses the Christian model of eternity (which is time without flux and to be in eternity is to be in time and out of time at once), she works out a far more complex idea of it. Her idea of eternity is neither only a *post-mortem* experience nor always an objective event; it can be the experience of mortals, too, here and now in the rare moments of the mind. As will be

shown, she has strong doubts about the exclusive merits of the Christianised eternity which is often understood as an extension of temporal consciousness beyond death into the after-life. She questions the rationality of such a notion and undertakes investigation into it by continuously dying imaginary deaths and dropping into the depths of her consciousness.

Like Augustine, Emily Dickinson notices two essential characteristics of earthly (profane) time: it moves and it changes. In fact, she can discern the presence of time by the spectacle of motion and change. She complained to Abiah Root:

> Old Father Time has wrought many *changes* here since your last short visit. Miss S.T. and Miss N.M. have both taken the marriage vows upon themselves. Dr. Hitchcock has *moved* into his new house, and Mr.C. is *going to move* into Mr.T's former house, but the worst thing old Time has done here is he has *walked* so fast as to *overtake* Harriet Merrill and *carry* her to Hartford on last week Saturday [Emphasis added] (L6).

However, in eschatological estimation flux is not wholly negative. It is required for arriving at the end of time and process. Flux serves this purpose in Emily Dickinson. As David Porter says, movement and change are two essential characteristics of process for her that, despite its dark bearings and apparently dubious proceedings, ultimately delivers, on balance, a happy ending:

> Movement and change represent for Emily Dickinson the process by which one passes from personal isolation to a consummate union, form artistic endeavor to literary immortality, and from spiritual aspiration to spiritual morality. In more abstract terms, the process is the change from the condition of possibility - emotional, artistic, spiritual - to the state of self-fulfillment, "Existence's whole Arc filled up," as she says in a later poem (P-508) (1966:75).

The eschatological mind perceives process as hierarchical, leading up to the ultimate, and turns its gradually run-down material state of things to good account.

Meanwhile several critics have considered Dickinson as a poet of process. A whole chapter, "Process," in Charles R. Anderson's *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: A Stairway of Surprise* (1960) explains how temporal illusions are created by the cyclical processes of nature and why these illusions are not to be dismissed as flimsy. Anderson says: "What seems like process within the limits of the temporal scheme, according to her [Dickinson's] system of images, may well turn out to be something quite different in the limitlessness of eternity"(162). Gelpi writes: "Whether we move centripetally or centrifugally, we also move toward the end of movement, for life is race against death. Soon after the mind senses its alienation from the world outside, it becomes aware of flux and recognizes that its very existence - which had gone unquestioned - is the process of dying." And under the surface of this flux Dickinson noticed the death's-head (1966:5). In Inder Nath Kher's analysis, process constitutes one of the contraries in Dickinson's poetry that makes for man's tragic awareness of existence in flux and his longing for repose (1974:8). Helen McNeil approaches the issue from an entirely epistemological point of view. By process she understands "passionate investigation" in Dickinson and presents it as an aspect of American poetry which characteristically embodies "acts of process" (1986:11). Nevertheless it proves the point that process is a continual current in Dickinson's stream of consciousness.

When time is viewed as process through this mind, as it is by Dickinson, a sort of melioristic perspective unfolds, too: P#193 ("I shall know why – when Time is over –") lays out this perspective. It puts a

bright face on really the bleak course of time. In another letter Dickinson keeps close watch on "Old Father Time" who wears a gleeful face of self-satisfaction for his steady successes over his victims:

> You asked me in your last letter if Old Father Time wagged on in Amherst pretty much as ever. For my part I see no particular change in his movements unless it be that he goes on a swifter pace than formerly, and that he wields his sickle more stern than ever (L7).

The image is that of the Grim Reaper in the western mortuary iconography. Figuratively speaking, the human being is the harvest of time and time is the peasant who reaps (kills) his harvest. The metaphor is obviously a product of an agrarian environment that Amherst still was at the time of writing this letter. Time with "his sickle" is Dickinson's girlhood portrait of it as Jack the Ripper and the hatchet man of Providence in his most threatening form. When she says, ". . .a 'reaper whose name is Death' has come to get a few to help him make a bouquet for himself" (L185) she may be playing upon the word to achieve death's image as a persistent Jack the Ripper too. It suggests to the mind that his victims readily succumb to him before their time. This rather hackneyed, traditional representation of time cutting away life is usually used for sentimentalising premature deaths. Dickinson does not indulge in this image in any serious poem on time. Yet, time being death's manifestation, it serves to bring time and death into a recognisable closer relationship with each other.

Her negative attitude to time is not only traditional or conventional. It has a personal ring about it, too. When it is known that quite a few among her close circle fell to Death's sickle in their prime in less than a decade and she was then in her prime herself, it is not difficult to sympathise with her sharp sentiment against time. In her early teens she witnessed the death of Sophia Holland (aged 15). When well into deep

intellectual and perhaps emotional relationships with Benjamin Franklin Newton (aged 32) and Leonard Humphrey (aged 27) in her early twenties, she lost them both to death. They were all close to her heart. Besides these, among continual reports of deaths in her letters, a great many mourn early deaths, the most shocking of all being the death of her eight-year-old nephew Gilbert. Thus her standard complaint against time is that he cruelly cuts life short. Under the circumstances a mawkish description of time is perfectly in order. Moreover, one would do better justice to her by remembering the enormously popular trend, at this time, of sentimentalist biography (a branch of consolation literature) against the background of a steadily rising toll of premature deaths in Amherst.[6] The sickle might make too naive a rhetorical figure by the complex and rigorous standards of modern poetics. Yet it served her purpose any way in representing the stark reality of time's veritable presence in her Amherst and its implacable exaction on life in the same way as the dreadful figure with the scythe on a Massachusetts gravestone had tried to drive home the incontestable fact of death in life before her.[7] Julien says: "Chronos is an allegorical representation of death. He is seen carrying a scythe, a tool used for harvesting, both a symbol of death and of 'the new hope the harvest brings'" (1996:100). It confirms that the metaphor is a product of an imagination fed on an agrarian society.

Time wears and tears, and finally destroys everything in its process. All change for the worse in nature and life is wrought by time, and an ongoing process like some invisible providence runs its course steadily and irresistibly. But for time and this process, heaven could be a possibility on earth. Time is an accomplice of the mortal process of decay that ends in death, in the final destruction of Dickinson's earthly paradise, her "pretty

acre" (P#116). She needs God's heaven only because it lies beyond the cruel, destructive clutches of time and its attendant evils. But this is not to deny that it is a poor substitute for her "pretty acre" whose superiority over God's she blasphemously vindicates now and then. For instance, witness her pride in the following excerpt from a letter:

> If roses had not faded, and frosts had never, come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one below - and if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I have seen - I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous (L185).

Her numerous letters indicate that she found life exhilarating and adequate if only it would last, and that, for her, heaven was embodied in familiar surroundings, in nature, in love, and in one's inner power of thought.

Time-bound and degenerative, fading, freezing and falling are life's condition. The supernatural *eschaton* would mean the end of time and the termination of all this process which continually invades the blissful state of earthly "Eden." Despite her sad cognisance of time as a process Dickinson vainly tries to comfort the disconsolate souls in agony with the consolation of the religious promise and her own pun on the sun:

> Time does go on -
> I tell it gay to those who suffer now -
> They shall survive -
> *There is a sun* -
> They don't believe it now -
> (P#1121)

Dickinson uses motor imagery in metaphorising the passage of time as process: wheel carriages create visual representation of time in progress. Traditionally the symbol of cyclic time and physical space, the sun is the "Wheeling King" (P#232) that softly, imperceptibly glides away with his plunder (P#11). It perfectly fits into her poetic mould as she believes that

"Advance is Life's condition" (P#1652). The main focus of the following lines in an early letter (L8) is time as a process that declines from a youthful summer to a dry, gaunt, sickly, yellow autumn:

> Since I wrote you last, the summer is *past* and *gone*, and autumn with the sere and yellow leaf is already upon us. I never knew the time to *pass* so swiftly, it seems to me, as the *past* summer. I really think some one must have oiled his chariot wheels, for I don't recollect of hearing him *pass*, and I am sure I should if something had not prevented his chariot wheels from creaking as usual (Emphasis added - L8).

Time is a charioted gentleman riding away in his well-oiled carriage at an imperceptibly swift pace. The sense of fleeting time is reinforced by the repeated and insistent use of the verb "pass" and its varied form, and its effect on nature is the tell-tale "sere and yellow leaf." The withered looks of autumn suggests depletion and decadence rather than riches and affluence to her. Summer with its vigour and vivacity is a contrast to autumn which is not at all mellow and fruitful for her as it is for Keats. Autumn receives a typical New England treatment in Dickinson's hands. Buell notes that autumn in New England was a time "of sharp visual and moral contrasts" rather than merely "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" (1986:290).

Dickinson followed time's chariot through three more years and wrote to her brother Austin :

> To you, all busy & excited, I suppose the time flies faster, but to me slowly, very slowly so that I can see his chariot wheels when they roll along & himself is often visible (L22).

Like Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* she knows that the perception of time is circumstantial and that time ". . . travels in divers paces with divers persons" (III.ii.291). This consciousness of the passage of time is acute in both her poetry and letters. Slow and the most painful time is felt by the most distressed, and in conveying the lingering time in

this case she uses another martial image like the chariot, namely chargers, the horses used in ancient warfare:

Time's wily Chargers will not wait
At any Gate but Woe's -
But there - so gloat to hesitate
They will not stir for blows -
(P# 1458)

Again she perceives the passage of time in terms of mental states, sometimes as liquefaction and sometimes as deadweight and drag:

Too happy Time dissolves itself
And leaves no remnant by -
'Tis Anguish not a Feather hath
Or too much weight to fly -
(P#1774)

Clearly her subjective consciousness affects her perception of time, and perceptual variations create temporal illusions.

As an aside it is noteworthy that the image of time riding a chariot is reminiscent of Andrew Marvell's "Time's winged chariot hurrying near" in *To His Coy Mistress*. Like Marvell Dickinson makes haste, too, "lest Competing Death / Prevails upon the Coach -" (P#1297). Both the poets associate flying time with this carriage which was used in ancient warfare. Thus the chariot might not imply mere pleasure rides. It might remotely suggest death and destruction which both Marvell and Dickinson associate with time. But while it moves with ferocious speed and grandeur in Marvell, it comes and goes on the stealth in Dickinson, and its passage can be told only by the trail of change and destruction behind it. Often the perception of transience is a source of elegiac moods in Dickinson's poems and letters, and the chariot concretises the invisible flight of time. She repeats this motor symbol also in L22.

Dickinson realised quite early and remained convinced that mortal life is frantically distracted by the illusions of time. Anderson opines that the immutable and eternal casts its false shadows on the time-trapped senses (1960:134). But when the human condition is looked upon as a fallen state in Christianity, it is the sinful and corrupt human perception conditioned by temporality that is at fault. When the immutable and eternal are filtered by the senses through time, they suffer distortion and lose their substantiality by being transformed into shadows. It is thus that time creates illusions by manipulating the appearance of reality and creating false, fleeting impressions of the immutable. Its "temporary and distorting" nature constitutes one of Dickinson's chief reasons for getting rid of time (Robinson, 1986:23). In the shifting, flickering shadows of time truth, the white radiance of eternity and the vision of the ultimate all become wavy, delusive and deceptive. That illusion is generated by process in complicity with the imperfect mortal senses is demonstrated, for Dickinson, in the varied and protean appearances of the sun, the transcendent point (the Copernican constant) from which time is measured but which is itself paradoxically free from time:

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple
Leaping like Leopards to the Sky
Then at the feet of the old Horizon
Laying its spotted Face to die
Stooping as low as the Otter's Window
Touching the Roof and tinting the Barn
Kissing its Bonnet to the Meadow
And the Juggler of Day is gone
(P#228)

Time is an illusion and the sun is the conjurer that creates it. To the mortal eye the sun is born every morning and dies at the end of day. The ball of

fire blazes across the sky and quenches in the night. From beginning to end the imagery changes gallopingly, allowing no time to ponder. The refracted sunlight shades off into a wide range of colours from red-gold dawn through purple sunset. The spectacular dynamics of ethereal colours flashes in quick succession. Immediately after this chromatic magic, the sun shapes up into a leopard with "its spotted Face to die." The ferocity of the sunrise in one line is counterbalanced by the pathetic sunset scene of the resigned face in the next. After the brief Keatsean interlude of pathos before the finale in the next two lines, the consummate illusionist of all this legerdemain briefly appears and quickly disappears, "Kissing its Bonnet to the Meadow."

In P#232 the sun, the "wheeling King," creates the illusion of grandeur, permanence and eternal spring: it raises false hopes in the morning. The morning is taken in by the sun's outward appearances of everlastingness. Unaware of its own ephemerality, it becomes euphoric, and waxes self-complacent and proud:

> She felt herself *supremer* -
> A *Raised - Ethereal Thing*!
> Henceforth - for Her - *What Holiday*!

But the morning's princely dazzle and gaudiness are a borrowed thing which disappears with the sun's subtle progress out of sight, leaving the morning behind in abject poverty, despair and frustration, "Her unanointed forehead" without a diadem:

> Meanwhile - Her wheeling King -
> Trailed - slow - along the Orchards -
> His *haughty - spangled* Hems -
> Leaving a *new necessity* !
> The *want of Diadems* !
>
> The Morning - *fluttered - staggered* -
> *Felt feebly* - for Her *Crown* -

Her *unanointed forehead* -
Henceforth - Her *only* One !

Time and immortality stand in sharp contrast in the eschatological mind. An early letter records Dickinson's Puritan sentiment about the ephemeral gains of time *vis-à-vis* the permanent reward of immortality. It is for this same reason that she rejects not only the scheme of time on principle but also its products presumably distorted by deceitful time: she forgoes "The Bullion of Today -" in favour of "the Currency / Of Immortality," the "Slow Gold - but Everlasting" (P#406). Earthly power and clever social distinctions are the doing of time: "Color – Caste – Denomination – / These – are Time's Affair – " (P#970). When she heard that her friend Abiah Root had consented to give herself up entirely to her religion, Dickinson wrote:

> Perhaps you have exchanged the fleeting pleasures of time for a crown of immortality. Perhaps the shining company above have tuned their golden harps to the song of one more redeemed sinner (L10).

Much later in life she returns to this characteristically Puritan theme once again:

> How much the present moment means
> To those who've nothing more –
> The Fop – the Carp – the Atheist –
> Stake an entire store
> Upon a Moment's shallow Rim
> While their commuted Feet
> The Torrents of Eternity
> Do all but inundate –
>
> (P# 1380)

This is in accord with the fundamental arguments of eschatology against time. The perceived reality of life and nature under the influence of time is in fact "aspects of nature as process, nature going down to the 'death' of eternity" (Anderson, 1960:135). Those changing aspects are mistaken for objects by the limited mortal view. In the temporal condition time and

space are opposed to each other resulting in their consequent division and fragmentation, as Dickinson says, ". . . time, and space, as usual, oppose themselves. . ." (L31). Eternity as ceaseless death frightens her (L10).

Within the frame of reference of Judeo-Christian apocalyptic eschatology time has the unique pattern of a linear and irreversible process (May,1972:12). Process is hierarchical and quantifiable. St. Augustine says that measurable time (that is, earthly time or "profane time") is a temporal process while by contrast eternal time (that is, sacred time) is not (1961:269). It does not, however, assume an absence of time. It only means the presence of all time instantaneously without sequence or hierarchy. The objective experience of eternity is the privilege of the omniscient and omnipresent. On the human level however, it can be subjectively experienced by forcing the mind to a standstill. Incidentally this experience is frequent in Dickinson, varying its significations from temporal to eternal.[8] As long as the mind remains in a state of perfect repose and tranquillity, the condition of eternity prevails.

Rather than wish or wait for *post-mortem* eternity as a supernatural handout Dickinson would like to achieve it in this world; and when she does so, it is synonymous with immortality. Hockersmith says, ". . . she does manage to conceive of a form of transcendence within the limitations of a transient, mortal existence" (1989:288). If the promise of *post-mortem* immortality in eternity becomes a shady affair, or uncertain, the only choice left to the creative mind is to get provided for even in mortal life against the shuffling off of the mortal coil and the fear of "This Mortal abolition" (P#306). Like Shakespeare, she seeks immortality through art, as her poem "Of Bronze - and Blaze -" (P#290) bears out.

A good many critics have already noticed a mentalistic notion of eternity in Dickinson's poetry. Robert Weisbuch designates this eternity in life "temporal eternity" or "experiential eternity": "Dickinson's idea of experiential eternity leaps over the grave, negates Judgement, and insists that the mind's circumference *is* the ultimate circumference" (1975:129). Sharon Cameron calls it "immortality" which is "purified of all but created soul" and describes Dickinson's "belief that immortality not only will replace an inadequate temporal scheme in the future that is promised by a traditional Christianity . . . but also that it does replace temporality in the present, as the body is transcended in the phenomena of loss and immortality alike" (1979:4, 5). Albert Gelpi implicitly takes eternity to be synonymous with heaven in Dickinson and succinctly characterises it as a psychological state stretched to "the furthest dimension of selfhood" (1975:265). Suzanne Juhasz calls this rarefied state of the mind "abstract" and "the embodiment of thought at its most conceptual" (1983:135). All these critics have this in common that they interpret Dickinson's notion of eternity figuratively whereby the inadequacies of temporality, such as process that operates on principles of category, hierarchy, succession and the like, are removed from experience. Dickinson characterises temporal reality as fragmentary in L656. When eternity is thus brought about in the present, experience stands revealed in its entirety and the *Eschaton* realised at the most individual and private level. Most importantly, the mentalistic interpretation of eternity comes close to defining one of Dickinson's chief pursuits – namely, salvaging all she prizes in life from the abysmal chaos of the temporal process and preserving them in a timeless and thus changeless state. Actually what Sharon Cameron calls "lyric time"[9] is time of the mind free from temporal flux or spatiality and, broadly speaking, it

is of the same quality as sacred time in eschatological terms. She discerns an underlying sense of time in Dickinson's poems which tends to overcome the temporal present and points to an order of things that resembles the fulfilled future of the Christian Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation :

> There is frequently in the poems a time not present that haunts the present as it haunts the speakers' minds, confusing its dominance in memory or dream with a prediction about the future, mistaking itself for prophecy. The present, then, the "time" of Dickinson's poems, is overwhelmed by the promise of another, more satisfactory, order that will destroy time altogether, replace it by 'Slow Gold - but Everlasting -' (P#406) and this belief in that impossible future is strengthened in direct proportion to how deeply a given speaker is mired in the characteristic deprivations of experience. For many of Dickinson's speakers the world is a landslide of lost things, and their imagining if a future, rectifying providence lurks beneath the surface of the speech, as tenacious a conception as it is a wordless one. Silence serves illusion in such instances, for the dream that revenges itself on an inadequate reality by giving to itself what it will never be given conceals the consolation it knows is not true (1979:2).

Experiences are defined by their *telos* and the present by a projected future rather than a retrojected past. The present embodies all our loses. It is middle time whose chief function is to sharpen our sense of a missing something that is to be restored by death alone. As Frank Kermode writes of supernatural fictions in general, "We project ourselves . . . past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (1967:8). Dickinson's projected future is this attempt to see and live the whole proleptically.

In modern philosophy process is not conceivable as otherwise than continuity, and time as other than duration, which means that there are no durationless moments, and "instant moments" are fictional.[10] Perception registers the world as a durational flow of events rather than as discrete, unchanging, or permanent substances (Rosenthal, 1996). In Dickinson's poems, too, the world is not understood as an aggregate of separate entities

but seen as a process which dodges all attempts to seize it (Hagenbüchle, 1974:34). Time as flux with man being helplessly borne down its course towards an uncertain but predestined goal is cast in the emblem of a river and a boatman without an oar in the following poem[11]:

Down Time's quaint stream
Without an oar
We are enforced to sail
Our Port a secret
Our Perchance a Gale
What Skipper would
Incur the Risk
What Buccaneer would ride
Without a surety from the Wind
Or schedule of the Tide -
(P#1656)

The image of time as a stream or river with a mighty, dreadful current is quite old and traditional (as "quaint" would well indicate Dickinson's awareness of it). It is a blind, fatalistic journey without a choice on the part of the boatman. He is set adrift blindfold, and down goes he to meet with his fate. Symbolically, the stream is the process in which man is compelled ("enforced") to participate without any means of either self-control or self-defense ("Without an Oar"); he must submit to the vagaries of time and accept whatever might be in store for him. ("Our Port a secret"). It is this blindfold advance that sums up "Life's condition" (P#1652) - man's state - for Dickinson. In this journey the future remains absolutely in the dark and it will never clear up until the end of time.

In this flow of time the objective world does not impact on her with its sharp contours: the contours fade out and only impressions of objects impinge on her conscious mind. Dickinson's poetics is a set of synaesthetic strategies to capture this complex of evanescent impressions that the object world leaves on her perception. As evanescence is embodied in the fleeting

present Dickinson strives to capture this moment (the "Nows") with the best of her imaginative effort. Her early letters bristle with grumblings against time. She seems to concentrate more and more, in her later ones, on "the fleeting pleasures of time" (scorned in L10) and her imagination captures the fleeting present as a butterfly (L979), an insect that symbolises, for her, fragile spangled beauty (P#1627) and life in process or transience (P#s. 129; 354), a delicate creature (P#1387) of thwarted immortality (P#1685). Hence the fleeting present is of utmost value to Dickinson. As the butterfly vanishes without leaving a clue (P#s. 354; 533), so does the fleeting moment. The rescue of this evanescent present (figuratively the butterfly-moment) is a supreme challenge to Dickinson's poetic power The temporal flux is made up of the fleeting moments, each of which is complete in itself and is called by Dickinson "God's full time" (P#295). As it is potential and revelatory of the supernatural in character, Hagenbüchle regards this crucial moment as the pivot of Dickinson's poetics:

> The . . . concentration on the "critical" moment [the present moment] is a crucial element in Emily Dickinson's poetry. . . . It finds expression, first ironically, in the epigrammatic shortness of her poems, second thematically, in the numerous descriptions of unstable phenomena in nature such as the rising and setting of the sun or its precarious poise at the meridian hour of noon, the changing of the seasons at the solstices and certain fleeting effects of light in general (1974:38-39).

Like the Transcendentalists Dickinson stakes everything on the present fleeting moment, for it is at this moment that the self is totally conscious and cosmic (Lynen, 1969:3-4). The present is the sum and substance of all reality to the Transcendentalists. For them it contains all things because it contains all time. It is identical with the Augustinian eternal present. If revelation means the exposure of the hidden content in totality, then decoding the present moment is fateful. Since revelation is the

communication of the divine it must be total *at once*, and *not* sequential and partial in unfolding itself: "It must be that when God speaketh he should communicate, not one thing, but all things; should scatter forth light, nature, time, souls from the centre of the present hour" (Emerson, 1903:65-66). Thematically the present is a critical juncture because eternity is embedded in perpetual "nows."

In eschatological discourse the value of the temporal process can hardly be overemphasized, though it is beset with a contradiction: that is, however unstable and imperfect it may be, it mobilises all worldly life and earthly activities towards the desired and long-awaited goal, the Apocalypse, which is simultaneously the acme and the end of historical - in other words - profane time, according to Christian eschatology. That is, although apparently negative, it carries within it a silver lining of hope. Both the presence of time and its working towards the climax of total elimination of its fluxional elements are therefore necessary before the Apocalypse can duly occur. It is important to note that in Dickinson all problems regarding the "ultimate truths" – the afterlife, the *post-mortem* state of the soul, heaven and hell and so on and so forth – are principally resolved with reference to the issue of time. Time and change are two recurrent themes occurring together or separately in her poems and letters. However painful, they are necessary agents for enhancing the exit from what she calls "wicked" (L30) and "this world of death"(L195). For Emily Dickinson, change indicates the presence of process that terminates only in death. As long as mortality is a condition of worldly life, process associates with it as its inevitable concomitant which is completed in its termination by death. Emily Dickinson is often found to be deriding change, because it brings one nearer and nearer to the end, though it exists

as a prime necessity. Death exists because there is change. If there were no change death would be otiose. In a sense Dickinson's idea of heaven is an idea of freedom from spatial and temporal change: ". . . no fading leaves, no dying friends, and I heard a voice saying there shall be no more tears, neither any crying . . ." (L62).[12] Change and death complement each other by both their presence and absence.

The question about the extension of consciousness beyond death evidently disturbed Emily Dickinson. Even probably sometimes her query would overstep all propriety. Her mother took umbrage when one night she heard Austin and Emily discussing the post-mortem status of consciousness: "Austin and I were talking the other Night about the Extension of Consciousness, after Death and Mother told Vinnie, afterward, she thought it was 'very improper'" (L650). Conventional Christianity posits eternal consciousness, which is to hold that consciousness abides after death in a timeless and changeless state. As Dickinson experienced consciousness, she found it not only subjective in nature but also that subjective consciousness is steeped in time and must always be aware of something. She finds the Christian concept of immortality and the subjective nature of time (as she experienced it herself in life) rather incompatible, for consciousness itself is inseparable from the presence of time, and the riddance of temporality is possible only when consciousness itself is wiped out. She believes that consciousness is subjective in nature which dies hard upon the death of the person. It always measures the duration of its own existence in time. So when her religion speaks of the continuity of consciousness into a timeless and changeless state after death, she doubts such a possibility, and as long as this

consciousness of time remains alive, life's imperfections, from which she longs so much to escape, can hardly be got over with. The only complete reprieve from time and the imperfection of life would be through the annihilation of subjective consciousness itself. This consciousness being time-bound, its existence, for Dickinson, in any form whatsoever, mortal or immortal, is unable to transcend time. Thus the idea of eternal consciousness ensconced in the numerous *vita nuova* promises of Christianity rings hollow to her. Poem #463 demonstrates that the consciousness of time stays even in death:

I live with Him - I see His face -
I go no more away
For Visitor - or Sundown -
Death's single privacy

The Only One - forestalling Mine -
And that - by Right that He -
Present a Claim invisible -
No wedlock - granted Me -

I live with Him - I hear His Voice -
I stand alive - Today -
To witness to the Certainty
Of Immortality -

Taught Me - by Time - the lower Way -
Conviction - Every day -
That Life like This - is stopless -
Be Judgment - what it may -

It is life-in-death and therefore the more miserable. Once she said: "A breathless Death is not so cold as a Death that breathes" (note to L553). The third-person pronouns – "He," "Him," "His" - refer to Death rather than God. Although the speaker declares that she "stand[s] alive" in the curious company of Death – apparently outside the orbit of time – she is still aware of "Sundown," "Today" and "Every day" occurring outside the domain of death where she is trapped, isolated, and motionless, perceiving

only herself and Death. She can see the temporal phenomena such as "Visitor," "Sundown" and the like from her detention. But she cannot take part in them. Death is her total engagement, but he maintains a cold distance from the speaker. At the same time from the fastness of his "single privacy" he keeps making "a Claim invisible" upon her without granting her the lawful "wedlock." It means that death keeps possession of her at a distance without formalising the connection. The ceremonial recognition of the relationship would mean a perfect union with death, and thereby the end of the prevailing limbo of life-in-death. The clandestine nature of this bond ("a Claim invisible") reflects both the irreconcilable gulf between death and the speaker, and the illicit and adulterous status of this relationship.[13] As long as this otherness of death as an object remains before the speaker, her consciousness of the other persists, and so does that of time as a concomitant. Sharon Cameron explains this chief impulse of union with the object behind dying in Dickinson's poems, whereby the dissolution of the demarcation between self and object results:

> ... while the most profound estrangement is that precipitated by death, in Dickinson's poems death is not loss for the dying person but is rather reunion. So, at least , is the poems' premise: life must be sacrificed, selfhood go by the way, all defining characteristics dismissed, but the recompense for these exactions is the end of the solitary self, the loss of the boundary between self and object, not because they are dead to each other but rather because they are fused with each other. . . . The union of subject and object requires death because it requires the cessation of time, just as it requires the collapse or transformation of spatial distinction. For the death world is purely symbolic one in which the body is exchanged for meaning; or, to put it differently, it is a world in which meaning is not hindered by limitations of any sort, and relatedness not defined by, or as a consequence of, identic separation. If only the end could not be, or could be survived beyond, there might yet be hope for the abolition of the more intractable boundary, tho one that separates selves (1979:136-37).

If death is to be freedom from temporal conditions it has to be first and foremost freedom from time through annihilation of consciousness.

Although the poem might look an assertion of the traditional Christian idea of death as a passage to a timeless eternity, a close scrutiny of the poem reveals death as "a state of monotonous isolation of consciousness in time" (Hockersmith,1989:279). Traditionally, immortality means freedom from time and union with the ultimate. Death does not unveil "the Certainty/ Of Immortality" to her in the poem, and will not until she is wiped clean of all time-tainted consciousness. What time has taught her "the lower Way" is "Conviction - Every day - / That Life like This [like death] - is stopless -/ Be Judgment what it may -." She finds her present state of death, or rather life-in-death, to be like life because it has brought into it the misery of temporal consciousness. There is a suggestion in the poem that the speaker leads a life of temporal nature even in death which becomes all the more miserable for the suffocating and claustral state of her totalised consciousness. In life death is the hope of freedom from time-bound consciousness. But while she waits for "the Certainty of Immortality" to emerge from death, her new perception of death as object discovers consciousness as imperishable. Ironically an awareness of the immortality of consciousness emerges instead of the immortality of the soul. Given this new perception she cannot but recognise here as elsewhere: "Of consciousness, her awful Mate / The Soul cannot be rid -" (P#894). "Death's single privacy" totalises her attention. This privacy is not only rigidly maintained within death's own confines; it usurps the speaker's, too: "The Only one - forestalling Mine," says she. The usurpation is complete in blocking God and immortality out of her line of vision. Immortal consciousness entails an ineluctable awareness of time,

even after death. On top of it, what she perceives, to her great woe, with death as object, is that this consciousness is immortal ("stopless"). This is the ironic certainty of immortality unfolded to her. Her subjective awareness of Death in death provides the certainty of an isolated immortal consciousness, and her recognition of this bleak prospect motivates the implicit lament in the poem. As the final line suggests, she realises that the Christian promise of "Judgment" is simply fatuous, for it cannot occur as long as time-bound subjective consciousness remains alive. Last Judgement will come to pass only for those who are totally dead by being wiped of all consciousness, and not for those such as this speaker whose consciousness keeps them alive in death and both self-conscious and conscious of the other and of the passage of time. In this poem her subjective consciousness has in view two clear objects - itself and death - and another implicit one, namely, the "Certainty of Immortality." In "Because I could not stop for Death" the present *post-mortem* consciousness remembers the last ride to the mortal limit as the other , and is aware of the duration of its own existence since then.

Both these poems in the characteristic Dickinsonian manner portray speakers who relate their experience of death from beyond the grave. But neither can achieve a transcendence of time, though the traditional notion of death presupposes a transcendental timelessness. Nor is in either poem death transcended by dying, as in both she perceives it as object, the other. As in P#463, the speaker perceives "Death" and "Immortality" as discrete entities in P# 712 too : "The Carriage held but just Ourselves - / And Immortality."

Instead of death being oblivion, it upgrades consciousness to an immortal state, "Costumeless Consciousness," as Dickinson calls it elsewhere (P#1454), which is experienced as a ceaseless passage of time. The journey takes place in time and space, and the movement of the carriage registers reality as flux:

> We passed the School, where Children strove
> At Recess - in the Ring -
> We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain -
> We passed the Setting Sun -

As the carriage progresses physical reality zooms past and falls away into the receding distance. Noticeably the perception of the speaker gets confused beyond the point of "the Setting Sun," admittedly the limit of all physical reality and cyclic time: "Or rather - He [the Sun] passed Us -" . The sun and the carriage now swap their status: the sun is moving and the carriage is standing still. The sun loses its primacy of the physical dimension in the Copernican sense, and is relegated to the condition of relativity on the metaphysical level ; that is, metonymically speaking, cyclic time loses its predominance to the carriage headed "toward Eternity," the indication of a linear movement. The journey still continues beyond the grave - the "House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground" - but the carriage travels now in the dimensions of metaphysical reality. If this represents the Christian belief in the soul's flight from both physical reality and cyclic time after death, the change of dimension from the corporeal to the non-corporeal does not, however, exempt her altogether from the consciousness of time. It frees her from corporeal limitations and cyclic time but keeps her alive and even bound to, as Hockersmith calls, "a linear form of time" (1989:280). Her consciousness-in-the-flesh experienced cyclical time before death; but now death has invested her with an

imperishable and disembodied consciousness which is still conscious of its own duration in time. From the point of her retrospective narrative of the experience of death, she has long since been aware of the passage of "Centuries." Since then, time has changed its unit for her, too, but has not been extinct: "Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet / Feels shorter than the Day." This changed unit also suggests that the speaker now belongs to a cosmic reality, whose single day can well contain countless sublunary centuries in it. Thus, even if death clears the dead speaker physically of all worldly time characterised by natural cycles, it does not, in any way, wipe her entirely clean of a perpetual consciousness of its own longevity in time. Often the distinction between time and eternity is made from erroneous conceptions of time as a categorised dimension and eternity as liberated from such time. But, as P. D. Ouspensky contends, eternity might mean another dimension of time (as we know it) which could throw light on Dickinson's idea of eternity:

> Time in the sense of before, now, after, is the product of our life, of our being, of our perception and, above all, of our thinking. Outside this life, outside the usual perception, the interrelation of the three phases of time can change; in any case we have no guarantee that it will remain the same. And yet, in ordinary thought, including religious, theosophical and "occult" thought, this question is never even raised. "Time" is regarded as something which is not subject to discussion, as something which belongs to us once and for all and cannot be taken away from us, and which is always the same. Whatever may happen to us, "time" will always belong to us, and not only "time", but even "eternity".
>
> We use this word without understanding its true meaning. We take "eternity" to be an infinite extension of time, while really "eternity" means another dimension of time (1984:466).

Post-mortem consciousness is an undying and time-tainted consciousness in the state of life-in-death that is aware of its immortality through an endless passage of time. Cyclic time leads to death but linear time is bound for eternity. Being impeded by time, the journey "toward

Eternity" is hardly likely to be ever accomplished.[14] Meanwhile it is noteworthy that linear time is conducive to the apocalyptic eschatology of Christianity.

In fact traditional Christianity tacitly assumes the continuity of consciousness in its present form (*sans* its temporality) into the afterlife when it posits eternal consciousness; that is, it assumes that consciousness persists beyond the grave in a timeless and changeless state. But , as is evident from the above discussion, eternal consciousness actually exists in time and obstructs the soul's freedom from the imperfection of life. The poem "No Rack can torture me" (P# 384) throws into relief the fine irony attached to the popular concept of the soul's liberty upon death.

No Rack can torture me -
My Soul - at Liberty -
Behind this mortal Bone
There knits a bolder One -

You cannot prick with saw -
Nor pierce with Scimitar -
Two Bodies - therefore be -
Bind One - The Other fly -

The Eagle of his Nest
No easier divest -
And gain the Sky
Than mayest Thou -

Except Thyself may be
Thine Enemy -
Captivity is Consciousness -
So's Liberty.

Besides focusing the body-soul dichotomy of conventional Christianity, the poem unfolds a slow reversal from the soul's self-satisfaction to the shocking realisation that the soul's liberty after release from the body would be little better than its present condition, if obtained in the state of *immortal* temporal consciousness. The irony about the soul's

liberty seems to be at work right from the first stanza when the speaker cannot see that what she capitally calls "Liberty" about the soul's present fortified state "Behind this mortal Bone" is but a form of incarceration. Safety is captivity. The speaker is equally conscious of captivity and liberty, and therefore being the object of consciousness, liberty is no less hostage to consciousness than captivity. Thus the release from the flesh is no guarantee of liberty as long as consciousness lives on. Consciousness exists in time, and time cannot be got rid of until and unless consciousness is completely annihilated. The self is consciousness ("Thine Enemy") that keeps up the awareness of the self-other dichotomy. In this condition the consciousness of liberty makes liberty itself a captive of consciousness. Towards the end of the poem it transpires that the soul is farther into misery than in its corporeal state of the "mortal Bone" in the *post-mortem* condition of immortal consciousness. Hence even if the "Eagle" soul "gain[s] the Sky" after death, its true freedom remains far from realised and the promise of the eternal life of perfection is falsified by the presence of eternal time in eternal consciousness. In P# 642 the self of the speaker is her tormentor and, try hard as she may, she cannot yet shake it off and get "peace" from its continual assault. (It is to be borne in mind that captivity by the enemy temporarily acting as a divine agent of retribution is part of the eschatological phenomena before Last Judgement finally takes place in the Judeo-Christian eschatological tradition (Hastings, 1967:377).[15] The incarceration of the soul in the flesh by "Thine Enemy" in Dickinson's poem is paradigmatic of the divine persecution and punishment of the sinners at the hands of their own enemies before their freedom in the Bible. The speaker's time-bound consciousness plays the role of the divine retributive agency in this case before the eschaton of the soul comes about

upon its release from the prison of "this mortal Bone." Dickinson deals with the theme of captivity in three other poems: P#s 652, 1166 and 1601, of which the last one portrays captivity as a divine punishment for some incomprehensible reason: "The Crime, from us, is hidden - / Immured the whole of Life / Within a magic Prison.")

Dickinson deems the capture of the soul by immortal temporal consciousness far worse than the agony of mortal life. Quite often this consciousness is portrayed as a state of tyrannical isolation. The soul is circumscribed by consciousness in "This Consciousness that is aware" (P#822), and consciousness is aware of itself and death:

> Adventure most unto itself
> The Soul condemned to be -
> Attended by a single Hound
> Its own identity.
> (P#822)

The image of the pursuing "Hound" implies continuous action in time and it is the speaker's own consciousness that "hounds" and "assaults" her.[16] She suggests "subjugating Consciousness" as the only way of getting rid of the oppressive self in P# 642: here, too, consciousness is depicted as inexorable:

> But since Myself - assault Me -
> How have I peace
> Except by subjugating
> Consciousness ?

In both poems the speaker is tormented by her continual awareness of her painful existence in time. Hell and guilt, as buzzwords, are not so frequently to be met with in Dickinson's poetry as they are expected in Puritan literature. Considering the environment in which clerical rhetoric would swing chiefly between heaven and hell, one or two occurrences of the word might be deemed rather too scanty.[17] But, as will be seen, a deep-

lying consciousness of guilt and a grave fear of damnation still persist in her, and she may be said to have compensated the lack of frequent reference to hell and sin, among others, by an idea of the immortality of temporal consciousness. It is her hell-substitute.

In both poems mentioned above the idea of an eternally restless isolation in time is pre-eminent. Sometimes she images this state of utter despair as a shoreless perilous sea evocative of primordial chaos:

> But, most , like Chaos - Stopless - cool -
> Without a Chance, or Spar -
> Or even a Report of Land -
> To justify - Despair.
> (P# 510)

But in myths of the eternal return and religions with the promise of resurrection and rebirth despair can hardly remain justified for too long. The prospect of the new life dispels it (Eliade, 1967: *passim*). There is a similar silver lining to chaos in this poem too. She wrote: "Emerging from an Abyss, and reentering it - that is Life, is it not, Dear?"[18] (L1024). Chaos or abyss is the beginning and end of life. She implies that time carries his victims into the unspeakable darkness of abyss: "To attempt to speak of what has been, would be impossible. Abyss has no Biographer – Had it, it would not be Abyss . . . Time makes such hallowed strides . . ." (L899). Besides, the image of the sea serves to convey her idea of life caught in the toils of time as an unstable and perilous state.

However, for Dickinson, immortal consciousness is not the only possible concept of death. Some of her poems portray death as it ideally should be, that is to say, ablation of consciousness resulting in complete oblivion. In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (P#280) and "I heard a fly buzz" (P#465) the dead become totally oblivious. Death is the end of rational

knowledge after an apocalyptic crash of reason ("As all the Heavens were a Bell") and a headlong drop of consciousness into nothingness:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

In the other poem the speaker passes out with ". . . the Windows failed - and then / I could not see to see -" The total blackout sets in and engulfs not only the speaker's vision but also her consciousness of time and space as in "We pray - to Heaven -" (P#489) it is affirmed of the true dead that "Location's narrow way is for Ourselves - / Unto the Dead / There's no Geography -".

Perhaps the poem "What care the Dead, for Chanticleer -" (P#592) best illustrates death as total oblivion:

What care the Dead, for Chanticleer -
What care the Dead for Day?
'Tis late your Sunrise vex their face -
And Purple Ribaldry - of Morning

Pour as blank on them
As on the Tier of Wall
The Mason builded, yesterday,
And equally as cool -

What care the Dead for Summers?
The Solstice had no Sun
Could waste the Snow before their Gate -
And knew One Bird a Tune -

Could thrill their Mortised Ear
Of all the Birds that be -
This One - beloved of Mankind
Henceforward cherished be -

What care the Dead for Winter?
Themselves as easy freeze -
June Noon - as January Night -
As soon the South - her Breeze

Of Sycamore - or Cinnamon -

Deposit in a Stone
And put a Stone to keep it Warm -
Give Spices - unto Men -

Dickinson here equates the absence of cyclic time with the total absence of consciousness. The poem alternately depicts the dead as lacking awareness of sensation and of time. It implicitly connects the awareness of time with perception and hence consciousness itself. Like "the meek members of the Resurrection" of P#216 ("Safe in their Alabaster Chambers -") these dead are "Untouched" by the seasonal cycles which pass "over them." Besides the third-person narrator in both these poems de-sentimentalises what in the other two poems of first-person narration generates pathos and personal relationship with their listeners. This narrative technique renders these last two poems (P#s. 216 and 592) more complete as poems of oblivion in death. "What care the Dead, for Chanticleer" depicts the dead as totally oblivious. Although the poem arouses a sense of desperation at the prospect of death as oblivion, its speaker's rhetorical posture fills it with derisive cynicism that refutes all arguments not only for the dead being any longer sentient but also for any possibility of their future resurrection. The mocking, disdainful tone of the poem is apparently directed towards the Christian proponents of the New Life attained through death.

It might be true that the dead become free from cyclical time after death; but it is as true that they become petrified and as cool as "the Tier of Wall" upon death. The breeze of the "South" – apparently a symbol of regeneration – could as easily enter stones as it could blow its blessings on living mankind ("Give Spices - unto Men -"). But this gift of resurrection is idle in mortal life and useless to living humanity. It fails them when they really need it, namely, after death, for when they themselves permanently "freeze" in death, they can only be ironically trusted to "keep warm" the

forces of rebirth. They can fondly cherish the promise of resurrection as long as they live in the scheme of time. But when they go out of it the biblical promise stands null and void, too. The absence of time and consciousness invalidates resurrection. Thus Emily Dickinson tacitly connects the blessings of resurrection and rebirth with the conditions of cyclical time and consciousness, and suggests that the extension hereafter of this consciousness *sans* time is fraudulent. In so far as eternal life gives meaning to death eternity is a positive *post-mortem* phenomenon in religion. But it is not always so with Dickinson. Often she apprehends that life in eternity will be endless misery. The "mightiest Belief" in "the Chance of Life" (P#1323) after death terrifies her, for that life holds out to her the prospect of nothing better than what Inder Nath Kher calls "an abysmal face which the ordinary human mind cannot fathom or even be casually conscious of, without losing sanity" (1974:9).

She is gripped by an awful agoraphobia. Eternity menaces her like a shoreless ocean with its swirling watery swipes: "I cannot tell how Eternity seems. It sweeps around me like a sea" (L785). A poem of her early twenties asks the "Pilot" of the endangered boat with all the urgency of a passenger in peril:

> "Ho! Pilot, ho!
> Knowest thou the shore
> Where no breakers roar –
> Where the storm is o'er?
> (P#4)

At last, though, she is landed on the peaceful shore of eternity. Her dread of eternity as conscious existence in endless time is recorded in an earlier letter:

> Does not eternity appear dreadful to you. I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity. To think

> that we must forever live and never cease to be. It seems as if Death which all so dread because it launches us upon an unknown world would be a relief to so endless a state of existense [sic] (L10).

Life in eternity would be for her to encounter the "yawning Consciousness," "That awful stranger Consciousness," which she is loath to "Deliberately face" (P#1323).

Her aversion to eternity is mostly due to the fear that it will carry on the consciousness of mortal life *ad nauseam*, for when Christianity promises eternal life after death it implies preservation of mortal perception in the hereafter. And then this consciousness will be immortal and endlessly painful. She does not care if eternity is stasis or flux. She feels pleased and immensely relieved to be certain that whatever it is, eternity will be controlled by the "Fundamental Laws" after all:

> Eternity will be
> Velocity or Pause
> At Fundamental Signals
> From Fundamental Laws.
> (P#1295)

The death she wishes for in the letter means total oblivion, and certainly not for the kind in which consciousness is alive.

Eternity, though free from time, is however understood in terms of earthly time, for the perception of it is steeped in time. It is different from earthly time in being staid in one single state of existence *ad infinitum*, and this state is the endless "now" devoid of the temporal categories (i.e. past, present and future):

> Forever - is composed of Nows -
> 'Tis not a different time -
> Except for Infiniteness -
> And Latitude of Home -
>
> From this - experienced Here -
> Remove the Dates - to These -
> Let Months dissolve in further Months -
> And Years - exhale in Years -

Without Debate - or Pause -
Or Celebrated Days -
No different Our Years would be
From Anno Domini's -
(P# 624)

The collapse of temporal categories, if not the dissolution of time, leads to the brink of eternity where the clock is laid off and temporal absences and negatives make up what St.Augustine calls the eternal present, the confluence of past and future:

Great Streets of silence led away
To Neighborhoods of Pause -
Here was no Notice - no Dissent
No Universe - no Laws -

By Clocks, 'twas Morning -
The Bells at Distance called -
But Epoch had no basis here
For Period exhaled.
(P# 1159)

In both the poems the word "exhale" is used to suggest the lighting out of time though hardly does it quite happen. Eternity being eventless for her ("Without Debate - or Pause - /Or Celebrated Days -" or as she says elsewhere: "Because it's Sunday - all the time - /And Recess - never comes -" P# 413), the biblical assurance of eternal life promises her dullness despite the "Latitude of Home" (P# 624).

Dickinson is agonised by the prospect of ceaseless existence and apprehensive of ". . . Homesickness/ After Eternity" (P#900). The persistence of nostalgia (literally, the agony for *nostos*, "return home," nowhere more apposite than here, perhaps!) after the imaginary end of eternity indicates that home in eternity is no sweet home. She understands that the kind of eternity Scripture preaches means a tiresome, endless

duration of time that should be followed by a reasonable respite for the "sufferer" of eternal life. But time can be yet more dreadful. Sometimes time looks so terrifyingly incomprehensible that even eternity seems a welcome relief, as though it had a limit:

Time feels so vast that were it not
For an Eternity -
I fear me this Circumference
Engross my Finity -
(P#802)

For the finite being this vastness looks much too much. When she is faced with this dreadful vortex, she makes her Hobson's choice: eternity. By comparison eternity is the more solid ground reclaimed and salvaged from abysmal time. If she fails to achieve eternity, infinite time would draw her into its vortical "Circumference" and devour her infinitely small being, her "Finity." When time and eternity are thus juxtaposed, she would fain go after the allurements of the eternal life promised by religion; yet she cannot visualise herself being sucked into dark faceless time, however rational and realistic that thinking might be. Eternity is said to be experienced as stable "spatialized time" by Dickinson (Cambon, 1963:38) in contrast to the wild, fluid whirlpool of time without so much as a foothold. Meanwhile she names eternity as one of the few fixed things in her catalogue of flux and fixity where time is in the company of winged creatures (a suggestion that time flies):

Some things that there be -
Birds - Hours - the Bumblebee -
Of these no elegy.

Some things that stay there be -
Grief - Hills - Eternity -
Nor this behooveth me.
(P#89)

Understood as such, eternity looks far secure, placid and hence tolerable in comparison with the dark, chaotic vortex of time. Now to return to P#802, the abyss of time is unstable and vortical, shoreless and fathomless with an awfully incomprehensible circumference in which the state of being is woeful circumscription. However vast time might seem its circumference is prison-like which threatens to swallow up the speaker ("Engross my finity"). And to remain a prisoner there is to be bound to a deathless consciousness and infinite time. Although she appears to prefer eternity to time, Dickinson ultimately disapproves of eternal life with a temporal consciousness because it would only perpetuate the miseries of temporal existence from which she constantly seeks release and relief. If eternity is a form of time, (as she can surmise from the postulation of eternal consciousness by conventional Christianity), process is as much at work in it as in temporal time. Thus to choose eternal life with a temporal consciousness would mean a prolongation of existential suffering.

Yet time and eternity are not conflicting opposites in Dickinson's mind; they are mutually supportive poles holding each other in balance:

> Because Emily's strong religious conscience daily converses with eternity, she can so keenly feel the value of the transitory, of what can there only once and then irrevocably disappear. Time and eternity for her are not two rigidly opposed concepts, as they would have been in a more orthodox Calvinist, but two dialectical poles of existence (Cambon, 1969:31).

However, Emily Dickinson does not quite commit herself to the idea of eternity or eternal life handed to her by her religion. In this respect, as in every other else, she cannot accept on faith a version of reality that does not square with her rational thinking. Dickinson's idea of eternal consciousness in the *post-mortem* state is closely bound up with her subjective experience of being. But this need not be considered a negative

point as she can dispel the sense of alienation that might follow the end of temporal being. She would not like to fill in this void with mere philosophical deductions. Dickinson's rejection of speculative metaphysics or ontology is noted by Ruth Miller, who further says that Dickinson "understood that corporeal reality may be perceived only by the senses, that no act of the intellect may operate on that which is beyond reality" (1968:57). Budick is of the opinion that

> . . .the rationalistic, theological Dickinson inclines toward the view that human 'Consciousness' is finite and that it communicates its instructions through the rational, countable limits of time. In attempting to traverse the interval between this world and the next, consciousness does not succeed in bringing the soul to heaven. Rather it manages to impose on heaven all the corrupt materialistic conditions of earth (1985:203).

The idea of eternity that Dickinson receives from her religion terrifies her. She replaces it with one of her imagination. The eternity preached by her religion is endlessly boring, and a ceaseless repetition of the mortal life. Her poetic effort is directed towards substituting it with one enriched with the wealth of her powerful imagination. Her idea of eternity however corresponds to the mystical experience of it that views eternity *not* as an absence of time but as the prevalence of the eternal present. Again this idea of eternity differs from the one taught her by her religion. Indeed, by her own institutional standards Dickinson rather inordinately insists on obtaining right here and now what her religion reserves for the afterlife, and when she is denied she forces it into being with the strength of her own inner resources. In this respect she acts like her eschatological forbears, as has been noted earlier, in experiencing the *Eschaton* at the individual level through personal integrity and spiritual

rigors when it fails to come about through the collective effort of the community concerned.

While time is a negative aspect of mortal life because of its hierarchical nature (i.e. past, present and future) and fragmentary rather than total presence, it comes to an end with the death of an individual and thus at the personal level it might be regarded as the occurrence of the eschaton, in a manner of speaking, bringing about the end of time. Quietly it comes to a stop at death:

> Look back on Time, with kindly eyes –
> He doubtless did his best –
> How softly sinks that trembling sun
> In Human Nature's West –
>
> (P#1478)

Death is the decisive stroke of time that brings about the final, irreparable disruption in the continuity of life. It is this final moment that engages Dickinson's interest throughout her poetry and letters. Significantly the west, as in the above poem – the region of sunset – is an object of her constant gaze, for it holds unfathomable mystery for her which is believed to open up after death. She piningly wrote to Susan Gilbert Dickinson:

> . . . I slip thro' the little entry, and out at the front door, and stand and watch the West, and remember all of mine - yes, Susie - the golden West, and the great, silent Eternity, for ever folded there, and bye and bye it will open it's everlasting, arms and gather us all - all . . .(L103).

When eternity is regarded as a phenomenon outside the subjective self, it is located in the west where the sunset of the earthly life ushers in the new eternal one. This affirmation is based on the traditional idea of life after death.

Time is a natural measurement of death to any Christian who looks forward to immortality as an unending spiritual life: it is constantly contrasted with the skimpy biblical span of three score and ten. When this

brief human calendar is set against eternity, mortal life looks all the more brief and lamentably inconsequential. Even human history measured on the scale of decades, centuries and millennia is nothing much in comparison. The clock is man's best invention for measuring this earthly time. The ongoing life processes are represented by the tick-tock movement of the clock hands. In a letter she says that it feels like Doomsday to her when the clock stops ticking as the aftermath of a storm: ". . . the clock stopped — which made it seem like Judgment Day" (L471), for a sign of the Apocalypse is the termination of time. That is the end of profane, earthly time, for sure. In a death-bed poem the ticking sound reassures the attendants keeping the death-watch that life is still there: "'Twas comfort in her Dying Room / To hear the living Clock." (P#1703). The audible ticking sound of the clock keeps man grounded on the earthly side of the grave and consolably in control of things. It conveys a sense of reality to the death-bed attendants who keep a death-watch, for the tick-tock gives them an illusion of reality.

Dickinson makes a ingenious conceit out of a "dead clock" to convey a complex notion of time, mortality and eternity and of their interrelationship as in the following poem:

A clock stopped -
Not the Mantel's -
Geneva's farthest skill
Cant put the puppet bowing -
That just now dangled still -

An awe came in the Trinket !
The Figures hunched, with pain -
Then quivered out of Decimals -
Into Degreeless Noon -

It will not stir for Doctors -
This Pendulum of snow -
The Shopman importunes it -
While cool - concernless No -

Stares from the Gilded pointers -
Nods from the Seconds slim -
Decades of Arrogance between
The Dial Life -
And Him

(P#287)

The stopped clock suits the concern of a poet genuinely obsessed with the end. It represents the opposite of calibrated time, that is, "Degreeless Noon." It is an intricate Swiss clock rather than a simple hourglass engraved by the early New England Puritans on the gravestones to represent their idea of the relationship between life, death and time. The hourglass is too worn out a device for Dickinson's complex idea, and its mechanism too simple for her purpose. On the other hand, while running, the Swiss clock epitomizes for her the motion of life, and the stillness of death while out of order. Its life is in its ticking movement and its death is indicated by its silence and inertia. Mobility or immobility on the clock's face is also indicative of either a temporal or an eternal setting respectively. When the clock ticks, the puppet (a comic representation of mortals without any will of their own) moves on the calibrated temporal face of the clock.

This time-bound setting ("The Dial Life") is then inhabited by the "Figures" with human attributes, such as bowing, awe, doubling up with pain and quivering. The mechanical "puppet" and "Pendulum" imply that they are externally controlled by some invisible force and therefore have no independent will of their own. Imaginably, this image of man would greatly please the Puritans who deferred body and soul to the supreme will of God. It indeed is a characteristically Puritan image of man while the *contemptu mundi* attitude of the poet (typical of the eschatological mind) towards inconstant mortal life is manifest in the portrayal of the droll cheapness of

"puppet," "Pendulum" and "Trinket.."[19] And all these images point to the fact that mortal life is bound to time, and it is a bad investment of the human spirit. On the other hand, as soon as the ticking stops and the soul of the clock passes out of the decimals of human time into the "Degreeless Noon" of eternity, everything on its face becomes otherworldly: a terrifying silence sets in, and the dial becomes a perfect setting for eternity, a setting pretty similar to that of P#1159 — pure, inviolable and repellent to human tinkerings: "The Shopman importunes it – / While cool – concernless No – / Stares from the Gilded pointers –". It is essentially similar to the face with which she visualizes herself going "out of time"(P#336).

Like her Puritan predecessors, Dickinson perceives a double scale of time and a dual sense of place according to John Robinson. But the two time referents in Robinson's theory are past and future: the past is common knowledge - firm, unalterable, tainted with original sin and traumatic with the Fall which is the collective lot of the human race; and the future is looked forward to from the individual standpoint: it holds the secret of either redemption or damnation according as the individual is pious or sinful. At any rate the prospect of recovering the lost Garden in the future, says Robinson, turned the Puritan into a nervous practitioner of the creed at the individual level, and Puritanism into a dynamic religion collectively. It is thus that Robinson puts Dickinson's sense of past, present and future into the Puritan perspective of time:

> . . . no matter what the proportions of fear and hope which this situation encourages in the believer, it is clear that it is in the future that the deepest reality lies. There we shall know the truth about ourselves which is concealed on earth. There we shall come to rest, for there humanity's time and God's timelessness intersect; and we can surely see the earth as only a place of transit. The future is our target. The future is the reference point and mark we steer by now. It is the future that ultimately makes meaning since it is the realest real we shall ever know. Emily

> Dickinson kept this as a major emphasis and orientation. It helps explain her relative lack of interest in the past and a certain restlessness about the status of the present.
>
> It follows from this obsessive interest in future destiny that the present is subordinate and may even be felt to be an irritating distraction. The present is something to be used - as a means to an end. It is not something to be relished. It may set up false perspectives, it may generate false values. We should not be in love with this world, we should try to get through it as quickly as possible (1986:37).

Although Robinson makes light of the importance of the present in Puritanism, it is very crucial for Dickinson, as has been discussed earlier.

While she lives here and now in the flesh, her imagination lives a non-corporeal existence; while she suffers through the mortal hours, her spirit proleptically lives in eternity. She is truly divided between the temporal and the eternal. In like manner, when the clock stops the spirit starts its eternal existence. Swinging full circle around their three hundred and sixty degrees, when the hands of the clock join palms on twelve, it is both the beginning of their new cycle and the hour of "Noon." Noon is her frequent symbol of the eternal state of bliss. Richard B. Sewall interprets it as "a token of the instantaneous, arrested present which is timelessness , or eternity, or heaven, when all accident, or 'grossness,' is discarded and there is nothing but essence. In the poem 'A Clock stopped,' 'Degreeless Noon' is the timelessness of death" (1976:681). Richard Benevunto reads "a more sinister meaning" into the word "degreeless" when he deduces the sense of "degree" from its etymon: "Degreeless Noon" then means lifelessness *in aeternum*.[20] In one poem she describes heaven as "Centuries of Noon" (P#112). It is a state where ". . . the Everlasting Clocks – / Chime – Noon!" (P#297). In the clock poem it is a "Degreeless" state, for the hands are not separated at an angle. Twelve o' clock is zero in terms of degree but zenith in terms of the position of the sun standing right

overhead in the sky. As such both hands of the clock while pointing at twelve are also lifted towards heaven or eternity. The sun appears to stand still at noon. Thus the stopping of time is visible through optical illusion created by the juggler sun. In either case it is an absolute state. "The Dial Life" is a representation of process; it is therefore calibrated, measurable and hierarchically sequenced. Past, present and future describe the human perception of the order in which process appears in mortal life. But when the clock goes "out of Decimals," the calibration of the clock face becomes a useless bauble, as it being eternity now, this life cannot be hierarchically measured because all time is present at once in "Degreeless Noon," and "Time's Analysis" (P#1241) strictly performed by the dial of the clock is thereby obviated.

Dickinson is not interested in eternity or timelessness as traditionally understood in the Christian tradition. Christianity claims that so-called post-mortem eternal consciousness exists without the shortcomings of earthly time. She is critical of the inherent contradiction of such consolation, for mortal consciousness even when extended into the after-life for eternal beatitude or damnation cannot exist without time of earthly nature. Mortal consciousness experiences time as continuously leaking away. But the lyric consciousness that the mind in its most concentrated condition conceives can hold total time at once. It is the state of existence in which time does not move and get fragmented thereby and, as a result, space remains in one piece, which results in the "Degreeless Noon" of Augustinian nature. Her desired eternity is time without its flux which exists

> In a steadfast land,
> Where no Autumn lifts her pencil

And no Reapers stand!
(P#163)

This "steadfast land" is the country of her lyric mind "at the White Heat" "Whose Sun constructs perpetual Noon" and where ". . .Consciousness – is Noon" (P#1056). Like the other Puritan concepts that trigger coflicts in Dickinson, the Christian eternity as a posthumous otherworldly reality clashes with her private mentalistic eternity of symbolic potentiality.

Dickinson appears to think of two types of time, namely profane and sacred, in which two kinds of consciousness exist. Profane time, that is , human or earthly time, corrupts consciousness to the extent that any reality perceived by it becomes distorted, disjointed and discontinuous. This temporal consciousness is a vicious deterrent to union with the ultimate. On the other hand, the consciousness represented by "perpetual Noon" is to be distinguished from the one steeped in profane time. Existing in sacred time, "God's full time," it is the eternal consciousness of totality and wholeness as opposed to the temporal consciousness that can but perceive reality as illusory shadows, fragments, categories or hierarchies, and flux, but never as a whole. On the contrary, "Degreeless Noon" is both constant consciousness and sacred time, and as time it is all present to consciousness at once. As there is no "degree" (hierarchy) in this consciousness (represented by the fullness of day with the sun at the zenith and at its most intense, that is, high "Noon" P#1056), eternal time is not experienced as categories appearing one after another. There is no flux in eternity. It is the post-apocalyptic state of "Forever . . . composed of Nows," the perpetual present. As she says, "'Tis not a different time" but just the present stretched *ad infinitum* (P#624). It is indeed eternity experienced by a mind, as Augusitine says, "seized and held still" (262).

NOTES

[1] It did not matter how fragile this guarantee was as long as it *was* consolatory under the given circumstances of total uncertainty about the next world from which the New England Puritans constantly suffered.(Robinson, 1986:36) Their very ignorance of their destiny was a powerful incentive to behave as if they were saved; but inwardly, they remained on tenterhooks of self-doubt.

[2] Mercea Eliade distinguishes between two times - sacred time or "the Great Time", *illo tempore*, and profane time. In the presence of the first category, the laws of the second stand abolished and "Time stands still"(1968:23, 33).

[3] The following letters refer particularly to the passage of time: LL.6 - 10; 13; 22; 27; 59; 62; 86; 170; 979. The other letters where she discusses time in relation to immortality and eternity are LL.103; 319; 339; 353; 356; 408; 641; 667.

[4] The image of time as an old authoritarian patriarch could as well signify its predacious nature as a male attribute. The father figure is no less despotic and arbitrary in Dickinson than in Blake.("Papa above"- P# 61), for instance.

[5] St. Augustine devotes a whole book (XI) of *Confessions* to the mystical exegesis of time, and it is perfectly appropriate to invoke his authority for a mystical interpretation of time in an author who would keep her soul ajar to receive all day the "Bulletins of Immortality " in her singular privacy. (P#1055)

[6] Children's deaths were apotheosised in nineteenth-century memoirs. Ann Douglas writes: "Children, veritable infants, became a conventional subject not just of poetry but of full-scale biography. Tots like Agnes Adams and 'little Gerogie' Cuyler, the respective protagonists of . . . *Agnes and the Key of Her Little Coffin* (1857) and *The Empty Crib* (1873), were notable, understandably, less for their lives which were usually short, than for their deaths which were often protracted."(1978:240) Lydia H. Sigourney, the sweet singer of Hartford, gathered a great many statistics of the young dead in her unpublished "A Record of My School."

[7] The Joseph Tapping stone, 1678, King's Chapel, Boston, Massachusetts. Plate 55 in Ludwig, 1966.

[8] The term "eternity" changes its meaning throughout her work. When it implies boredom it is an endless stretch of time which she detests, as will be shown in the course of this discussion. But it is also synonymously used with "immortality," "Eden," "paradise," and "heaven."(Juhasz, 1983:133) It needs a continual adjustment and adaptation of the term's implications to the context. It is an example of semantic fluidity that makes her poetry often obscure, puzzling and difficult.

[9] It is the subject of her book, *Lyric Time:Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (1979).

[10] This idea is in perfect accord with modern process philosophy which holds that basic reality is constantly in a process of flux and change, an idea that could have great champions among the Puritans. Process philosophy emphasizes dynamic becoming.

Robinson says: "Puritanism does not live in the present. Puritanism is constantly moving. This, too, is marked in Emily Dickinson's thought."(Robinson, 1986:37)

[11] The full extent of Dickinson's familiarity with the emblem tradition and its influence on her has been treated most elaborately by George Monteiro and Barton Levi St Armand (1981:186-280). This particular poem is influenced by Thomas Cole's emblematic series *The Voyage of Life* (1840). This series became popular through the distribution of fine engravings based on the original canvases and its theme is the four ages of man, emblematically represented as a boat journey down the stream of existence towards the sea of eternity. Dickinson took up this motif several times such as in an early whimsical poem, "'Tis was such a little - little boat."(P#107) The individual afloat on a perilous sea with a threat of imminent doom or dissolution can also be explained as an important typology of risky poetic life with the poet floating on the complex sea of experience.(Johnson, 1985:14)

[12] See also L185. When Austin was planning to come to Amherst for the annual cattle show, Dickinson wrote to invite him to her symbolic garden of the mind:

> . . . there is another sky ever serene and fair, and there is another sunshine, tho' it be darkness there - never mind faded forests, Austin, never mind silent fields - here is a little forest whose leaf is ever green, here is a brighter garden, where not a frost has been, in its unfading flowers I hear the bright bee hum, prithee, my Brother, into my garden come!(L58).

It appears as part of P#2 and serves to contrast "the world of death" and the world of imagination.

[13] In "Because I could not stop for Death," death appears as a suitor, a seducer who will never formally consummate the relationship.

[14] Both Inder Nath Kher (1974:213) and Hockersmith (1989:280-81) believe that the journey does not stop beyond the grave, though eternity as destination is either not yet reached or absolutely unreachable.

[15] Captivity foretold in the Bible: De 28:36; 1 K 14:15; Is 39:7; Je 13:19; Am 7:11; Da 3:8; Lu 21:24. Prophecies fulfilled 2 K 15:29, 17:6, 18:11, 24:14, 25:11; 2 Chr 28:5.

[16] Budick subscribes to a similar opinion. (1985:202-205)

[17] Thomas H. Johnson lists only P#929 in the subject index of his 1955 edition as referring to hell. Dickinson mentions hell in L10 and alludes to it in L175. The solemn issues and moral dimensions of her Calvinistic Christianity get little attention from her. Robinson writes:

> . . . there are two major omissions from her poetry. The first is sin and the second is Satan. In one poem she does talk about herself as 'spotted' (P#964) but this is only to have it brushed aside in a not very profound piece of play-acting and in one of the three instances where she uses

'sin' it is to scoff at it as 'a distinguished Precipice / Others must resist' (# 1545) (The other two , in # 801 and # 1460, are negligible.) In general, hers is not poetry of a moral dimension. She is not troubled by guilt (1986:42).

[18] Inder Nath Kher notices an enactment of the myth of the eternal return in Dickinson's poetry(1974:8-9). Perhaps one could even be aware of a death-rebirth cycle of the pagan type in a statement such as this!

[19] "Trinket" is perfectly in accord with the Calvinistic view of life as a bauble, a paltry thing, foolishly purchased at a dear price. In P#1024 remorse is caused by the typical Puritan realization that

> Earth at the best
> Is but a scanty Toy -
> Bought, carried Home
> To immortality
>
> It looks so small
> We chiefly wonder then
> At our Conceit
> In purchasing.

[20] Richard Benvenuto deduces the meaning of the word "degree" from its etymon and suggests that Dickinson may have used the word in the etymological sense:

> The etymology of "degree" goes back to the Latin "*gradus*" and to the Syriac word for "to go." Webster refers us to the Latin "*gradus*, a step; *gradior*, to step, to go"; and to the Welsh "*rhodiaw*, to walk about"; and finally Germanic and Scandanavian verbs for "to go, to travel, to journey. . . . In Sw and Dan. the verbs signify not only to travel but to raise." Within the degreeless noon of death, then, lies an intimation or interior meaning of "stepless," "ungoing," "unrisen" – meanings which reinforce the finality of death or a lifeless eternity, and which fit with the mechanical associations of the puppet-trinket. (1983:52)

Benvenuto shows that "degree" means going rather than ungoing in P# 275 presumably written about the same time as the clock poem.

CHAPTER IV

PROBLEMS OF THE DUST

Death is no escape, ah no! only a doorway to the inevitable.

– D.H. Lawrence, "Death," *More Pansies*

Death is the end of temporal existence. It is the first of the four Last Things in Christianity.[1] Emily Dickinson's extraordinary preoccupation with this terminal fact can neither be overemphasised or nor repeated too often, as she felt "Death's tremendous nearness" (P#532) all her life. She always suffered an acute sense of loss, sorrow, anguish, despair and often even futile feelings of grudge and jealousy against God on account of the death of some very important persons in her life such as Ben Newton, Leonard Humphrey and Reverend Charles Wadsworth besides the ones for whom she greatly cared.[2] When she could not bear it any more she would desire to swap places with them. But she knew that "Death goes far around to those that want to see him" (L670). Two years before her own death she said: "The Dyings have been too deep for me, and before I could raise my Heart from one, another has come . . ." (L939), a remark that encapsulates the psychological consequences of the keen bereavements she had known due to the almost unremitting frequency of death in her close circle of friends and relatives. It would also account for her ever-deepening eschatological sensibility which she had already inherited from her New England religious culture.

The most conspicuous New England heritage of Puritan thought in Dickinson is her preoccupation with death and the grave (Flinn, 1981:63). She knew death as intimately in her personal life as her New England

predecessors had done before. The eschatological implications of death in her writings have no doubt their roots in her religion and particularly in New England Puritan culture, and that she looks upon death as a rite of passage, a crossing point on to the upper rungs of a spiritual hierarchy is a New England Puritan remnant in her thoughts of death. As has been said earlier, death became a major subject of community thought in nineteenth-century Amherst because of its rampancy. Dickinson was no less deeply affected by its rampage and led to describe this life as a "world of death" (L195) and visualise it as "but a Nest, from whose rim we are all falling" (L619). It brings to mind Cotton Mather's urging to "look upon everything as a sort of Death's-Head set before us, with a Memento mortis written upon it" (1701:94). Funerals, burials, graves, tombs, graveyards and sepulchres constitute a significant portion of Dickinson's graveyard themes and imagery. She demonstrates an extraordinary capacity for feeling funerals in her brain as well as experiencing them in life. She writes of the grave sometimes as a prison or a chamber of horror and sometimes as the last home of the dead or the stopping-off place before the soul makes its onward journey to the future state of being in the next world.

Dickinson knew death to be an implacable and irresistible separator whose sole purpose is to cleave and segregate human beings from one another. It is thus that she apostrophises death in a poem: "Thou only comest to mankind / To rend with Good night –" (P#1552), and this theme persists until her late years. A poem terms death "Auctioneer of Parting" (P#1612). Although she gradually came to accept death as an irreversible fact of life, she could never reconcile herself completely to its terms, and kept complaining all her life against gross divine injustice executed

through death. She figuratively presents her case in Poem#116: one day she found herself haplessly entangled with a jealous deity in "a rival Claim" over her "property, my garden." But powerful and high-handed that he is, her right could not stand. He sent down his "Bailiff"(Death) to appropriate her "pretty acre," which in her estimate was superior to "His Paradise." Her letters indicate that one of her typical concerns was the safekeeping of her loved ones. In a letter of thanks written to Mrs. Henry Hills in 1878 Dickinson said: "Heaven is so presuming that we must hide our Gems" (L535). But her "Gems," too, had met with the same fate as her "pretty acre." Much earlier she had searched for a safe place where she could conceal her most prized things from the indiscriminate and arbitrary forages of death (L195). But all in vain! Despite her wide-eyed vigilance she lost her "estate" of close friends and relatives (L193) bit by bit to death.[3]

Death affected Dickinson in two ways: as a human being she suffered a sense of great loss at every death as every mortal does and felt awfully depleted, particularly because, as said just now, death took away her "Gems." She says: "A Sickness of this World it most occasions/ When Best Men die" (P#1044), by whom she certainly meant the ones that had made up her "estate." But, on the creative level, death had invigorated her poetic imagination with rare marrow. It lent her diction an unusual edge and peculiar strength and imprinted her creative work with a patent unmistakably her own. The recurrent experience of watching death was not peculiar to her alone, though. It was common to the Amherst of her time in general. Death would make frequent intrusions into this Connecticut Valley village, and often the dead were mostly children and young people.

The funeral processions to the cemetery near the Dickinson Homestead would also act as a continual reminder to her of death's constant presence (Mudge, 1975:45) and made considerable impact on her at both individual and community levels so that she could write: "Looking at Death, is Dying" (P#281). These circumstances quite possibly led her imagination to naturalise reflection on death as a tenor of her general thinking which inevitably turned into a raw material of her writings. Hence the subject of death calls for close attention in an eschatological survey of Dickinson's writings. In any discussion of her life, mind and art therefore it is the inevitable starter. In terms of popularity it is the fondest of all her subjects to her readers, as though she would not (to use her own ironic word in the letter introducing her poems to T.W. Higginson) "breathe" as a poet if she were forgotten as anything but a poet of death. Consequently it has come to be the most overworked area, sometimes giving birth to too many platitudes or critical banalities. On the other hand, any critical estimate of her writings that bypasses this subject would risk the flaw of incompleteness. But it must be admitted that the issue of death is so jostled with diverse and often overlapping angles in Dickinson criticism that a new point of view is likely to be too squeezed up and fresh critical rhetoric needs to be scraped. Another endemic reason is that the problem of death is *mostly* the prime mover of all her thinking in both her poems and letters. Behind every utterance she makes there is the impetus of this terminal theme.

Yet there is nothing *absolutely* new in Dickinson's treatment of the subject of death as terminal experience. Ford shows that she makes extensive use of almost all traditional approaches to the subject ranging

from the conventions of medieval *ars moriendi* such as the personification of death in *danse macabre* to those employed in Elizabethan drama such as death as king, monarch, tyrant or some kind of royal personage; as sleep, night or darkness; as a leveller of materialistic and social differences; as the archetype of all parting in life; as a comforter, traveller and kind-hearted host to the insecure, fragile and tired in life. One can also find in common in Elizabethan plays and her poetry such contrastive ideas as the vanity and transitoriness of life and the permanency of death. Like the Elizabethans, too, she uses church bells, tombs, funerals and graveyards as devices to work out ideas in her poetry (1966:26-30). But it certainly *is* unique that death and its paraphernalia are part and parcel of her standard idiom.

Her letters on the occasion of deaths are mostly condolences to the bereaved, where she hardly debates the prickly and unpleasant matters of post-mortem blanks and voids. Those letters are always sympathetic, affectionate and sorrowful, reassuring the bereaved of reunion with their beloved dead. Except for the reports of death, laments, condolences or consolation and very often sentimental musings, there is not much in the way of serious eschatological reflection in her letters. Besides their expedient nature (because they addressed specific emotional needs and situations) allows the *perhaps* valid conjecture that she responded to requirements of individual circumstances without regard to a consistent system of belief about death even if she had one. So her letters might not be a reliable source from which a dependable picture of her religious thought about death and the afterlife can be constructed. Her poetry provides far more solid ground for the purpose, for here she is under no

burden of duties, social or familial, and deals with none but herself and her "rebellious thoughts"(L39).

Frequent deaths in her close circle led Dickinson to think of death quite often from her very early life to her death. On the evidence of her letter to Abiah Root, her girlhood friend Sophia Holland's death was the first serious impact of death on her sensibility (L11), and she had since remained a keen observer of death's varied manifestations. They triggered an endless series of questions in her about the mystery of death, the destination of the dead and the existence of the afterlife. These are the puzzling phenomena that leave no trail of explanation to follow. She would often turn to religion for support and some kind of reassuring light at the terrifying thought of the post-mortem blank and infinite darkness therein. Sometimes she leaned on the Bible and believed in the traditional answers to her gritty questions. But when she found them exceeding the mark of rationality or blatantly inadequate she despairingly fell back upon her inner resources to overcome the depression. Dickinson alleges that there is a close relationship and secret complicity between God and death, and therefore the knowledge of one is likely to yield the secrets about the other. Silent, distant, abstract and therefore intractable, neither can be pinned down, and none can see either and live to report the experience: ". . . None can see God and live" (P#1247). Substituting the figure of a stranger – once she refers to death as "the deep Stranger" (L535) – for some impalpable force or entity is Dickinson's strategy to deal with what she thinks to be her obstinately abstract opponent, God (Diehl,1980:2). Thus confronting death becomes mandatory, and so much crucial to her quest. In the absence of any other alternative means it is the only way left open to

meet the ultimate. Therefore her search for answers to certain metaphysical questions consists in finding answers to her queries about the mystery of death.

Death is particularly dreadful and unnerving because of its nondescript nature and its unforeseeableness. Dickinson gropes for some kind of label for death as though defining it would somehow give it a recognisable identity and some kind of concreteness. That it cannot be understood in human terms is the theme of P#390:

> It's coming – the postponless Creature –
> It gains the Block – and now – it gains the Door –
> Chooses its latch, from all the other fastenings –
> Enters – with a "You know me – Sir"?
>
> Simple Salute – and certain Recognition –
> Bold – were it Enemy – Brief – were it friend –
> Dresses each House in Crape, and Icicle –
> And carries one – out of it – to God –

Death's impersonal conduct is characterised in the poem by the pronoun "it." As death cannot be deferred, it is called "the postponless Creature." Its progress up until its final appearance is meticulously recorded in the poem. Death's irresistibleness is dramatised in its firm selection of the latch and its utter disregard of social formalities (that is, entering the house without knocking). Besides, it is an exasperating puzzle for the dying person to place the visitor as either friend or enemy. There is no description of the visitor in the poem, thereby leaving the emotional aspect of death out of account. It is this absolute unconcern and remorselessness for the dying that makes death callous to all human supplication. Death approaches with a metallic invincibility and "drills his Welcome in" (P#286). It is important to note that a part of Dickinson's rhetoric

persuades the reader of the irresistibility and invincibility of death. She convincingly shows that the steel steady point of death's drill works its way in and nothing can head it off. Life is a flawed vessel and "Like Sailors fighting with a Leak/ We fought Mortality" (P#1136). It is the picture of a collective crisis in which all mankind is caught up. In this poem Dickinson also views death as a sly intruder who could not be stopped and "as easy as the narrow Snake/ He forked his way along."

Death does not have a fixed meaning for Dickinson; neither is it felt as a single sensation by her. She experiences a wide and unpredictable variety of sensations and meanings. After her mother's death, for instance, she wrote: "Her dying feels to me like many kinds of cold – at times electric, at times benumbing – then a trackless waste . . ." (L788). The sensations are understandably the various shades of cold feeling which again appear with similar gradations of feeling in the last two lines of P# 341:"As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow – / First – Chill –then Stupor – then the letting go."

The progressive stages of oncoming death hold her interest as much as does watching a dying person. The protean face of death puzzles her infinitely. She, therefore, uses the format of definition in several poems in order, as it were, to circumscribe the formless fuzziness of death and thereby understand it in perceptible shapes. What emerges from her attempts is certain attributes of death as symptoms. In its despotic definitiveness it is the "Old Imperator," (P#455) who wields absolute control and authority over both the living and the dead. Again in its bodiless navigation it is as silent and soft-footed as a ghost "in Mechlin"

(P#274). The age-old image of death as eternal sleep constitutes one of Dickinson's definitions of death when she calls it "A long – long Sleep – A famous – Sleep" (P#654),[4] even much "quieter than sleep" (P#45). A unique feature of death is its rigidity: it is absolute, changeless ("exempt from change") and unadjustable to human and temporal circumstances (P#749). In an early poem (P#153) she defines death as a creature born full-fledged and perfectly adult without any history of further growth (suggesting that growth is the trait of the mortal, and death is immortal by not having this trait):

> Nobody knew "his Father" –
> Never was a Boy –
> Hadn't any playmates,
> Or "Early history" –

Sometimes death is personified as a romantic lover as in "Death is the supple Suitor" (P#1445).[5] The hard face of death is apparently softened by this image but he becomes the more cunning and deceptive with his "pallid innuendoes and dim approach." Dickinson uses the idiom of love poetry in portraying death as a stealthy wooer in the poem. He becomes increasingly bolder and at last whisks away the bride amidst flourishes of "Bugles" and the pomp of "a bisected Coach." This gradual advancing of death on the victim increasing to the final stunning intensity of the predator's gracious *coup de grace* is dramatised in another earlier poem poem:

> 'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,
> That nearer , every Day,
> Kept narrowing boiling Wheel
> Until the Agony
>
> Toyed coolly with the final inch
> Of your delirious Hem –
> And you dropt, lost,

When something broke –
And let you from a Dream –
(P#414)

The process of dying is one long protracted experience of gradually gathering confusion coming to a head in a complete blackout of consciousness and of finally plummeting into unfathomable depths. Unlike the image of a lover in the preceding poem, death looms as a ghastly goblin keeping a steadfast eye on running-out time and his victim:

As if a Goblin with a Gauge –
Kept measuring the Hours –
Until you felt your Second
Weigh, helpless, in his Paws –

Towards the end of her life Dickinson appears to have recognised the hopeless nature of her pursuit of tracking down and defining death. In P#1716 she compares death to an elusive, run-away worm and admits that this "insect" in the human tree will always have "burrowed/ Out of reach of skill–" In all these poems the invincible power of death is not denied but affirmed in certain definite figures and symptoms with a view to countering the fear of death.

As mentioned earlier, Dickinson received two distinctly opposite views of death from her traditional and contemporary religious culture. The traditional idea of death is that it is the wages of sin, and every mortal must pay a price in death for their share in the original sin. In this context death is portrayed as terror and menace (as represented in the gravestone images of the death's-head and its attendant ghoulish troops).[6] Dickinson presents the traditional image of persecutory death in the metaphor of the cat-and-mouse game relentlessly played to the full:

The Cat reprieves the Mouse
She eases from her teeth

Just long enough for Hope to tease -
Then mashes it to death -
(P#762)

On the other hand, under the influence of the Rural Cemetery movements and the Sentimental Love religion that thrived in Dickinson's New England, death became the most desirable, and graves developed into snug accommodations in idyllic, landscaped cemeteries. In this new national mood death was romanticised and made an object of great attraction and honourable attainment.[7] It was viewed "as a peaceful and beautiful deliverance – the releasing of a butterfly from its cocoon" while the afterlife was dreamt of as a peaceful dwelling place of eternal spring (Stannard, 1977:174). This new attitude to death is reflected in the following poem:

Let down the Bars, Oh Death -
The tired Flocks come in
Whose bleatings ceases to repeat
Whose wandering is done

Thine is the stillest night
Thine the securest Fold
Too near Thou art for seeking Thee
Too tender to be told.
(P#1065)

Both these attitudes are present in Dickinson's poems and letters, and they constitute her ambivalence towards eschatological questions. Her dual attitude to death can well be illustrated from her graveyard poems.

P#51 is a graveyard poem. The speaker is a dead person who died "Earlier, by the Dial, / Than the rest have gone." When she was alive, the graveyard she passed by on her way to and from school looked like a strange village. (To the living the graveyard is always suspect: in P#892 it

looks like "a curious town.") Then it seemed to be a curiously quiet and dreadful place. Sometimes she would see some people come there and leave the place after doing some curious business; she could not guess what. It was a distant view, and she was ignorant of the place. She became knowledgeable about the place after her own death. The fear of the place disappears when she herself becomes an inhabitant of the place. But as a dead person now she finds it really snug and protective, quiet and peaceful: it poses no threat to the delicate and vulnerable:

It's stiller than the sundown.
It's cooler than the dawn –
The Daisies dare to come here –
And birds can flutter down –

Distance between the place and the viewer holds back knowledge and the lack of knowledge gives rise to all sorts of unfounded guess and fear about this really friendly place. The first-person narrative lends an authoritative tone to the speaking voice. As the object of her attention draws nearer and nearer, the speaker gets on intimate terms with it and at one stage domesticates it. When she becomes part of it by death her role changes from outsider to insider: now she plays kind host to the dead. Personal relationship with it dispels fear and the place looks human with its compassion for the " . . . tired – / Or perplexed – or cold –" in life, and finds that "Underneath the mould" is the promise of healing and relief. The "cool" of the graveyard contrasts with the "cold" of life and strongly suggests the assuaging quality of the place. The speaker promises warm hospitalities in the grave: "Trust the loving promise/ Cry "it's I," "take Dollie," / And I will enfold!" Again "The thoughtful grave encloses - / Tenderly tucking them [the fragile and distressed] in from frost"(P#141).

The neglected in life become its most prized and guarded "treasures" that the "cautious grave" never exposes. One of the reasons that Dickinson refers to the dead as treasures is that her general idea of death developed out of her acute sense of loss of the most valuable persons in her life whom she would like to refer to as "estate," "possessions" and "treasures." Her imagination would therefore often conceive of the cold Puritan grave or coffin as a nice little private place or a priceless casket into which her loved ones were stolen by the Calvinistic God *alias* the "burglar" and "banker." At the same time she had hoped that God would "refund" them after her own death (McIntosh, 1998:2857). But, then, she considered herself no less a hoarder of treasures (L193).

P#1443 describes the typical atmosphere of a graveyard. As is often the case with Dickinson, the fine irony of "A chilly Peace" undercuts what seems to be a sincere adoration of the graveyard atmosphere in the poem. (The word "chilly" suggests an uncomfortable and uneasy peace). Rather than compose her, the graveyard's cold peacefulness upsets the speaker. Dickinson theorises about the grave on the assumptions of traditional religion, and then she foils it with ironic implications that the lifelessness of the place is imprudently understood and appreciated as peacefulness. However, as a resting-place the atmosphere of the graveyard is perfect: sombre, placid and hallowed. The description is a copybook reproduction of the cemetery in conventional graveyard poetry. Dickinson makes no departure from it. Consistent with the traditional idea, death is sleep in which the dead are absorbed and assimilated in the graveyard. As sleep is suggested to be the condition of the soul in the grave and an essential

precondition for its resurrection, she asks everybody to be quiet near the graveyard lest any noise should disturb the germinating process of the sleeping corpse-seeds: "Let no Sunrise' yellow noise/ Interrupt this Ground – " (P#829). The sun lying respectfully on the grass adds to the solemn dignity of the graveyard. Being at rest the sun might signify a perfect ending so that "Not any Trance of industry/ These shadows scruitinize – " (P#1443). The restless activity of life and the restful passivity of death are juxtaposed and represented by the light and shade of the place: if the sun means activity the shadows might suggest rest. The graveyard is not only a chamber of horror; it can be hospitable, affectionate and protective. So the entrant is exhorted to enter it joyfully. The eschatological individual craves for this state of the spirit and it is the exciting climax of all spiritual career. It is the enactment of the End at the personal level. It does not however diminish the meaning of the *eschaton* in the least since it is thus the individual enhances and accomplishes the cosmic event at the very personal level. The love and freedom of this state is almost utopian:

> Where every bird is bold to go
> And bees abashless play,
> The foreigner before he knocks
> Must thrust the tears away.
> (P#1758)

The image of the cemetery as a happy home cemented with close family ties was developed by the founders of rural cemeteries in the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, revealing the significance of a rural cemetery in his consecration address on June 20, 1841, the Reverend Amos Blanchard disclosed his "secret wish that when death shall have torn

his beloved ones from his embrace, and when himself shall have died, they might repose together, where they should never be disturbed by the encroachments of a crowded and swelling of the living . . ." (qtd. by Bender, 1974:202). Dickinson shows this tendency when she views a visit to the grave as home-coming, and her principal expectation from the afterlife is one of a long-awaited family reunion. In an early letter to her girlhood friend Abiah Root written perhaps on the occasion of the recent death of her friend Leonard Humphrey she compares the graveyard to a home. The letter is meant both for self-consolation and for sharing, in a way, her thoughts on death with the recipient of the letter. Here the graveyard figures as a place of reunion with the darling dead. Dickinson reports her early thoughts about the graveyard while reporting a graveyard walk and her musings:

> You have stood by the grave before; I have walked there sweet summer evenings and read the names on the stones, and wondered who would come and give me the same memorial; [8] but I never have laid my friends there, and forgot that they too must die; this is my first affliction, and indeed 'tis hard to bear it. To those bereaved so often that home is no more here, and whose communion with friends is had only in prayers, there must be much to hope for, but when the unreconciled spirit has nothing left but God, that spirit is lone indeed. I don't think there will be any sunshine, or any singing-birds in the spring that's coming. I shall look for an early grave then, when the grass is growing green; I shall love to call the bird there if it has gentle music, and the meekest-eyed wild flowers, and the low, plaintive insect. How precious the grave, Abiah, when aught that we love is laid there, and affection fain go too, if that the lost were lonely! I will try not to say any more – my rebellious thoughts are many, and the friend I love and trust in has much now much to forgive. I wish I were somebody else – I would pray the prayer of the "Pharisee," but I am a poor little "Publican." "Son of David," look down on me! (L39).

The letter is typically Dickinsonian: in turn reflective, sentimental, sad, despairing, hopeful, affectionate, humble, quietly firm and finally unyielding. For her this visit to the graveyard is a homecoming, because her dear dead are embedded in its sacred ground.[9] She refers to the grave as home in both her poetry and letters and even admits that her thoughts are spontaneously directed towards it. She wrote to Mrs. J. G. Holland a few years before her death: "It is almost involuntary with me to send my Note to that Home in the Grass where your many lie – Could I visit the Beds of my own who sleep, as reprovelessly, even Night were sweet" (L775). It implies a belief that all her beloved dead are sleeping in their graves with whom she expects to reunite in heaven. In that case death would not mean separation or solitude but reunion and jubilation (LL 729-732). Sharon Cameron rightly says: "... while the most profound estrangement is that precipitated by death, in Dickinson's poems death is not loss for the dying person but is rather reunion" (1979:136). She wrote to Charles H. Clark about two years before her death: "To be certain we were to meet our Lost, would be a Vista of reunion, who of us could bear?" (L896).

Dickinson employs the sea metaphor for the restless human race and the graveyard is imaged as a terminus: " . . . all mankind deliver here/ From whatsoever sea-"(P#1443) ("whatsoever sea" echoes the "Democratic Death" of her letter. The graveyard therefore, instead of being exclusive, offered hospitality to all and sundry, especially to those persecuted, neglected and deprived in life. The graveyard is therefore a sort of Dickinson's version of Spenser's House of Holiness). Elsewhere Dickinson compares the inconceivably vast chaos to the sea that

presumably follows upon death. It is "the recallless sea"(P#1633), similar to Coleridge's "sunless sea" of oblivion in "Kubla Khan." The tempestuous sea was close to the experience of the early New England Puritans, and it had been all the more so to the first settlers; and it was one of Dickinson's Puritan inheritances in the imagery recurring in her writings. The historical pattern of the growth of the American settlements in New England also helped her to understand the curious phenomenon of the growth of any graveyard in a place. Every graveyard is a piece of land chosen, reclaimed from the wilderness and settled by some first homesteader (a dead person in this case). Subsequently others follow and the consecrated ground thrives into a habitation of the dead:

Before Myself was born
'Twas settled, so they say,
A Territory for the Ghosts –
And Squirrels, formerly.

Until a Pioneer, as
Settlers often do
Liking the quiet of the Place
Attracted more unto –

And from a Settlement
A Capital has grown
Distinguished for the gravity
Of every Citizen.
(P#892)

It illustrates Dickinson's particularly "graveyard sensibility" that makes every explanation from the perspective of a graveyard. Like a settlement grown in the wilderness, a graveyard is inaugurated by some "Pioneer," too, and gradually it develops into " a Capital", a necropolis – the heart of the community and the most important centre of life. (In L82 Dickinson refers to the graveyard as "the celestial city"). Thus Dickinson alludes to the example of American history in order to illustrate the growth

of a graveyard to a great importance. When the graveyard is imagined as a capital (P#892) the dead person becomes a metropolitan and urban sophisticate, and thus the status of the graveyard is upgraded as a place for the sophisticated residents. In Lydia H. Sigourney's writing the graveyard becomes "the most sacred city of the dead" (St.Armand, 1984:48). Dickinson understands her New England cultural (political, not excluded) history through the growth of this "Capital" of the dead.

The grave is the focal point of Dickinson's consciousness, and always fires up her imagination. It is the gateway to the mysterious beyond that intrigues her infinitely and, as she said to her friend Jane Humphrey, a prelude to the "house not made with hands" (L180). The grave, being the earthly limit of mortal life – the earthly *eschaton* – provides the experiencer with an opportunity for the apocalypse of material being. In fact, the comprehensive apocalypse of the bodily perception happens at the moment of death and it occurs with the cataclysmic intensity of the biblical apocalypse. Howsoever the grave may be interpreted in the light of Christian optimism, she primarily imagines its horrors: its restricted size, the living death-sleep, the physical decay and dissolution,[10] the entombed consciousness, the impossibility of escaping from this fast enclosure. That is, the "bareheaded life – under the grass" did disturb her immensely "like a wasp" (L220). In P#943 she is scared of the "restricted Breadth" of the grave at first; but when she remembers that this crammed space would widen out into an expansive "Circumference without Relief – / Or Estimate – or End – " after death she feels relieved. In these terms the suffocating grave becomes a spatially enormous, more airy and sunnier place, instead of being a narrow dark pit of unfathomable depths. Such

reflection and sentiment lend the grave a imaginative expansion: "A Grave – is a restricted Breadth – / Yet ampler than the Sun – ". Apart from signifying the area of the grave, the word "Breadth" sounds "breath," too, implicitly putting us in mind particularly of the brevity, decomposition and decay of the flesh, and of mortality in general. On the other hand, the Christian understanding of the grave as vast and adequate (thought of in relation to the enormous magnitude of the hereafter) posits it as superseding in degree the most powerful object in the natural world, that is, the sun. In fact the poem argues how the "restricted Breadth" is "ampler than the Sun." When considered from the Christian point of view therefore, the grave is neither the end nor closed space for Dickinson. Death transforms the grave from its narrow miserable prison-like state to an adequately roomy accommodation. This view softens up the hard traditional icon of death as endless misery. Thus she may critique, as she does now and then, the "Eclipse" (i.e. the faith in religion and God) that her family members address every morning (L261); but the thought of inescapable death and of the suffocating space in the grave remains tolerable to her because of the biblical promise of a spacious hereafter.

However Camille Paglia finds no such relief in Dickinson's portrayal of the grave and looks upon it as a veritable chamber of horror:

> . . . Dickinson gets her best black comedy from the graveyard: "No Passenger was known to flee/ That lodged a night in memory – / That wily subterranean Inn/ Contrives that none go out again." (1406) This is like the commercial for Black Flag Roach Motel, a little box tiled with insecticide glue: "Bugs check in, but they don't check out!" The Procrustean host of the subterranean inn is probably a Christ of mixed motives, avenging the No Vacancy of his infancy by keeping a perpetual open house with one-way doors (1991:633).

Paglia treats Emily Dickinson as a sadomasochist in which case the grave serves as the most ideal torture chamber. She refreshes the memory of the medieval depiction of the maggoty festering corpse in the sepulchre. There the grave figured as a chamber of horror with its prospects of corporeal putrefaction and decomposition in medieval *ars moriendi* because it looked upon the grave as the appropriate consequence of earthly power and glory. The catholic didacticism of the medieval church weighed heavily upon it, making the fate of the flesh look as frightening as possible in its terminal state. In medieval European *ars moriendi* the grave took precedence over the after–life and the fate of the flesh in the grave was so magnified that it obstructed the vision of the spirit's career. So early New England Puritanism had a striking similarity with medieval Christianity in the depiction of death in its gravestone art (Miller, 1963: I, 17).[11] Reminiscent of early New England mortuary art, death, for Dickinson too, does not always mean transfiguration of the corpse into an angelic form; sometimes she notices the dehumanising act of death resulting in the transformation of the dead into an inanimate and even degendred object.[12] Sometimes, again, it is mysterious, strange and even bizarre. In P#272, the corpse in the grave behaves like a zombie; its death-sleep has no human quality except for the "Pantomime" of pneumatic motions (Ottlinger, 1996:154). The poem provides a peepshow of the world of the dead, as it were, who are not truly alive, but something of a semblance of living human beings. In P#115 the grave looks like a suspicious inn without provisions - its boarders are peculiar, its rooms curious and the owner is a

"Necromancer," a trafficker with the dead: The grave is depicted as an inn of strange arrivals and unaccountable departures:

What inn is this
Where for the night
Peculiar traveler comes ?
Who is the landlord?
Where the maids?
Behold, what curious rooms!
No ruddy fires on the hearth,
No brimming tankards flow.
Necromancer, landlord,
Who are these below?
(P# 115)

That the speaker is bewildered in the alien setting of the grave is reflected in a series of interrogatives in the poem. So the early Puritan image of the grave as a frightful pit somewhat overshadows Dickinson's idea of it. But this image is no longer accompanied by the idea of death as the "King of Terrors" and the wages of sin that bedevilled the early New England Puritans.

However it is not always the case with Dickinson's view of the grave. The changed attitude of her time towards death domesticated the grave and fitted it out with homely hospitalities. Sometimes the atmosphere of the grave is familiar and friendly. In P#1743 the speaker keeps the house ready to entertain guests with "marble tea." She appears to be perfectly at home in her impeccable sepulchral household ("little cottage") eagerly waiting for guests:

The grave my little cottage is,
Where "Keeping house" for thee
I make my parlor orderly
And lay the marble tea.

It is this quality of neat order and warm hospitality that makes "that ferocious Room / A Home" (P#1489). Such offer of love and affection not only considerably reduces the fear of death but it can also encourage one's desire for it, as it reportedly did in nineteenth-century New England.[13] The room is little but *not* small[14]: although physically small, its inner space in metaphysical terms acquires an endless expanse for holding "A Citizen of Paradise" (P#943). Dickinson uses house symbols for graves and graveyards. This is to allay the fear of death and to build up a more welcoming image of the after-life. The soul is supposed to be the resident of the grave until Resurrection; it does not go direct to heaven after death. It is thus as the waiting room of the dead that the grave receives consecration and acquires respectability in Dickinson's writing. The grave becomes a place of love and affection, for it houses "the meek members of the Resurrection." It looks like a version of the medieval purgatory. But the subjunctive "till Judgment break" virtually leaves the speaker in doubt. When the grave is being made she reminds the gravedigger to accomplish his task with great care and solemnity:

> Ample make this Bed --
> Make this Bed with Awe --
> In it wait till Judgment break
> Excellent and Fair.
> (P#829)

This removes the fear of death as the "King of Terrors" and encourages a desire for death, instead. Several of her poems catch the mood of the topical Rural Cemetery movements, as, for example, the following poem evinces it in the newly refurbished "Prison" (i.e. the grave):

> How soft this Prison is
> How sweet these sullen bars

No Despot but the King of Down
Invented this repose.
(P#1334)

Though "the King of Down" replaces "the King of Terrors," yet she does not forget that the grave is essentially a prison, and this one only a little superior with its new refurbishment. This might mean that the intermediate state between mortal life and immortality is not a happy one, and there is no need to be deluded by the sentimental depiction of the condition in the grave. The Cemetery movements therefore could not remove the essential horror of the grave from Dickinson's mind.

However, this does not preclude the possibility of resurrection, as the grave is often a holy stepping stone or prelude to the afterlife for Dickinson. Her idea of death tends to show a streak of mortalism (the belief that the body and soul are now lying dead in the grave and will be resurrected together on Judgement Day) when the graveyard is venerated as a holy ground and graves as bedchambers as in P#829. According to the Bible, the soul is supposed to be the resident of the grave until Resurrection and Last Judgement which are expected by her religion to be "Excellent and Fair." It does not go direct to heaven after death. This notion implies that the grave is merely a transit room for the dead on its onward journey to the next world. In the second stanza of the poem Dickinson might be developing the organicist process of burial and resurrection metaphorised in the Bible respectively as sowing a seed and germinating it. She sets forth her categorical instructions to the undertaker:

Be its Mattress straight –
Be its Pillow round –
Let no Sunrise' yellow noise
Interrupt this Ground –

The corpse is looked upon in the Bible as a seed in the process of germination.[15] Perfect peace in the seedbed is an essential precondition for an uninterrupted germination of the corpse-seed, that is, for the resurrection to happen "Excellent and Fair." Hence her reminder: "Let no Sunrise' yellow noise/ Interrupt this Ground –" (P#829). But the irony is that, contrary to the law of the natural world, the sun is a deterrent rather than an accelerant to the germination of the corpse-seed. The eternal life is opposed to the present sunlit temporal one. Dickinson makes this insinuation as often as she touches on the subject of the afterlife.

Dickinson's graveyard poems in which the cemeteries look like peaceful promenades and the graves are tenderly treated as homes and shelters for the dead are the products of mid-nineteenth-century America when landscaped rural cemeteries, private ownership of graves, and a romantic attitude to death became enormously popular. For instance, Dickinson looks upon the grave as a personal acquisition in the following lines. It is a private place, and distinctively belongs to a particular individual:

I am alive – because
I do not own a House
Entitled to myself – precise –
And fitting no one else –

And marked my Girlhood's name –
So Visitors may know
Which Door is mine – and not mistake –
And try another Key –
(P# 470)

In this sense every owner of the grave is a proprietor. When one is alive one cannot be the owner of this "House." But, upon death, the title

("Entitled" is used in legal terms to indicate the right of possession) of the property is handed to the incumbent. The New England Puritan tradition focused on graveyards as the reminder to the forgetful materialist of the ultimate fate and, as much as their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century predecessors had done before, the mid-nineteenth-century devouts hoped that "the aspirations of vanity, and the pride of distinction in place, wealth, and power [would] here receive an effectual rebuke" (qtd. by Bender, 1974:202). It is reminiscent of Cotton Mather's admonition to children mentioned in Chapter I.

The humanitarian element exists in Dickinson's mortuary thinking when the grave is sentimentally thought of as a shelter or a hospice owing to the tender virtue of its loving kindness towards the fragile, delicate and neglected (even "unnoticed by the Father" P#141). These dead are called "Lambs" for their Christ-like innocence and delicate nature. It is for this reason that they were isolated and discriminated against. They suffered the cruelties of life "for whom time had not a fold" (P#141). Now the tomb protects them from "Nature's Temper" (P#1172). In recognition of this prudence the grave is called "thoughtful" (P#141). Nature and time buffet, turn out of doors and wear down the wretched and destitute. The grave picks them up and tucks them into a warm, peaceful shelter from the hurries and scurries of time. While frightful morning bells drag the children out of their sleep and "nimble Gentlemen / Are forced to keep their rooms -" the tomb is the place without such hurry and jostling. Dickinson defines the grave in terms of insulation against worldly noises: "Not Father's bells - nor Factories, / Could scare us any more!" - "Where tired Children placid sleep / Thro' Centuries of noon" (P#112). This

constitutes Dickinson's idea of bliss and heaven, which, she believes, begin from the grave.

A little before her own death she wrote: "There is no Trumpet like the Tomb"(L1043), implying that the apocalypse occurs at death and in the grave, the trumpet call being the sign of the imminent Revelation in the Bible (Re 1:10; 4:1). When alive the Dickinson persona complains, "I'm finite – I can't see –" (P#696). But "The Dying – as it were a Height" (P#906) furnishes the dead with the unique power of "Compound vision" or "Convex – and Concave Witness –" (P#906). In the tomb the dead is advantageously placed with the ability of looking in two directions simultaneously: backward to the finite life lived in mortal conditions and left behind, and forward to the life to come in infinity. It also enables her to see the bygone life and the forthcoming one in their right perspectives and "Reorganize Estimate." Hence the "Open Tomb" serves as the vantage ground for illumination and revelation at once.

The search for the meaning of life in death led the Puritans to speculate on the grave. Dickinson shared it with her Puritan forbears that the soul should shine forth with a "Vital Light" (P#883) in order to embrace the "Circumference" of lasting rather than momentary meaning.[16] She raced against transitoriness and momentariness for permanence and eternity. The peaceful state in which she imagined her beloved dead to be residing is reflected in the placid and serene figure of the mourning maiden, cool silent tombstone and weeping willow which became the dominant icon of New England consolation literature. The nineteenth-century New England imagination adopted neo-classical marmoreal forms to express its romantic desires (St.Armand, 1977:44). This is in contrast to

the early New England practice of representing the dead in stone where the pictorial scheme was dominated (reminiscently of the *ars moriendi*) by grim death's-heads, dancing skeletons and winged skulls of Puritan stone carving. As the graven figures suggested, the nineteenth-century New England *ars moriendi* portrayed the next world as bathed in sweetness and light. Death in Dickinson, too, stands in a dramatic gesture as a pointer to a world of eternal light – a "Beckoning – Eutrascan invitation – / Toward Light" (P#295). Dickinson's "Alabaster Chamber" is the soul's safe and clean well-lighted residence with ample space for its occupant.

The fanciful urn of the popular marble tombstone was a memento rather than a practical container of the dead person's ashes. It was put up in a garden-like environment. The transformation of the grave from the chamber of horror to one of quiet and peace, and light and brilliance occurred under the impact of a radical shift in the attitude to death in Dickinson's time and for some time past. Death underwent a process of romanticisation and sentimentalisation or, as Ann Douglas says to suggest death's altered image of soft and affectionate embrace, feminisation.[17]. As a result death no longer was represented as a dreadful, strange something staring out of the scooped-out dark eye-pits of the death's-head. It became, instead, a promise of transforming this perishable life into something enduring and permanent, and needless to say, far better. This new national mood led even to the change of the face of the graveyard: benign and beautiful imagery such as urns, vases, weeping willows, doves, flower wreaths, and fingers pointing heavenwards and gay butterflies shooting out of the cocoons embellished the gravestones. Contrasted with the gravestones engraved with skulls, scythes and hourglasses of the

Puritan past, this new graveyard art continuing down well into Dickinson's time affirmed the triumph of life over death.

This same strain runs in Dickinson's attitude to the dead in the grave as priceless treasures (P#141). These treasures have the tender names of delicate creatures: sparrows, lambs, and so forth. The grave provides shelter for the neglected and miserable in this world who receive tombstones as trophies of triumph at death and emblems of permanent spiritual metamorphosis and promotion (P#1396). The elaborate design and glamour of tombstones were made to compensate the dead for their misery and wretchedness in their lifetime. The tombstone was regarded as a memorial of triumph and a reward to the neglected in life. It was an important convention in the art of consolation of the time. Ann Douglas writes:

> The tombstone is the sacred emblem in the cult of the overlooked. It is hardly accidental that the ornate statuary which increasingly decorated Victorian graves has some resemblance to enlarged victory trophies; symbolized and congratulated by stone angels, the dead were not losers but winners (1978:242).

Besides celebrating death, this interpretation in stone would try to picture the manner of the soul's reception in the hereafter. Dickinson would find this idea of the beyond quite convenient and commensurate with her idea of heaven as a place for a family reunion after a long absence of the members. As a result, the grave turned into a temporary suite of romance for her. As St. Armand says:

> Gradually the grave became for Dickinson not a permanent residence but a stopping-off place, a "small Domain" (P#943), a beacon whose "little Panels" were glowing with a welcoming light (P#611), a boardinghouse or a wayside "Inn" that entertained "Peculiar Travelers" (P#115), or finally a "little cottage" where once could play at being

> husband and wife – literally, a subterranean honeymoon hotel (P#1743)(1986:69).

Ambivalence, as has been noted so far, is a conspicuous element in Dickinson's depiction of the grave and indicates a frame of mind as indecisive as her positions on the unseen and unverifiable. Just as her delineation of the grave is strongly affected by the sentimentalism of her time, most of the time she cannot forget the horrors of the sepulchral state of the corpse, too.

This duality is well demonstrated in P#216 ("Safe in their Alabaster Chambers – "). Paralysed consciousness in the grave and the doubtful certainty of resurrection constitute the central themes of this poem. The corpses are lying immaculately dressed up in their luxurious alabaster coffins waiting for resurrection. The graceful calm on their aristocratic faces – matching, as though, the label "meek members of the Resurrection" – reflects self-complacency at the certainty of their salvation in the life to come. The irony emerges, as Ottlinger argues (1996:158-59), when a third poem is composed of three stanzas from the two versions as follows: [18]

> Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –
> Untouched by Morning –
> Untouched by Noon –
> Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection –
> Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone!
>
> Light laughs the breeze
> In her Castle above them –
> Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
> Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence –
> Ah, what sagacity perished here!
>
> Grand go the Years – in the Crescent –above them –
> Worlds scoop their Arcs –
> And Firmaments – row –
> Diadems – drop – and Doges – surrender –

Soundless as dots – on a Disc of Snow –.

The first stanza posits a religious view of death and the grave within the Puritan frame of reference, and is deeply informed by the idiom of the Bible and Protestant hymns, particularly "meek members," "Safe" and "Sleep" in the second and fourth lines (Ottlinger, 1996:157). The word "Lie" of the second version replacing the "Sleep" of the first would be significant from the Calvinistic point of view, since it would imply that the dead will be lying "expectantly" (that is, without sleep) in their graves till Last Judgement which is appropriate to Calvinistic thinking.[19] They are beyond the temporal processes and death is marginal to them. But the irony is that, for all their privileges and aristocratic status, they are to remain shut in from the festivities of life. Dickinson contrasts the frozen costliness of the grave with the high jinks of nature outside suggesting that maybe these dead are after some illusion in their wait for resurrection ("Ah, what sagacity perished here!"), which might never come true. Their sagacity in foregoing the joys of life might prove foolish in the long run. If the coffin or grave is where sagacity perishes, then this costly chamber certainly means the end of cognitive power. The last stanza of the above poem expands further into a wonderful vision of cosmic arcs and circles of which these so-called "meek members of the Resurrection" are also deprived. Ironically, this vision is not available to them for all their privileged status because of the same reason that the temporal processes cannot touch them. The vision is part of this process. Only the living that belong to the temporal law of change are privileged to witness it. So the grave or coffin may be a safe, changeless place; but it is nevertheless dark, cold and lifeless. The grave still holds her attention, because she knows it

to be the only key to the enigma of the afterlife. This ambivalence also characterises Dickinson's attitude to the afterlife whose existence continually intrigued her with various degrees of probability.

Dickinson's "Codicil of Doubt" (P#1012) always interferes with any simple conviction about the after life. Yet some sort of belief in the beyond shows through her eschatology. In P#1757 the mention of hell implies an afterlife even for "a wretch" who is considered "Too sullied for the hell" by harsh temporal judgement. Although she knows that the dead never return to the living once they are separated by death, she would like to believe that the dead somehow "still abide" with the living, perhaps in the same way that certain memories of the past live on in us (P#1515). Her dear dead, she would like to believe, are similar to such joys which go to come back like travellers, who always return with richer experience: their absence is temporary, and mourning for them therefore is otiose. Dickinson's simile for the dead is "joys" which intermittently reappear and therefore never completely go away. The simile cleverly works out a consolation for her through the reassurance of a future reunion with the departed. This obviates mourning for the dead: "We do not mourn for Traveler, or Sailor, / Their Routes are fair –" This assumption that the departed are safe and sound is make-believe but useful in consoling the bereaved spirit.

The nature of the world of the dead is suggested in Dickinson's letters and poems by way of commentaries on the relationship between the living and the dead. She says that pity for the dead is superfluous and even misplaced. She mocks at the lachrymose gestures of the living towards the

dead, for their sorrows now benefit the mourners more than they do the dead who were denied pity or sympathy when they actually needed them, that is, when they were alive. The bereaved draw the sympathy of others for themselves by mourning:

> 'Tis easier to pity those when dead
> That which pity previous
> Would have saved –
> A Tragedy enacted
> Secures Applause
> That Tragedy enacting
> Too seldom does.
> (P#1698)

(The participles "enacted" and "enacting" subtly differentiate between the belated, ineffectual sorrow of the present staged for "Applause" and the timely sympathy of the past that might have spared the dead their tragedy in life). In P#521 the dead reject the pity of the living "with Death's Ethereal Scorn." The loss that death causes occurs only to the living, for "loss" is an earthly phenomenon which has no power over the dead. Tears are therefore of the material world for earthly mortals, and the dead have no use for them. Deriding the earthly offerings to the dead, she said to T. W. Higginson: "To congratulate the Redeemed is perhaps superfluous for Redemption leaves nothing for Earth to add –" (L593). In fact the living need tears but for themselves because the dead leave no accounts receivable: at death they

> Paid all that life had earned
> In one consummate bill
> And now, what life or death can do
> Is immaterial.
> (P#1724)

After the death of her father Edward Dickinson she told her Norcross cousins in the way of consolation: "The grief is our side, darlings, and the glad is theirs" (L278). The poem (P#335) incorporated in this letter carries the usual Dickinson paradox: "It is not dying hurts us so, – / 'Tis living hurts us more." It is a typical Puritan view in her that death liberates the individual from the pains of mortality, life being itself a continual, "multifold" death (P#1013). Human beings are trapped in this existential condition because they cannot adopt "a better Latitude" when the frost of death sets in. In 1870 she wrote to her aunt to say that death is the security of life and guarantor of happiness: "It is sweet to think they [the dead] are safe by Death and that that is all we have to pass to obtain their face. There are no Dead, dear Katie, the grave is but our moan for them" (L338). When she interprets the grave as "our moan," Dickinson suggests the utility of mourning to be exclusively for the bereaved. To pass death is not merely to cross it but also to achieve it that qualifies the living to enter the rare company of their beloved dead in the next world. Therefore in P#1691 death is designated as an accomplishment. When death appears to be a firm, ineluctable fact, an unavoidable end and a compulsory route to be travelled, Dickinson wishes for a possible reunion with the dead after her own death.

The death of others can affect the living individual positively: the sight of life's closure enriches them with both a sense of completion and fulfilment, and an enlightened understanding of the afterlife. The spectacle of death effaces all self-consciousness in the living and their materialistic sense of superiority. In P#856 Dickinson speaks of "a finished feeling/

Experienced at Graves." Whether the dead or the living experience this feeling is not clear in the first stanza. But in the second stanza it is clearly about the living: a wider vista of the future life with its vast magnitude and freedom is opened out to them who can also acquire thereby a heightened power to make exact self-estimation and wise inferences about the future life:

> A leisure of the Future
> A Wilderness of Size.
> By Death's bold exhibition
> Preciser what we are
> And the Eternal function
> Enabled to infer.

Encounters with death equip us with a rare capacity to understand both the human condition and the supernal dimensions of the ultimate "with a more detached and daring intelligence" (Weisbuch, 1975:96).

One use of death for the living is that it heightens the intensity of earthly life by sharpening the awareness of "life's penurious length": death helps "Italicize its [life's] sweetness" (P#1717). As italics are used in writing for highlighting and emphasis, Dickinson uses the typographical term "italicise" obviously to indicate the heightened sense of lust for life that death provokes by reminding the living "That it [this life] will never come again" (P#1741). This realisation "Is what makes life so sweet. / Believing what we don't believe / Does not exhilarate." There might be a subtle motivation towards hedonism in casting doubt on the sincerity of the complacent feeling arising out of an unverified harangue about the afterlife. True exhilaration comes from a genuine conviction sincerely lived. The most the persona can think of in the poem that might follow upon death is "An ablative estate –," that is, a total blank that arouses

repulsion from death ("an appetite / Precisely opposite"). The thought is rebelliously unpietistic indeed (as she says of her thought in L39) while her religion fills the post-mortem void with a precisely defined picture of heaven and hell and so on and so forth.

Dickinson was consistently ambivalent towards earthly life: while recognising the pains of mortality, she encouraged Susan Gilbert (her future sister-in-law by marriage to Austin) to indulge in a sort of hedonism: "Susie – have all the fun wh' you possibly can – and laugh as often and sing, for tears are plentier than smiles in this world of our's . . ." (L56). What she points out as the imperfections of the world are, in a sense, the doing of death and its associates. The option for a life of pleasure is a sign of utter despair in the condition of rampant death as construed by the author of the *Decameron*. Boccaccio records similar reactions among the Florentines caught up in the grip of the Great Plague in the mid-14th century: stupefied by persistent death, they thought that "an infallible way of warding off this appalling evil was to drink heavily, enjoy life to the full, go round singing and merrymaking, gratify all of one's cravings whenever the opportunity offered, and shrug the whole thing off as one enormous joke" (1972:52). So when Dickinson experiences the world as a valley of death, her suggested choice of a life of pleasure is a perfectly standard one.

P#1665 affirms the persona's sense of superiority over the "people in the Grave" just for the fact of being alive and more enlightened. The "right to walk upon the Earth" is a matter of pride and privilege which she relishes the more because the dead are denied such delights now. But at the same time it is true that the awareness of death has enabled her to notice

closely the otherwise insignificant details and actions of life. Thus death makes the individual sensitive to, and conversant with life: "'Tis this expands the least event / And swells the scantest deed –." The persona feels pity for the dead in P#529 because the latter cannot participate in the busy, convivial harvest season and their former human associations:

> A Wonder if the Sepulchre
> Don't feel a lonesome way –
> When Men – and Boys – and Carts – and June,
> Go down the Fields to "Hay"

Dickinson's usage of death is significantly different from the early New England approaches. The early England Puritans would use the fact of death for educating their sinful flocks in the ways of the afterlife: they found it to be an efficacious shock therapy for the self-forgetful slumbering laity. Dickinson finds herself a different didactic use of death. It is true that "one Defaulting face/ Behind a Pall" (P#1328) shakes us up to the fact of life's brevity and mortal status; but, on the other hand, says Dickinson, it serves as an impetus to intense Epicurean living in temporality rather than as an admonition for moral rectitude with a view to consequences in the afterlife:

> Had I known that the first was the last
> I should have kept it longer,
> Had I known that the last was the first
> I should have drunk it stronger,
> Cup, it was your fault,
> Lip was not the liar
> No, lip, it was yours
> Bliss was most to blame.
> (P#1720)

It is one of Dickinson's look-back poems in which the dead persona ruminates on her past life in her present state of death. By hindsight, she judges her temporal life and repents not enjoying it enough. Her belated realisation and deep regrets for not having made the most of this life make the poem unlike any typical Puritan piece. A Biblical passage (Mathew 20:16) is twisted in the poem to yield irony. The original passage in Scripture tells of the reversal of the earthly order of things: those who are last in worldly estimation are to have an upfront position on the Day of Judgement. But there are no metaphysical implications of "first" and "last" in this poem: they refer to temporal life. While "first" and "last" in the first line refer to temporal order, "last" means this life and "first" signifies its supreme quality in the third verse. The persona despairs of not having enjoyed her earthly life longer and better, for she did not know that that life was the only one given her. Thus the poem is an extollment of earthly life, and does not make any metaphysical reference beyond the point of death. But the consciousness of the certainty of death in the poem remains the sole catalyst for her life of the senses, though there is no comparison made between the persona's present state in death and the past one in life.

Dickinson found in her religion both the extremes of the pains of mortal life and the ecstasy of the liberated spirit. On the one hand the Bible reminded her of life's brevity and death round the corner: she was constantly in mind of "life's penurious length" (P#1717) that kept pestering her immensely. She is deeply grateful, on the other, for this life: "Life is a spell so exquisite that everything conspires to break it" (L389); "To live is Endowment. It puts me in mind of that singular Verse in the

Revelations -- 'Every several Gate was of one Pearl'" (L399). She vindicates the power of life over death in P#677. Although life is fleeting and short, it is power enough in itself:

> To be alive – is Power –
> Existence – in itself –
> Without a further function –
> Omnipotence – Enough

Life's intensity derives from the fact of its brevity. The helpless human condition with little or no power to transcend it absolves human beings from all responsibilities regarding their ultimate fate. Dickinson renders this Calvinistic conviction about human beings as essentially handicapped creatures in the following poem:

> In this short Life
> That only last an hour
> How much – how little – is
> Within our power.
> (P#1287)

She is neither in the interrogative nor in the exclamatory mood: it is one of despair and resignation. It is the fleeting duration of life that deeply disturbs her. She shows her eschatological tendencies in viewing earthly reality as a passing shadow – insubstantial, illusory and short-lived – as predominantly made up of transients. Objects as delicate and thin as "floss," "gauze" and "gossamer" serve her both as the emblems of this reality and life and as the metaphors of her own thoughts, the finery of her mind: "For only Gossamer, my Gown – My Tippet – only Tulle –" (P#712). However refined the words may be ("Yarn of Pearl"), they are vulnerable and fragile in the last analysis, for they prove to be mere "Sophistries" (P#605) – insubstantial and slight – when death appears as

an irrevocable and massive reality and blasts them to shreds and nothingness.[20]

The deceased receive an apotheosis at death denied them in life. They are glorified in spite of themselves: death is the moment of coronation for everybody, high and low, whether they want it or not:

> One dignity delays for all –
> One mitred Afternoon –
> None can avoid this purple –
> None evade this crown
> (P#98)

The grave is an impartial leveller. All social differences are smoothed out by death: "Not any higher stands the grave" (P#1256), says she. Although Dickinson is sarcastic about death being "democratic" (L195) she appreciates its unbiased or unprejudiced funerary ministrations to all alike. It is "A Miracle for all" that "The hospitable Pall" receives everyone impartially in an egalitarian manner:

> No Life can pompless pass away –
> The lowliest career
> To the same Pageant wends its way
> As that exalted here –
> (P#1626)

So passing away is also passing out in full regalia for everyone. It serves as a consolation for those who suffer the indignities of time resulting from the temporal classification of "Color – Caste – Denomination" (P#970). Death removes temporal labels and the deceased acquire new categories through "Death's diviner Classifying":

> As in sleep – All the forgotten –
> Tenets – put behind –
> Death's large – Democratic fingers .
> Rub away the Brand –
> (P#970)

The dead change through death's mysterious process of "Obscuring" into a form of life incomprehensible to even "the minuter intuitions" of the living. The social respect that the dead command and the awe that they inspire among the living are due to the fact that "My Lord 'the Lord of Lords' / Receives [them] unblushingly" (P#171).

But ironically such honour accorded to the dead is misplaced, for it meets with utter indifference from them. One of the reasons is that the dead become inanimate *objects* bereft of all human qualities through death as Dickinson indicates by the use of "it" in the following poem:

Praise it – 'tis dead –
It cannot glow –
Warm this inclement Ear
With the encomium it earned
Since it was gathered here –
Invest this alabaster Zest
In the Delights of Dust –
Remitted – since it flitted it
In recusance august.
(P#1384)

Besides such adoration is often suspect, momentary and forgettable in the course of time because it is most likely to be sentimental effusion (P#1660). However death can be a speckless and impeccable lens through which a right perspective on the dead can be obtained:

The height of our portentous Neighbor
We never know
Till summoned to his recognition
By an Adieu –
(P#1497)

The neighbour begrudged in life goes beyond envy in death and ironically acquires an irresistible fame thereby, as Francis Bacon says: "Death hath this also; that it openeth the gate to good fame, and exitinguisheth envy" (1967:5).

Dickinson believes like her Puritan predecessors that life holds a warped perspective on life. One can sense a Shelleyan ring about the view that death removes the illusions in which the individual remains wrapped up in life, and reveals the person's true stature by allowing, in Shelley's words, "the white radiance of Eternity."[21] Human beings shine in the best light in death, not in life. "I see the clearer for the Grave" (P#1666) is about death as an eye-opener enabling us to make a true estimate of the deceased. Death helps define human beings existentially: it is not their physical presence but the magnitude of their act left behind after his death that defines him:

> I know thee better for the Act
> That made thee first unknown
> The stature of the empty nest
> Attests the Bird that's gone.

The "impassive stone" (i.e. the gravestone) – metaphorically the mirror of death that now reflects the absentee's work but not the person – is contrasted with any worldly reflector that flatters and magnifies the living person with his material achievements. Thus the function of death is to disperse the false light of illusion under the influence of corporeal presence and reveal the exact stature of the person by "the Act."

Eschatologically, then, it is an affirmation that full knowledge comes from an encounter with the ultimate, and death in individual cases functions as an apocalypse. Death is synonymous with a search for ultimate knowledge. When the persona in a poem says on the eve of her death, "'Tis Dying – I am doing – but / I'm not afraid to know –" (P#692), she virtually acts out an apocalypse. Death roundly reveals to her the mystery that otherwise refuses to yield.

Sometimes Dickinson thinks of the emotional ties between the living and the dead as impediments to a smooth progress of the dead towards their final destination. In P#901 the dead seem to be hesitant to take leave owing to the backward pull of affection for the living: "Those that rose to go – / Then thought of Us, and stayed." But there are also poems in which this concern for the living is totally absent. The dead persona in P#1410 would rather keep silent than tell why she had left the loved ones. The implication is that the fact of her total unconcern for them "would ravage" their hearts. Or maybe she is too busy with serious preoccupations there to remember her earthly company:

> In thy long Paradise of Light
> No moment will there be
> When I shall long for Earthly Play
> And mortal Company –
> (P#1145)

Apparently the "long Paradise of Light" is thought to be a busy place which permits no concern for human frivolities. The brass tacks of such query are that the dead in paradise would have no concern for the living mortals.

For Emily Dickinson, the implications of death come in useful, since they supposedly hold some sort of key to the mystery of the afterlife, on the one hand, and exhilarate mortal life, on the other. She often writes about the ties between the living and the dead in her letters, too, that influence the quality of life in several ways. The dead not only remind the living of the ultimate day of reckoning; they also provide their life with some kind of value. So the living need to make themselves worthy of their dead if they believe that they will meet them in the next world. In 1882 she wrote to Higginson about the death of Charles Wadsworth: "To be worthy

of what we lose is the supreme aim" (L765). By their death the dead not only reduce the fear of death for the living but they also perhaps increase the attraction of death for them to the point of temptation. In a prose fragment she says: "We do not think enough of the Dead as exhilarants – they are not dissuaders but Lures – Keepers of that great Romance still to us foreclosed – while coveting (we envy) their wisdom we lament their silence" (PF50). That she can *believe* only "doubtfully" in an afterlife is evident in her ironic gratitude to God for not revealing the truth in this life in the same fragment: "That they [the dead] still exist is a trust so *daring* we thank thee that thou hast hid these things from us and hast revealed them to them. The power and glory are the post mortuary gifts." Her left-handed compliments to the deity do not however dim her conviction that eternal power and glory can but follow upon death. Yet she constantly wrestles with doubt and despair and looks for solid and substantial support from reliable sources. Like her Puritan predecessors, she turned to nature in the belief that it served as a symbolic medium of communication for God and the supernatural world, and therefore the activities of the natural world were signs of some hidden divine or supernatural import.

Dickinson searches through nature for evidence that the Biblical assurance of an afterlife following death is true. Her treatment of the eschatological implications of natural phenomena has provoked diverse and discordant responses from her critics. Richard Chase observes a distinct parallel between nature and Dickinson's "personal eschatological myth" (1952:196). On the contrary William Sherwood contends that Dickinson could not accept the signs of nature as evidence of the existence of an afterlife until 1861 despite Emerson's influence on her (1968:99). He

claims that Dickinson had by then developed her own inner strength that could trust in immortality without any external promptings. Rather than a "key" to the afterlife she found nature to be an impenetrable "wall" (Sherwood, 1968: 179, 200). Albert C. Gelpi, by contrast, can trace the Edwardsean tendency of interpreting nature as a supernatural analogue in Dickinson's poetry (1965:153-155). There is ample testimony in her poetry that she seeks evidential support from nature towards a faith in the afterlife. But, then, to repose absolute faith on a vulnerable and unstable foundation such as nature was not her way.

The cyclical process of vegetable nature provides Dickinson with the traditional metaphors of mortality, resurrection and immortality. In the Bible analogies are drawn between sowing and burial, and between the seed and the corpse. She would like to believe that death and resurrection are similar to the regenerative process of nature carried out by the sowing of the seed and the transfiguration of the seed into a plant. In P#40 the natural phenomenon of the sown seeds "To bloom so, bye and bye" prefigures the miracle of "the people/ Lain so low, / To be received high" as blossoms in "the garden/ Mortal shall not see – ". This belief shorn of the "Bee" (that is, doubt) helps the persona overcome the brooding despair of losing "this summer [that is, this life], unreluctantly." Germination of seeds symbolises resurrection from death and burial in nature. The metaphor is a biblical precedent: in 1Corinthians 15:36-44 the dead body is compared to a seed "that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die"(36). The poem in L739 captures the drama of burial and resurrection in the figure of the dandelion coming into gorgeous bloom from its "pallid Tube":

The Tube uplifts a signal Bud
And then a shouting Flower, -
The Proclamation of the Suns
That sepulture is o'er.

Metaphorically, the "Proclamation of the Suns" is made of eternal life.

In Dickinson's writings flowers represent salvation, and here, figuratively speaking, the change from seed to flower is a hierarchical advance up the ladder of being from a lower state of life and form to a higher and better one. The persona in P#46 takes heart that the dead might have a different form of life when she sees the return of blossoms in nature:

I keep my pledge
I was not called –
Death did not notice me.
I bring my Rose.
I plight again.
By sainted Bee –
By Daisy called from hillside –
By Bobolink from lane.
Blossom and I –
Her oath, and mine –
Will surely come again.

Noticeably her faith in a resurrection (return / rebirth) is not based on the promise of the Bible. (She is rather frustrated that fulfilling the pledge has earned her but neglect.) It is rather certain positive signs such as "sainted Bee," "Daisy," and "Bobolink" that can reassure her better. The verb form of the word "plight" implies a situation which, in the context of the poem, might suggest her firm resolve to go it alone by her own private faith whether her official religion approves of it or not.[22] Anyway the cyclical process of the seasons serves as a concrete analogy for the Christian idea of resurrection through death of the body and the burial of the corpse. Thus

nature provides her with instances of some arrangement in the scheme of creation and dissolution by which the dead might have a similar rebirth into a superior state. The speaker tries to assure herself that she will certainly find a renewed life on a higher plane of existence. The strong conviction to this effect expressed in the final verse of the poem is a desperate attempt to find an answer to the mystery of death.

Generally cold, frost, midnight and winter are associated with death of a malign and predatory nature in Dickinson's poetry that snatches away lives prematurely. On the other hand, the death that comes as mellow midsummer with its "Consummated Bloom" and "Corn, her furthest kernel filled" figures as a benevolent harvester of the soul (P#962). It is similar to Keats's autumn which brings the fully mature and ripe to a seasonable close. Metaphorically the perfect soul is conceivable as the kernel of a full-grown grain of corn. It is the midsummer of the spirit, "A full, and perfect time" for the soul to come out of the husk of the body.[23] In Dickinson's poem (P#962) the comparison between the perfecting process of nature and the consummation of the soul is obvious "When These – leaned into Perfectness – / Through Haze of Burial –" The comparison is made between the climax of the natural world in ripe fruit and the culmination of spiritual development, for the speaker implicitly believes that the regenerative prospects of mortal life are similar to the stages of the seasonal cycle. She rests her faith on the regenerative process of nature. But in a later poem (P#1386) the analogy does not seem to work well, for it is said: " . . . Summer does not care – / She goes her spacious way."

If summer and death are symbolically synonymous (as it *is* suggested to be in the other preceding poem), nothing transpires from the spectacle of death in the way of revelation:

> The Doom to be adored –
> The Affluence conferred –
> Unknown as to an Ecstasy
> The Embryo endowed –

It does not tell us whether what follows is wealth or poverty, light or darkness. Despite all effort to know the reality of post-*mortem* existence, we remain as hopelessly ignorant of the other world as the embryo is of the life to come. Whatever it is, the circumstances of the afterlife have to be left to blind faith. So the process of the eternal return enacted by the seasonal cycle of nature is not to be taken as an unimpeachable evidence of the existence of the afterlife and immortality.

In P#1422 the exception is strongly pronounced: summer has two beginnings (in October and May) so that its departure is short-lived soon to be followed by its arrival:

> Departing then – forever –
> Forever – until May –
> Forever is deciduous –
> Except to those who die –

Except for those short breaks, summer is continuous. The death of a vegetable life in nature can look festive because it is holiday for that object which will resume its life in the near future. Summer goes to come back while the dead person goes away forever. Therefore

> We were our sober Dresses when we die,
> But Summer, frilled as for a Holiday
> Adjourns her sigh –
> (P#1572)

Then it is not difficult to see why "Forever is deciduous," that is, recurrently alive and green in nature, and why departure in vegetable nature is not so permeated with grief as it is in the human world. Death takes the deceased "beyond the Rose" without allowing them to return while the rose comes back after death (P#56). The "deciduous" scheme of things, then, does not hold good for human departees, especially those who have exited by death. Nature experiences a kind of immortality by its recurrent cycle, which Dickinson qualifies by "deciduous," that is, not sustained but interrupted by seasonal mortality. Dickinson suggests by "deciduous" that the whole talk of post-mortem existence conceived of on the model of the natural cycle is, as a matter of fact, an expediency and a publicity for ready consolation.

Dickinson always contrasts the death in nature with that in the human world. Dew serves to exemplify the difference between two kinds of departure: human beings go from the earth as quietly as dew but not like dew do they "return / At the Accustomed hour" (P#149). Once they leave, they are never seen again. There is no waking them up from "A long – long Sleep – A famous –/ That makes no show for Morn – / By stretch of Limb – or stir of Lid –" (P#654). We simply suspend our anxiety about the fate of the dead by consigning them to nature and assuming that they have become part of the natural cycle of death and resurrection:

> Lain in Nature – so sufficeth us
> The enchantless Pod
> When we advertise existence
> For the missing Seed –
> (P#1288)

The corpse-seed that goes out of sight by sowing is conveniently thought to have started another existence from the moment of death and burial onward. But the "enchantless Pod" does not tell much to that effect about "the missing Seed." Nature seals off the dead so firmly and conclusively that no effort can "move a sod/ Pasted by the simple summer/ On the Longed for Dead." So nature reveals no secret about the other world, though it seems to come tantalisingly close to making disclosures.

A sharp contrast between the living and the dead, between life's closeness and death's remoteness, is brought out in P#1702:

> Today or this noon
> She dwelt so close
> I almost touched her –
> Tonight she lies
> Past neigborhood
> And bough and steeple,
> Now past surmise.

Death puts a look of distance on everything it touches (P#258), and defamiliarises the familiar. Death transforms the known life of the dead into a baffling riddle for the living, for the dead walk "within the Riddle" (P#50). The realm of the dead seems to be

> Further than Guess can gallop
> Further than Riddle ride –
> Oh for a Disc to the Distance
> Between Ourselves and the Dead!
> (P#949)

As death imposes total silence, there is no knowing his mysteries from Death: he "only shows his Marble Disc – / Sublimer sort – than Speech"(P#330), as though speech were too profane for such high and mighty persons.[24] Withholding knowledge is characteristic of death: death is "the Tomb, / who tells no secret" (P#408). So what happens in and after death is beyond the grasp of living human beings. For Dickinson life and

death pose a sharp contrast between what we know and what we don't: "Life – is what we make it – / Death – We do not know –" (P#698). Her poems are therefore interpretable as heuristic exercises in finding out about the indecipherable mystery of death.

Although interpretively potential for their enigmatic signs, the terminal phenomena in nature nevertheless seem to yield no decisive clue to queries about the afterlife for her. Neither does she get a univocal answer to her problems from her observations of nature. Or the evidence is too tenuous to be satisfactory as explanation in favour of the existence of an afterlife. This was opposed to the orthodox religious view of nature held equally by the Anglicans and Protestants of her day.[25] Dickinson tries every kind of strategy and possible sources of answers, for she is not frozen with any single blind faith in what she cannot experience directly with her senses. She concentrates on death for the same reason of an absent centre. Diehl says, "In the absence of any firm faith, Dickinson turns to death as the potential disclosure of final mysteries" (1980:2). It is thus that she achieves a kind of closest proximity to the ultimate. The eschatological activities in the natural world quicken her imagination with their apocalyptic occurrences as diurnal and seasonal endings. Dickinson is magnetised by these subjects.

But when she finds nature to be an inadequate and unconvincing source of explanation for the final mysteries of death she turns to the very situation or moment when death is expected to be actually "witnessed." The deathbed, then, is the vital spot worth watching, where the dying person is supposedly on the threshold, and in sight of the afterlife. It is her next alternative to nature as a medium of revelation. She has a keen eye for

descrying the impalpable divine grace that lights up the countenance of the deceased at the final hour. It is thus that she describes the face of her dead mother in an otherworldly setting: "Mother was very beautiful when she had died. Seraphs are solemn artists. The illumination that comes but once paused upon her features, and it seemed like hiding a picture to lay her in the grave . . ." (L785). But while capturing the epiphany and divine light Dickinson did not miss the shadow of death in the simile of occlusion and concealment – "hiding a picture."

Yet, as she argues in her self-consolatory letter to the Reverend Forrest F. Emerson (L1018) on the occasion of little Gilbert's death, she would like to believe that " . . . there is a purpose of benevolence which does not include our present happiness." The divine purpose, then, is indifferent to, or discounts the impact of death on the living. The implication is that she is willing to suffer "little human" bereavement if she is assured of death's good intentions and greater purpose in the long run. Actually she did become somewhat convinced of death's friendly intentions and got something of a hint of a "happy-and-gay," merry-go-round environment in the next world from little Gilbert's death-bed cry: "October is a mighty Month, for in it Little Gilbert died. 'Open the Door' was his last Cry – "the Boys are waiting for me!'" (L1020). Dickinson constantly seeks confirmation of the Christian claim that heaven exists and that it is "a perfect – pauseless Monarchy" (P#721). Whoever enters there, she is told by her religion, is conferred a regal degree and admitted into the aristocracy of the dead: "Courtiers quaint, in Kingdoms / Our departed are" (P#721). If she can be certain of it, then she will be able to accept death as a means of obtaining entry into that world.

Dickinson's logical mind militates against the biblical high talk of heaven and immortality as objective entities in the *post-mortem* state:

> To die – without the Dying
> And live – without the Life
> This is the hardest Miracle
> Propounded to belief.
> (P#1017)

Yet she forces herself to believe in "the hardest Miracle" – death-without-dying and life-without-living – in order to work out a consolation by which she can reject death as permanent separation and can wait for reunion with her dear dead in the "pauseless Monarchy" until her own death. In her view "passing," then, would mean moving towards the reclamation of the lost:

> We'll pass without the parting
> So to spare
> Certificate of Absence –
> Deeming where
>
> I left Her I could find Her
> If I tried –
> This way, I keep from missing
> Those that died.
> (P#996)

She would like to believe in death as a separation only longer rather than perpetual in order to overcome her emotional difficulty of admitting it to be a permanent one. To her absent brother Austin, she wrote to share consolation for his long absence:

> . . .the time will soon be over, and we shall all be together again as we were of old – you know how fast time can fly, if we only let it go – then recollect dear Austin, that none of us are gone where we cannot come home again, and the separations here are but for a little while (L104).

Dickinson resorts to the traditional Christian consolation for absence which is based on the belief that all earthly separations are temporary. It provides her with the logic that if separation means being elsewhere where one can go for reunion, the death-separation can also be made good by rejoining the dead by dying. The "Fleshless Lovers" meet for a "second time" before the "Judgment Seat of God" and this time they wed (P#625). Therefore her gaze is fixed on the life to come. For her, then, death is the dividing line between this life and the next, and parting is not negation but potentially positive and prospective. She calls death "the Hyphen of the Sea" (P#1454), the verbal sign that at once directs the eye backward and forward and both divides and connects up what goes before with what comes after. At the same time it indicates the ambivalence of the perceiving mind and the ambiguity of the situation itself. She seeks relief from these agonising ambiguities by whatever means is available to her, even by keeping a traditional death-watch.

Dickinson's poems and letters show her avid interest in the manner of dying. Watching the dying person for post-mortem mysteries came to her from her New England Calvinistic tradition. It was a common practice among her contemporaries, too. The vivid account of Beecher's wife's deathbed scene described in *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher* would be typical:

> She was struggling with death when I entered: her brows were knit, and a deadly paleness was gathering fast, with distressing movements and convulsive throes. I thought, 'lord God! Can we go through this?' ... She broke out, 'Oh how delightful!' Her whole countenance brightened and gleamed. She waved her hands with joy, saying, 'Oh how delightful! Did you ever see anything like it? Joy unspeakable and full of glory! There is not room enough to receive it!' She continued in this state until she sunk into a sleep-like state...(2:275).

The dying person's words were given utmost importance of which John Ross MacDuff said in his *The Words of Jesus*: "How specially cherished and memorable are his last looks and last words!" (1856:80-81).[26] At any rate the art of dying was carefully cultivated on both sides of the Atlantic. The practice was so widespread and often carried to such an extent that an "etiquette of dying" existed among Christians of all denominations in the 19th century in both the United States and Great Britain (Rowell, 1974:7-8). The death-bed was considered the place where the elect testified to their faith and demonstrated their trust in God.

One of the reasons for Dickinson's interest in deathbed details of the deceased is that she hopes to pick up some kind of intimation from the afterlife through the medium of the dying person. The human medium might act more reliably in the way of unveiling the supernatural dimensions of death. She keeps a death-watch because no second-hand report is acceptable to her without first-hand verification. As Thomas Ford contends, "She apparently did not try to escape the problem [of death] by ignoring it, or by accepting some second-hand or easy solution. Rejecting pre-conceptions, she chose to pursue that first-hand experience of the existentialist" (1966:32). It is because she does not accept on faith any single school of thought on death. Therefore the clinical evidence of close observation of the dying is crucial to her.

This might account for frequent fumblings and gropings for a definition, and occasionally for resulting inconsistencies in her thoughts about death. Although the visions seen by the dying person are not available to the living, the attendant might get an impersonal impression of the other world by faithfully recording the exact details of the dying

person's deathbed behaviour. It is done in the hope that some kind of objective idea of the next life could be obtained thereby. P#s 71 and 547 are good examples of Dickinson as an artist *par excellence* of deathbed dramaturgy. Death lends a dramatic quality to her otherwise introvert lyrics (Ford, 1966:33):

> A throe upon the features –
> A hurry in the breath –
> An ecstasy of parting
> Denominated "Death" –
> (P#71)

The violence of death is nowhere better dramatised than in the spasms of the flesh (in Puritan judgement, the most terrified of the human elements at the approach of death) and the quickening of breath: on the contrary, the spirit is thrilled at death's arrival. Death causes the separation of flesh and spirit, the climax of the meditation and spiritual career of the pious. This response to death on the part of both flesh and spirit is Puritan in particular and religious in general. The flesh and the spirit are entangled with, albeit opposed to, each other. At the moment of death, therefore, the excruciating pain of the flesh and the joy and jubilation of the spirit get ironically mixed up. The final moment is the loosening up and coming apart of body and soul from their interlock.

Dickinson dramatises another deathbed watch in P#547. The dying person becomes an ocular and oracular medium, as it were. The eye roves around to capture "Something" that the "living" eye cannot see. The "Dying Eye" acts supposedly as a reflector of the invisible to the death-bed attendants. The singular "eye" instead of the plural "eyes" is indicative of the watcher's utmost concentration on the dying person's facial and ocular expressions in order to descry, if possible, some reflection of the

other world. There is a peculiar merging of the points of view of the observer and the observed. In lines four and five the objective narrator becomes subjective when she self-forgetfully sees the world through the dying person's eyes. But what at first appears to be transparent and shiny fogs up and gradually freezes up into an impenetrable opaque veil – dead thick, in fact too thick to see through. (In P#479 the transparent eye misted over with an impermeable film repeats Dickinson's meaning of death – a thick veil put up by the frozen eye between the living and the dead, thus cutting off all communication: "The Film upon the eye/ Mortality's old Custom – / Just locking up – to Die." Death sends off the victim into its lockup and the frozen eyes are metaphorised into the lock of Death's dungeon.). Instead of that "Something" being apparent, the fadeout takes up all attention. The medium, at first soft and shifting, slowly solidifies into a hard, invincible wall between the intent onlookers and the presumed vision of the other world:

> Then Cloudier become –
> And then – obscure with Fog –
> And then – be soldered down
> Without disclosing what it be
> 'Twere blessed to have seen –

Ironically the expectation builds up stage by stage to frustration at last. There is only the closure of the eyes and the disclosure of nothing. The "Something" visible only to the "Dying Eye" remains a mystery to the living and hence a matter of intermittent speculation and conjecture. So the watcher's ultimate effort is the backlash of uncertainty as to what visions were vouchsafed the dying person. Wilner suggests it to be eternity:

> Here is the centre of her vision, the human eye clouded before the confrontation with eternity, which leaves that eternity both indicated and forever in doubt (1971:137).

True that the presumed something is the all-absorbing focus of Dickinson's imagination but to call it eternity is to nail it down with a single identity, and thus the mysterious is shorn of its mystery value which is so much important to Dickinson's imagination and poetics. For her the central mystery is the visitation of an unpredictable something from nowhere that completely erases the individual from "our Practise" (P#922), and is not to be so easily defined and dismissed, either. Although the eyes of the dead reveal nothing whatsoever and strain all human speculation, they command respect from the poet just as well because they have become consecrated and holy by virtue of presumably witnessing the visions of the End in its entirety. She asks the mourner to close them softly:

> These – saw Visions –
> Latch them softly –
> These – held Dimples –
> Smooth them slow –
> (P#758)

But there is no telling what "Visions" are revealed to those eyes.

Dickinson has still another reason for watching the ongoing occurrence of death: it is her way of preparing for her own death. In P#281 she says, "Looking at Death, is Dying." Every death teaches her new lessons of *ars moriendi which* she learns diligently so that she can gracefully perform her own final exit. Thomas W. Ford believes that her close scrutiny of the dying is a means of her quest for "some sign of grace" (1966:116). Barton Levi St.Armand views Dickinson's death poems as "dress rehearsals for her own beatific vision of her lover's face, in which

pain mixed with pleasure and anxiety jostled anticipation" (1984:54). Since St.Armand treats Emily Dickinson as a votary of the Sentimental Love Religion (that was all the vogue for some time in 19th-century New England under the influence of the burgeoning romantic moods), it is appropriate for him to subscribe to a romantic lover-pining-for-lover theory about her extraordinary fascination with death. Generally speaking though, her deathbed poems[27] are acts of preparation ("rehearsals") for her own death which is further corroborated by Ford: "She tried to become as familiar as possible with death in all its aspects, in the hope that when she did come face to face with it, the experience would not be wholly unfamiliar . . . . Moving around the circumference, gazing at death in the center, she saw its many faces, each evoking from her a different emotional response" (1966:32). It is her way of blunting the sharp sting of death so that when it comes, it is no longer "a novel Agony" (P#412). In P#272 she claims to have perfected the art of dying: "I breathed enough to take the Trick." The tendency to keep the deathbed watch also shows Dickinson's Puritan habit of verifying the fact of election in the words and actions of the dying person.

Death means closure of communication. Johnson says: "It is the knowledge that death snaps the lines of communication with those we have known and loved, and creates the uncertainty in the minds of all mortals whether that communication can ever be established (Johnson, 1955:204). For Dickinson non-communication and silence betoken death. She says, "Could the Dying confide Death, there would be no Dead . . ." (L312). Dickinson makes a desperate, all-out effort to learn about the whereabouts of the departed. But there is no knowing whither they go: "Death is the

other way –"(P#922), and when the dead go that way as they do they "perish from our practice." She wonders about the final destination of the dead in P#28 which ends up on the question: "Are ye then with the God?" Emily Dickinson develops an idea of death in which a relationship continues between the living and the dead. It makes little difference between the old dead and the new in terms of the communication since both are removed from the line of communication – they "Equally perish from our Practise –"(P#922).

Although Dickinson values the last words of the dying person, sometimes she doubts the possibility of revelation from the event of death. P#1708 questions the final words of the dying as the authentic source of revelation. While life is all known, death is as much shrouded in incomprehensible mystery (P#1385). Postponed knowledge about the real nature of death and the afterlife afflict one more than does the thought of death itself, for one cannot know about one's chance of salvation which is so much important in Dickinson's religious tradition. Therefore "Suspense is Hostiler than Death" (P#705). She contrasts death and suspense in the poem: while death occurs only once, suspense "perishes – to live anew – "; that is, it continues to nibble away until death. In a fundamental sense, the whole of eschatology as a discipline is about the undoing of the suspense about the End. This continual suspense about the End is likened to multifold death and the impact of its intensity on her nerves is conceivable from the homicidal metaphor of "Murder by degrees" (P#762). Suspense is portrayed as prolonged death in the metaphor of the cat-and-mouse game which, besides rendering the killing game, captures the tantalising nature of the apocalyptic knowledge of the afterlife. Continual suspense is "dying

half" without achieving a perfect quietus. So Dickinson's eschatological concerns are epistemological, too, denoting a pursuit of knowledge of the End that represents the Apocalypse for her. It is quite usual then that the consciousness of the dying experiences collapse, blackout and dissolution in Dickinson's poetry (P#280).

On the other hand, Dickinson sometimes thinks of death as complete dissolution. It is conveyed through the image of an eclipse: "If he dissolve – then – there is nothing – more / Eclipse – at Midnight –" (P#236). This picture of the afterlife should relieve Dickinson of her anxiety about the nature and form of the post-mortem state. In fact she is divided between believing and disbelieving in a well-structured world pictured to her by her religion. The same idea occurs in L261 where she mocks at her family members for addressing an "Eclipse" in their prayer every morning. These utterances point to her belief in the afterlife as emptiness. In P#236, whether the "He" is an earthly lover or Christ, who has replaced Dickinson's earthly master, "his" fate is dissolution, the same fate awaiting all mankind (Ruth Miller, 1968:81). But the second stanza reverses this premise to a further life in the post-mortem state by reference to the crucifixion, Easter and the Resurrection:

> Sunset – at Easter –
> Blindness – on the Dawn –
> Faint Star of Bethlehem –
> Gone down!

Thus death as annihilation and as the cause of perfect dissolution without continuity of existence seems again to be Dickinson's alternative thought on death. Instead of being an absolute term, dissolution could be a relative one depending on the point of view of the individual concerned: it might

be falsely understood as a finality when equated with defeat (P#539) and interpreted as the end of all and endless darkness thenceforth. Christ is the only person, Dickinson suggests in the poem, who endured "Dissolution – in Himself" and told the living what death really meant.

Gradually Dickinson moves towards a positive attitude towards death and seeks to develop an argument from the example of the disappearing heavenly bodies. She wonders what may have happened to the stars gone out of sight:

> It knew no lapse, no Diminution –
> But large – serene –
> Burned on – until through Dissolution –
> It failed from Men –
> (P#560)

She invokes the law of the indestructibility of matter[28] to reinforce her argument and contends that the vanished celestial bodies may have been transformed into other entities or had "an Exchange of Territory." George Eliot, whom Dickinson greatly admired, believed that in the Bible dissolution was awarded to the impenitent (1963:183). Yet "the sky" reminds Dickinson of "Oblivion bending over . . " (P#1645) – obviously a suggestion of a post-mortal void. Sometimes she goes for a blunt black-and-white distinction between life and death: life means noon, activity and business with prospects of achievement. While death is looming darkness "At Distance," "The Foot upon the Grave / Makes effort at conclusion" (P#960). It is the conclusion of the corporeal phase, and what follows this ending is a hint of helpless dependence on some kind of love ("Assisted faint of Love").

This wavering between belief and disbelief, faith and doubt, ecstasy and despair about the afterlife is typical of Dickinson's religious thinking

and a fundamental characteristic of her eschatological consciousness. The thought of total annihilation terrifies her; but, then, the traditional evidence about the existence of a next life cannot convince her. Although an untiring quester, she knows that it is the ignorance of the form of life after death that makes the present life tolerable. She knows that "Our ignorance – our cuirass is – " (P#1462) against the dark insoluble mystery of post-mortality. Yet her ambivalence towards death persists in a late poem where she is divided between calling the grave "a Relay" and "a terminus" (P#1652). If it be the first, "Life's condition," that is, movement would still prevail in the journey through what she pictures as a dark "Tunnel." Although dark, it promises deliverance into a lighted future after the intermediate eclipse. On the contrary, the second possibility ("terminus") would mean a discontinued journey and the end of all hope of resurrection and the afterlife. In that case, she says,

Existence with a wall
Is better we consider
Than not exist at all –

The onward journey of the soul seems to be one of Dickinson's favourite subjects. In an early poem (P#158) she cries for light and help in the dark night of the soul making its journey:

Dying! Dying in the night!
Wont somebody bring the light
So I can see which way to go
Into the everlasting snow?

Steeped as her mind was in the traditional religious knowledge that the soul makes its final journey through vicissitudes in post-mortal darkness, she would like to believe in some kind of light at the end of the journey, no matter even if it be deluding:

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small –
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all –
(P#1551)

To believe without seeing is a blind act that Dickinson teaches herself to perform on the assurance of the Bible[29]:

Not seeing, still we know –
Not knowing, guess –
Not guessing, smile and hide
And half caress –

And quake and turn away,
Seraphic fear –
Is Eden's innuendo
"If you dare"?
(P#1386)

Although Dickinson deals, as she often needs to do, with capricious, cunning, casual and bureaucratic God with all the obliquities of her art (such as irony, sarcasm, innuendo and so on and so forth), her approach to Christ is simple and direct[30]: she believes him and his testimony about the existence of the afterlife and therefore agrees to follow his lead without a murmur. She doubts the Word of God in the Bible and requires to verify it; but Christ's declaration is trustworthy and acceptable on faith: [31]

If Jesus was sincere
I need no further argue –
That statement of the Lord
Is not Controvertible –
He told me, Death was dead –
(P#432)

Yet, in her characteristically skeptical manner, she cautiously holds on to a conditional "If." Death is humiliating, but she agrees to stoop low because "Christ – stooped until He touched the Grave –" and "Redignified" it (P#833). Certain humiliations lend richer dignity to the humiliated.

Christ's humiliation redeemed the grave and transformed it into a house of holiness that leads the believer into the new life. Since Christ (her "Tender Pioneer") had run the whole gamut of the experience of both mortality and immortality at first hand, she believes that nothing is left out in his account of the afterlife:

> All the other Distance
> He hath traversed first –
> No New Mile remaineth –
> Far as Paradise –
>
> (P#698)

As has been said about the use of the conditional "If" in P#432, Dickinson's faith in the invisible and unverifiable is provisional, and therefore whenever she submits herself to a blind lead, she takes a risk. So her faith is not of a complacent one – secure, settled, and placid – but one of an adventurer proceeding on a hypothesis in an uncertain state of mind, "a combination of awe, reluctance, and eagerness . . . yoked together into a mixed, yet inextricably mixed, feeling about the destination ahead" (Griffith, 1964:140). She comes to terms with her human condition of ignorance about a doubtful next world. The soul can have meaning if an afterlife exists to which death is the only gateway. If it does not, the soul is not worth clinging to. Therefore, she urges her soul to take the risk of the adventure of death:

> Soul, take thy risk,
> With Death to be
> Were better than be not
> With thee.
>
> (P#1151)

The subjunctive "be not" in the third line relates to the possibility of postmortem existence or being.

There is something particularly poignant about the intensity of feeling that death's ubiquitousness and imminence have in Dickinson's thinking. For her, death is not merely the end of life; rather it is an extraordinary moment in a human being's spiritual existence as it is the climax to which spiritual life gradually builds up and at which the entire secret vista of the afterlife stands revealed. Therefore death not only signifies the perishable and impermanent side of existence; it also indicates that the dying individual is on the threshold of divine revelation. The dying person is in the act of crossing the border between this life and the next. For the pious Christian it is surely the most crucial moment, for only then can he know about the exact status of his predestination.

In addition, it is for Dickinson the time to confirm what her religion has taught her to be true so far. So, besides being the only efficacious anaesthetic to "Being's Malady (P#786)," death means the end of all agonising speculation about the world beyond, that is, whether the assertions of the Bible about the afterlife are true or not. Although she knows that the final revelation of immortality will not come in this life permanently as no single death would ever solve the mystery once and for all, the actual process of dying is still significant in being the last observable link with the hint of immortality. As has been mentioned earlier, she practises dying in her life with the aid of her imagination and she experiences death as dizziness, a collapse of the senses and an apocalypse. She is capable of feeling feverish funerals in the brain to the point of a tremendous crash of being. Yet there persists in her a last-minute desire or a groping for some kind of option that would allow her to eschew mortality.

In a letter of her mid-twenties Emily Dickinson expressed her Faustian desire for an obscure existence so that she could remain unnoticed and unassailable by the malignant powers of death: "I often wish I was a grass, or a toddling daisy, whom all these problems of the dust might not terrify . . ." (L182). Of all the problems of the dust, mortality worries her the most, to be sure. On another occasion Dickinson comments on dust that has eschatological implications. In a letter to Mrs. Samuel Bowles (about August 1861) she wrote: "The Dust like the Mosquito, buzzes round my faith" (L235). When dust is a constant reminder of the ultimate futility of worldly life, all New Testament high talk of "the Resurrection and the Life" rings hollow to her: then, her faith falters. Human beings are not privileged as grass is and, for that matter, all vegetable nature is, to cycle back to life after death. Obviously she is awed by the vision of the ultimate fate of the individual reduced to the form and condition of dust, and seeks an escape route. Dust is not only his or her metonymic form following the end of this sinful life of the flesh on earth; it is also affirmed in the Bible to be the quintessential constituent of mortality: "And the Lord God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life . . ." (Ge 2:7). In the next chapter of Genesis God points out to the fallen Adam and Eve the ultimate fate of this dust and expressly states the reason: " . . . out of it [dust] was thou taken: for dust thou art thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Ge 3:19).[32] This return to dust, then, is God's punishment of man for his sin of disobedience signifying a fall from grace to disgrace, from glory to ignominy. Dickinson's scathing irony exposes God's blatant self-contradiction in the verse, "The supreme iniquity/

Fashioned by thy candid Hand/ In a moment contraband –" (P#1461). When she reads of Christ's promise to redeem mankind from such despairing circumstances and of the eternal life, her mind comes to rest for a while. Then she can deliver her beloved dead to dust:

To the stanch Dust
We safe commit thee –
Tongue if it hath,
Inviolate to thee –
Silence – denote –
And Sanctity – enforce thee –
Passnger – of Infinity –
(P#1402)

But how could this be when the natural work of dust is effacement? Dust effaces our former identity all too soon:

This Dust, and its Feature –
Accredited – Today —
Will in a second Future –
Cease to identify –
(P#936)

The word "Accredited" suggests formal recognition of status and distinction and thus the importance of dust in the temporal framework is emphasised. The limits of dust's jurisdiction are set: dust will have no power whatsoever in the afterlife ("second Future"). In the manner of Hamlet or Shelley's Ozymandias she muses on dust as the quintessence of life in the following *ubi sunt* poem:

This quiet Dust was Gentleman and Ladies
And Lads and Girls –
Was laughter and ability and Sighing
And Frocks and Curls.

This Passive Place a Summer's nimble mansion
Where Bloom and Bees
Exists an Oriental Circuit
Then cease, like these –
(P# 813)

When Dickinson thinks of death in this vein, she sounds more like the pessimistic voices of the Old Testament and Old English bards than the New Testament promises of the *vita nouva*. She does not poeticise about the fact that the corpse in the grave disintegrates and turns to dust. On the evidence of this existential realism, she wonders as to "how my shape will rise – " (P#237) and leaves the problem to the sarcastic solution of her "Chemical conviction" (P#954). She remains tacit about the consolatory nature of this solace for the living. She knows that the dead have no use for it:

> Ourselves we do inter with sweet derision.
> The channel of the dust who once achieves
> Invalidates the balm of that religion
> That doubts as fervently as it believes.
> (P#1144)

While her early life experienced the thrust of clerical intimidation like any normal Puritan child, she appears to have taken the typical 19th–century romantic stance upon death and the afterlife: death as beautiful and beautifying like the emergence of a butterfly from its cocoon into new life, and the afterlife as a peaceful dwelling place of eternal spring (Stannard, 1977:174). Dickinson's tender treatment of death in her poetry reflects not only the popular 19th–century New England attitude to the afterlife that she adopted; but it also helped mould her private eschatology. It is thus that she attempted a new adjustment with the universal and ineluctable crisis of death. It helps her to get on to the romantic and sentimentalist paradigms, too, which allow death to be an amour whereby the role and importance of the flesh are considerably minimised. Therefore the "bareheaded life under grass" receives next to no attention from her in

spite of being the source of her constant worry. In fact there is little contemplation on the physical act of dying itself in her writings.

Dickinson's "problems of the dust" constitute her chief anxiety as to whether dust is the end of all or whether there is another existence beyond death; and, if there is an afterlife (which she wavers to believe in), what its form would be like. She sifts through all possible sources and searches for some univocal affirmation in nature, deathbed dramaturgy and in the testimonies of her correspondents. Sometimes she seems to have come close to finding some positive evidence. But most often her quest founders on hard scepticism. The result is a deeply troubled and ambivalent response to death. The "promised Resurrection" seems to her to be little more than "a conceited thing" (L184), by which she implies a strong doubt of the rationality of this probability. The eschatology of orthodox Christianity militates against the evidences of rational knowledge in her mind. It is necessary, nevertheless, for her to come to terms with death before she can develop her own personal view of the Last Things. She would like to believe that another existence follows death. But her observations of death hardly seem to admit of such certainty. Yet she nurtures the paradox and the hope that "Life is death we're lengthy at, death the hinge to life" (L281). Emily Dickinson's Puritan predecessors wrote elegies in order to mourn the dead as lost. But she does not write elegy as such, for she refuses to recognise death as a farewell forever. She argues that the fact of eternal life – if it be true – should obviate a goodbye, "since immortality – makes the phrase quite obsolete" (L192). Somehow she believes that there is another life where she will be reunited with her lost loved ones through death. She imagines the hereafter as a sort of

duplication of her earthly home, a place of restored personal relationships in the *post-mortem* state, the other shore that she hopes the separation of death would connect with the present world as a hyphen does the two parts of a whole sentence.

NOTES

[1] The three others are Judgement, Heaven and Hell.

[2] The following is the roll of deaths that affected Emily Dickinson one way or the other or both emotionally and intellectually. If the ones marked with single asterisks affected her deeply, she was devastated by the double-asterisked ones.

1838 April 22	Samuel Fowler Dickinson dies.
1844 April 29	** Sophia Holland dies, age 15
1846 May 5	Joel Norcross, grandfather, dies.
1847 September 28	Olivia M. Coleman dies, age 20
1848 May 14	Jacob Holt dies, age 26
1848 December 19	Emily Brontë dies
1849 March 5	Mary Lyon dies
1850 November 30	** Leonard Humphrey dies, age 27
1853 March 24	** Ben Newton dies, age 32
1860 April 17	Aunt Lavinia Norcross dies.
1861 June 29	Elizabeth Barrett Browning dies
1862 March 14	* Frazer Sterns killed in action
May 6	Death of Thoreau
1863 January 17	Loring Norcross, uncle, dies
1864 February 27	Professor Hitchcock dies
May 19	Hawthorne dies
1866 January 27	ED's dog Carlo dies
1871 June 3	Eliza Coleman Dudley dies in Milwaukee, age thirty-nine
1872 January 27	Joseph B. Lyman dies in Richmond Hill, Long Island, New York
1874 June 16	** Father dies in Boston
1877 September 2	Mary Higginson dies
December 10	Mrs.Lord dies
1878 January 16	** Samuel Bowles dies
1880 December 24	George Eliot dies

1881 July 2	President Garfield shot; dies September 19
October 12	* Dr.Holland dies
1882 April 1	** Charles Wadsworth dies
April 27	Emerson dies
November 14	** Mother dies
1883 October 5	** Gilbert (nephew) dies, age eight
1884 March 13	** Judge Lord dies
1885 August 12	Helen Hunt Jackson dies

The great number of young men who died in the Civil War (1861-1865) had a traumatic effect on her. Espcially the death in battle of the son of the President of Amherst College, young Frazar Sterns, shocked her deeply. In the last decade of her life the deaths of friends and relatives like her parents, Samuel Bowles, Dr. J.G. Holland, Reverend Charles Wadsworth, Judge Lord and her nephew Austin's son Gilbert proved to be emotionally too devastating for her which in fact elicited her utterance: "The Dyings have been too deep for me . . ." (L939). Emily herself died of Bright's disease (a form of nephritis) on May 15, 1886.

[3] In this same letter she says that if God had known that friends would engross all of one's attention away from Him, He would not have created friends: "God is not so wary as we, else he would give us no friends, lest we forget him! The Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superceded [sic] I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally." The "seize-the-day" sentiment in the last line is remarkable. Dickinson was herself aware of the inordinate nature of her love for friends. Sometimes she even felt guilty about her possessiveness in this regard which, she implies in this letter, amounted to a Deadly Sin. "Forgive me," says she, "then the avarice to hoard them!"

[4] The idea of death as sleep can be found in the numerous verses of the Bible: De 31.6; Jb 7.21; 14.12; Jer 51.39; Da 12.2; Jn 11.11; Ac 7.60; 13.16; 1 Cor 15.6, 18, 51; 1 Th 4.14,15. Although sleep was not a popular metaphor for death in early New England, it became a favourite in the nineteenth century under the influence of certain graveyard movements such as the Rural Cemetery Movement and due to the vogue of consolation literature.. John Calvin was also fond of comparing death and sleep. In his commentaries he notes that Paul "speaks of death as a sleep, agreeably to the common practice of Scripture - a term by which the bitterness of death is mitigated, for there is a great difference between sleep and destruction" (Calvin, *Commentaries*. I Thes.4.4, 1948,p.279), and in the *Institutes* he explains the aptness of sleep as a symbol when he writes that "our sleep itself, which astonisheth a man, and seemeth to take life away from him, is a plain witness of immortality, forasmuch as it doth not only minister unto us thoughts of those things that never were done, but also foreknowings of things or time to come."(Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Thomas Norton,, London, 1611, 1.15.2.)

[5] The most anthologised poem of this group is "Because I could not stop for Death"(P#712) discussed in the preceding chapter in connection with time.

[6] Stannard demonstrates by pictorial illustrations the change of attitude to death and the corresponding "metamorphosis away from the death's head image to the beginnings of the more Romantic cherubic or angel's head motif"(1977:159-160).

[7] Postmortem rituals and burial developed into an elaborate institution with the undertakers designated funeral directors "joining national professional associations, attending conventions, and reading and contributing to 'in-house' publications with names like *Mortuary Management, Sunnyside, Shadyside, and The Casket*" A competitive market of patented gorgeous coffins also thrived for a fast-increasing clientele (Stannard, 1977:188).

[8] This line recording Dickinson's express desire to be remembered by marble memorials is typical of one's last will and testament in the 19th-century manner. Notably she is not worried about her death; her concern is more to find herself a memorialist after her own death.

Ann Douglas argues that such visits to the graveyards in the nineteenth century were for sheer entertainment: there was no serious purpose in them:

> Hamlet went to the graveyard in a mood of alienation from his kind, of philosophical despair; he resorted to the churchyard to confront some ultimate reality. The mid-nineteenth century American went to the cemetery rather in the spirit in which his twentieth-century descendant goes to the movies: with the hopefulness attendant upon the prospect of borrowed emotions. (1978:252-3)

But Dickinson's visit should be excepted from this generalisation, as it is apparently more than a light-hearted stroll, because this graveyard holds her personal loss.

[10] But Dickinson did not concentrate on the festering corpse in the manner of the medieval moriens.

[11] Allan I. Ludwig, too, demonstrates it by pictorial illustration in *Graven Images: New England Stone Carving and Its Symbols, 1650-1815* (1966).

[12] Camille Paglia writes:"Dickinson thinks of death as enforced passivity, agonizing impediment of movement. She dwells on the moment a person becomes a thing, as in " The last Night that She lived," where the pronoun disappears in the last stanza: " And We – We placed the Hair –/ And drew the Head erect."(1100) A human has passed into the object– world. Some death poems use no personal pronoun at all: " 'Twas warm – at first – like Us." It, it, it, she says of the one. (519) Mind, body, and gender have gelatinized. Dickinson's death is a great neuter state. A dead female is a frozen phallic shaft; a dead male is a felled tree of humiliating inertness. Death is a maker of sterile androgynes. A corpse is soldered with rivets because it is a manufactured object, an android. Dickinson's notorious preoccupation with death is thus a hermaphrodizing obsession, a Romantic motif in its Decadent late phase" (Paglia,1991:647–648).

[13] Both Ann Douglas and David E. Stannard extensively discuss this 19th-century American trend in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) and *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (1977) respectively.

[14] Dickinson may have had in mind a conscious distinction between "small" and "little." While the first implies cramped space, the second is a term of endearment for one's beloved home. It is in this second sense that she views the grave.

[15] The image of the corpse as a seed awaiting germination under proper conditions is

developed in the Bible:

> But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?Thou fool, that which thou sowest, is not quickened, except it die (*1 Cor* 15:35- 36).
> So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption:It is raised in dishonour, it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body (*1 Cor* 15:42- 44).

These verses focus the transformation of the natural corrupt body through death into a spiritual entity ("body" is the biblical word for it). It implies that the bodily form will be retained at the resurrection.

[16] By circumference she would mean the truth of life, the whole range of human experience (Sewall,1976:700).

[17] Ann Douglas elaborates on this process in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1978) and particularly the feminisation of death in Chapter 6("The Domestication of Death." Pp.240-272).

[18] The poem has two versions written two years apart from each other in 1859 and 1861. Each consists of two stanzas. Except for the word "Sleep" of the 1859 version replaced by "Lie" in the 1861 version and the last two lines of the first stanza in the first version rearranged into a single line and the initial letters of "satin" and "stone" capitalised in the second version, the first stanzas of the two versions are similar while their second stanzas are substantially different..

[19] While denying purgatory, Calvin believed in an intermediate state between death and the Last Judgement of temporal duration in which the soul kept progressing towards the latter state. According to him, the soul separates from the physical body at death but it retains its former identity (Quistorp, 1955:58). During the interval between death and the Last Judgement, the soul does not sleep but either continues its journey towards perfection or suffers the torments of provisional damnation (*ibid.*, 1955:92-93).

[20] One is here reminded of Keats' ultimate despair that the Grecian urn, howsoever beautiful and timeless as art, is not life after all: it is life's surrogate. It is vulnerable in time, and it does become a dead object ("Cold Pastoral") when the poet's imagination is put out by the interception of time. Dickinson's phrases here imply a similar futility of art (whether verbal finesse or sartorial finery) in the presence of death.

[21] Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples to fragments.
(Shelley, *Adonais*,52)

[22] ME *plihten* < OE *plihtan* , to pledge, expose to danger < *pliht* , a pledge, danger, akin to *pleon* , to risk, Ger *pflicht* , duty]] to pledge or promise, or bind by a pledge

[23] The metaphor reflects the influence of the agrarian setting of 19th-century Amherst on Dickinson's diction.

[24] Dickinson sarcastically notes also in a poem (P#103) that "Silence" and "sublime" are the attributes of God.

[25] Natural phenomena were invoked for supporting the truth of the claims of Christianity in the "Christian Evidences" courses in the 19th-century American colleges. Nature also provided a common tie between orthodoxy, deism, Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. (Wright, 1955:174-175). The most popular explanations of "natural" theology were provided by Archdeacon William Paley's Natural Theology (1802) and Bishop Joseph Butler's Analogy of Religion (1736). The latter was Emily Dickinson's textbook at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke. The Dickinsons were also in considerable touch with a host of writers who advanced the theory of relationship between God and nature and Christianity, and whose works to this effect were published in the first half of the 19th century. Among those writers were Horace Bushnell, Mark Hopkins, Edward Hitchcock and Emerson. According to Mark Hopkins, God revealed truths through nature before making Scriptural revelation.

[26] This book, particularly the chapter in which this line appears, seems to have been read by the members of the Dickinson household, as is apparent from the copious markings of the passages, though it is not certain if Emily had read it herself. In any case it is an index of what stress the Dickinsons put on this practice.

[27] Deathbed poems are P#s. 45, 50, 158, 150.

[28] Sewall argues that Dickinson was influenced by President of Amherst College Edward Hitchcock's scientific interpretation of Peter's description of the future destruction of the world by fire (II Peter 3:10-11) in the Bible. Hitchcock said that "fire only changes the form of substances" and there would not be total dissolution of the world. Dickinson turned this theory into P#954 "with a touch of irony" (Sewall, 1976:345-46).

[29] "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." (I Peter 1:8)

[30] Barton Levi St.Armand argues that the Father-God of Calvinism is supplanted by the Brother-Christ of a new Sentimental Love Religion that prevailed in nineteenth-century New England (St.Armand, 1984:89).

[31] Dickinson writes several poems expressing her love and sympathy for Christ who, she says, "Wrung me with Anguish – / But I never doubted him – / 'Tho' for what wrong / He did never say – "(P#497). Her heart goes out for him because "The Savior must have been / A docile Gentleman – / To come so far so cold a Day / For little Fellowmen – " (P#1487). She believes that Christ's personal goodness redeemed him from death: "'Twas Christ's own personal Expanse / That bore him from the Tomb – "(P#1543).

[32] There are numerous other references to dust in the Bible. The ones referring to the essence of man are Ge 13:16; Ps 30:9; 102:14; 103:14; Ec 3:20. In the Book of Ecclesiastes the prophet says: "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."(12:7)

CHAPTER V

THE HOUSE OF SUPPOSITION

The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns – puzzles the will . . .
– William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* III.i..79-80.

Hamlet's problem persists in Emily Dickinson, too, despite her struggle to reach a conclusion about the existence of an afterlife: she keeps vacillating between "to be or not to be." Sometimes she feels that she is receiving intimations of immortality from what seems to her like a next world (P#1055). But at other times the post-mortal prospects appear to be buried forever in the darkest shadows that interminable speculation goes on digging endlessly. It means that her skepticism cannot be wholly dismissive about the afterlife and that her doubting mind poses questions in the hope of coming up with an affirmation rather than an outright negation. As a result Dickinson's opinions about the existence of the afterlife constantly alternate between doubt and faith, and no absolute statement can be made as a general definition of her attitude. Although some of her letters express doubt that death leads to an afterlife, several others reveal less ambivalence and even strike a strong note of optimism. After her mother's death she described her as being on her way to "a frost-less Land"(L782). This rests on the faith that the deceased has weathered and conquered death. Her belief in resurrection and eternal life appears to be particularly strong in the letter to Mrs. William Sterns: "It is possible, dear friend, that the rising of the one we lost would have engrossed me to the exclusion of Christ's"(L434). It also carries her strong desire

(consequent upon a belief in the afterlife) to meet her dear dead in the next world.

But one might as well sense "a strained quality in her affirmations, as if she desperately wanted to believe but could not bring herself to do so honestly and unreservedly. Furthermore, evidence on the other side strongly indicates that her basic feelings about immortality were ones of doubt and apprehension" (Ford,1966:22). Charles R. Anderson notices the contrary states of her mind as "constant from an early age down to her death" (1960:257). The poem "I know that He exists"(P#338) begins with the implicit belief that God's silence is not more than a caprice and is meant to make bliss the more precious and rewarding:

'Tis an instant's play.
'Tis a fond Ambush –
Just to make Bliss
Earn her own surprise!

But her belief begins to crack up when doubt pokes at it: what if this silence were the real silence of death, death were the end, and there were no afterlife?

But – should the play
Prove piercing earnest –
Should the glee – glaze –
In Death's – stiff – stare –

This second thought is the rub that teases her sceptic mind and afflicts her with great insecurity and anxiety about the afterlife. In P#346 Dickinson even fears Heaven to be illusory and delusive: Heaven and immortality might be an insidious lure:

Not probable – The barest Chance –
A smile too few – a word too much
And far from Heaven as the Rest –
The Soul so close on Paradise[1] –

What if the Bird from journey –
Confused by Sweets – as Mortals – are –
Forget the Secret of His wing
And perish – but a Bough between –
Oh, Groping feet –
Oh Phantom Queen!

Heaven is a hypothesis or some sort of mirage, and Dickinson considers the negative consequences should the conjecture prove wrong at the end. As in P#338, she reflects on another "what if" premonition. The fear of the doubtful existence of Heaven with which the poem begins ultimately leads to the painful discovery of Heaven as a dreadful delusion with the bird losing self-control, doddering, consequently collapsing and finally thinning out in a phantasm. The temptations of Heaven ("Sweets") are a bait to delude, befuddle and trap the dupes. The fate of the confused bird is exemplary to the mortals already "Confused by Sweets." Obviously it is an adverse commentary on the probable existence of the afterlife portrayed as a solid structure by orthodox Christianity. Such commentaries, and they are frequently met with in her writings, indicate that she was ill at ease with the official explanations of the mystery of the afterlife.

Apart from this explicit duality in her attitude to the afterlife, a binary situation continually develops in her writings as she employs the language, particularly the theological terminologies of her religion.[2] That is, the language in which she expresses her scepticism carries in it the spirit of orthodox Christianity wherefore the conventional picture of the afterlife still lingers in her expressions of doubt. To be more precise, her diction heavily draws upon terms that allusively create a mental picture of the afterlife which is sometimes derivative of the one provided by her religious

iconography and sometimes an adaptation of it to her imaginative or emotional needs. As Ankey Larrabee argues, "Puritan theology . . . the Bible and hymnal . . . equip her with terminologies, molds in which her personal conceptions can take form, rather than actual Christian conceptions"(1943:116). An "appropriator of religious language" (Barnstone, 1997:145), she frequently uses the imagery of resurrection, judgement[3], Heaven, Hell and quite often of immortality. The related ideas such as election and grace recur with great frequency. Dickinson employs these terms in her writing not in compliance but in conflict with their religious connotations. For instance, she cannot reconcile the blatant self-contradiction in the preaching of man's free will and the idea of predestination. These words are associated with ideas connected with the afterlife, the very ones in which she must, of necessity, state her difference. So, in spite of herself, her contentions carry in tandem the traditional ideas of the afterlife. All these ideas ultimately converge in the concern for the salvation of the soul from the sinful condition of the flesh which is the chief goal of all Christians.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, an ongoing process of death and resurrection is evident in vegetable nature, but it remains an insoluble puzzle whether this can be true of human mortality. Dickinson notices a fundamental difference between the end of life in vegetable nature and that in the human world: death in nature is temporary and the resurrection of the lost takes place clearly in the renewal of natural life in the cyclical return of the seasons. The recurrence of life in spring or summer follows the death in winter. This process is so spontaneous and regular that resurrection in nature seems hardly a miracle. It is the usual business and

nature does not register this metamorphosis and change of scene with any astonishment or surprise or any special feeling:

A Lady red – amid the Hill
Her annual secret keeps!
A Lady white, within the Field
In placid Lily sleeps!

The tidy Breezes, with their Brooms
Sweep vale – and hill – and tree!
Prithee, My pretty Housewives!
Who may expected be?

The Neighbors do not yet suspect!
The Woods exchange a smile!
Orchard, and Buttercup, and Bird –
In such a little while!

And yet, how still the Landscape stands!
How nonchalant the Hedge!
As if the "Resurrection"[4]
Were nothing very strange!
(P#74)

Once she said to her friend Abiah Root: "Did you ever know that a flower, once withered and freshened again, became an immortal flower, - that is, that it rises again? I think resurrections here are sweeter, it may be, than the longer and lasting one - for you expect the one, and only hope for the other. . ." (L91). However sometimes the example of the natural cycle tempts her to draw an analogy between the human and the natural world. By "the longer and lasting one" she obviously implies the human variety of resurrection and clinches it with a tacit doubt. On the contrary, the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of life after death can hardly be known with any certainty. So it causes a great deal of controversy. Edward Hitchcock, President of Amherst College, whose ideas of the future

resurrection of the body greatly influenced Dickinson (Sewall,1976:345) wrote:

> Scarcely any truth seems more clearly taught in the Bible than the future resurrection of the body. Yet this doctrine has always been met by a most formidable objection. It is said that the body laid in the grave is ere long decomposed into its elements, which are scattered over the face of the earth, and enter into new combinations, even forming a part of other human bodies. Hence not even Omnipotence can raise from the grave the identical body laid there, because the particles may enter successively into a multitude of other human bodies. I am not aware that natural history taught us the true nature of bodily identity . . . (Qtd. in Sewall,1976:346).

When Dickinson visualises the mammoth gathering of the resurrected dead at the Last Judgement she can see "The Dust – connect – and live/ On Atoms – features place –"(P#515). It is the result of her "chemical conviction"(P#954) that Hitchcock's theory of unaltered bodily resurrection had instilled in her mind. In the following proleptic poem she is elated to see the dead rising in their earthly forms and identities:

> "And with what body do they come?" –
> Then they *do* come – Rejoice!
> What Door – What Hour – Run – run – My Soul!
> Illuminate the House!
>
> "Body!" Then real – a Face and Eyes –
> To know that it is them! –
> Paul knew the Man that knew the News –
> He passed through Bethlehem –
> (P#1492)

Dickinson is generally reluctant to part with her earthly form and selfhood or to admit to self-annihilation. She said of Heaven: "I hope it is not so unlike Earth that we shall miss the peculiar form – the Mold of the Bird –" (L 671). Her idea of the afterlife is often cast in the images of this world. Although she sometimes questions the appropriateness of imagining

the mystery of the afterlife in terms of familiar earthly categories in writings (Barnstone,1997:147), one can yet find a contrary tendency in her.[5] Her "Columnar Self" grounded on a "Granitic Base"(P#789) is often too upright, stubbornly impeding her unreserved belief in the afterlife. Because while Biblical authority asserts the essence of the Christian eschatological doctrine to the effect that the earthly body will be transformed into a new spiritual one (Chapter IV, n.17), Dickinson insists on retaining her earthly self-identity after death instead of taking on a new one or accepting any alteration whatever to the old one after resurrection. Her worry about self-effacement constitutes one of the patent marks of her imagination in both poetry and letters.[6]

But in P#984 ("'Tis Anguish grander than Delight") Dickinson seems to be rendering the Christian doctrine of Resurrection strictly to the letter. She graphically describes the resurrection of the dead, as though "the meek members of the Resurrection" (described in P#216) were rising from their sleep and going up to join the great event. The occasion is marked by a mixture of elation and anxiety:

'Tis Anguish grander than Delight
'Tis Resurrection Pain –
The meeting Bands of smitten Face
We questioned to, again.

'Tis Transport wild as thrills the Graves
When Cerements let go
And Creatures clad in Miracle
Go up Two by Two.
(P#984)

The resurrection is witnessed as a grand vision of miracles with the transformed bodies of the resurrected dead gliding out of their graves (". . . Creatures clad in Miracle") under their new identities. But curiously there

is no description in the poem of what the new reconstituted bodily forms of the resurrected are like. Anyway it is this change of identity that Dickinson fears death would cause her according to the Bible. Here it is important to note a typical situation in her poems where the observer is merely an outsider unable to participate in the general proceedings, though she can admire the situation or even intellectually comprehend it. In the fourth line she chips in a suggestion of her sceptical distance from the believing "Bands of smitten face" by repeated queries about and/ or perhaps a continual challenge of their faith in Resurrection ("We questioned to, again."), an indication that she is reluctant to surrender her selfhood.

All these depictions of Resurrection are based on the traditional and biblical models.[7] But, as in the case of other religious terms, Dickinson's attitude to Resurrection is not one of uncritical acceptance of the idea. As usual her commentary on the subject is mixed with waverings between faith and doubt, and consequently there is an implicit satiric edge to her stated rapture:

> To live, and die, and mount again in triumphant body, and next time, try the upper air - is no schoolboy's theme!
>
> It is a jolly thought to think that we can be Eternal - when air and earth are full of lives that are gone - and done - and a conceited thing indeed, this promised Resurrection! . . . we have each a pair of lives, and need not chary be, of one "that now is"– (L184.)

At the same time that she recognises the subject as serious with the miracle of the upper air being filled with the departed creatures once again, she maintains the sceptic's mocking tone on the side and foils those rhapsodies with skewed, tongue-in-cheek phrases such as "conceited thing" and "a pair of lives," and with the panache with which the mock indifference to the present life is expressed. She appears to be toying with the traditional

idea of Resurrection without allowing it to grow into illusion and cause delusion. The deictic phrase, "this Resurrection," is aslant with a somewhat ironic angularity, as though the idea were a nagging psychological itch rather than a reliable panacea for the anxiety about post-mortality, for the word "conceited" already casts a slur on the idea of resurrection as a sort of bloated bunk. In P#237 ("I think just how my shape will rise –") salvation is suggested to be conditional upon the wholesale effacement of the mortal form:

> . . . I shall be "forgiven" –
> Till Hair – and Eyes and timid Head –
> Are *out of sight* – in Heaven –

And the speaker's lips, too, will require to take on a spectral and incorporeal form to utter the "shapeless – quivering – prayer –" in order to draw God's attention on the day of Judgement. Bodily resurrection is therefore contrary to the idea of salvation. Notably the slanting words and the words in quotes throw her doubt into sharp relief in the poem. It indicates that she is as uncertain of her bodily rise after death as of the salvation of her soul. One of the changes she anticipates in Heaven is that of facelessness. A few years before her death she asked Susan Gilbert Dickinson apparently in a puzzle: "I sometimes remember we are to die, and hasten toward the Heart which how could I woo in a rendezvous where there is no Face?" (L856). About the same time she wrote to Charles H. Clark: "Believing that we are to have no Face in a farther Life, makes the Look of a Friend a Boon almost too precious" (L859). Understandably identity would be the most important condition for restoration of, and reunion with, one's old community in the afterlife. Naturally therefore the thought of a faceless resurrection deeply troubles Dickinson who

constantly seeks reassurance of a family reunion after death. Thus Dickinson gets further embroiled into the controversy about the biblical account of Resurrection that Edward Hitchcock blamed on natural history for imparting incorrect knowledge about "the true nature of bodily identity"(qtd. earlier).

Yet again, as she does in her search for the knowledge of the afterlife (discussed in the preceding chapter), Dickinson is willing to submit to Christ's authority and trust His words. But, then, she approaches the Son of God rather cautiously for fear of being fooled once again, as she feels on all other counts of biblical promises which were made but have since remained unfulfilled. Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes:

> The only reason that we have to believe in a Resurrection that will vanquish death is the promise of the Man who called Himself "Christ." Yet if all of these other promises have proven false, is there not compelling reason to suppose that the anticipation of rising in triumphant body is no more than a fool's hope? (1987:262)

Since all other promises failed her, it is natural for Dickinson to doubt the reassurance of some birth after death. She is thankful that she has no faith in Resurrection lest she should be deluded in this respect, too. In P#79 she says: "I'm glad I don't believe it/ For it would stop my breath –". In this poem there is a subtle satire on the inexplicable and, hence irrational, procedure of the entire business of "Going to Heaven." She is glad that those she buried on "the mighty Autumn afternoon" could die believing in it, for their faith is their guarantee for their salvation. On the contrary, Dickinson, who would love danger and like "to buffet the sea"(L39), would play a high stake by retaining her rationality and disbelieving what seems to her to be a ludicrous improbability. So she and the dead are

happy in their own separate ways, though she becomes a loner thereby. But, then, death would mean dissolution and ultimately total extinction, if she could not believe in Resurrection. She overcomes this crisis by her faith in the transcending power of love, the common element in her and the God who became man to embrace mortality for levelling up with sinful mankind out of sheer sympathy. It is Christ's human love that qualifies Him to redeem the dead: "Love is the Fellow of the Resurrection/ Scooping up the Dust and chanting 'Live'"(P#491). Love is the bond, as she says elsewhere, "Sufficient troth, that we shall rise – / Deposed at length the Grave –"(P#322). However it still remains an unresolved conundrum in Dickinson's thought that while she cannot put off reason to accept Christ's promise of rebirth after death intellectually, neither can she shake off her tenacious belief in the existence of the God who had become man only to die on the cross (Wolff,1987:263). So, after all, Dickinson's understanding of the end is deeply Christian in the most profound sense: it means lasting life and love, which is emotionally felt but intellectually incomprehensible. This opposition between head and heart is a typical circumstance that deepens her spiritual crisis. Yet there lingers at the heart of her sense of the end a deeply felt conviction in some kind of post-mortal judgement to be followed by immortality in Heaven or Hell.

Dickinson thinks of post-mortem judgement as the most crucial event after death and a critical moment for the dead, for then God dispenses justice to them according to the merit of their earthly conduct. Judgement is a crucial stage in the soul's progress towards salvation. According to the Roman Catholic Church human beings are judged twice: once individually at the time of death and then collectively at the time of the Last Judgement following the resurrection of the saved at the *Parousia*

(the Second Coming of Christ). Except for the belief in purgatory, the Calvinistic idea of post-mortem judgement is similar to this doctrine of double judgement. Actually the belief in two judgements came into being when the early Christian expectation of an imminent judgement failed to materialise. Though both these judgements were generally recognised, many clerics and members of the laity often forgot that the resurrection of the dead would take place only at the *Parousia*, and assumed in reality instead that the dead would go straight to Heaven or Hell according to the merit of their worldly deeds (Rowell, 1974:23). The moment of death was deemed critical by the Protestants who did away with the doctrine of Purgatory. It is easier to appreciate, in this light, the New England Puritan obsession with deathbed study in general and Dickinson's interest in deathbed details in particular.

An early letter expresses Dickinson's typical Calvinistic anxiety that results from the doctrine of double predestination which states that just as God's elect would have eternal life in Heaven, the unelect or rejected (those who are not blessed with God's grace) would go to perdition. The soul will be either sentenced to the endless term of permanent separation from its loved ones or awarded the bliss of reunion and eternal co-existence with them in the hereafter. But whether the individual was one of the elect or not was dark knowledge about which the Puritan would remain constantly tense. Dickinson details the Court of God and its proceedings in the following letter obviously after their biblical paradigms:

> I hope we shall all be acquitted at the bar of God, and shall receive the welcome, Well done Good & faithful Servants., Enter Ye into the Joy of your Lord. I wonder if we shall know each other in Heaven, and whether we shall be a chosen band as we are here. . . . I feel life is short and time fleeting – and that I ought now to make my peace with my maker – I hope the golden opportunity is not far hence when my heart

> will willingly yield itself to Christ, and that my sins will be all blotted out of the book of remembrance. Perhaps before the close of the year now swiftly upon the wing, some one of our member will be summoned to the Judgment Seat above, and I hope we may not be separated when the final decision is made, for how sad would it be for one of our number to go to the dark realms of wo [sic], where is the never dying worm and the fire no water can quench . . . (L10)

In this early letter Dickinson expresses the typical fear of a Puritan child of separation from her friends and relatives. Separation from the closest ones was deemed a severe form of punishment for sin in the afterlife by the Puritans, and when viewed in this light, it is not difficult to appreciate her frequent concern regarding the restoration of her earthly community in the next world. She would like it to be retained in the next world exactly as it is here and now. Although an early letter, it contains typical Puritan anxieties, fears and ecstasies. It describes the majestic spectacle of the judgement of the dead at the Celestial Court. The visual details of the judicial proceedings are clearly set out, such as summoning, standing trial before the Judgement Seat of God, sentencing (leading to either deliverance or damnation), so on and so forth. No earthly conduct is taken into account here as an evidential reference in the trial, and the judgement is apparently quite arbitrary. After the judgement some go to Heaven and the rest to Hell. (The longer and more vivid treatment of Hell than Heaven is a reminder of the typical Puritan interest in the punishment rather than the acquittal of the soul.)

Despite the absolutely arbitrary nature of election, it was imperative that the heart surrender willingly, unconditionally and entirely to God and His Son for sanctification leading to divine grace and faith in God.[8] Although Dickinson sometimes protests that we are to be judged, not on our actions but on our intentions (P#823), yet at other times she recognises

the value of effort and discipline to be gone through compulsorily before attaining Heaven. She said to Mrs. Holland: "There is many a discipline before we obtain Heaven"(L547). Therefore the spontaneous response of the heart to the divine call, which is the sign of God's grace, is particularly stressed in the letter (L10) as her serious concern for the soul's salvation in the next world, for grace is thought to act as an infallible disciplinary power of the divine upon the sinner's heart. In L11 again she refers to the parting of friends and family on the Day of Judgement, and indeed she could never quite get rid of this fear in her life as her letters from time to time would testify. In this letter her vision of the Last Judgement is basically one of separation based on the Gospel of St. Matthew 25.32-33: ". . . I hope when the great shepherd at the last day separates the sheep from the goats we may hear his voice & be with the lambs upon the right of God." Whatever the judgement, Dickinson is afraid of a possible separation from her close ones. She takes up this traumatic eventuality in P#640:

> They'd judged Us – How –
> For You – served Heaven – You know,
> Or sought to –
> I could not –

If her lover belonged to the saved and herself to the damned, she says, "That self – were Hell to me –" So she proposes some kind of arrangement that she might be in touch with her love paradoxically even if it means a glimpse once in a while through a door ajar:

> So We must meet apart –
> You there – I – I here –
> With just the Door ajar
> That Oceans are – and Prayer –
> And that White Sustenance –
> Despair –

Therefore Dickinson tries to work out an eschatology now and then that would permit her to retain and carry her earthly identity into the next world and remain in the company of her loved ones hereafter.

Dickinson's early letters are of a confessional nature which are often laden with repentance and a deep, distressing guilt-feeling about not being able to consign herself unconditionally to Christ's care, an undertaking that was being constantly demanded of her. When everyone of her known circle of friends and relatives was spontaneously responding to crisis conversion as their desperate attempt to obtain sanctification[9] but she was unable to do so and stood back, Dickinson lamented her spiritual straits in poignant language.

According to Richard B. Sewall, "the revival spirit, calling for deep individual soul-searching, confession of sins and repentance" was extremely distressing to Emily Dickinson (1976:24). Her father and sister Lavinia were converted during a revival in Amherst in 1850. This revival was "unusually fervent" (Sewall, 1976:25) and resulted in the conversion of many of her friends. She told Abiah Root: "I am not unconcerned Dear A. upon the all important subject, to which you have so frequently & so affectionately called my attention in your letters. But I feel that I have not yet made my peace with God. I am still a s[tran]ger – to the delightful emotions which fill your heart"(L13). In her mid-teens, she was already aware of having reached a point of no return: ". . .I had rambled too far to return & ever since my heart has been growing harder & more distant from truth & now I have bitterly to lament my folly . . ."(L11). She could very well realise the full gravity of her spiritual condition, and therefore supplicated for immediate divine intervention: "I feel that I am sailing upon the brink of an awful precipice, from which I cannot escape & over

which I fear my tiny boat will soon glide if I do not receive help from above"(*ibid.*). Yet she wrote of her compulsive apostasy to Jane Humphrey: "Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion"(L35). It may be observed that her guilt-feeling at foolishly throwing away the best chance of redemption initially shaped her eschatological frame of mind.

Given her continued refusal or failure, then, to join the exodus to mass crisis conversion in Amherst under the auspices of the evangelists, Dickinson's fear was genuine that God's Judgement might separate her from her loved ones in the afterlife as her well-deserved punishment. Moreover she feared that she would be judged to damnation because she did not have the required qualification for entrance to Heaven.

It is noteworthy that in the early letters her fear of punishment at the Last Judgement brings along with it the vivid pictures of the grand occasion, too. Even when she makes confessions to failure and repentance or declarations of refusal and rebelliousness there, the traditional image of the afterlife remains the standard referent of her penitential discourse. This picture closely resembles the one delineated by the official position of the Congregational Church on post-mortal judgement:

> We believe in the ultimate prevalence of the kingdom of Christ over all the earth; in the glorious appearing of the great God and our final Saviour Jesus Christ; in the resurrection of the dead; and in a final judgement, the issues of which are everlasting punishment and everlasting life. (Qtd. in Walker, 1969:564)[10]

Although not often convinced of the rationale of theological arguments about the afterlife, Dickinson was nonetheless provided with a well-structured vision of the Last Judgement by her religion whose terrifying

tableaux as well as dazzling splendours continually came to her in distinct graphics from the contemporary New England evangelical pulpits.

But this clear-cut picture of God's judgement became increasingly blurred as Dickinson's attitude to God and the afterlife grew more and more complex. In this later phase of the development of her sensibility, her writings register a vacillating attitude to the probable basis of God's judgement. Sometimes she thinks of it as limited to human beings only and explains the divine motive as sheer love for, and a special favour to mankind. But at other times it seems to be universally applied to all creatures as the whole range of God's creation, no matter what their hierarchical importance, together makes up God's grand design. In P#885 the "Pink and Pulpy multitude" which become a slap-up meal to the "little Bird" exist with as much purpose as does their feathery predator. So, enlightened (her "Modesties enlarged"), the speaker lets the scene alone undisturbed in favour of the bird and infers: "As I of He, so God of me/ I pondered, may have judged." If it is true, the only rational surmise is that each and every element of the divine scheme will be held to account without any concession and receive an equitable dispensation of reward or punishment from God at the time of Judgement when every earthly action is weighed against or matched with the inscrutable divine plan. But this inference is invalidated by the contrary evidence of indifference to the consequences of human "Auto da Fe" or divine judgement in the autonomous natural world where carnality is apparently the ultimate measure of bliss:

> Auto da Fe – and Judgment –
> Are nothing to the Bee –

His separation from His Rose –
To Him – sums Misery –
(P#620)

Dickinson seems to land up in this contradiction to some extent because she seeks signs and analogues in nature after the fashion of natural theology[11] preached and practised in her time which claimed that God's intentions and post-mortal realities could be guessed from natural phenomena. But while the Puritans would watch the natural signs and recognise the fallibility of their interpretation, and not of the signs, because both nature and themselves were in a depraved state and therefore in danger of misperception, Dickinson always tries to read the vestigial *signs* of nature as perfect *analogues*. While the Puritan interpreters agonised over the accuracy of their explanations, Dickinson takes the signs to be complete manifest proofs. So nature can serve as a semiotic medium at best, a fabric of signs and signals from the supernatural order which might not always connect to make sense to the depraved human perception. And it is precisely this that defeats Dickinson's attempts to formulate and base her belief on consistent evidence.

Then, if God brings part of His creation to book and exempts the rest from judgement for no convincing reason, His justice shows some streak of arbitrariness which remains a nagging suspicion in a number of her poems. For instance, she tries to puzzle out – ultimately in vain though – "Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven?"(P#248) If it is her high-pitched singing (figuratively, her bold and disturbing poetry), she proposes to "say a little 'Minor'" as atonement, but nothing doing: she is still refused entrance into Heaven. Thomas Ford regards the poem as an expression of Dickinson's abiding apprehension that she might be a victim of God's arbitrary judgement and be excluded from the company of the elect

(1966:99). The poem exposes the ridiculous irrationality of God's discretionary judgement as explained by orthodox religion. However it is not only with ordinary humans that divine justice is inequitably executed; she can also find a degree of unfairness in the treatment of such figures as Moses and Ananias in the Bible (P#1201).

Dickinson cannot help apprehending the probability of a capricious element in divine judgement. The speaker in the following poem has little more than the gambler's luck in her having to hang on the sheer chance of a "merciful mistake" somewhere in the dispensation of post-mortal justice:

> Death warrants are supposed to be
> An enginery of equity
> A merciful mistake
> A pencil in an Idol's Hand
> A Devotee oft consigned
> To Crucifix or Block.
> (P#1375)

It matters very little that she was His "Devotee" in life and worked herself into ground to please Him. Rather it is important now that there is an error in her favour of the "enginery of equity" in the judicial proceedings owing to the deity's whimsies. At the moment of judgement it is really the caprice of the judge rather than the merit of the persona's earthly works that would send her arbitrarily to either salvation ("Crucifix") or damnation ("Block").

Chance salvation or damnation also constitutes the fundamental crisis of the soul in P#286. It is a contest between Christ and Death for the possession of the departing soul which is compared to a falling "Granite crumb." The Saviour must snatch it away to salvation in a split second or else it would drop by death into the fathomless depths of annihilation:

> That after Horror – that 'twas *us* –
> That passed the mouldering Pier –
> Just as the Granite Crumb let go –

Our Savior, by a Hair –

A second more, had dropped too deep
For Fisherman to plumb –

The chance of salvation is a cliff-hanger, perilously dangling "by a Hair" and here we have the picture of a tense Christ on his toes, concerned for, rather than complacent about the fate of the departing soul. The moment of death, then, is not only a crisis for the soul; it is also a trying time for the Saviour Himself who is pledge-bound to save the Christian soul from total extinction. Thus if the ultimate salvation of the soul is so very fortuitous, then this depiction of the precarious state of both Christ and soul can be little more than an ironic commentary on the futility of all earthly preparations. In another poem (P#414) a dozing deity is apparently sitting in judgement, and starts up from a self-forgetful snooze, as it were, at the last minute and saves the soul from falling irrecoverably into depths of dissolution

As if your Sentence stood – pronounced –
And you were frozen led
From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt
To the Gibbets, and the Dead –

And when the Film had stitched your eyes
A Creature gasped "Reprieve"!
Which Anguish was the utterest – then –
To perish, or to live?
(P#414)

The speaker is frozen with stark terror not because she would have been lost in the abyss but for the accidental intervention of God but because her brush with extinction was due to God's carelessness. (Notably she does not glory in her rare luck here.) This terror is hardly mitigated by the knowledge that she had had a last-minute "Reprieve" from a gasping

voice. To have thus escaped extinction by sheer luck leaves her measuring the extent of agony rather than revelling in thanksgiving.

In a late poem, P#1712 ("A Pit – but Heaven over it –"), Dickinson depicts a nail-biting moment of judgement with herself and others sitting precariously balanced over a pit, awaiting judgement. She looks into the dark abyss in terror and breathlessly maintains her risky position in a narrow space before judgement begins:

To stir would be to slip –
To look would be to drop –
To dream – to sap the Prop
That holds my chances up.
Ah! Pit! With Heaven over it!

The depth is all my thought –
I dare not ask my feet –
'Twould start us where we sit
So straight you'd scarce suspect
It was a Pit – with fathoms under it –
Its Circuit just the same.

Evidently she apprehends a negative upshot as she says: "The depth is all my thought." The poem is symbolic in its conception of the psychological state of a self-indicted sinner in anticipation of an uncertain judgement and its terrifying sequel. It is an instance that certainly repudiates Robinson's suggestion that Dickinson's "is not poetry of a moral dimension. She is not troubled by guilt" (1986:42).

Dickinson portrays another judgement scene in which only the disembodied soul is arraigned for trial but which is not based on the usual New England doctrinal paradigm:

Departed – to the Judgment –
A Mighty Afternoon –
Great Clouds – like Ushers – leaning –
Creation – looking on –

The Flesh – Surrendered – Cancelled –
The Bodiless – begun –
Two Worlds – like Audiences – disperse –
And leave the Soul – alone –
(P#524)

The solitary soul is left to face judgement alone, and the trial is poised to begin in a completely desolate, strange setting with the dispersal of both the corporeal and the "Bodiless" world. The third and fourth lines make up the cosmic backdrop appropriate to the solemn business of the Celestial Court. But the poem leaves off at the point where the trial is about to begin. The actual trial, however, does not take place and there is no account of the judgement in the poem. It is perhaps because Dickinson is more interested in the circumstances of the soul on trial than what award it might receive thereof.

But if it is her idea of judgement, then her eschatological vision patently departs from the official doctrine of the soul's state in the afterlife as preached from the New England pulpits. According to this doctrine the soul is always in some company one way or the other. Instead of separation and abandonment, the award of Heaven is followed by reunion, celebration and grand festivity attended by celestial guests, as depicted in P#625 (""Twas a long Parting – but the time"); but in case of damnation, the condemned soul is placed with infernal creatures in Hell as Dickinson envisions the sinner's state in L10. The portrayal of the soul in the solitary circumstances in P#524, then, is quite a novel idea and obviously Dickinson's private vision of judgement. Or at least it is thus that she would like her own trial to go before the Judgement Seat of God. Another interpretation of the solitary conditions of the Court could be that she would like her identity to remain distinct from the crowd of "sheep and

goats"[12] ensuring her reunion with her dear dead the better. As in the case of resurrection, her concern here too is the retention of selfhood that would permit her to reunite with her loved ones after death. Although the doctrine of double judgement is popularly recognised in the Protestant world and was preached in nineteenth-century New England, generally speaking Dickinson appears to have believed in individual judgement at death which remains a matter of utmost eschatological concern in her writings.

The Day of Last Judgement[13] is clearly portrayed in the Bible as the day of reckoning for all and sundry preceded by fantastic supernatural visions and natural prodigies and attended by numerous gruelling crises and great woes in the human and the natural world. In the Old Testament it is "summed up comprehensively as 'the Day of Jahweh,'[14] the day of Jahweh's vindication against the sinful nation. He punishes it or the wicked in it with the scourge of the Gentiles and with captivity"(Hastings,1967:376). Dickinson recreates this all-pervasive apocalyptic cataclysm of the Last Judgement in a mock-serious letter to her "backsliding" uncle Joel Warren Norcross who had apparently provoked the comic piece by failing to keep up correspondence with his niece. After depicting the penultimate situation she takes off Jehovah in His flaming wrath and strident voice:

> One promised to love his friend and one vowed to defraud no poor – and *one* man told a lie to his niece [that is, herself] – they all did sinfully – and their lives were not yet taken. Soon a change came – they young men were old – and the flocks had no shepherd – the boat sailed alone – and the dancing had ceased – and the wine-cup was empty – and the summer day grew cold – Oh fearful the faces then! The Merchant tore his hair – and prayed to die. Some kindled the scorching fire – some opened the earthquake's mouth – the winds strode on to the sea – and serpents hissed fearfully. . . . I call upon all nature to lay hold off you – let fire burn – and water drown – and light put out – and tempests tear – and hungry wolves eat up – and lightning strike – and thunder

stun – let friends desert – and enemies draw nigh and gibbets *shake* but never *hang* the house you walk about in! My benison not touch – my malison pursue the body that hold your spirit! (L29)

The Day of Last Judgement is not always all that dreadful, bleak and black. For instance, her musings on her silent "King" (God) climax in the breaking of the Day of Last Judgement into her dream as an evocative reproduction of the convivial mood in the oracular chapters of the Book of Revelation with their spectacular dream visions of vibrant coronals and alleluias:

It is as if a hundred drums
Did round my pillow roll,
And shouts fill all my Childish sky,
And Bells keep saying "Victory"
From steeples in my soul!
(P#103)

However, such images or visions of the advent of the day of general judgement are not too many in Dickinson's poetry or letters but whatever few there are give a fairly good idea of her notion about the post-mortal judgement of the dead as a serious eschatological event of fateful significance. Or at least they indicate her interest in the Day of Last Judgement. Her belief in this regard is fairly conventional as the following poem bears out:

'Twas a long Parting – but the time
For Interview – had Come –
Before the Judgement Seat of God –
The last – and second time
(P#625)

But the flood light of the general focus narrows down to a spotlight clapped on a high comedy in paradise – namely, a great festivity on the occasion of the reunion in marriage of a pair of long-separated lovers, now in paradise being attended by a heavenly company of luminous dignitaries.

It is Dickinson's way of making the general particular and personal. But by no means does it re-define or depart from the traditional concept of judgement. For instance, it is perfectly conventional to imagine reunion with the beloved as the happy consequence of a favourable *post-mortem* judgement as she does in this poem.

P#829, too, reworks the age-old belief, and even the image, that the grave is the bed of the dead who sleep there "till Judgment break/ Excellent and Fair." One can also note an eagerness in Dickinson for the Last Judgement in P#279 ("Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord") as a matter of her habitual curiosity, and she seems willing enough to attend it if it should happen. But she appears to believe in the first and individual judgement at death and also – in a way – in personal election, salvation and immortality, no matter how the Last Judgement turns out for her.[15] She seems to have no hesitation in writing about the salvation or redemption of others. In her condolence letter after the death of Judge Dickinson's wife, she wrote: "She is now with the redeemed in Heaven & with the savior she has so long loved according to all human probability"(L11). She was to maintain the same confident stance sixteen years later while condoling on another death: "Little Irish Maggie, [whose] awkward little life is saved and gallant now" (L375). But she was diffident about the prospects of her own salvation even within about two years of her death: "I had felt some uncertainty as to my qualification for the final Redemption . . ." (L920).

Dickinson's use of the word "redemption"/ "redeemed" (a more frequently employed word than salvation) freely switches between religious or biblical and secular signification, verbally conflating the natural and supernatural orders.[16] For instance, the congratulatory word "Redeemed" for the newlywed T.W. Higginson and his new home

(reminiscent of "Home in the Revelations") in L593 resonates with the biblical implications of eternal fulfilment in Re 7.16. When she talks of redemption as a metaphysical mystery, her statement is a supposition that verges on doubt and dismissal of such probability. Rather she is sometimes more inclined to use it in the sense of worldly achievement. Her accolades for George Eliot's attainment of earthly glory in *Middlemarch* could be adduced as her use of the word "redemption" with a non-metaphysical slant: "The mysteries of human nature surpass the 'mysteries of redemption,' for the infinite we only suppose, while we see the finite" (L389).[17] George Eliot demonstrates to her the truth of the verse in 1Corinthian (15.53) that ". . .this mortal must put on immortality." And Dickinson only changes the general and authoritarian "must" of the biblical prophecy to a personal "has" in the letter to particularise the instance. Obviously Dickinson believes that immortality is attainable in this world itself in personal terms. After the death of her favourite author, she wrote to Susan Dickinson: "Perhaps she [George Eliot] who Experienced Eternity in Time, may receive Time's omitted Gift as part of the Bounty of Eternity" (L688). Dickinson implies that George Eliot's literary fame redeemed her in time. But this conclusion is quite contrary to the Calvinistic doctrine that redemption cannot be obtained in the temporal framework by personal effort. George Eliot's work, then, gets the better of it, and thus redemption as a religious term is isolated towards a personal, and more importantly, a temporal meaning in Dickinson's writings.

This personal slant on her idea of redemption becomes obvious when she insists on the inclusion of nature in the purview of salvation as a necessary adjunct. While nature is excluded in the official doctrine of redemption and salvation, her idea includes it as a necessary

accompaniment, as her letter to Mrs. Edward Tuckerman bears out: "The immortality of Flowers must enrich our own, and we certainly should resent a Redemption that excluded them –" (L528). It is not merely a flippant statement: she associates flowers with Heaven or paradise on a number of occasions.[18]

Redemption or not however, God's judgement is executed through two extreme dispensations: either it places the soul in Heaven or sends it off to Hell, as there is no provision for purgatorial cleansing leading to redemption in Calvinism. Dickinson's eschatological thoughts on the ultimate fate of human beings in the post-mortal state take off from this premise too, though they gradually develop subjective implications as usual. Yet she appears to have believed in some kind of afterlife as a continuation of this life, and in this frame of mind her eschatological thinking is similar to the Calvinist's plain faith:

> And after *that* – there's Heaven –
> The Good Man's – "Dividend" –
> And *Bad* Men – "go to Jail" –
> I guess –
>
> (P#234)

She sums up all the theological fuss about Heaven and Hell in terms of sheer gain and loss as "Dividend" for doing a good job and prison for defaulting it respectively. But the closing "I guess" insinuates a naivety of the doctrine that makes her own subscription to the explanation rather hesitant and equivocal. For her the difference between Heaven and Hell is mainly topographical, and they are searched for in two different landscapes:

> How far is it to Heaven?
> As far as Death this way –
> Of River or of Ridge beyond
>
> Was no discovery.

How far was it to Hell?
As far as Death this way –
How far left hand the Sepulchre
Defies Topography.
(P#929)

In both cases queries and searches ultimately come to nought. But she believes that Heaven and Hell are complementary entities and the former is the sweeter for the latter: "The Heaven hath a Hell – /Itself to signalize – /And every sign before the Place / Is Gilt with Sacrifice –"(P#640). The agony of sacrifice then constitutes an element of Hell for her.

When Dickinson's search for the geographical location of Heaven and Hell (as her religion insistently affirms that they have an objective reality), ends up nowhere in a fiasco, she gives them her personal meaning; or she understands them as the attributes of Hell in the agonies and ecstasies of her psyche. Generally speaking, she internalises religious doctrines and employ them to explore and characterise her subjective life. Hell helps her articulate negative feelings of extreme nature. Except in L10 nowhere does she again give such a vivid portrait of Hell as a physical setting frozen and freezing, or as a lake of unquenchable fire, dark and infested with unspeakable infernal creatures perpetually carrying out the divine sentence of eternal punishment. But it serves as a model for continual psychological suffering for her. For instance, in P#744 the unmitigable anguish from remorse is defined as "The Adequate of Hell", which, for her, functions as the earthly complement of Hell. Smouldering guilt-feeling arising out of the "Presence of Departed Acts" continues unabated and blocks her squarely "At window – and at Door" of her mind. Remorse resembles Hell in being "cureless" and therefore eternal just as Hell can never be removed, for "Not even God – can heal – / For 'tis His

institution –". Thus the traditional idea of Hell helps her gauge and convey the extent of her anguish caused by remorse. In the same way the distress caused by separation from her love, she says, would mean "Hell to Me"(P#640) and she can perceive an element of Hell in the terrible charge of thunder in the natural world: "A thunder storm combines the charms / Of Winter and of Hell."(P#1649). The coventional idea of Hell as an external divine contrivance for punishing sinners might come to her mind now and then, but mostly this idea serves to deal with and image forth her intense mental crises and the most terrifying experience in nature and life.

But Dickinson was not the first to question the claim of objective reality for Heaven and Hell and assimilate the related doctrines and ideas as subjective values in her time. Horace Bushnell, Dickinson's contemporary famous for his unorthodox views of Christianity and for liberating Congregationalism from the cold grips of 19th-century petrifying Valley Calvinism (Atkins, 1942:173-174), preached a subjective view of Heaven which ran contrary to New England Congregationalism:

> If you have been thinking of Heaven only as a happy place, looking for it as the reward of some dull, lifeless service, arguing it, as the place where God will show his goodness, by making blessed loathsome and base souls, cheat yourselves no more by this folly. Consider only whether Heaven be in you now. For Heaven, as we have seen, is nothing but the joy of a perfectly harmonized being, filled with God and his love. The charter of it is, – He that overcometh shall inherit. It is the victorious energy of righteousness forever established in the soul (1858:242).[19]

Dickinson might be very close to Bushnell in her conception of Heaven as an intensely felt subjective state in her mature life. But in her girlhood she imagined Heaven to her friend Abiah Root, as any devout Christian with a literalist mind would do, as a geographical place when she begged her to

pray for her sinful soul that she might enter Heaven after death: "Pray for me Dear A. that I may yet enter into the kingdom, that there may be room left for me in the shining courts above. . ."(L13). In a much later letter she visualised Heaven in almost similar radiant terms: "Indeed it [Heaven] is God's house - and these are gates of Heaven, and to and fro, the angels go, with their sweet postillions . . . ." (L187). These pictures of Heaven came to her, to be sure, direct from the Bible, particularly from what she called the "Gem chapter"(L536), that is, Chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation. The last four stanzas of P#70 record Dickinson's early attitude to Heaven which appears there as an objective structure, as Father's house "in the skies" to be reached through an apocalyptic cataclysm:

What once was "Heaven"
Is "*Zenith*" now –
Where I proposed to go
When Time's brief masquerade was done
Is mapped and charted too.

What if the poles should frisk about
And stand upon their heads!
I hope I'm ready for "the worst" –
Whatever prank betides!

Perhaps the "Kingdom of Heaven's" changed –
I hope the "Children" there
Won't be "new fashioned" when I come –
And laugh at me – and stare –

I hope the Father in the skies
Will lift this little girl –
Old fashioned – naughty – everything –
Over the stile of "Pearl."

Gradually however Dickinson's idea of Heaven changed into one of a private nature. Heaven came to be meant for her a jolly place for reunion with her lost family members and friends. Notably, on such occasions,

Dickinson uses eschatological rhetoric which combines "the negation of the negative and the analogy of the future" exemplified by Verse 21.4 of Revelation: "And death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more"(J.D.M., 1974:374). The following excerpt from her letter has a strong reverberation of this biblical hope and reassurance:

> . . . I read my Bible sometimes, and in it as I read to-day, I found a verse like this, where friends should 'go no more out'; and there were "no tears," . . . My only sketch of, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have seen in June, and in it are my friends – all of them – every one of them – those who are with me now, and those who were "parted" as we walked, and "snatched up to Heaven" (L185).

It could be said that this personal idea of Heaven results, to some extent, from Dickinson's home-centredness. Together with this, it might be inferred too that this personal idea of heaven as a vast space actually derives from the biblical idea of it as a place of permanent reunion, eternal joy and jubilation. Once her brother Austin's homecoming launched her into a similar dream world that fetched her similar visions of millennial peace and fulfilment, as she wrote in the letter to him:

> I was thinking of you. Lo,I dreamed, and the world was no more this world, but a world bright and fair - no fading leaves, no dying friends, and I heard a voice saying there shall be no more tears, neither any crying , and they answered, nevermore, and up from a thousand hearts went a cry of praise and joy and great thanksgiving, and I awoke, yet I know the place was heaven, and the people singing songs were those who in their lifetimes were parted and separated, and their joy was because they should never be so any more (L62).

Yet very often she doubts such a possibility; and if there is one, she feels insecure to be there, for she suspects that "Heaven beguiles the

Tired"(P#121). She keeps telling, suggesting and insinuating continually that Heaven is a fiction and the weary get cheated by trusting in it:

> The House of Supposition –
> The Glimmering Frontier that
> Skirts the Acres of Perhaps –
> To Me – shows insecure –
> (P#696)

But this hardly proves that she looked away once and for all from what she calls here "The House of Supposition." Although her religion provides her with a tangible structure of this house – the "'house not made with hands'"(L180) – she can only see its distant glimmering frontier beyond which the perspective appears quite nebulous and unstable to her eyes.

Dickinson's idea of Heaven in her early poems is that of a romantically remote place, free from the shadows of terror. Heaven is a far place, as far as the east from the west and "Dim – as the border star – "(P#53). It is something unreachable, says she: "'Heaven' – is what I cannot reach!"(P#239). But one could argue as well that this blurred landscape triggers off her poetic imagination and creativity, too, that ultimately shapes a private Heaven suitable to her personal immortality. The sfumato of "the Acres of Perhaps" allows her mind to endlessly create its own images of Heaven. She says:". . . Heaven is a different thing, / Conjectured, and waked sudden in -" (P#172). Although her Heaven is a series of conjectures, each of her speculations is as real and true to her as Keats said of "Adam's dream" in his letter to Benjamin Bailey.[20] Yet none of the descriptions or images are a complete portrayal of this "House of Supposition." She needs to return to it to find out about its authenticity and a likelihood for her own admission there. Since she does not use the model of institutional Heaven but goes on exploring a great range of different

possibilities, there is a wide, unsystematic and, sometimes, contradictory and discordant diversity of descriptions of Heaven in her poems instead of her settling for a single definition.

One can meet with a long array of pictures of this private heaven in her poems. They vary from the trite and sentimental "fair schoolroom of the sky"(P#193) to one of the astonishing intensity of the Metaphysical trope such as "Eternity's vast pocket – picked"(P#587). Sometimes she imagines it to be "Brittle" (P#680) suggesting that its delicacy is the product of her private musings. When she thinks of Heaven to be inferior to the earth, as is often her wont, Heaven is described as "Bashful" and "shy of Earth"(P#703). But Heaven can also be synonymous with "Nature" when she observes an overwhelming "Simplicity" and magnificent "Harmony" among its flora and fauna (P#668). Love is another sign of Heaven for Emily Dickinson as she says in a letter, "To be loved is Heaven" (L361). The sudden inward enlightenment of lovers about their relationship is "a Change" that she designates "Heaven"(P#246), too. In some poems Heaven figures as "Physician"(P#1270), "Conjuror"(P#239) and "Old Suitor" (P#1580). The definitions can be antipodal, too: just as in one poem the magnificence and snuggery of Heaven are imagined as those of "a small Town – / Lit with a Ruby – / Lathed – with Down –" (P#374),[21] a chilling "Is Heaven then a Prison?" speculates on a terrifying alternative in another (P#374).

Dickinson suspects a tall story in all the grandiose divine promises of Heaven. Her sarcasm is at its sharpest when she says that the heaven fashioned by the deity would be too large for her "modest needs," and it is this Heaven like "The Apple on the Tree" that she "cannot reach"(P#239). She prays for a heaven on a much diminutive human scale:

Great Spirit – Give to me
A Heaven not so large as Yours,
But large enough – for me –
(P#476).

She knows how hollow the divine megatalk – "Whatsoever Ye shall ask – / Itself be given you– " and so on and so forth – rings! Besides, being once bitten, she is twice shy now as regards the allurement of God. She is on her wide-eyed guard:

But I grown - shrewder - scan the Skies
With a suspicious Air -
As Children - swindled for the first
All Swindlers - be - infer -

This blasphemy and profanation would have surely been risqué even in the increasingly liberal New England context of 19th-century Amherst.

One of the reasons that Dickinson tries to develop a picture of Heaven to her liking through such a multiplicity of imaginative efforts and explorations is that she finds the existing orthodox Heaven uninviting and unconvincing or fears, as she says in P#413, that it could be a boring place *ad infinitum*:

I don't like Paradise -
Because it's Sunday - all the time -
And Recess - never comes -

Instead of relief and rest, Sunday reminds her of tedious Sabbaths and religious practices from which she would always run. But this picture of Heaven is different from the one given by Charles Wadsworth, though noticeably there is still no exemption from worship:

> There will be no sabbaths in heaven, for we shall not need special seasons of sacredness in that perfect life of holiness where all work will be worship. There will be no prayer in heaven, for prayer pre-supposes want, and therefore more or less unhappiness, and these will be impossible unto the higher experiences of immortals (1882:197).

On the other hand, the alternative pictures she thinks up are only provisional, as they have no official sanction. There is never one picture

consistently maintained throughout her poems or letters. Different circumstances suggest to her different pictures so that her idea of Heaven remains always fluid, the more so because doubt assails her faith in the afterlife itself now and then. Even towards the end of her life she would often be troubled with strong doubts about its existence. In 1883, a few years before her death, she wrote to Charles H. Clark: "Are you certain there is another life? When overwhelmed to know, I fear that few are sure"(L827). After the death of her nephew she desperately asked Mrs. J. G. Holland: ". . . is there more? More than Love and Death? Then tell me it's [*sic*] name!" (L873). She knows that death is unavoidable, an afterlife is necessary and Heaven is desirable. But her questions regarding them do not assume that they do exist. Besides, all the evidence is incomplete and wispy rather than clear and foolproof. It explains why she often expresses satisfaction with earthly Heaven and fondly clings to it instead of nurturing the hope for the one "With that old Codicil of Doubt." She says: "The 'bird within the Hand'/ Superior to the one / The 'Bush' may yield me" (P#1012). To Samuel Bowles she wrote too in defence of her choice of earthly Heaven: "The Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superceded [*sic*] I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally" (L193). So she plays it safe by choosing earthly Heaven over the one to come.

One of the several reasons Dickinson gives for the need of a heaven is that there ought to be a central focus in every person's life which organises their present chaotic and fragmentary life and drives them towards a larger one:

> Each Life Converges to some Centre –
> Expressed – or still –
> Exists in every Human Nature
> A Goal –
> (P#680)

Heaven is the name of this centre for Dickinson and the meaning of achieving this goal can be non-religious signifying simply self-fulfilment (Mudge, 1975:110-111; Weisbuch, 1975:164). Of course this would require boldness and risks, and the failure of the attempt will be redressed by eternity:

> Ungained – it may be – by a Life's low Venture –
> But then –
> Eternity enable the endeavoring
> Again.

Whether this goal is ultimately achieved or not, the effort would transcend the narrow compass of "Dimity Convictions" (P#401) and lift life into a larger existence. Hence the target has been set as Heaven for human beings outside the self to prevent degeneration into self-complacency:

> Lest this be Heaven indeed
> An Obstacle is given
> That always gauges a degree
> Between Ourself and Heaven.
> (P#1043)

Although this life is not be satisfied with, yet the preparations for embracing the higher goal have to be made here and now. Thus Dickinson not only departs from the orthodox religious – particularly the Calvinistic – meaning of Heaven (that requires this life to be thrown away and renounced) by emphasis on temporality but also invests it with a purport and value that relate to worthwhile earthly existence.

Dickinson's idea of heaven is of an ethereal kind that can best be explicated in her own figurative terms . She compares it to a tent in a circus party which keeps moving away and gradually lights out of sight:

> I've known a Heaven, like a Tent -
> To wrap its shining Yards -

Pluck up its stakes, and disappear -
Without the sound of Boards
Or Rip of Nail - Or Carpenter -
But just the miles of Stare -
That signalize a Show's Retreat -
In North America -

No Trace - no Figment of the Thing
That dazzled, Yesterday,
No Ring - no Marvel -
Men, and Feats -
Dissolved as utterly -
As Bird's far Navigation
Discloses just a Hue -
A plash of Oars, a Gaiety -
Then swallowed up, of View.
(P#243)

The persona catches a glimpse of Heaven just at the moment of disappearance or dissolution. Dickinson uses the conceit of "a Show's Retreat" in order to characterise the paradise of her perception that grows and figures thinly in her mind and then keeps fading away. The moment is evanescent, fleeting. Dickinson uses certain ephemera as metaphors for the transparencies of the internal revelation. The vision of fulfilment *alias* heaven vanishes successively from the tactile to the auditory in a trailing manner: It wobbles out of sight "As Bird's far Navigation / Discloses just a Hue -/ A plash of Oars, a Gaiety - / Then swallowed up, of View." Dickinson's heaven is a construct of the imagination, and there it vulnerably stands at the mercy of the capricious mind. Hence heaven tends to be tenuous and insubstantial in her writings as opposed to the solidly built structure of the official Heaven that appeals concretely to an ordinary believer. In the poem heaven disappears first from sight ("Hue"), then from hearing ("A plash of Oars") and then it becomes purely mental or spiritual

("a Gaiety"). In another poem heaven is a figment of imagination and its entity is wholly dependent on the capacity of the individual mind:

Heaven is so far of the Mind
That were the Mind dissolved –
The Site – of it – by Architect
Could not again be proved.

'Tis vast – as our Capacity –
As fair – as our idea –
To Him of adequate desire
No further 'tis, than Here –
(P# 370)

The "Here" is therefore no doubt capital for Emily Dickinson. It is the Emersonian mind that builds such a heaven upon its ethereal ground. This creative mind is comparable only to the "Brain" which is "just the weight of God"(P#632). In fact it is this brain that forges Dickinson's private paradise safe and secure out of the attributes of Christian Heaven. However majestic and dazzling it might be standing upon "the Acres of Perhaps," "The House of Supposition" (P#696) is inaccessibly remote for her, and harbours, besides, unknowable threats and insecurity for her after all. Therefore if she could help it, she would rather choose to live "Here" in the heaven of her creation than grope "in those sweet mansions the mind likes to suppose" (L394).

The Christian doctrines of Resurrection, Judgement, Heaven and Hell continually clash with Emily Dickinson's rational judgement and provoke her sceptical mind with their magniloquent claims. She confronts and challenges those beliefs but can never discard them completely. Rather she develops a dual relationship with her religion in which she is able to reject the irrationalities of these doctrines on the one hand while receiving a regular feed of poetic metaphors from their corpus on the other. Her

mind itself turns into a house of supposition wherein she brings those doctrinal ideas and images to subserve her emotional extremes and thereby help construct a private eschatology of her unspeakable agonies and ecstasies.

NOTES

[1] Dickinson uses "paradise" and "heaven" equally frequently; and, more often than not, synonymously, too, in the same way as the 1846 edition of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* does. Sometimes "paradise" is used in her writings to signify this world. In Webster's *Dictionary* the word "paradise" is annotated as "Heaven, the blissful seat of sanctified souls after death." But it would never be used in Protestant theology and Dickinson never uses "paradise" in the sense of a waiting room for the sanctified souls prior to redemption.

[2] The word "binary" is used here in its contemporary usage under the aegis of deconstruction to mean the implied presence of the absent as the opposite of what is explicitly stated.

[3] Although she says much less on the subject of judgement than any other, her thoughts are yet incisive and crucial in this respect.

[4] Often Dickinson uses quotation marks to keep the linguistic inheritance of her religious culture at an arm's length from her own language (Barnstone,1997:147), as in this poem or P#215 ("What is – "Paradise" – ").

[5] For instance, "Tonight looks like "Jerusalem." I think Jerusalem must be like Sue's Drawing Room, when we are talking and laughing there, and you and Mrs.Bowles are by." (L189) In P#215 ("What is – "Paradise" –") Dickinson tries to imagine heaven as a prototype of her Amherst. Meanwhile, the reference to Jerusalem is always eschatologically significant in Judeo-Christian culture and here used as simile, it points up Dickinson's sense of the End. "For Christians, the very name of Jerusalem evoked visions of the end of time and of the heavenly city"("Crusades," *The 1996 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopaedia*).

[6] As shown in the discussion of P#s. 813 and 936 in the preceding chapter, her worry about the retention of identity is paramount in her thinking.

[7] Divine promises concerning Resurrection can be found in the following verses of both the Testaments of the Bible: Ps 49.15; 71.20; Ho 13.14; Jn 5.25; 6.40; 11.25,44; Ac 9.40; 24.15; 1 Co 15.22; 2 Co 4.14; 1 Th 4.16; 1 K 17.22; 2 K 4.35; 13.21; Mt 9.25; 27.52; Mk 5.42; Lu 7.15; But there are also instances in the Bible of doubting

Resurrection: Lu 20.27; Ac 17.18,32; 1 Co 15.12; Ti 2.18. So Dickinson may have biblical precedent for her sceptical observations on the doctrine of Resurrection.

[8] The nature of the individual's conscious intentions, that is, whether they are directed towards God or evil, would determine respectively whether s/he would be placed in Heaven or Hell. God would only take the person's conscious will into consideration at judgement (Guardini,1965: 38-40).

[9] Dickinson writes about witnessing conversion experiences at Mount Holyoke as well as at home in Amherst, and though she does not herself undergo such an experience (as do her father, her sister Lavinia, her sister-in-law Sue, and several close friends), she is intrigued by the effect of "sanctification," as she comments in the following letter to Jane Humphrey:

> I cant tell you what they have found, but they think it is something precious. I wonder if it is? How strange is this sanctification, that works such a marvellous change, that sows in such corruption, and rises in golden glory, that brings Christ down, and shews him, and lets him select his friends! (L 35).

[10] But the vision of the Last Judgement became increasingly scarce in 19th-century consolation literature, because the millennial period and the heavenly after-life became confusingly synonymous, and this earth when purified and transfigured was thought to be the locus for both.(Douglas, 1978:266)

[11] Chapter IV, note 30.

[12] It is thus that the gathering of souls before the Seat of God's Judgement is described in the Bible (Matthew 25.32-33).

[13] There are several references to the Last Judgement in the Bible: Mt.25.31-32; He 9.27; 2Pe 2.9;3.7; 1Jn 4.17; Jude 14-15; Re 20.12.

[14] The Day of Last Judgement is variously known as "the great and dreadful day of the Lord"(Mal. 4.5), "the day of the Lord Jesus"(1Cor. 5.5; 2Cor.1.14), "the day of the Lord"(1Th.5.2; 2Pe 5.2), "the day of wrath"(Ro 2.5), "the great day"(Jude 6), and "the great day of his wrath"(Re 6.17). Besides there are references to "the end of the world" in the Gospel of St. Matthew (13.39, 49;24.3; 28.20) and the Hebrews (9.26) that have all a strong overtone of impending doom.

[15] Dickinson resents the Calvinistic doctrine of arbitrary election and salvation in several poems, such as P#s.139, 306, 343, 528 and 1531 in which she suggests her utter dissatisfaction with the wilful and even unreasonable selection of the elect. In P#528 ("Mine – by the Right of the White Election!") she goes so far as to hint that she is not only elected to salvation but also her power of nullifying the grave comes from a knowledge by dint of which she can even choose to reject both election and death. The source of this power however is not made clear in the poem.

[16] Or it occurs in her writings when the hidden and enigmatic divine in nature is revealed to her, as she says: ". . . I noticed, that the 'Supernatural' was only the Natural disclosed – "(L280). For her, actually, the supernatural is the mystery of nature, and the unveiling of this mystery constitutes the epiphanous moment. It confirms the Puritan vein of Dickinson's thought that God's intentions appear as natural signs to human beings.

[17] It attempts to reproduce a phrase from St. Matthew: "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven, but to them it is not given (13.11).

[18] She called flowers "heavenly"(L631) and wrote to Mrs. J.G.Holland: "We are by September and yet my flowers are bold as June. Amherst has gone to Eden"(L354). Flowers redeem her by helping her forget the trauma of the Fall and remind her that heaven is not all lost: "Expulsion from Eden grows indistinct in the presence of flowers so blissful, and with no disrespect to Genesis, Paradise remains"(L552).

[19] But the literalism of Calvinistic theology, on the contrary, can be represented by Charles Wadsworth's view from Dickinson could not have been further as she was closer to Bushenell' subjectivism. Reverend Wadsworth wrote:

> But now lift your eye heavenward. There, only seen through a glass darkly, the New Jerusalem, the city of God; its eternal walls, precious stones; its gates, each a mighty pearl; its streets of pure gold, like unto transparent glass; its rivers of living waters; its gardens of the trees of life; and within it the throne of God, and the temple of God; and over it a firmament which night shall never darken; and there in all the transcendent splendor of immortal life, Abraham, Abraham! (1882:100).

[20] ". . . he awoke and found it truth." *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Keats*. (ed.) Harold Edgar Briggs. New York: The Modern Library, 1951: 428.

[21] Dickinson is used to imagining her private heaven or paradise as a little town and occasionally Amherst is a model town in this respect (*vide* Note 6).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson's eschatological sensibility took its life from her fundamentally afterlife-oriented religious culture but in her maturity she began to interrogate in the privacy of her mind the basic Calvinistic doctrines and dogmas about the life after death.. In the process she veered away from the conventional eschatology of Calvinistic Puritanism and a personal eschatology quietly shaped up in her mind. Her poems are the products of this interminable interrogation and a gradual development of her new sense of the end of this mortal life and of the one that follows it. She questions the very rationality of the Calvinistic doctrines and doubts the truth of their assumptions about time and eternity, election and predestination, resurrection, judgement, heaven, hell and immortality in her poems and letters. She disdained publication as "the Auction / Of the Mind of Man"(P#709) and hence her radical mind remained beyond public attention. Otherwise her views (rather forward for her orthodox community) might have ruffled the smug sentimentalism of consolation literature that rose in the wake of the loosening rigour of Calvinism in nineteenth-century New England. Her scepticism would have been even too upsetting for the monolith of the age-old Puritan establishment in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Had it been a little more than a century earlier, says Allen Tate, "Cotton Mather would have burnt her for a witch" (Tate, 1963:27).

In discussing eschatology in Emily Dickinson's life, mind and art it is not only important to understand its theological meaning; it is also necessary to recognise its potential for imaginative extensions and intense personal expressions. It is incontestable that her immediate environment of Calvinistic

Amherst served as an active catalyst for her imagination. The Amherst pulpit regularly fanned the fire and fury of evangelism of the Edwardsean brand that raged in the Connecticut River Valley from time to time in the 19th century. It not only nurtured the community's contemporary eschatological imagination but also refreshed and sustained the continuity of the early New England visions of the End such as the Second Coming, Millennium, the establishment of the New Jerusalem upon the hill, the Last Judgement, Heaven and Hell. Along with these, the continual reminders of fleeting time, life's brevity and impending death created a widespread End-oriented mood in Amherst. Dickinson was deeply affected by these ideas and mood which became manifest in her obsession with time and death, and in her queries about the truth of biblical promises of an afterlife and postmortal existence itself, and in her frequent references to them in both her poems and letters. The other ideas basic to the eschatological mind such as the *contemptu mundi* (hatred of the world) attitude of the poet towards inconstant mortal life, the futility of worldly glory and achievement, complaints against the miserable existence of human beings in temporal conditions, viewing this life as a necessary probation qualifying the soul for the next world, and voluntary suffering and renunciation of the life of the senses are all present in Dickinson's writings in some form. These are, to use Johnson's expansion of Dickinson's own phrase, her "flood subjects."[1]

The objective of all Christian eschatological quest is to witness the end or *eschaton* revealed in its wholeness. From the teleocentric point of view it means the revelation of certain fundamental mysteries withheld from mankind until then, namely, the absolute presence of God and His inscrutable plans or providence, and the next world. These remain out of human sight in the temporal conditions though they irrevocably control all activities in the human

and the natural world according to Christianity. Northrop Frye understands the apocalyptic to be the part of eternal being. An apocalypse is not just a climax; it witnesses the transformation of mundane nature into the content of "an infinite and eternal living body"(1970:119). If this supreme metamorphosis takes the form of the ultimate - the beginning and the end in a single and singular being comprising totality - and means revelation, it is hardly different from the biblical model (i.e., *The Book of Revelation*) in which, too, alpha and omega come together. Apocalypse, whether in religion or art, provides a profound sense of liberation from all constraints, whether religious, social or personal. What Frye says of religious apocalypses is equally true when they happen in the realm of art: ". . . the transcendental and apocalyptic perspective of religion comes as a tremendous emancipation of the imaginative mind" (1970:125). This might as well apply to the principal goal of all Dickinson's quest. Her sense of the end is a similar experience of transcendence of mortal limits and union with eternal being.

Time figures as importantly in Dickinson's writings as it does in any New England Puritan sermons and literature in particular and any eschatological or apocalyptic literature in general. It is because Revelation or Apocalypse cannot occur in the temporal setting, and the eschatological mind craves for the end of historical or profane time. Along with this awareness, the eschatological perception is sensitive to a ceaseless temporal process leading to death. Dickinson is found to be constantly aware of the ubiquitousness of profane time which is reflected in the flux, fragments and categories of mundane reality. Her eschatological propensities are only too apparent in her perennial interest in the end of time and the keen and sad awareness of all earthly glory dissolving in death. Her speculation and curiosity about the mystery of death, the intriguing postmortal phenomena of the Resurrection of

the dead, Judgement, Heaven and Hell, too, bear the stamp of an eschatological frame of mind. She portrays the dead awaiting resurrection in their graves, the trial of the soul in the Celestial Court and breathtaking moments of waiting for the sentence. She realises that all action performed in this condition must be fragmentary, incomplete and diffuse, for totality and fulfilment can be achieved in the condition of sacred time which can occur only at the Apocalypse, the final revelation of the mysteries of what stands beyond the end of historical time. "Existence's whole Arc"(P#506) would be filled up only at the moment of Revelation.

The evils of profane time are continually reflected in the ongoing disjunctive and decadent processes of temporal life. Dickinson helplessly watches time's degenerative processes in the lives laid under clods of earth and the separation of dear ones, and sometimes laments her inability to stop its rampage. Dickinson's idea of time as the creator of illusion is compatible with the Puritan view of worldly life as such. She realises that profane time is ineluctable in the temporal condition but it can be removed by working the mind up into the condition of sacred time. It is this sacred time upon which the Apocalypse is predicated. She internalises the Christian Apocalypse and experiences it when time ablates in the lyric state of the mind. In the condition of the delayed Apocalypse, it is not a crusade to be fought in the objective world; it is rather one's constant struggle against one's own faltering self for establishing the true church in the heart. In the Calvinistic creed the true church is nurtured in the heart of the believer until it comes into being through historical evolution (Gilsdorf, 1965:4-5). One can often notice in Dickinson's writings an effort to achieve a kind of immortality in time. She defines eternity as the perpetual present: "Forever - is composed of Nows -" (P#624). It indicates that she does not negate profane time absolutely. She believes that

eternity in the sense of immortality can be experienced in time here and now in the form of epiphanies in the life of the mind. But the mind must attain the necessary purity and intensity by virtue of disciplined renunciation before it can experience "The Soul's Superior instants"(P#306).The idea of eternity received from her religion scares her. She works out an imaginative substitute which is the mystical experience of all time instantaneously present at a focal point.

Dickinson notices that two kinds of consciousness exist in two types of time, profane and sacred. The consciousness that resides in profane time is of corrupt nature producing distorted perception of life and nature. On the other hand, the consciousness projected in the form of "perpetual Noon" or "Degreeless Noon" in her poetry stands for "God's full time," or the Apocalypse. It is in the condition of this consciousness that totality and wholeness can be perceived without the interference of the shadows of illusion. It is the post-apocalyptic state of the perpetual present. As she says, "Tis not a different time" but just the present stretched *ad infinitum* (P#624).

However, Dickinson does not accept eternity or timelessness as traditionally understood in Christianity which holds the view that so-called post-mortem eternal consciousness exists without the shortcomings of earthly time. She calls into question the inherent contradiction of such solace, for mortal consciousness even when extended into the next world for redemption or damnation cannot exist without earthly time. On the other hand she can perceive eternity in lyric consciousness where the eternal present shines like noon: ". . .Consciousness – is Noon"(P#1056).

The deep bereavements that she continually suffered in life made her speculate on death as a great range of probabilities but she always ends up inconclusively. In her poems and letters she puzzles over this alien power that

unpredictably invades and assaults the human and the natural world. Although she understands it as an irrevocable condition of human life, it does not dissuade her from wrestling with its enigma. Death's impalpability intrigues and troubles her infinitely. Despite the many different negative traits of death she finds a few very important virtues in it. For one thing, it is the only exit from this world into the next. So death provides *the* only shift key that can bring about a rite of passage, a modal change in existence and an upliftment into a higher order of being. Besides, there is an irony in her praise of death for removing the neglected, wronged, and unsheltered into the shelter of the grave for whom this world is a place of misery. Of course she was influenced by the spirit of 19th-century consolation literature in this regard. On top of all her personal reason for obsession with death is that it would enable her to meet her dear dead in the next world. So paradoxically, and ultimately, death would not mean separation for her: it would mean reunion. In this respect Dickinson's faith is deeply Christian. All these considered, death appears to be quite serviceable to mankind in Dickinson's eyes.

Death always mystifies Dickinson, for it comes suddenly, appears in unpredictable forms and turns its victims into cold inanimate objects. She understands that death is elusive because it is fuzzy. In a good number of poems she attempts to define it, as though to reduce death to a definition would help her understand the shadowy entity of this formless adversary and allow her some kind of grip on it. She wonders about its address in both poems and letters. Her intellect and imagination remain on the constant alert to apprehend death, ultimately to no avail though. It is important for her to crack the mystery of death, for she believes that the secrets of God and the afterlife are encoded in it. She adopts strategies such as defining death and keeping deathbed watch eagerly expecting that she might elicit some kind of disclosure

about the nature of death and the afterlife. It is also Dickinson's last-ditch attempt to penetrate the mystery of Revelation in individual life, for thereby she hopes to get a first-hand report of the hereafter from the dying person's deathbed conduct. This moment is the closest the living can ever come to witnessing Revelation. It is an instance of Dickinson's heuristic mind that refuses to accept the tenets of her religion about postmortal existence simply in good faith and without personal empirical enquiry. These vigils also serve as her rehearsals before she is ready to take death's final strike tranquilly. The repeated encounters with the soul's extremity (P#412) in her consciousness free her from the humiliating dread of death. As a result, her meeting with death is not "a novel Agony" but little more than a refined social gentility.

Dickinson's adjustment with death takes her through a multiplicity of experiences. The quest for this knowledge takes her down the line to apocalyptic moments of perception where she experiences dissolution and rebirth. It is not ordinary even to read such charmed poetry as it is touched with a kind of uncanny magical power. Dickinson lived all her life on the precipice of her consciousness, and anyone willing to share in her experience must risk this perilous brink. An occasional reader of Dickinson must beware of this hazardous cliff. Hers is a genius teetering with the sense of ending. It is not for the ordinary mortals to endure such a state for too long. Dickinson suffered and survived it, and emerged from it with splintered experience in fragmentary poetry. It is no wonder that Higginson, on meeting her, felt terribly unnerved and enervated.[2] This should be exemplary to those who are too curious about geniuses and seek their close company.

Dickinson imagines a strange kind of death in which the dead are not completely dead: a consciousness lives on, which obstructs the dead from being at one with death. This oneness is essential to be completely dead, as

death by definition is the wiping-out of consciousness. And as long as consciousness remains, temporal time lingers too. Dickinson finds the Christian postulate of eternal consciousness preposterous. If such were the case it should be horrifying, because it would only prolong temporal miseries into eternity, as consciousness cannot exist without time. Then death would not release human beings from the fetters of mortal suffering in time. This would only defeat the whole purpose of death being the transcendence of time.

The best and most of her imaginative strengths and resources are invested in the exploration of the nature and mystery of death and all that lies beyond it. Her soul-searching about the End is not confined to a few occasional pieces only; it permeates her total sensibility regardless of subject and occasion. As her letters about the business of everyday life testify, even the most trivial subject would receive allusions from her to the presence of death in life and to the afterlife.

The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead intrigues and horrifies Emily Dickinson. She finds the cyclical return of life in nature to be no foolproof evidence of a similar principle working in the resurrection of the human dead. While the scheme of things in nature is "deciduous" (P#1422), Providence may have made human life a one-off affair as the dead never return to the world of the living again. Besides the express statement of transubstantiation of the dead in the Bible is a constant fright to her. As set forth in the Bible, the resurrected body will assume a newly reconstituted form and its former earthly identity will be completely annihilated. She demurs at the idea of identity loss or putting on a new one, for it is by the old marks that she both hopes to recognise, and be recognised by her lost loved ones in the next world after her death. In both poems and letters Dickinson expresses regular concern over the prospects of reuniting with her dead friends and

relatives and retaining her earthly community in the world to come. In fact it is about all the attraction of death and heaven for her. So if she loses her present self and identity through death and resurrection, she fears that she might not be able to re-establish her human relationship with them. It logically follows that Dickinson hopes to remain still "human" in the hereafter. But it contradicts her own observation that death transforms a person into an inanimate, dehumanised object. However this contradiction is symptomatic of Dickinson's effort to develop her own eschatological framework in order to replace the institutional one.

In fact the retention of earthly community in the hereafter is also central to her ideas of heaven and hell. Reunion with the darling dead is heaven and separation from them makes for the condition of hell. Eternal separation from her own people is the worst sentence that she can ever expect from *post-mortem* judgement for her apostasy and delinquent conduct. Sometimes Dickinson goes out of her way to conceive a judgement of the dead where the soul on trial is portrayed in solitary circumstances (P#524). Besides she believes that the dead receive judgement at death and the Last Judgement is a remote possibility. She also entertains the idea of attaining personal immortality on earth and in time which belief, she shows, has the sanction of the Bible. As is obvious in Dickinson's hope for the restoration of her earthly community in the afterlife, personal elements deeply inform her ideas of heaven and hell too. Gradually her heaven and hell took on subjective qualities instead of being actual places in objective space. They signify the apocalyptic conditions of her mind in its extreme states of agonies and ecstasies. Yet the traditional assumptions of Heaven and Hell themselves provide her with the ideas of her private heaven and hell.

The account of the splendour of Heaven and the End in the "Gem chapter" (Chapter 21) of the Book of Revelation dazzles, excites and overwhelms her with the prospects of eternal life full of beatific joy and bathed in glorious empyrean light. It is no wonder that she received "Bulletins all Day / From Immortality," (P#827) because her eyes are still filled with the visions of the End and the lost paradise that the Book of Revelation contains:

". . . once – on me – those Jasper Gates
Blazed open – suddenly

That in my awkward – gazing – face –
The Angels – softly peered –
And touched me with their fleeces,
Almost as if they cared –[3]
(P#256)

She suffers the denials and deprivations of this life in the hope of regaining this paradise. She is a typical Puritan in her patient wait for this vision to come true again through self-inflicted suffering. She learnt from her religion to hide her time for deferred delights. Therefore she keeps her gaze ever fixed on the end.

Dickinson's eschatology is concerned with the conditions for subjectivity within a Christian narrative, which organises experience in this world according to a vision of another world, or an eschatological frame. In other words, Dickinson inherits her world linguistically, socially, and culturally through a narrative that claims to tell us about what happens after death. The fundamentals of the Christian narrative are directed towards the post-mortem world. The principal focus of Dickinson's eschatological poems is located where the eschatological frame of the Christian narrative locates "the next life," the absolute presence of God. She uses the same universal Christian mythos but assimilates it into her subjectivity. She breaks the archetype but retains its fragments in the body of her innumerable fractured and discontinuous lyrics and over a thousand "emotionally naked" letters (Johnson

& Ward, 1965:XV). Her sense of the end is definitely an offshoot of Christian eschatology further intensified by the eschatological New Englanders, yet it is completely her own.

NOTES

[1] Emily Dickinson calls only "immortality" her "flood subject"(L319) but Thomas H. Johnson places – rightly enough – nature, death and immortality under this rubric. Time, Resurrection, Heaven , Hell and Election could be included in this subject category in consideration of their frequent use in her writings.

[2] The encounter with Dickinson was emotionally an awsome experience for Higginson, who instantly felt the presence of a genius. After this he wrote home to his wife:

> I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her. She often thought me *tired* & seemed very thoughtful of others (L342b:476).

[3] But there is a slight inaccuracy in detail. The twelve gates of the holy city are not of jasper but of pearls (Re 21:21) and the wall is made of jasper (Re 21:18). It is an instance of Dickinson assigning secondary value to detail, her primary objective being to create the effect more poetically than by any academic scrupulousness.

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