

## ***The Banquet of Abstemiousness: Emily Dickinson's Calvinistic Stance***

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Emily Dickinson ranks among the most famous authors of the American Literary Renaissance and as such, her poetry is often related to Transcendentalism, in particular to Emerson who visited her several times and with whom she corresponded. One should underline at the outset that the American Renaissance with the notable exception of Edgar Allan Poe was largely a New-England phenomenon so that most American writers of the period were writing against Puritanism, even though that rebellion was often expressed in Puritan terms. One of the best examples of this paradox was Nathaniel Hawthorne who constantly denounced the hypocrisy of seemingly pious appearances, thus drawing upon the dichotomy between Seeming and Being which is inherent in the dualism of Puritan metaphysics.

In order to grasp this rejection of New England Puritanism, it is first necessary to set out the main tenets of the faith: particularly the insistence upon the soul's personal relationship with God, which is often one of conflict and vacillates between ecstasy and despair. Metaphysically, as hinted above, Puritan dualism tended to favour that which exists permanently, spirit, as opposed to that which is constantly changeable, matter. As a consequence the material world was downgraded and had to be repressed: Sin had largely to do with desires of the flesh and physical beauty nearly always smacked of evil. To this, one must add that American Puritanism was particularly austere for it was Calvinistic, which was not true of the English branch of the same faith. Calvinism entails a particularly desperate sense of the depravity of man who is sinful, hopelessly flawed from birth and intrinsically not worth saving. As Jonathan Edwards stresses in his powerful sermon comparing man to a wretched spider hanging over the fiery pit of hell, man is saved only through God's agency and therefore has to be predestined (*The Harper American Literature, Vol. I, 1994, 351*). The world of postlapsarian Nature is particularly suspicious in American Puritanism which places a strong emphasis on divine Grace. The Elect have to become children of Grace as opposed to the heathen who are merely Children of Nature. In addition, American Puritans, being forced to survive in the midst of a hostile environment, were not much given to theological speculation. Thus, the ferment of thought-provoking ideas, wild inventiveness and novel interpretations of the Holy Scriptures which we find in England had no parallel in New England where a particularly stern canon quickly became fixed and rigid.

In that context, the stance which the Transcendentalists were to take when they affirmed their trust in nature as a guide for moral conduct consisted in a complete reversal of Puritan values. Emerson, who had renounced dogmatized religion and given up his career as a Unitarian minister advocated a return to nature, not unlike the Wordsworthian kind of Romanticism or Rousseau's theories, and preached the existence of a universal God immanent in Nature. The word "transcendentalist" meant that one had to transcend the physical world but not disregard it altogether: it was mind over matter but one could find beauty and meaning in exterior things. Emerson thus reinstalled nature as the only place where one could discover true Christianity: "We can never see Christianity from the catechism; - from the pasture, from a boat in the pond, from amidst the songs of wood-birds we possibly may" (*The Harper American Literature, Vol. I, 1994, 1085, from "Circles"*).

Like Hawthorne who denounced the tyranny of the Minister and the rule of the Mob in his fiction, Emerson pointed to the inherent contradiction in American Puritans who had fled established religious institutions for the sake of liberty only to recreate an even stricter form of dogmatic tyranny: “The Puritans came here in revolt against forms. Why should they have kept any then? ... Is *any* form necessary?” (*The Harper American Literature, Vol. I, 1994, 1087*). For Emerson, God was found independently from tradition, history or dogma. In fact, intuition and imagination sufficed: “Everyman for himself; driven to find all his resources, hopes, rewards, society and deity within himself” (*The Harper American Literature, Vol. I, 1994, 1041*). Interestingly, one notes that, as is the case with Hawthorne, this is a criticism of Puritan ethics in terms of Puritan metaphysics since Emerson merely reinterpreted the Puritan doctrine of self-reliance and individualism. Owing to his theory of the “inner light” present in each and every one of us, (*The Harper American Literature, Vol. I, 1994, 1039*). Emerson made so bold as to deliver the daring injunction: “Make your own Bible” (*The Harper American Literature, Vol. I, 1994, 1085, Journal Entry*).

Emily Dickinson, in spite of her relative silence regarding the literary and political movements of her own times, was not unaware of other writers of the period. Apart from her correspondence with Emerson, she does mention Hawthorne in a letter to say: “He entices – appals.” (Warren, in Sewall, 1963, 106). And she was also conscious of being part of the tradition of New-England: “I see - New-Englandly” (*The Harper American Literature Vol. I, 1994, 2559*). Her poems about Nature, her rebellion against religious dogma are to a certain extent in tune with the Transcendentalist stance. When she utters such statements as “The Soul selects her own Society”, (Poem 303) this declaration of Independence of the Soul can be interpreted as an offshoot of what Thoreau, the other prominent Transcendentalist, advocated with the concept of “Home cosmography” (*The Harper American Literature Vol. I, 1994, 1089*). Poem 303 also illustrates the oblique manner in which Emily acknowledges the exterior world. The divines that the speaker rejects are part of New England, the ample nation she spurns quite clearly designates America, and she gives the word “Majority” an ironical twist. In short, the whole of American society is knocking at the persona’s door, but it is weighed in the balance and found wanting like Belshazzar at his feast.

In her letters, Emily Dickinson often sets out the superiority of nature over man, society and man-made creation: “You ask for my Companions Hills – Sir – and the Sundown – and a Dog – large as myself that my father bought me – They are better than Beings – because they know and do not tell – and the noise in the Pool at Noon - excels my Piano.” (*The Harper American Literature Vol. I, 1994, 2604, Letter 25 April 1862 to Higginson*). Other letters dwell upon the beauties of Nature as in the following description of spring: “The lawn is full of South and the odours tangle, and I hear today for the first the river in the tree.”

Many poems such as 324 turn away from church institutions and replace them with nature in true Emersonian fashion: “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church - / I keep it staying at Home - / With a Bobolink for a Chorister - / And an Orchard for a Dome – ”. “Clearly, these poems seem to express a seraphic view of nature akin to Emerson’s own when he wants to find Christianity in the fields, but, as we shall see, this is deceptive.

In some other nature poems, Emily Dickinson also keeps true to an enduring English tradition according to which Nature reverberates man’s individual drama: the all important “I” invades the world of nature which thus becomes allegorical. I mentioned Wordsworth earlier but, of course, Emily Brontë’s poetry is more to the point here. The latter was another rebel for whom natural elements reflected the metaphysical: “those lonely hills .... Can centre both the

worlds of heaven and hell” (Brontë, “Often Rebuked”, in Davies, 1976, 91). As John Crowe Ransom has pointed out: “It is still true that the spontaneous expression of our metaphysical moods ... is to be found in the incessant and spacious drama of the natural world ... Natural events have visibility, and audibility too; yet they seem touched with Heavenly influences, and, if you like, they are sufficiently mysterious” (Crowe Ransom, in Sewall, 1963, 92). Emily Dickinson amply demonstrates the theory when she uses the Sunrise and the Sunset as metaphors for the birth and the death of Christ (Savinell, 1993, 132) or when a walk by the sea-side turns into a menacing encounter with invisible forces as in poem 520: “I started Early, took my Dog -/And visited the Sea -”.

However, if the examples given above can be related to Transcendentalism and/or English Romanticism, they do not tell the whole complicated story of Emily's relationship with nature and dogmatized religion.

Unlike the Transcendentalists, Emily Dickinson does not merely *turn away* from traditional religion and accepted norms of behaviour and her rebellion goes much further than theirs. Religion in her poems is totally subverted. She is prone to take religious dogma, and stand it on its head, in other words, she seems to take particular pleasure in reducing the religious to the profane. In fact, when Emily Dickinson downgrades and secularizes Calvinistic concepts like selection in 303, a poem in which the Soul supersedes the Calvinistic Deity, she comes very near blasphemy. Similarly, in a letter to “Susie” after the death of the latter's son Gilbert, Emily Dickinson quotes the line of a poem which E. Brontë had written to “the Almighty, ever present Deity” (Brontë, in Davies, 1976, 88) but with a difference, as she applies the line to Gilbert instead of God: “Every Existence would exist in thee.”<sup>1</sup> (Howe, 1985, 134). The subversion of Calvinism is also uncompromising in poem 508, in which the persona rejects the Church of her childhood and her Baptism (the major sacrament for Protestants with the Eucharist): “Baptized before, without the choice, / But this time consciously of Grace – / Unto supremest name - ”. The lines imply that her religious baptism didn't bring her Grace, on the contrary, Grace came with her rejection of Baptism, and Emily has turned the tables on Calvinism. Similarly, in poem 336, the persona goes to Heaven's door carrying her lover's face in exchange for which she receives “such a crown/As Gabriel never capered at -”. Here again, religious dogma is subverted: it seems that it is earth which can teach Heaven something and that the role of Gabriel, the Heavenly Messenger who brought glad tidings to Mary, has been reversed by the persona whose earthly love causes her to act the part of a sacrilegious archangel.

Nor does E find any compensation for her religious scepticism in the world of nature, for the vision of nature which transpires through this poetry brings no real solace. Nature is often cruel as in 328, “A Bird came down the Walk -” when the persona watches a bird eating a worm raw or it is frightening as in poem 986 when the speaker comes upon a snake and feels “Zero at the Bone -”. Even the sublime elements in nature can turn into so many personal enemies. In poem 348, “I dreaded that first Robin so” which is about spring, the speaker describes herself as “the Queen of Calvary”, therefore hardly attuned to the prevailing mood of joy in the outside world: the first Robin still “hurts a little”, “the Pianos in the Woods ... mangle”, “the Daffodils [and] their Yellow Gown ... pierce”. The idea that spring or summer somehow either bypasses the persona or contends with her is a major motif we also find in poem 322 where the solstice of June leaves a few souls behind.<sup>2</sup> This ambivalence in her

<sup>1</sup> The poem by Emily Brontë is “No Coward soul is mine”.

<sup>2</sup> “As if no soul the solstice passed”

response to nature is clearly set out in poem 1400: “But nature is a stranger yet; / The ones that cite her most / Have never passed her haunted house, / nor simplified her ghost”. In this, Emily Dickinson is a precursor and announces the poetry of Robert Frost, another inheritor of the Puritan tradition, who often fore-grounds the estrangement between man and nature or man and the universe. We find in Frost's poetry the same paradox as in Emily's: a return to nature is preferable to the conventions of society but nature itself is no friend to man. In a poem like Frost's “Bereft” natural elements are in league against the persona just like the robin and the daffodils in Emily's 322: “Leaves got up in a coil and hissed; / Blindly struck at my knees and missed” (Frost, 1973, 148). The similarity with Frost can, I think, elucidate some of Emily's more mysterious poems such as 315: the speaker after having had her Soul scalped by the mysterious “He” concludes with a cryptic epigram: “When Winds take Forests in their Paws - / The Universe is still”. The stillness of the universe under the final blow is presented as a contrast to the slow torture of the soul, and this seems to imply that the universe is not ruled by the same laws as those that regulate human perception and sentiment. This spells out man's fundamental alienation from nature and this concept may throw some light on some other cryptic final lines. In poem 515 which is about the overwhelming import of Resurrection to mankind, the persona questions the fact that this wondrous expectation can be of any significance to the Universe as the final stanza reads: “What Duplicate – exist - / What Parallel can be - / Of the Significance of This - / To Universe and Me?” The interpretation of this ambiguous statement depends on the persona's vision of nature. If Nature, the Universe, *were* similar to the world of men, then Universe (and Me) would be concerned. But, the conclusion, I believe, is much grimmer: the Universe being nothing even remotely akin to the emotions of man, no parallel can be established and this forebodes ill for the man-made construct that Resurrection represents. The last stanza contradicts the rest of the poem and turns Resurrection into mere fantasy. Indeed, Emily's poetry variously asserts the sad fact that creation is *not* anthropocentric: in poem 553, she describes the private sorrows of men as so many “Peninsulas” with each a grief unknown and uncommunicable, an implicit refutation of John Donne's famous re-assertion of the principles of the Great Chain of Being: “No man is an island”. Fundamentally, this is why Christ, although, as a human being, He “Broke – Perfect – from the Pod -”, (Poem 567) constantly falls short as a rescuer or a bringer of life in Emily's poetry. In 318, the yellow little boys and girls, a metaphor for the Sunrise and the birth of Christ, cannot have their way when the sun sets for good. They have become a flock which is “led away” and put behind bars by a grey “dominie”<sup>3</sup> so that all hopes of Resurrection seem abortive. There is no prospect of immortality for these children chastised by grown-ups in a poem that sounds very reminiscent of Blake's “Holy Thursday”. As the critic Yvors Winters remarks, Emily Dickinson's poetry conveys the haunting sense of “human isolation in a foreign universe” (Sewall, 1963, 32). But perhaps one can go even further and view the universe as not only alienated from man but ruled by some sort of malevolent power which again stresses a similarity with Frost. Far from finding God in nature, Frost developed the idea of a malevolent God in the Petrarchan sonnet called “Design” in which the speaker contemplates an albino spider eating its prey: “Assorted characters of death and blight ... like the ingredients of a witches' broth” (Frost, 1973, 179). From the unsavoury spectacle, he concludes that either creation is absurd, without “design” or that if there is “design”, then the “designer” can only be as monstrous as his own creation: “What but design of darkness to appal? - ”.<sup>4</sup> This idea of an implicit malevolence in creation is present in many of Emily's poems such as the rebellious 313: “I should have been too glad, I

<sup>3</sup> A Scottish word for “schoolmaster”: one perceives the influence of the Presbyterian Scottish Kirk in that lexical choice.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, Frost here is alluding to Thomas of Aquinas' proof of the existence of God as the Great Designer.

see -" in which the Creator seems bent on watching the suffering of His creatures and declines to respond to their many "sabachthanis."

With these considerations, one notes that the frequent downgrading of the "world without" brings Emily further away from Emerson and closer to the Calvinistic notion of a hostile nature. In fact, her thoughts mostly draw towards Emerson when the latter is at his Calvinistic best, that is, when he asserts the fundamental creed of individualism with his theory of the inner light. Henry James was later to deride this predominance of the Self over all other preoccupations and his pronouncement on Emerson could conceivably apply to Emily Dickinson: "The doctrine of the supremacy of the individual to himself, of his originality and, as regards his own character, *unique* quality, must have had a great charm for people living in a society in which introspection, thanks to the want of other entertainments, played almost the part of a social resource. There was ... much relish for the utterances of a writer who would help one to take a picturesque view of one's internal possibilities." (Aiken, in Sewall, 1963, 12). The soul as a picturesque dramatic agent was certainly a fundamental aspect of Puritanism as well, as is illustrated by these lines written by the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet and preacher, John Goodwin: "I sing my Self, my civil wars within/The victories I hourly lose and win".<sup>5</sup> In America also, as Allen Tate notes, the Puritan theocracy had "dramatized the human soul" by highlighting its inner conflicts and giving "a heroic proportion and a tragic mode to the experience of the individual" (Sewall, 1963, 17). Indeed, individualism enables one to enhance a humdrum existence and endow the inner drama of the soul with unexpected magnificence.<sup>6</sup> (Sewall, 1963, 96). All of the above recall Emily's dramatic poetry to mind as well as the intensity of her personae's inner conflict. Whether or not her dramas of the soul are autobiographical does not signify. In a famous statement made to Higginson, Emily made clear that her poems did not refer to her experience directly: "When I state myself (that is use 'I') as the representative of the verse - it does not mean me - but a supposed person" (White, in Martin, 2002, 109, Letter to Higginson 268). However, as John Crowe Ransom points out, these inner dramas can still be autobiographical in a secondary sense: "the sense of being true to an imagined experience" (Sewall, 1963, 96).

Whatever the case may be, the intensity of the focus "inward" and the intimacy of the drama inevitably lead to the complex relationship with nature noticed supra for when nature is viewed as the soul's endless refraction or its allegorical extension, it may comprise the Infinite, like the Sea in 520 but when the drama of the Self supersedes the exterior world, nature is rejected as in poem 348 or 322. In short, all things in nature are valueless unless they can be interiorized. Lastly, the dissociation between man and the universe often causes the world of nature to be allegorized into despair, a kind of bleak numbness which totally diverges from the Romantic mood. Emily could find her own "Grisly Frosts - first Autumn morns" (Poem 510) in her own soul and, in that again she reminds us of Robert Frost who discovered within himself terrifying "desert places", far more frightening than all the "empty spaces" in our galaxy (Frost, 1973, 175).

Thus, in E's poetry, the inner drama of the soul with its constant wavering between the two extremes of Puritanism, despair and ecstasy, far outweighs the exterior world. As Blackmur notes, Emily Dickinson "had the resignation and the loneliness and the excruciation - she had

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<sup>5</sup> John Goodwin, English poet and preacher 1594-1665, given at a lecture in Cambridge by Professor Sylvia Adamson.

<sup>6</sup> This is a misquote from John Crowe Ransom who uses the same terms but applies them to E. Dickinson herself: "she was systematically adapting her own experience which by common standards was a humdrum affair into the magnificent image of her Soul which she had created in the poems".

the characteristic *misery* of Protestantism and a version of her own for its hysterical glee.” (Sewall, 1963, 84). Indeed, as Emily herself states, “Take all away from me but leave me Ecstasy / And I'm richer then, than all my Fellow Men.”<sup>7</sup> (Higgins, in Sewall, 1963, 166). The inner experience of her speakers, full of unexpected riches, is often referred to as a “mine”, as in poem 528 with its wordplay on the possessive pronoun and the mine from which precious stones and minerals are extracted (Savinel, 1993, 91). In this poem, both the personal integrity and the secret riches of the soul are fore-grounded: “Mine - by the Right of the White Election / Mine – by the Royal Seal”. Christine Savinel calls the poem “the litanies of the Self” because of the anaphoric repetition specific to religious litanies (Savinel, 1993, 97). The poem could be read with 466 which is about spiritual riches as opposed to material wealth: “’Tis little I - could care for Pearls - / Who own the ample sea”. Or as Wendy Barker suggests, it can be read with 406: “Some – Work for Immortality ... Slow Gold – but Everlasting” (Martin, 2002, 87). It seems clear that those who “own the ample sea” or “work for immortality” are marked by the “Royal Seal” we find in 528, which, like most of Emily’s “seals”, refers to the *Book of Revelation*. The Seal stands for the mystical sign which betokens the sacred Covenant between the Lamb and the Justified; it is a mark which is meant to set the righteous apart from the rest of mankind so that they will be spared the oncoming destruction at the end of the world; then, the chosen ones shall wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb till they become pure white, hence “the White Election”;<sup>8</sup> finally, they shall partake of the Lamb’s Supper, also mentioned severally in Emily’s poetry, particularly in 322, a love poem which draws upon the same Biblical reference: the lovers are “Each to Each the Sealed Church” and they will take part in the “Supper of the Lamb”. Whether religious or not, plenitude is often marked by the mysterious Seal and the white Election but it has to be paid for by the blood of the martyr, “the Scarlet Prison”. What is remarkable in the litanies of poem 528 is that suffering is embraced as part of the necessary price to pay. Whatever state or condition is alluded to (and it is clearly linked with solitude and destitution), the deprivation is fully accepted: the poem does not reject the world arrogantly as the speaker in 303, nor is the persona rebellious and somewhat didactic as in 508, nor does she focus solely upon pain as in many other poems. The agony and the ecstasy balance each other out, perhaps as part of a secret covenant with whatever Infinite the self has chosen. As the critic, Wilbur notes Emily’s life was deprived, as it were, *by choice* as if she had discovered endless bounty in the midst of destitution. Deprivation itself was a source of secret nourishment and she could turn deprivation into fruition. The paradox is that “privation is more fruitful than plenty, that to renounce is to possess the more, that ‘The Banquet of Abstemiousness/Defaces that of wine.’” (Sewall, 1963, 130). In short, “the pain of abstinence is justified by moments of infinite joy, and the object [of desire] is spiritually possessed” (Sewall, 1963, 133). This interpretation seems corroborated by Emily’s letters. In one of them we read: “Enough is of so vast a sweetness, I suppose it never occurs, only pathetic counterfeits”; (Sewall, 1963, 134) in another addressed to “Susie”: “To miss you Sue is power. The stimulus of Loss makes most possession mean” (*The Harper American Literature Vol I*, 1994, 2607). This also explains the enigmatical tone of some of her aphorisms: “’Tis Beggars – Banquets – can define - / ’Tis Parching – vitalizes the Wine -” (Poem 313) and the fact that she often talks in riddles: “It might be lonelier / Without the loneliness” or “Water is taught by thirst” (Reeves, in Sewall, 1963, 120-121). In short, if satiety can never be reached, it is best to renounce it altogether and again R Frost is called to mind: “Happiness can make up in height for what it lacks in length” (Sewall, 1963, 136).

<sup>7</sup> Two lines of poetry which are found in the draft of a letter to Mrs. Jackson.

<sup>8</sup> In the Book of Revelation a great deal of insistence is placed on the Lamb’s garments: the colours white and gold are emphasized and the Elect who wash their robes in his blood also wear garments of spotless white.

Thus, Emily highlights the Calvinistic notion of abstemiousness as the *summum bonum* although she expresses this in Shakespearean terms by regularly equating riches with beggary and spiritual bounty with the sea. In poem 406, for instance: “the Bullion of Today” is “A Beggar” as opposed to Immortality. In fact, much of Emily’s terminology when she harps upon this theme can be traced to *Romeo and Juliet*: “They are but beggars who can count their worth”, (Act II, scene 6, 32) says Juliet to Romeo, meaning that bliss cannot be quantified, therefore has to remain unexpressed. Other lines spoken by Juliet literally haunt Emily Dickinson’s poetry: “My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep: the more I give to thee, / The more I have: for both are infinite” (Acte II, scene 2, 133-135). The sea is equated with endless reciprocation and deprivation can but make one all the richer. Thus, in Emily Dickinson’s poetry “the ample sea” in 466 becomes the lover’s breast in 506: “It was a boundless place to me / And silenced, as the awful sea / Puts minor streams to rest”.

Stylistically, the eulogy of destitution leads to the paradox that words must be used sparingly for abstemiousness followed to its logical conclusion leads to complete silence. And indeed in the previous quotation from 506, we note that “the boundless place” is “silenced”, whereas words are nothing but “minor streams”. As Donald Thackrey points out, the constant watchwords in this poetry are: “*frugality, economy, conciseness, reticence and simplicity*” (Thackrey, in Sewall, 1963, 59) and naturally “frugality” rings a Puritan bell. Since Emily heard silence in nature, in life, in man, in death and in God, “this withdrawal from communication by the mightiest things ... was worth emulating, in so far as possible, by the mightiest human minds (Thackrey, in Sewall, 1963, 63). Indeed, many poems celebrate the virtue of silence as in 1681: “Speech is a symptom of Affection, / And Silence one - / The perfectest communication / Is heard of none -” The end of poem 310 makes the same claim: silence is “Sublimer sort – than Speech -”. In fact, the paradox consists in the attempt to express with words what lies too deep for words and Christine Savinel expresses this ambivalence via the image of the *adytos coros*, the sacred part of a Greek temple, which one can circle around but never enter, hence the statement “my Business lies in Circumference” (*The Harper American Literature Vol. I*, 1994, Letter to Higginson, 2607) or the no less famous: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant - / Success in circuit lies” (Savinel, 1993, 205). The poem is Thus, Emily’s poems often remain in the suburbs of some sacred centre which is unattainable: “‘Heaven’ - is what I cannot reach”.<sup>9</sup>

The preceding considerations serve to illustrate not only the Calvinistic influence but the fact that these poems for all that they waver between pain and bliss are poems of power in which, on the whole, the “glee” outweighs the despair. If inner riches are better than any earthly good, if deprivation is chosen for its own sake, if the seal is willingly set, then indeed, the persona’s position, as “the Queen of Calvary” in 322 is higher than any other on earth which accounts for the wealth of regal imagery in Emily’s work: kings, queens, emperors, royal seals and crowns abound. In 508, the persona “chooses just a crown”, she receives a crown in 336 and in 528, she is “Titled – Confirmed”. The idea of an invisible kingdom informs the whole opus with words such as: “supremest name”, “diadem”, “rank”, “erect” (508), “Degree”, “Kingdoms” “Sufficient Royalty” (336); “deference”, “salute”, “plumes” (348). Sometimes, the notion of absolute control is underlined with graphic suddenness as in the last line of poem 308. In this poem, the persona’s art competes against nature in the creation of a sunset. The speaker works in the dark for she manages two sunsets and a few stars while day

<sup>9</sup> The word “suburbs” comes from poem 1245, as Christine Savinel notes in *Emily Dickinson et la grammaire du secret*, op. cit. p. 205, and the quotation about Heaven is from poem 239.

“was only making One”, and so she wins the contest. Although Nature’s sunset “was ampler”, an allusion to the speaker’s own uneventful life, her inner life or creativity proves more rewarding than the ordinary day of men as the end of the poem makes clear: “Mine – is the more convenient / to Carry in the Hand -”. Underneath the deceptively homely allusion to a sheet of paper inscribed with a short poem, the phrase “Carry in the Hand” (duly capitalized) displays the image of the persona holding two sunsets and a few stars in the palm of her hand like a Queen with complete mastery over the universe. Austin Warren shrewdly remarks that, in her own life also, Emily always behaved like “a princess” (Sewall, 1963, 111). “she could never be moved from Amherst. She never came to Higginson: he, and other professed admirers, had to come to her, to her home, where she could set the tone and dictate the ritual” (Sewall, 1963, 112). And this also applied to Emerson, himself.

Finally, even if we do not know what kind of royalty is involved or what special covenant is marked by the seal or what exactly is gained through “the Banquet of Abstemiousness”, we dimly recognize that the spiritual gain, the stimulus of desire, the very creativity are somehow intertwined with rebellion, a recognizable Puritan trait. While reading her poetry, we are constantly confronted with the many ways in which she managed to challenge authority, and as a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman, she had a large choice at her disposal. The writing of poetry itself can be viewed as a major liberation since the world of prose is equated with a sort of prison enforced upon her in poem 613: “They shut me up in Prose”. In 657 we read: “I dwell in Possibility - / A fairer House than Prose - / More numerous of Windows - / Superior - for Doors -”.

Love functions in much the same way as poetical creativity in the sense that, passion constitutes a breach from the niceties of decorum and therefore hints at passionate self-assertion: poems like 249 “Wild Nights! Wild Nights” or 340 “Is Bliss then such an Abyss” do not point to emotional entanglement so much as to a sort of war declared against conformity. In fact, love and poetic inspiration seem interchangeable for in her numerous “riddle poems” or “definition poems” where the tenor of the metaphors is not given, that tenor is often interpreted either as love or poetic genius, the enigmatical “He” in poem 315 being a case in point. But of course there is always the third way, the possibility that “He” might be some sort of godhead after all, for Emily’s scepticism is somewhat “slant” and even in a God-is-dead poem such as 1551, she seems to uphold the superiority of faith: “The abdication of Belief / Makes the Behavior small –”(Poem 1551). Before hastening to categorize Emily Dickinson as a sort of avant-garde existentialist, one should recall that her poetry reflects an endless mirroring of gods. As Austin Warren observes: “Behind God the Son ... is God the Father, the Creator of all things and the Abyss of Godhead, unexhausted by what His creatures understand of His ways: moving in a mysterious way His wonders to perform, and best known not defining Him” (Sewall, 1963, 108).

In his critical essay on Emily Dickinson, Allen Tate develops the notion that great literature usually flourishes under the shadow of disaster, at the waning of a prominent culture, not necessarily because the artist consciously rebels against that culture but because he or she has to come to grip with the reality of its fall. “The poet finds himself balanced upon the moment when such a world is about to fall” (Sewall, 1963, 24). The historical context has to be “assimilated ... to the poetic vision; it is brought down from abstraction to personal sensibility” (Sewall, 1963, 24). Consequently, Tate draws a parallel between the Elizabethan and Metaphysical poets and the writers of the American Renaissance owing to their similar historical conditions. Thus, Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson’s favourite author or John Donne whom she is often compared to, wrote at the collapse of the Medieval world picture and the

authors of the American Renaissance produced their impressive body of work at the collapse of doctrinal Puritanism. Perhaps, this accounts at least in part for the vivid, dramatic urgency of Emily Dickinson's poems. As Archibald MacLeish observes, "Few [poets] have committed themselves as actors more livingly to the scene. That voice ... not only *speaks* but it speaks to *you*" (MacLeish, in Sewall, 1963, 160). And, in a lighter vein, MacLeish observes that this is the highest of all achievements in poetic writing: "The subject of all poetry is the human experience and its object must therefore be humanity as well. It is no excuse to a poet that humanity will not listen. It never has listened unless it was made to" (MacLeish, in Sewall, 1963, 160).

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