CHAPTER-IV

A POET APART

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Dickinson's poetry fairly reveals her awareness of the contemporary tendencies. A number of recent critics build upon her links with the literary and socio-cultural contexts of her time. Jay Leyda in his The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (1960) observes that Dickinson was "much more involved in the conflicts and tensions of her nation and community than we have thought" (XIX-XX). Barton Levy St. Armand in Emily Dickinson and Her Culture (1984) discovers her affinities with the sentimental and aesthetic writers of her time. More recently, Judith Farr in The Passions of Emily Dickinson (1992) traces the painterly sources from Europe and America as possible inspiration for many of her poems. Cynthia Griffin wolff also explores her poerty in terms of the intellectual and spiritual tendencies of her age in her intensive study, Emily Dickinson (1986). All these studies have certainly widened our knowledge of the poet in her contemporary context. Yet Dickinson's originality transcends all her sources. Speaking about the qualitative gap between her"gathered material" and their transformation, Ronald Hagenbüchle comments that it is a "real quantum leap" (Emily Dickinson Hand Book 369). Her approach to the content and technique of poetry is so strikingly individual that she seems to be shockingly original beside poets like William Bryant, John Whittier or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the gentle romantics of the early-nineteenth-century America. She may be bracketed with Edgar Allan Poe whose art also negates the optimistic transcendentalism that dominated the era. Yet her perceptions of life, sceptical and transcendent at the same time, are too distinctively her own without any parallel in the whole of nineteenth-century American literature. She is even radically different from Emerson and Whitman. Emerson and Whitman too challenge the contemporary poetic conventions. But Dickinson goes even further. She creates an individual poetic idiom of her own. A brief discussion of Emerson's and Whitman's poetic philosophy and style is necessary at this point to bring out the identity in difference between them on the one hand and Dickinson on the other.

Emerson's views of life and art were shaped by his transcendentalism. An aggressive faith in the power of the individual self, an offshoot of his transcendentalism,and a mystic belief in the spirituality of nature and in the harmonious union of the human and the divine are the focal points of all his discourse and poetry. He passionately celebrates the autonomy and the possibilities of the human self in "Self Reliance" (1841) : "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think" (The Portable Emerson 143). For him, " To believe in your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men- that is genius" (ibid 138). This insistence on the need for self-reliance and self-trust runs through the pages not only of "Self-Reliance" but recurs in his "Divinity School Address" (1838) and "American Scholar" (1837). His essay "Circles" pays tribute to man's never-ending possibilities of growth. Emerson here proposes that onwardness and movement, not stasis, is the "Lord of Life" : "The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles and that without end" (The Portable Emerson 230). Emerson rejects historical Christianity. However,as an ardent transcendentalist, he believes that the divine pervades every atom of the creation: "World is the product of one will, of one mind; and that one mind is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool" (("An Address" in An Emerson Reader191). His conviction about the divinity of the human self is the inspiration behind his passionate advocacy of self-reliance : "The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps" (The Portable Emerson150). Emerson's various writings illustrate the fact that he thinks both the "finite" and the "infinite", temporal and "immutable" combine in man. His vision of nature is also influenced by his romantic-idealistic philosophy. Like the romantics, specially reminiscent of Wordsworth, Emerson spiritualizes nature and finds it full of moral meanings for man. He observes in "Nature" (1836) that "particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts" and "the moral law lies at the centre of nature" (The Portable Emerson 19 and 29). He believes that nature rather than tradition or authority is our best teacher. The beauty of nature "sober and heal us" ("Nature" in Essays 328). In "Woodnotes" he proclaims that nature also purges man of sin:

> Come, lay thee in my soothing shade
> and heal the hurt which
> Sin has made.

The poem also suggests that nature is ever faithful to those who "trust" her. For Emerson, nature is a "metaphor of the human mind" and the "symbol of spirit" (Portable Emerson 24,19). To him, universe represents the externalization of the human soul. In Emerson's idealistic scheme of things, nature is no mysterious stranger. It elevates human soul, and ultimately man and nature are harmonious parts of a greater organic unity, the "perfect whole" as he calls it in the poem "Each and All".

We should not suppose that Emerson was naively unaware of the limitations and vulnerability of the human self. "Experience" and "Conduct of Life", his most important later essays, demonstrate his anguished consciousness of evil, of man's powerlessness before fate and death despite his affirmation of life. Stephen Whicher in his famous book Freedom and Fate : An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1953) emphasizes Emerson's awareness of the limitations of optimism. However, Emerson remains ultimately an optimist as he privileges the positive over the negative in human life. In his late essay "Perpetual Forces", Emerson observes that "We see the cause of evils and learn to parry them and use them as instruments" (The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson 10:73). He retains his belief in the power of the imagination "to rise" above despondency and conquer the conditions of life.

Glorification of the self is also the hallmark of Whitman's poetry. The very first lines of "Song of Myself" emphasize the heroic dimension of the human self :

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I asume you shall assume.
>
> (Leaves of Grass 28)

Like Emerson, he also conceives this individual self not as an isolated entity but as united with all human beings from "victim to the murderer" (Cambon 27). "Solitary at midnight", he walks in his imagination on "the old hills of Judaea with the beautiful gentle God by my side" (Leaves of Grass 64). A visionary desire for connecting personal self with everything and everyone is the focus of Leaves of Grass. "Like a noiseless patient spider" that "launch'd for filament, filament out of itself", his soul yearns to unite with every manifestation of life and divinity "till the gossamer thread it flings" catches "somewhere" ("A Noiseless Patient Spider", Leaves of Grass 450). This insistence on the spiritual ties between the self and the world recurs throughout "Song of Myself":

> I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of things
> to be.
>
> (Leaves of Grass 80)

Whitman stands on the same ground with Emerson in his poetic perception of life and the world.

Emily Dickinson, however, sees the world very differently from these two of her most outstanding contemporaries. Her poetry projects two worlds: one celebrating the invincible power of the soul and the other in the throes of pain, terror, doubt, despair and alienation. Accordingly, the celebrant and the nihilist exist side by side in her art. Her poems deal with all the commonplaces like love, death, religion, nature etc. But she rethinks them for herself, uninfluenced by tradition and authority. Speaking about Dickinson's originality, Harold Bloom writes in The Western Canon : "Except for Shakespeare, Dickinson manifests more cognitive originality than any other western poet since Dante" (291). He finds only Blake comparable to her in this respect.

Undeniably, Dickinson's aggressive individualism and independence of mind is to a great extent the result of the Emersonian tradition. Dickinson never met Emerson in person though she had the opportunity to meet him when he stayed in her brother's house during a lecture tour in Amherst in 1857. Anyway, she remained a reader of Emerson throughout her life. Emily Fowler Ford, Dickinson's girlhood friend, remarked that "Dickinson was immersed in Emerson's essays in the mid-1840s." (Porte and Morris, Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson 175). In 1850 Benjamin Newton, her beloved "tutor", had given her a copy of the 1847 poems (Letters Vol. I: 85). Critics such as George Whicher, Austin Warren and Roy Harvey Pearce find close link between the two poets. Clark Griffith also considers Dickinson a "Post-Emersonian"(Simon and Parsons, Transcendentalism and Its Legacy 124). Perhaps Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance and his trust in the power of the individual self fostered her own faith in the creative energy and the sustaining power of her own psyche. A number of poems such as no 383 ("Exhilaration is within"), no. 713 ("Fame of myself to justify") and no. 384 ("No rack can torture me") amply illustrate her faith in her consciousness as an alternative source of power. One of the most revealing is 789 in which Dickinson intends to rely on the power of the "Columnar Self" instead of on God or on external nature:

> On a Columnar Self -
> How ample to rely
> In Tumult or extremity - (789)

The trust in self sustains her "Conviction", that "Granitic Base / Though None be on our Side" (789). As for Emerson, for her also, "Exhilaration – is within-/ There can no Outer Wine / So royally intoxicate / As that Diviner Brand/ The

Soul achieves – Herself" (383). Her faith in the sustaining power of the self is so profound that she unhesitatingly proclaims:"The Soul selects her own Society - / Then – shuts the Door".

Despite such Emersonian glorification of the individual self, Dickinson was clearly sceptical of unqualified optimism. After her denial to hear Emerson's lecture or visit him at her brother's residence at Amherst, Dickinson wrote to Susan Dickinson, her sister-in-law, about his visit : "It must have been as if he had come from where dreams are born!" (Letters Vol. III:913). Helen Mcneil observes that this phrase appears in a poem — "A precious – mouldering – pleasure – 'tis –" (371) where it refers to an antique bookseller :

> He traverses-familiar -
> As One should come to Town -
> And tell you all your Dreams - were true -
> He lived where Dreams were born - (371)

In the context of the poem, Dickinson's supposed praise of Emerson in the letter cited seems rather ironical. Mcneil comments that the phrase refers to Emerson as a "kind of travelling salesman of optimism" (Emily Dickinson 100).

Dickinson's individuality lies, however, in her ability to see beyond the Emersonian vision of an invincible self another world of vulnerability, negation and doubt that also haunt the human self. Her poetry makes us feel that the self that sustains often has its demoniac counterpart and anticipates much of the findings about divided self in modern psychology. She is also acutely aware of the limitations of the self. Some of her best poems demonstrate with an almost clinical precision her dark vision of the soul's terror of pain, despair and fragmentation – a vision that reminds one of Kierkegaard's vision of reality. One such poem of formidable intensity is no. 761-"From Blank to Blank–". The first stanza presents the indifference of the agonized self to terror and hopelessness:

> From Blank to Blank -
> A Threadless Way

I pushed Mechanic feet –

The last two lines of the first stanza focus on the deep sense of despair with telling intensity:

To stop or perish — or advance –
Alike indifferent –

Finally, the "end", she gained, "ends beyond / Indefinite disclosed —". This is no nineteenth-century poem but almost a post-modern one demonstrating the cool purposelessness of despair. Two of her best poems also portray in a telling manner the self in the aftermath of acute despair. She explores the physical and emotional shock the self undergoes after intense suffering in "After great pain" (341). "After great pain," the poet feels, "The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs —". The whole physical system goes into a state of paralyzed shock :

The Feet, Mechanical, go round —
Of Ground, or Air or Ought —
A wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone — (341)

Such a physical and psychic state, the poet defines as the "Hour of Lead" which the soul, that can survive this agonized state, remembers :

As Freezing persons, recollect the snow —
First chill-then stupor-then the letting go (341)

I felt a "Funeral in my Brain" (280) (discussed in detail in the next chapter) is another remarkable poem on psychic distress. Along with the poems analysed above, it questions the Emersonian concept of the mind as "eternal" "supreme" and "absolute"(Frothingham 238). Formidable also is her cool and detached exploration of the nature of pain that often engulfs a distressed soul in no.599. The suffering is so intense that it swallows the self :

There is a pain – so utter –

It swallows substance up –

The mind, in its pathetic effort to recover, as if, covers the "Abyss" with "Trance". The last four lines depict the conscious delusion of the self to withstand the intense pressure of agony :

So Memory can step
Around - across - upon it –
As one within a Swoon –
Goes safely - where an open eye
would drop Him - Bone by Bone. (599)

Harold Bloom finds such poems almost Kafkaesque in their intensity : "Except for Kafka I cannot think of any writer who has expressed desperation as powerfully and as constantly as Dickinson" (Western Canon 295).

Some of her poems are also extremely interesting in their exploration of the fragmentation and duality of the self, revealing unbelief in a single unitary self. The agony of a split self, the consciousness of an other within the self, is the focus of poem 642. The poet's self is "impregnable unto All Heart". But she cannot banish consciousness, the other "me", from her self :

And since we're mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication —
Me — of Me ? (642)

Soul is perceived in another poem as an "imperial friend" and also as an "agonizing Spy at the same time :

The soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend-
Or the most agonizing Spy-
An Enemy-could send- (683)

Dickinson is also keenly aware of the destructive potentiality of the self, an awareness that goes far beyond the nineteenth-century conception of the self. Almost with a gothic imagination, she conceives "an assassin" within the self, "far more terrible" than the one hidden in a haunted house :

> Ourself behind ourself, concealed –
> Should startle most –
> Assassin hid in our Apartment
> Be Horror's least. (670)

The other self, the awful internal stranger, can appear in the "Corridors" of the "Brain". It is more frightful than any external horror.To the poet,even a "midnight meeting" with the "External Ghost" is "far safer" than an encounter with the stranger in the interior of the mind. She can visualize the frightening power of the unconscious buried within "The Cellars of the Soul":

> Its Hour with itself
> The Spirit never shows,
> What Terror would enthrall the Street
> Could countenance disclose
>
> . . . .
>
> The Subterranean Freight
> The Cellars of the Soul . . . (1225)

Thus she explores with a rare psychological accuracy otherness in identity, the self that is both a light and an engulfing darkness. Very often, as noticed in the poems discussed above, her poems combine the concept of an all-powerful invincible self with that of a self which is vulnerable, disintegrated and often potentially destructive. Stressing this point, Robert Weisbuch thinks that this perception of the dual character of consciousness reflects her composite mind, her attempt to explore experience as a whole. This awareness of the dialectical character of human self brings her close to modern sensibility.

Dickinson's uniqueness as a poet rests largely on her nature poetry also. She is considered to be one of the greatest American Romantics. Yet, Unlike the British and the American Romantics, Dickinson never spiritualizes nature or finds any moral or ethical value for man as does Emerson. Nature to her is no divinity. She cannot accept the popular belief that nature illustrates God's design for man and symbolizes immortality. The cyclical aspect of nature suggests to her the passage of time rather than eternity and resurrection (discussed with examples in chapter 6). The singularity of her nature poetry lies in its insistence on the separation between man and nature. Mystery of nature remains as the mystery of God, ever unknown and incomprehensible :

> Nature and God — I neither knew (835)

In her experience, the mysterious forces of nature are often oppressive. The light that falls on the "Winter Afternoons" oppresses like the "Heft of Cathedral Tunes". It is an "imperial affliction" that gives us "Heavenly Hurt" though "We can find no scar" (258). So Dickinson, unlike Emerson and other romantic poets, feels an antagonistic relationship between the self and the other as symbolized in external nature instead of a harmonious interrelation.

Dickinson's original language use is now-a-days a commonplace of Dickinson criticism. Language of her verse, almost idiosyncratically individual in the context of her age, separates her from her compeers. Critics like Jack L. Capps and Robert E.Spiller, however, find some similarities between her style and Emerson's gnomic style. Capps writes: "She seems to be unaware of the way in which the poetic materials that she gleaned from "Emerson" appeared in her own verse" (Emily Dickinson's Reading118-119). Spiller remarks that "It is Emerson to whom she was most indebted for staccato forms and also for the bright courage of her terse speech" (The Literary History of the United States Vol. II: 909-10). But the worlds of their poetry are poles apart at a deeper level. Dickinson defies all conventional grammatical norms and often uses words and images almost surrealistic in character. Her poems possess very little communicative transparency. Her language is her extreme effort to conceptualize or communicate the subtle complexity of her self and its mysterious, estranging vision of the universe. So her poems were puzzlng to her contemporary readers and pose problems for her modern readers also. Commenting on Dickinson's supposed affinities with Emerson, David Porter observes in his famous work Modern Idiom (1981):

> ... Seeing likenesses between them is to judge on the superficial evidences of formal brevity, partial rhymes, stock ideas of compensation, and shared tropes, and to miss the deepest and contrary realities of their disposition towards experience and the disparity of their languages that perceived these different worlds.
>
> (Porter 171-172).

It is this "disposition towards experience that separates her not only from Emerson but from all her contemporaries.

It is imperative to compare Dickinson with Whitman for a proper evaluation of her distinction as a poet. They never met or read each other's work. Dickinson was told that Whitman's book was disgraceful, and she never read it (Letters Vol.II: 404). Whitman might have known her, but only seven of her poems were published during her lifetime. The remaining poems, close to eighteen hundred, were published after her death just before Whitman died. But both the poets are outstandingly original in the context of their literary scene. Leaves of Grass, in its first publication, was almost shockingly unfamiliar to its early readers and reviewers. The book was denounced as a gathering of "muck", a "mass of stupid filth", etc. (Zweig 266). He was even scarcely regarded as a poet at all (Willard 131). George Saintsbury writes : "A page of his work has little or no look of poetry about it because he produced a new kind of literature which we may or may not allow to be poetry" (qtd.in Leaves of Grass 788). Emily Dickinson was also barely published in her lifetime. The few poems published were also considered 'not poetry' by the representative literary critics of the time. Her unmatched originality was ungraspable by her contemporary and by the later critics also up to 1920s.

Both the poets shared many attitudes that were significant in their creative lives. Both of them viewed individual self as the creative centre of the universe, but their dealings with the self diverged to widely different destinations. Both of them tended to see poetry as replacing religion. The seriousness and the dignity of their poetry rest upon their expectations that art would rescue them from chaos and purposelessness. For Whitman, the "poet must replace the priest" (qtd.in Salaska 24). Whitman also observes in the preface to November Boughs (1888): "No one will get at my verse who insists upon viewing them as literary performance or aiming mainly toward art and aestheticism". Dickinson also turned to poetry for psychic sustenance. In her letter to Higginson, she reveals the innermost motive of her poetry :

> I had a terror-since September - I could tell to none and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground because I am afraid - (Letters Vol. II:404)

Yet the differences are many and far more fundamental than the affinities between the two poets. Whitman, as everyone agrees, fulfils Emerson's vision of a representative poet. Whitman's poetic persona in Leaves of Grass is "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos ... no stander above men and women or apart from them" (Leaves of Grass 52). undoubtedly, Leaves of Grass is a drama of the soul, an intensely subjective poem. In his 1876 preface Whitman defines it as a kind of "autobiography". At the same time, it is also a public poem, celebrating his vision of the newly emerging America — a vision that combines transcendence and practical reality. In the same preface of 1876, Whitman identifies the growth of Leaves of Grass with the growth of his country: "... within my time the United States have emerged from nebulous vagueness and suspense, to full orbic (though varied) decision, ... out of that strech of time...my poems too have found genesis "(Introduction, Leaves of Grass XXX). Whitman's poetry is thus a unique combination of the lyric self with the world outside and the universe:

> One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,
> Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.
> ("Inscriptions", Leaves of Grass 1)

The inscription of Leaves of Grass clearly reveals his literary nationalism:

> I heard that you ask'd for something to prove this puzzle the New World,
> And to define America, her athletic Democracy
> Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them what you wanted.
> ("To Foreign Lands",Leaves of Grass 3)

Sacvan Bercovitch appropriately observes in this respect :"The American hero fuses universal virtues with the qualities of national leadership and together they define him as a prophetic exemplar of the country" (The Puritan Origins of the American Self 149). Leaves of Grass conforms to this pattern and places Whitman in the context of national literature. The lyric poet and the epic bard co-exist in Whitman. He is never alienated from the surrounding world, from America and its people. His poetry like a camera ranges through the external world and captures the essential unity of the world despite its diversity. He is "of the old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise, ..." ("Song of Myself", Leaves of Grass 44). He is "maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man ... At home on Canadian snow-shoes or up in the bush, or with fishermen off New foundland." ("Song of Myself", Leaves of Grass 45).The identification goes on endless and the poet finally proclaims :

> Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,

A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.
(Leaves of Grass 45)

Whitman sees himself in "all people" and "the good or bad I say of myself I say of them" (Leaves of Grass 47). "Song of Myself" is thus the song of all men in all ages. It is boundlessly inclusive.

Dickinson, along with Whitman, stands at the centre of the American literary canon. Harold Bloom unhesitatingly claims : "No western poet, in the past century and a half, not even Browning or Leopardi or Baudelaire overshadowes Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson" (Western Canon 265). However, Dickinson's individuality as a poet in the context of the other outstanding literary artists of the time including Whitman rests largely on the intensely private character of her poetry. She starts from the experiences of the private self and discovers the world in the inner space of her soul. She is no representative American poet like Whitman. She lived in a secluded world of her own, cut off from the external world both physically and psychologically. In her own words, "The Soul selects her own Society — / Then - shuts the Door" (303). Recent emphasis on cultural studies since 1970s, however, grounds Dickinson in her particular historical and cultural context and tries to find newer perspectives in her poetic response to her contemporary time and place. Benjamin Lease in her Emily Dickinson's Readings of Men and Books (1990) Comments on Dickinson's "passionate involvement with family, with friends, with a cultural legacy of rebellion against orthodox answers to the religious questions of her time" (XII). Paula Bennett in Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet (1990), and Joanne Dobson in Strategies of Reticence 1989) place her in the context of her nineteenth-century feminine culture and explore the impact of that culture upon her poetics. Barton St. Armand in his Emily Dickinson and Her Culture:The Soul's Society (1984) discovers significant affinities between Dickinson's poetry and the popular subcultures of her time present in women's scrapbooks, contemporary journals, folk culture and landscape painting. In Emily Dickinson : A Voice of War (1985), Sara Woolsky tries to demonstrate that Dickinson's poetry "can be seen as profoundly engaged in problems of the external world and aggressively so" (qtd.in Emily Dickinson Hand Book 39). These scholars want to establish that Dickinson was quite aware of the public of her day and knew about the world through her reading and correspondences and that her poetry is also significantly impacted by this knowledge. Arguments of these scholars possess sufficient substance. Yet even a casual reading of her verse amply shows that cultural or environmental influences undergo such a thorough transformation in her poetry that her verse goes far beyond her immediate era, notwithstanding her awareness of local and global enviornment.

Besides, it is hard to establish that her awareness of contemporary events and issues directly activated her creative energy as it did whitman's and other contemporary writers'. In a letter to Mrs. Holland, her indifference to public affairs comes out clearly : "George Washington was the father of his country" — George who? that sums up all politics to me" (Letters Vol. III, no.849). In many of her letters throughout the years, we see evidence of this unconcern. To Mabel Todd in Summer 1885 she writes: "'sweet land of Liberty" is a superficial Carol till it concerns ourselves" (Letters Vol. III: 882). More instances can easily be cited from her comments on public issues. She hardly deals with any explicit social or political concerns of the time like the Civil War, slavery, poverty, women's rights, etc. She makes no attempt to change objective reality. Her poetry is primarily a discourse of the personal and the eternal. It has got no "design" upon the world and concentrates instead on the inner reality of the human self explored in terms of her own complex self. She is primarily concerned with her own soul engaged in universal issues like love, death, life, God and immortality. One finds a typical instance in the poem quoted below:

Soto ! Explore thyself !

> Therein thyself shalt find
> The "Undiscovered continent" – (832)

References to public issues and events do exist in some of her poems. But she pulls those references away from their objective reality and mostly uses them as metaphors in a personal context or reflects on them from philosophical or metaphysical perspectives. Her battle imagery particularly reflects this tendency. Words like war, battle, prison are used in a purely subjective context to describe the struggles in the self or serve as starting point for psychological and philosophical thoughts. Poem 639 explores the psychology of a defeated self:

> My Portion is Defeat – today –
> A paler luck than Victory –

Then the persona defines defeat in terms of death and human suffering:

> 'Tis populous with Bone and stain –
> And Men too straight to stoop again –
> And piles of solid Moan –
> And Chips of Blank – in Boyish Eyes – (639)

Defeat is "Death's surprise" and 'blank' stare in "Boyish eyes".

The terrible destruction and human loss during the Civil War may be at the source of such a poem. But instead of focussing on particular events, the poem becomes an ahistorical and universal lament for the human tragedy associated with war. Another poem on war and victory also does not make any reference to the Civil War that was raging at that time. Rather, it subtly voices the moral despair of a triumphant person at the spectacle of human suffering caused by war. The victor's triumph lasted "till the Drums had left the Dead alone". But he "hated Glory" of triumph when he "stole along/ To where the finished Faces" (1227). The sense of victory collapses like a fragile object : "I dropped my Victory" (1227). The feeling of waste and meaninglessness touchingly comes out through this strange image. In some poems, words like "Prison" are used in a metaphoric or philosophical sense. So human life is a "magic Prison" in 1601, and in another, prisons are made of "Phantasm Steel —/ whose features - day - night - are present to us". We can never escape this "prison" (652). The "prison" here goes beyond its usual traditional meaning and acts as a starting point for deeper existential thought. From this perspective, Dickinson differs markedly from her contemporaries. Turbulent public events of the time found direct creative expression in their writings. Whitman's major poems in Leaves of Grass such as "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", "Drum-Taps" are directly inspired by the events of the Civil War, Lincoln's assassination, etc. Historical context leaves its distinct marks on Whitman's poetry. War inspired also Melville's first book of poems, "Battle pieces and Aspects of War" (1866). Dickinson, however, transforms topical issues into ahistorical and universal themes. Poems abound demonstrating her constant effort to dissociate words from their definite socio-historical context and employ them in psychic and philosophical realms that fuse the topical with the personal. So her "wars" are laid away in "books" (1549); thoughts of real life battle merges with her reflection on death, the subject of her life-long pre occupation:

> I have one Battle more -
> A Foe whom I have never seen
> But oft has scanned me O'er - (1549)

It would be contrafactual to insist on the socio-historical consciousness in her verse. At the most, we may agree with Thomas W. Ford who suggests that Dickinson's awareness of the Civil War only increased her sensitivity to human suffering and her creativity (Emily Dickinson and the Civil War (1965). A number of critics identify this ahistorical and private nature of her verse as her differentia. For instance, Robert Weisbuch observes in her Emily Dickinson's Poetry : "Dickinson's identity with the American romantics is some what obscured by her own lack of historical concerns. She is far less concerned than her fellows with the idea of America and far less involved in the particular political issues of the day" (7). Benjamin Spencer also comments that Dickinson left very little evidence of her participation in the "quest for nationality" (Quest for Nationality 213). Making the same point, John Lynen writes : "Emily Dickinson is a baffling poet because she seems to bear little or no relation to the historical period within which she worked. She stands apart, as indifferent to the literary movements of her day as to its great events" (College English 28 November 1966 PP 126-136).

From the feminist perspective, however, the origin of this sense of estrangement lies in the fact that Dickinson is a woman poet. Feminist scholars contend that a powerful poetic voice like Dickinson could hardly identify her authentic poetic self with the predominantly patriarchal socio-literary culture of her time. She knew that Emerson's call for an American poet was the call not for a female but for a male poet. Joanne Feit Diehl justly observes on this point that "the woman poet does not, in the nineteenth century... perceive herself as speaking for commonal experience, as "representative". Instead, women poets more often perceive themselves as exceptions, as isolates, departing from, rather than building upon a tradition" (Women Poets and the American Sublime 2). Dickinson's definition of herself as a 'Nobody', they feel, is her response to this marginalization of women in contemporary America :

> I am Nobody ! who are you?
> Are you - Nobody - Too? (288)

This sense of being a 'Nobody' explains her indifference to literary nationalism so enthusiastically advocated by Emerson and Whitman. Dickinson's sense of being an outsider, insist her feminist critics, inspires her thematic and stylistic novelty. So Joanne Feit Diehl argues that Dickinson's radical experimentation with language emerged from her "deep sense of freedom" and from her "sense of discontinuity" from the "great male company of poets" (Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination 185).

Unlike other contemporary poets, and especially unlike Whitman, Dickinson brings to bear upon her treatment of experience a critical perspective, a trait that links her with the moderns. She is a romantic yet she diverges significantly from the British and the American romantics in her original attitude to self and nature.She is a realist; yet her realism is not of a social-historical kind. Hers is a drama of the soul supported by the modern day discoveries in the realm of human psychology. Whitman's sense of realism primarily centers upon the externals of life. The photographic realism of the some parts of "Songs of Myself" is indeed remarkable. Richard Volney Chase finds the lines quoted below from section 8 of "Song of Myself" almost "novelistic" in description:

The little one sleeps in its cradle,
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies
with my hand.

(qtd. in Leaves of Grass 891)

Whitman's snapshots of city life -"the blab of the pave", "the heavy omnibus", "the driver with its interrogating thumb" etc. - anticipate Eliot's city pictures, though the despair of "The Waste land" is not to be found in them. Whitman is a visionary too. His visionary passages, his "cosmos-inspired" verses are admittedly powerful. Who can write such an inspired and passionate invocation to the sun except a mystic and visionary?

O Thou transcendent,
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,
Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them

. . . .

Thou pulse — thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,
That circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,
Awthart the shapeless vastness of the space. . . .

("Passage to India", Leaves of Grass 411)

Dickinson is not a mystic in the traditional sense. But she is also capable of transcendent moments. However, her transcendence never wells up from external sources. Dickinson's poems on the sun manifest the enormous temperamental difference between the two poets. She is never rapturous over the mystic power of the sun. She portrays the mighty sun in a critical, realistic style that often borders on the irreverent. So, the sun in her poem "does not allow the caprices of the Atmosphere" to "interrupt His Yellow Plan" (591). The sun "does not so much as turn His" majestic head when the "snow heaves Balls of Specks, like vicious Boy/ Directly in his eye". The final stanza suddenly takes a different turn and upholds the tiny creatures of this earth :

> Yet Any passing by
> Would dream Ourselves — the busier
> As the Minutest Bee
> That rides — emits a Thunder –
> A Bomb — to justify – (591).

Another instance of this dry,descriptive style without any mystic overtone:

> The sun in reining to the west
> Makes not as much of sound
> As Cart of man in road below
> Adroitly turning round
> That whiffletree of Amethyst (1636)

This down-to-earth realism associating the sun with "cart of man in road below" reveals a mind very close to modern sensibility. A number of poems on the sun are written in the same vein more or less without any transcendental enthusiasm (eg. nos 871, 1023, 1447).

William James in a lecture in1895 opined that Whitman was temperamentally "incapable of believing that anything seriously evil can exist" (The Will to Believe 32). Whitman was not, however, blind to the evils or insensitive to sufferings that haunt man. Whitman's poem "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances" in Leaves of Grass speaks of his uncertainty and the anxiety that "reliance and hope are but speculations after all". He even doubts for a moment that "maybe identity beyond the grave is a beautiful fable only". But faith in human love and affection ultimately allays all sense of fear and uncertainty :

> To me these and the like of these are curiously answer'd by my
> Lovers, my dear friends,
> When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long while holding
> me by the hand. (Leaves of Grass 120)

He knows he cannot "answer the question of appearances or that of identity beyond the grave". But he is satisfied with human love:

> "He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me"
> (Leaves of Grass 120)

Dickinson's questioning mind, however, is never satisfied so easily. The sense of evil, dread or doubt is always a haunting presence in her verse. Her poems that celebrate the joy of life always take into account fears, doubts and despair. This everpresent sense of dread imparts to her poems of rapture a peculiar intensity :

> My reward for Being, was This
> My premium - My Bliss -
> An Admiralty, less -
> And realms -just Dross (343)

To her "Bliss" is "like Murder-/ Omnipotent – Acute –"(379). In her inclusive vision, there is no retreat from one feeling to another. Both the sceptic and the oracular voices coexist and combine to create a distinctive note of her own.

Dickinson's poems on death are also equally characteristic. Her poems treat death either as a direct subject or as a form of analogy. Thought of death possessed her sensitive and complex mind from a very early age. At twenty, she writes to her friend Jane Humphrey: "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 intend" (Letters Vol.I:197-98). Dominant feeling about death in her verse is one of incomprehension and awe. Death is a mystery as it can be least understood by direct experience. It is a "riddle" through which each of us must "walk" (50). It is the "spacious arm .. /That none can understand" (1625). Life, she writes in a poem, we can understand but "Death we do not know" (698).In poem after poem, she tries desperately to define death and to bring it within the range of comprehension : "Death is a long - long Sleep / That makes no show for Morn" (654). It is a "hurry in the breath" and it is "ecstasy of parting" (71). In her eagerness to explore the mystery of death, Dickinson even personifies it. She imagines death "wore no sandal on his foot - / And stepped like flakes of snow" /"His Gait was soundless". And the laughter of death is like the "Breeze- / That dies away in Dimples / Among the pensive Trees" -(274).

One of the masterpieces of her death poems beginning with the line "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died-" focuses on the moment of dying. It is a memorable effort to experience in imagination the last feeling of a dying person. The dying person feels the apprehensive silence that surrounds the room :

> The stillness in the Room
> Was like the Stillness in the Air -
> Between the Heaves of Storm - (465)

The dying one is prepared to die, and then "interposed a Fly -". The buzz of the fly seems "blue", "uncertain" and "stumbling" to the confused perception of the dying person. Finally, the "Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see -". The poem ends with the anguished uncertainty without any promise of the light that supposedly waits after death.

The significant fact that emerges from her death-poems is her separateness from both the Christian and the Romantic tradition of poetry on death. The poem we have just discussed also demonstrates this implicit distrust of orthodox beliefs. The living mourners wait for that last onset "– when the King/ Be witnessed – in the room" (405). But instead of the "King" there comes a "fly" with its "blue" uncertain "buzz". The change from the "King" to the "fly", an insect, subtly undermines all the expectation of the divine at the moment of death. The final line "I could not see to see" also directly refutes the vision of light imagined for the dying person.

"Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –"(216), another memorable poem on death, also sharply marks Dickinson's divergence from traditional death-poetry. The poem begins with an apparent acceptance of the conventional Christian consolation and then gradually exposes the myth through her wonderfully suggestive words in the next lines to follow. The dead lie "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers / Untouched by Morning / And untouched by Noon -". "Alabaster" implies a sort of purity and peace. But the "Chambers", "untouched by Morning" and "Noon", ironically suggest a cold prison locking out the morning and sunshine, thus hinting at the deprivation from the joys of living nature. The dead are the "meek members of the Resurrection", who wait, covered by "rafter of Satin" under "Roof of Stone". The expression "Roof of Stone" subtly negates the warmth of the rafter of satin and exposes the stark reality of death. The second stanza even more directly questions the orthodox hope of resurrection after death by emphasizing the warmth and vitality of life the dead miss :

> 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! (216)

On close scrutiny, the poem offers a chilling comfortless view of death instead of a hopeful one assuring immortality. Dickinson does not also romanticize death in the manner of Keats or other romantic poets. She is never in love with "easeful death" or hears the "Whispers of heavenly death" (Leaves of Grass 442). Rather, she emphasizes the feeling of waste, the loss of vitality and dynamism caused by death. Dead are

As far from pity as complaint-
As cool to speech -as stone- (496)

They are "as near yourself - Today / As children to the Rainbow's scarf / or Sunsets' Yellow Play / to eyelids in the Sepulchre" (496). Joys of nature, the colour of the butterflies are nothing to the "eyelids in the Sepulchre" (496). The dead are away from the splendours of the morning and the noon. The keen sense of waste comes out wonderfully in the following lines :

Insulting is the sun
To him whose mortal light
Beguiled of immortality
Bequeaths him to the night. (1724)

The buried dead forces this despairing question upon the poet :

Was ever idleness like This ?
Upon a Bank of Stone
To bask the Centuries away —
Nor once look up — for Noon ? (654)

Whitman, for all his originality, perceives death in the familiar nineteenth-century way that celebrates the immortality of the human soul. Though not literally religious, he conforms to convention in his effort to overcome the fear of death. "To Think of Time" thus records his intense desire to believe that "... the purpose and essence of the known life, the transient / Is to form and decide identity for the unknown life, the permanent" ("To Think of Time", Leaves of Grass 439). It is hard for him to accept that death reduces man to "ashes of dung":

> "If maggots and rats ended us, then Alarum! for we are betray'd";
>
> ("To Think of Time", Leaves of Grass 439)

Seeking consolation in the traditional religious belief, Whitman finds in death beginning of a new cycle of life: "The smallest sprout shows that there is really no death but change" ("Song of Myself", Leaves of Grass 126). Birth and death are merely stages in the eternal cycle of life. So he enthuiastically celebrates immortality in the last lines of the poem :

> I swear I think there is nothing but immortality !
> That the exquisite scheme is for it, and the nebulous float is for it,
>
> And the cohering is for it!
> And all preparation is for it - and identity is for it– and life and
> Materials are altogether for it!
>
> ("To Think of Time", Leaves of Grass 440)

He is not afraid of the "bitter hug of mortality". For him, life always returns : "Life I reckon you are the leavings of many death" ("Song of Myself", Leaves of Grass 87). Existential anxiety about death, the poignant sense of waste at the loss of life and earth that haunt Dickinson's poetry hardly figure in Whitman's poems on death. Rather, he celebrates human life in a romantic transcendental vein:

> I know that I am deathless
>
> . . . .
>
> I know that I shall not pass like a Child's Carlicue Cut with burnt
> stick at night.
>
> ("Song of Myself", Leaves of Grass 48)

These conceptual differences apart, languages of Whitman and Dickinson are also very dissimilar. The extreme unconventionality of Dickinson's language disrupting normal grammatical processes reflects an epistemological stance of doubt, negation and indeterminacy, baffling to her contemporary reader. These tendencies not only foreshadow modern Poetry but also"seem consonant", as David Porter argues, "with our post-modernist literary expectation" (Modern Idiom 117). Whitman too shocked his readers with the rude freshness of his long, sloping and irregular lines. George Saintsbury's review of the 1871 edition of Leaves of Grass well-exemplifies contemporary attitude to its novelty. "He employs", Saintsbury observes, "neither" rhyme, nor even regular meter ... A page of his work has little or no look of poetry about it" (qtd.in Leaves of Grass 788). Yet Whitman's language does not have the complex unintelligibility characteristic of Dickinson. For all its strangeness, Whitman's literary form is consonant with his desire for universality. His language is able to communicate its meaning while search for meaning in Dickinson stretches language to its utmost limit and generates multiple and often contradictory critical perspectives.The principal features of her poetics- the use of the dash and the question marks, absence of titles, infrequent use of periods and often no closing punctuation etc.- create an impression that Dickinson desires to unsettle rather than to conclude with a fixed meaning. Examples abound. For instance, the emphatic and assertive "Title Divine- is mine!" ends in doubt and indeterminancy with a question mark- "Is this the way?" (1072). For another convenient example, we have no. 581. Conviction expressed in the first lines- "I found the words to every thought / I ever had but one-" lapses into doubt in the closing "How would your own begin? / Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal / or Noon- in Mazarin?" (581).

Dickinson's poems also contain variants or alternatives for a word or line without indicating her particular choice and thus broaden the possibilities for several meanings or interpretations with equal importance instead of a single meaning or settled conviction. Sometimes again these variant words stand in opposition to each other and create contradictory meanings, (see Johnson's

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson). In either way, the variants contribute to the indeterminacy of meaning and thereby provoke multiple points of view. This is a very distinctive feature of Dickinson's poetry that aligns her with our post-modern sensibilities. Post-modern conception of meaning also insists on a situation of plurality and its accompanying epistemological uncertainty.

In discussing this issue of indeterminacy in her verse we may justly recall Roland Hagenbüchles's observation that metonymy is the chief structural principle of Dickinson's poetics because metonymy's "deliberate indeterminacy . . . . alone can do justice to the mystery of existence" ("Precision" 50).

Frequent use of irony as a dominant rhetorical device also marks her out from her contemporary poets. Whitman's affirmative life-vision was not appropriate for irony as irony is unsuited for expressing stable, meaningful and unified worldview. Irony results from a sceptical attitude to life and from a sense of dissonance and anomaly. Irony as a rhetorical device suited Dickinson's purpose as the elements of scepticism, doubt and dissonance pervade her poetry, particularly noticeable in her subtle critique of patriarchy and conventional religious faith.

Whitman's and Dickinson's fundamental dissimilarities provoke a critic to observe that "from Whitman to Dickinson the transition is so abrupt as to make any attempt to include them in a common perspective seem hopeless" (Cambon 27). Thus, Dickinson's vision of life and her unconventional poetic style make her an outsider. Unlike Emerson and Whitman, she is very close to modern sensibility. Loneliness and alienation, the two major themes of modern day literature, are also the obsessive themes of Dickinson's poetry. Worthnoting in this context is Roland Hagenbüchle's observation : "If one agrees that discontinuity is at the root of modernity, then it is not Emerson and Whitman who stand at the threshold of modern poetry, but Dickinson ..." . Dickinson, according to him, may be called a "post-romantic whose anti-lyrical poetry springs from the very experience of disharmony and loss" ("Sign and process : The Concept of

Language in Emerson and Dickinson" 137-55). So despite strong traces of similarity, Dickinson does not belong with Emerson and Whitman to the same literary scene. She is a poet of the nineteenth century. But she goes beyond it and stands as a poet apart.