

# The Prophet and the Pagan in the Letters of Emily Dickinson

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## Introduction

Poet Emily Dickinson's attitude toward religion in her nineteenth century New England milieu is usually regarded as a negative one. "She never formally became a Christian" and in fact, "persisted in calling herself a Pagan"<sup>1</sup> or, her whole life is described as one of "tension between faith and doubt."<sup>2</sup> These voices and others draw to a large extent on God, salvation, and heaven imagery in her poetry as a guide to understanding the poet's spirituality or lack of such. Critics discover facets of the Dickinson personality in and glean autobiographical data from her poems, despite the fact that she did not chronologically arrange the bulk of her work, and despite the fact that in her own words she says, "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse--it does not mean--me--but a supposed person." (L268)<sup>3</sup>

By comparison, the use of Dickinson's letters as primary critical material has been neglected.<sup>4</sup> Over 1,000 pieces of correspondence of varying lengths and addressed to a wide range of correspondents are

available : the author's voice and opinion on the subjects about which she cared most. Many of the letters are dated by Dickinson or can be dated by references in their content;<sup>5</sup> moreover, she incorporates sections of poetry within her prose from time to time, which indicate the fine line that distinguished poetry from day-to-day reality in the Dickinson value system.

In her letters as well as in her poetry, Dickinson is fond of hyperboles, aphoristic expressions, and cryptic phrases. She revels in darting from subject to subject like the bee, for which she felt a deep affinity. "I have borrowed a little Honey...of a religious Bee, who can be relied on." (L398) However, neither Dickinson nor her religious bee trouble to develop their theological whimsies into systematic statements about God or the universe that are useful to the critic. Instead of systems, the choice is often between mockery or humor as in the scene describing an outdoor funeral service in P18 -- "It was a short procession/ The Bobolink was there--/ An aged Bee addressed us --/ And then we knelt in prayer --/" Dickinson concludes with the startling :

In the name of the Bee--  
And of the Butterfly--  
And of the Breeze--Amen!

This is at the least, an unchristian, if not sacrilegious, benediction. While no systematic theologies can be rescued from the hyperbole and derision Dickinson often applies to religious matters when she addresses them in her letters and poetry, if her letters are examined chronologically, the scope of her pursuit of a spirituality becomes evident.

Beginning with the letters as the primary material which reveals the poet's spirituality, and including some of Dickinson's dissident poetry, we will try to show that the prophetic and the paganish

aspects of Dickinson's art are deliberate and cohesive, especially in regard to her attitude towards the universe, towards the sacrament, and towards belief.

### **An Attitude Toward the Universe**

Presently in the Harvard College Library but also published in Thomas H. Johnson's third volume of Dickinson's letters is a photograph of Martha Dickinson wearing a hat and an enigmatic expression on her lips. Emily Dickinson had only four years yet to live when she saw this photograph and sent her teen-age-niece a note in response :

That's the Little Girl I always meant to be, but wasn't --  
The very Hat I always meant to wear, but didn't and the  
attitude toward the Universe, so precisely my own that  
I feel very much, as if I were returning Elisha's Horses,  
or the Vision of John at Patmos-- (L787)

The occasion of viewing this photograph in her fifties releases in Dickinson feelings about what she might have been had she functioned in her full powers throughout her life. But the initial dissatisfaction with a lost girlhood and a lack of stylishness is quickly negated by Dickinson's crediting niece Martha with a similar "attitude toward the Universe."<sup>6</sup> This is a mighty subject of awareness which would probably surprise Martha, but it is the one topic that matters. It is what Dickinson really has to say about the photograph--calling attention to an attitude toward the universe so "precisely my own"--so original--that it is prophetic. She feels "as if I were" tied into the prophetic careers of two biblical characters. In the Old Testament situation Elisha receives not only the mantle from his mentor Elijah, but he is promised power twice that of the older prophet, if he but has the strength to gaze on Elijah when he departs.

As a whirlwind bears the prophet to heaven, Elisha sees it all--“Oh, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof!”

In her forties Dickinson celebrated Elijah's departure with the poem below, noting the magic with which he whirled off into heaven, noting the “feats inscrutable--”, the badge of prophecy she admires :

Elijah's Wagon knew no thill  
Was innocent of Wheel  
Elijah's horses as unique  
As was his vehicle--

Elijah's journey to portray  
Expire with him the skill  
Who justified Elijah  
In feats inscrutable--

(P1254)

It is no accident that Dickinson chooses an equally illustrious figure from the New Testament: John of Patmos--a prophet in isolation--banished for his message. On his remote island, he sees visions so distinctly Johannine in their symbolism, scholars still struggle to interpret them.

Dickinson is setting herself up as out-of-step with her times ; she is as enigmatic and misunderstood as any biblical prophet. She too has banished herself,<sup>7</sup> and even defends her prophetic retreat in a letter to Samuel Bowles in which she concisely states her understanding of the prophetic responsibility :

Because I did not see you, Vinnie and Austin, upbraided  
me--They did not know I gave my part that they might  
have the more--but then the Prophet had no fame in his  
immediate Town--My Heart led all the rest--I think  
that what we know--we can endure that others doubt,  
until their faith be riper. And so dear friend, who knew

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me, I make no argument--to you -- (L277)

Dickinson writes this when she is in her early thirties, and in her most productive period. While it is an explanation (but certainly no apology), it is a letter in which Dickinson portrays herself as uniquely equipped and knowing (Jesus is the prophet without fame in his hometown). Let the others, her very sister and brother, misunderstand and poorly grasp realities, Dickinson defends not only her refusal to meet Bowles when he comes all the way to Amherst to see her, she underlines her superior, self-appointed prophetic stance. Prophets not only know they know, they can bide their time, enduring misuse by others.

But if the prophetic side of the Dickinson personality as one aspect of an attitude toward the universe reveals itself, so too does her skeptical side. "Don't tell...but wicked as I am, I read my Bible sometimes..." (L185) There is exaggeration here in that we know Dickinson read the Bible a great deal to have quoted from it as prodigiously as she does. She calls herself "wicked" to forestall an identification with traditional Christianity. The same is true of her boast as a "pagan." Critics have made much of two references in her letters to herself as a pagan.

Dickinson wrote to Mrs. Joseph Sweester in 1878 "That no flake of [snow] fall on you...is a wish that would almost be a prayer, were Emily not a Pagan--" (L566), and in 1885 to Helen Hunt Jackson, regarding an injury, "Knew I how to pray, to intercede for your Foot were intuitive--but I am but a Pagan." (L976)

Just as Dickinson's style of prophecy is more Old Testament-like than oracular, more judgmental than prescient, this "paganism" is more effect than sacrilege and in some of her work is almost second nature :

His oriental heresies  
Exhilarate the Bee,  
And filling all the Earth and Air  
With gay apostasy

Fatigued at last a Clover plain  
Allures his jaded eye  
That lowly Breast where Butterflies  
Have felt it meet to die-- (P1526)

The satiated subject here is jubilant about heresy, joyful in apostasy and, free from guilt or acrimony about its choices, anticipates a gracious repose, but is it an autobiographical bee or merely an impishly pagan reflex the poet has developed through the years?

In her highly productive period of the early 1860's when Dickinson wrote P387 below, language about faith vs. apostasy becomes a code to discuss matrimony :

The Sweetest Heresy received  
That Man and Woman know--  
Each Other's Convert--  
Though the Faith accomodate but Two--

The Churches are so frequent--  
The Ritual--so small--  
The Grace so unavoidable--  
To fail--is Infidel--

In the first stanza, in the shrewd psychological observation that the lovers are deep into convergence--have become "each other's convert" --, Dickinson is ahead of her time. In the second stanza her biting wit, offers such ample grace that the couple cannot but keep the faith.

### After a Hundred Years

Dickinson's attitude toward the universe, then, evolves out of judgment on and reaction to the hypocrisy and inadequacies of the religious people and events of her mid-nineteenth century New England.

The great tragedy of her life perhaps, is that Dickinson was born in the nineteenth century instead of in the twentieth, in an era in which her unorthodox attitudes about faith would have been tolerated or even emulated.

After a hundred years  
Nobody knows the Place  
Agony that enacted there  
Motionless as peace

(P1147)

"After a hundred years," Dickinson's prophetic and paganish stance looks very different than it must have to her contemporaries. While she could warble of exhilarating heresy and gay apostasy in her fifties, as a young adult, there had been "places of agony". Dickinson was aware that her rejection of traditional Christianity would entail pain. Looking at her earliest letters, it is clear that under pressure from her peers at boarding school, Dickinson vacillates between guilt that she cannot embrace orthodox values and a growing conviction that the tenets of Calvinist piety do not satisfy her inmost spiritual longings. At eighteen she says, "How ungrateful I am to live along day by day...in a state of enmity to [Christ] and his cause" (L10); and "I have neglected the one thing needful when all are obtaining it...I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian." (L23) At twenty she can say (after her sister Vinnie "answers the call of Christ"), "I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very care-

less.” (L35) She boldly tells friend Abiah Root, “I have come from ‘to and fro, and walking up and down’ the same place that Satan hailed from, when God asked him where he’d been”, one of her first mocking uses of Scripture at her own expense.”<sup>8</sup> (L36)

As Helen McNeil points out :

One of the most important differences between  
Dickinson and her Puritan forbears is that she  
does not accept the concept of original sin.  
For her, it is perverse for us to suffer as we do.<sup>9</sup>

The perversity of Dickinson’s torment over indecision about Christianity, was to become an increasing bitterness for her. “It is not too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world.” (L23) Only eighteen when she wrote this, Dickinson continued to toughen her resistance. Perhaps she was not yet fully conscious of the unique genius of her inner “world,” but she intuited that those clerical voices admonishing the young to “Be not conformed to this world,” were grasping for her artistic soul. She would not stop experimenting with heretical ideas about “world” until she had created her own “attitude toward the Universe,” reactionary as it was.

After a hundred years, mocking the pulpit may not seem remarkable, but Dickinson’s horror of superficial piety became ruthless sarcasm and a judgment for her times: “Much Gesture, from the Pulpit--/ Strong Hallelujahs roll--/ Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/ That nibbles at the soul--” (P501). In a letter to her brother Austin about the Sunday morning preacher’s style :

No doubt you can call to mind his eloquent addresses,  
his earnest look and gesture, his calls of now today-- no  
doubt you can call to mind the impetus of spirit received



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from this same gentleman and his enlivening preaching--  
(L46)

"[The guest pastor] preached in our church last Sabbath...but I do not respect 'doctrines' and did not listen to him."<sup>10</sup> (L200); and, "...sermons on unbelief ever did attract me" (L176), are early statements of contempt for all that the Dickinson family had traditionally valued. In that they are directed at artificiality--doctrines are a later church's formulation, and not necessarily the words of Christ--they are prophetic observations of areas where moderation or correction is needed. Dickinson rejected doctrines. In replacement, as Hazel Durnell says, "Emily Dickinson's search for spiritual truth was her chosen church."<sup>11</sup> Possibly in her mid-forties Dickinson wrote to Mrs. Edward Tuckerman, "I fear my congratulation, like repentance according to Calvin, is too late to be plausible" (L406). Dickinson deliberately chose religious jargon and gave it a prophetic twist when she wrote, "The Snow is so white and sudden it seems almost like a Change of Heart--though I don't mean a 'Conversion'-- I mean a Revolution." (L689)

Such revolutionary witticisms, are matched with equally unrelenting sarcasm that twists Scripture in a manner which must have shocked her correspondents and reveals Dickinson at her most paganish moments. "Unless we become as Rogues, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (L715); "Where the treasure is, there the Brain is also--" (L320); "Blessed are they that play, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (L690); and "'So loved her that he dies for her,' says the explaining Jesus" (L892) are some examples.

Even to one of her favorite, frequent correspondents, Mrs. J. G. Holland, Dickinson risks misunderstanding or at least amazement on the part of her reader, when she observes, "While the Clergyman tells Father and Vinnie that 'this Corruptible shall put on Incorruption'-- it has already done so and they go defrauded." (L391) "Ask your

throbbing Scripture" she mocked at one correspondent (L562), while to another she avowed, "Santa Claus, though illustrates--Revelation" (L794).

Or, she will belittle religious topics: "...our stately Resurrection! A special Courtesy, I judge, from what the Clergy say!" (L193), and "...a conceited thing indeed, this promised Resurrection!" (L184), she writes on the grass on a Sunday morning, skipping church services as increasingly became her practice. But the poet is relentlessly honest enough to add that, "To live, and die, and mount again in triumphant body, and next time, try the upper air--is no schoolboy's theme!"

There are degrees of her paganish scorn. The mocking level as in, "'I have finished,' said Paul, 'the faith.' We rejoice that he did not say discarded it" (L731), is the more typical; while a few examples seem sacrilegious, even after a hundred years. In one case Dickinson claims her sister as confessor. "When Vinnie is here--I ask her; if she says I sin, I say, 'Father, I have sinned'--If she sanctions me, I am not afraid" (L202). She persists in equating correspondent Mrs. J. G. Holland's grandchildren with the Holy Family. On the arrival of a new grandson, "So Madonna and Daughter were incomplete, and Madonna and Son, must supersede!" (L977), and "Love for the 'Holy Family,' and say to the Son that the Little Boy in the Trinity had no Grandmama, only a Holy Ghost--" (L979).

### **Fleeing the Sacrament**

Basic to the understanding of Dickinson's attitude toward the universe in both its prophetic and paganish aspects is the fact that it was largely determined by her early twenties. An excerpt from her letters reveals seeds of ambiguity on religious matters sown at an early age.

She writes to Mrs. J. G. Holland in 1874 :

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When a Child and fleeing from Sacrament I could hear  
the Clergyman saying "All who loved the Lord Jesus  
Christ--were--asked to remain--"

My flight kept time to the Words. (L412)

Ten years later (and two years before her death) Dickinson is still reflecting on this experience to Clara Newman Turner :

The cordiality of the Sacrament extremely interested me when a Child, and when the Clergyman invited "all who loved the Lord Jesus Christ, to remain," I could scarcely refrain from rising and thanking him for the to me unexpected courtesy, though I now think had it been to all who loved Santa Claus, my transports would have been even more untimely. (L926)

The use of "cordiality" and "courtesy" in the second excerpt are in sharp contrast to the panic of "flight" in the first. In both of these instances, Dickinson indicates that she refuses communion, because her attitude toward Christ--or toward the Christian piety about which the clergyman is speaking--is not an appropriate one. In the first case, she is repelled by the clergyman's invitation ; in the second, the appeal of the ritual draws her, but she must refuse because she would not be participating for the appropriate reason.

Nevertheless, the aesthetic aspects of this ritual remain important as part of the poet's pursuit of a spirituality. To one correspondent Dickinson writes that we are "but [Love's] trembling Emblems--" (L522) a reference to the bread and wine. In a letter to Samuel Bowles in her early thirties, Dickinson's prose crosses a line into poetic sacramental imagery, "I am so far from Land--To offer you the cup--it might some Sabbath come my turn--Of wine how solemn --full !" (L247)

Two poems written at opposite periods of her life also evoke Dickinson's poignant use of the sacrament of communion as imagery. "Oh Sacrament of summer days,/ Oh Last Communion in the Haze/ Permit a child to join" (P130) is an invitation to the last rites of a glorious fall day. In "Your thoughts don't have words every day/ They come a single time/ Like esoteric sips/ Of the communion Wine" (P1452), the value of the ritual is such that, Dickinson concludes price and infrequency cannot be comprehended. While this imagery is evocative, it also seems to portray some of the early experience of the poet. But the fact remains that the memory of rejecting the opportunity for communion, by her own description, stands as one of Dickinson's early points of departure from the religious practices of the rest of the family.

Choice is always important to Dickinson<sup>12</sup> and rejection can be a prophetic stance. She is in her early thirties when she writes P508. If any of her work can be taken as autobiographical, certainly this one would seem to be a genuine experience:

I'm ceded--I've stopped being Theirs--  
The name They dropped upon my face  
With water, in the country church  
Is finished using, now,  
And They can put it with my Dolls,  
-----

Baptized, before, without the choice,  
But this time, consciously, of Grace--

The poet goes on to describe how far her departure from traditional piety has brought her: "Adequate--Erect,/ With will to choose, or to reject".

When the choices are denied or ambiguous, the poet's biting wit

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comes to the foreground. "Who were 'the Father and the Son'/ We pondered when a child,/ And what had they to do with us/ And when portentous told/ With inference appalling..." The poet assumes at some appropriate time she, the Father, and the Son "better Friend had been", but her choices now proscribe even heaven, for "We blush...to own the Miracle--". The poet's major problem surfaces in the fifth stanza :

We start--to learn that we believe  
But once--entirely--  
Belief, it does not fit so well  
When altered frequently-- (P1258)

Alteration is one of her choices, just as unrelenting truthfulness is a conscious stance.

How many of her diatribes against religion relate to a particular incident, is impossible to document, but on one occasion in her twenties she makes a prophetic observation in describing the visit of a young friend :

"D — fed greedily upon Harper's Magazine while here.  
Suppose he is restricted to Martin Luther's works at  
home. It is a criminal thing to be a boy in a godly  
village... (L234)

The criminal aspect of her enclosure in the godly Amherst seems never lost on Dickinson. When she writes to another "boy", her nephew Ned, sending in L753 a poem in which she, and her Mt. Holyoke Seminary schoolmates might be considered as the boys that "believe" or those that are "lost", she produces a scathing condemnation of the Christian piety she observed :

The Bible is an antique Volume--  
Written by faded Men  
At the suggestion of Holy Spectres--  
Subjects--Bethlehem--  
Eden--the ancient Homestead--  
Satan--the Brigadier--  
Judas--the Great Defaulter--  
David--the Troubadour--  
Sin--a distinguished Precipice  
Others must resist-  
Boys that "believe" are very lonesome-  
Other Boys are "lost"--  
Had but the Tale a warbling Teller--  
All the boys would come--  
Orpheus' Sermon captivated--  
It did not condemn--

P1545

After all the cryptic phrases in her letters, here is a portion of a letter become poetry; the setting of the "godly village" where the poet is surrounded by "faded Men;"<sup>13</sup> where Eden and the name of Dickinson's home are synonymous, where sin is sardonically, "a distinguished Precipice."

Having fled the sacrament in the criminal clutches of such an ungodly village, Dickinson is doing all she can to rewrite an attitude toward the universe: a captivating tale that does not condemn.

### **Too Much of Proof Affronts Belief**

When Dickinson wrote her mentor T. W. Higginson concerning her family that "They are religious--except me--and address an Eclipse, every morning--whom they call their 'Father'" (L261), she was describing her dissatisfaction with the piety of her family and community. Though with an irreligious air, she excludes herself from their circle, it was not that she wasn't preoccupied with the

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search to fill the void. Dickinson collected traditional religious jargon and re-tooled it for her own interpretation. If she uses terms like belief or faith, she usually did something memorable with them : “We both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble.” (L750)

When Dickinson uses “believe” in “We cannot believe for each other”, and addresses it to two difference correspondents (L555 and L591), the reader might assume she means “believe” in the traditional religious sense. However, she explains in the first instance, “there are depths in every Consciousness, from which we cannot rescue ourselves--to which none can go with us--”, and follows through with the phrase, “...we are mentally permanent”; “believe” seems to be the keystone in the formation of her spirituality, not her “religion”. Shoei Ando further verifies this. When comparing New England Transcendentalists and Zen, he finds Dickinson’s recognition of the depths in consciousness and its connection to mental permanency a link with Zen universal values.<sup>14</sup>

Dickinson treated belief in a variety of ways : including in her letter (L489), Poem 1144 :

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.

This unexpected juxtaposition of balm and doubt and the assurance that the tension between belief and death are finally rendered ineffectual by death is yet another example of the correlation between death, spiritual insight, and the search for ultimate categories that are meaningful.

Regarding this poem, John Robinson says, “Such a religion which had not the confidence to take love beyond the grave must surely

basically doubt itself, for all its fervent declarations.”<sup>15</sup> Dickinson is once again unmasking too pious “fervencies”.

Belief and death are also entwined in Poem 79, where the subject is “Going to heaven!” Dickinson concludes, “I’m glad I don’t believe it/ For it would stop my breath--” But she quickly adds, “I’m glad they did believe it/ Whom I have never found/ Since the mighty Autumn afternoon/ I left them in the ground.” She writes in P1323, when faced with death, “Beliefs are Bandaged, like the Tongue.” In P1741, “That it will never come again/ Is what makes life so sweet./ Believing what we don’t believe/ Does not exhilarate.” The material in her letters fails to convincingly systematize the universe, the sacrament, and now belief: “believing what we don’t believe” is completely paradoxical in Dickinson.

Robinson is a more recent critic who recognizes the paradox in the poet, but has created an explanation that fits into her spiritual search. Dickinson has turned her “battery of ironies on the more rigid and confining of [Calvinist] doctrines” into something that “has radically altered her sense of perspective.”<sup>16</sup> This leaves Dickinson “believing in Belief as an attitude set against Experience, but not wanting to be tied down to specific beliefs.”<sup>17</sup>

He compares this ambiguous position to the concept of trust. It is possible to speak of people being trusting without asking what it is they trust.

Therefore, Dickinson’s case is so special that much of the time we must speak of her as believing without asking what it is she believes. It is enough to know that belief is one of her attitudes toward the experience of living and therefore paramount in her ongoing development of a spirituality. An example of a Dickinson attitude set against experience can be found in P1017:

To die--without the Dying  
And live--without the Life



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This is the hardest Miracle  
Propounded to Belief.

Or in "What I see not, I better see--/ Through Faith--my  
Hazel Eye/ Has periods of shutting..." (L939), as well as in "Before  
I got my eye put out/ I liked as well to see--/ As other Creatures,  
that have Eyes..." (P327), the experience of belief is tangible on the  
poet's terms. That it is at the same time potentially transitory is  
evident in "To lose one's faith--", where she concludes, "Belief--but  
once can be/ Annihilate a single clause--and Being's Beggary--"  
(P377).

In contrast to beggary, the poet again can believe in the experi-  
ence :

Growth of man--like Growth of Nature  
Gravitates within--  
-----

Effort--is the sole condition--  
Patience of Itself--  
Patience of opposing forces--  
And intact Belief-- (P750)

But "intact" belief does not mean systematized formulations.  
One of the most convincing proofs that Dickinson believes in belief as  
an ambiguous and fluctuating attitude set against experience and the  
very universe, is P1228 :

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Too much of proof affronts Belief  
The Turtle will not try  
Unless you leave him -- then return  
And he has hauled away.  
-----

The metaphoric turtle is the perfect form for the poet's demeanor ; for when the critic-observer of that slow creature cooperatively withdraws scrutiny, the turtle takes advantage of the inattention and disappears. Too much proving in the pulpit ; too many hypocrisies in daily life offend the poet : prophet-like she makes her pronouncements and hauls away, leaving neither explanation nor system in her wake.

### Conclusion

By examining Dickinson's approach to the universe, by looking at her fascination with, but rejection of Sacrament, and by considering the range of her attitude toward belief, it is clear that Dickinson's search for spirituality is intentional and central in her art.

Furthermore, both her wit and her sarcasm in the broadest sense have a cohesive function throughout her letters. Certainly the earlier critical approach (of the 1970's), the "tension between faith and doubt" theory on the poet,<sup>18</sup> now appears too simplistic. In her recent work Emily Dickinson, Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes :

*It is too little to say that faith eluded Emily Dickinson. Her poetry...was founded on the conviction that a genuinely religious poet would have to grapple earnestly with faith... The fruit of her struggle would be an independent song of truth, even when the truth was terrible to hear.<sup>19</sup>*

In pursuing the terrible truth, Dickinson's units of measurement were her own :

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"Faith" is a fine invention  
When Gentlemen can see--  
But Microscopes are prudent  
In an Emergency. (L220)

First appearing in a letter to Samuel Bowles and later joining the canon, Poem 185 in its autobiographical aspect has been underestimated.<sup>20</sup> Life was Dickinson's emergency and through her powerful lens she documented the microscopic faults and blemishes of the Calvinist environment looming large enough in her experience of reality.

The prophetic and paganish material in the letters alone reveals a deliberate pattern that contributes to an artistic Dickinson whole. The poet's attitude even at its extremes--the prophet or the pagan role--moves toward concord, providing the poet's terms of "wholeness" are accepted. In Dickinson's value system, "To multiply the Harbors does not reduce the Sea" (L386).

That is, Dickinson is a lover of proliferations. For this reason, when she speaks to niece Martha of "an attitude toward the Universe, so precisely my own", the choice of "Universe" over "world" or "life" is deliberate. Dickinson does not subscribe to normal literary boundaries or to the standard confines of the imagination. Her diversification on the subject of belief alone, as discussed above, is an indication on one topic about what she can do with "Harbors" when her topical energy burgeons in all directions. Prophetic and paganish commentary therefore, run through the letters as complementary threads, which when followed through, do not indicate doubt, but a song of truth. Dickinson could have been speaking of the current generation of harrowed critics who strive to unify her work, when she wrote to Samuel Bowles, establishing her own prophetic credentials: "I think that what we know--we can endure that others doubt, until their faith be riper." (L277) "Faith" is our

trust in her Universe, whose dimensions we are only beginning to suspect.

### Notes

1. Richard B. Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974) p. 699.
2. Charles B. Anderson, Emily Dickinson (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960) p. 257.
3. Dickinson's letters and poems in this paper are numbered according to the standard system in and are taken from the editions by Thomas H. Johnson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, The Belknap Press, 1958) and The Poems of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, The Belknap Press, 1955). Dickinson's idiosyncratic spellings and punctuation in her letters are corrected in this paper.
4. Helen McNeil says, "Many of Dickinson's most vivid expressions are found in her letters; when letters are not considered worth critical attention, her work is distorted." Emily Dickinson, (London: Virago Press, 1986) p. 3.
5. In his notes on the volumes of Dickinson's letters which he edited, Thomas H. Johnson explains that her work was not always clearly dated: "Emily Dickinson rarely dated her letters after 1850, except by an occasional 'Wednesday' or 'Saturday'...Frequently internal evidence sets the date...sometimes an assigned date must derive solely from the evidence of handwriting..." The Letters of Emily Dickinson, Vol. I, xxiii.
6. See Hazel B. Durnell's "Japan and the Amherst of Emily Dickinson" in chapter one of Japanese Cultural Influences on American Poetry and Drama, (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1983) pp. 11-20 for her discussion of Transcendentalism and Zen as a possible application toward Dickinson's meaning of "attitude toward the Universe".
7. Dickinson's increasing withdrawal from normal Amherst social

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intercourse, so that by the time she was in her thirties, she virtually stayed at home--("I do not cross by Father's ground to any House or town." L330)--has recently been described as an OBD (organic brain dysfunction) type of agoraphobia. See Maryanne M. Garbowski, The House without the Door, A Study of Emily Dickinson and the Illness of Agoraphobia (London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989) p. 72. The mental and emotional repercussions from this isolation would have set in after the poet's basic spiritual quest had begun, it seems to me. Nevertheless, Dickinson's withdrawal from society goes hand in hand with her continuing outlook on life--her attitude toward the universe; though her isolation is not the subject of this paper.

8. Apart from her letters, mockery is evident in the canon, sometimes at Dickinson's own expense, sometimes otherwise. This paper is chiefly concerned with paganish phrases in the letters, but a number of poems might also be analyzed, for instance, "Of course--I prayed--/ And did God care?/" P376; "Prayer is the little implement" P437; "It's easy to invent a Life--" P724; "Heavenly Father'--take to thee" P1461; "Of God we ask one favor" P1601; and "God is indeed a jealous God--" P1719.
9. Helen McNeil, Emily Dickinson, p. 21.
10. But Dickinson also had clergy she appreciated. "We are all charmed by [Mr. Dwight]...I have never heard a minister I loved half so well..." (L123).
11. Hazel B. Durnell, Japanese Cultural Influences on American Poetry and Drama, p. 21.
12. For a discussion from a feminist critical perspective on how P508 relates to Dickinson's choices, see Vivian R. Pollak, Dickinson. The Anxiety of Gender (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) pp. 118-22.
13. Barbara Mossberg sees Dickinson as the "warbling Teller" replacing the "faded Men". "...[Dickinson] identifies with John of Revelations [the prophetic voice] or the small David, the 'troubadour'..." in "Emily Dickinson's Nursery Rhymes", in Suzanne Juhasz, ed. Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson (Bloomington:

- Indiana University Press, 1983) p. 54.
14. Shoei Ando, Zen and American Transcendentalism--An Investigation of One's Self (Tokyo : The Hokuseido Press, 1970) pp. 7-8.
  15. John Robinson, Emily Dickinson (London : Faber & Faber, 1986) p. 79.
  16. John Robinson, Emily Dickinson, p. 62.
  17. Robinson, p. 103.
  18. Charles B. Anderson, Stairway of Surprise, p. 257.
  19. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Emily Dickinson (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1986) pp. 262-63.
  20. For Anderson, this quatrain is not to be taken seriously. In it he finds Dickinson's wit and irony, "wholly the result of this linguistic maneuvering". Anderson, Stairway of Surprise, p. 34.

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