RESOLUTION AND IRRESOLUTION: AN EXPOSITION OF SCEPTICISM AND FAITH IN THE POETRY OF DENISE LEVERTOV AND EMILY DICKINSON

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation, ***Resolution and Irresolution: An Exposition of Scepticism and Faith in the Poetry of Denise Levertov and Emily Dickinson***, is the record of bona fide research work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. V. Nithyanantha Bhat, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this dissertation, ***Resolution and Irresolution: An Exposition of Scepticism and Faith in the Poetry of Denise Levertov and Emily Dickinson***, by Beena Job is a record of bona fide research work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

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ABSTRACT

Resolution and Irresolution: An Exposition of Scepticism and Faith in the Poetry of Denise Levertov and Emily Dickinson

This study assesses the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson in the light of the premise that the notion of faith is the prime mover in their thought and poetry and that scepticism is central to their achievement. It is an exposition of the dialectic of faith and doubt that they enact in their poetry. A chronological study of their work reveals that Levertov affirms God in the accomplishment of her intellectual and moral activity and in the exercise of her imagination, while Dickinson remains a doubter throughout with her back and forth movements from scepticism to faith. Thus a pattern of resolution and irresolution emerges from an examination of the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson respectively. The study attempts a theological analysis of their poetry with regard to the 'way to faith', the 'way of seeing' and eschatological vision revealed therein and an analysis based on the postmodern religious situation, in order to bring into sharp relief certain distinctions in their faith experience that reinforce this pattern of resolution and irresolution. Finally, a philosophical analysis based on the Kierkegaardian and Hegelian matrices is employed to foster greater clarity through a dialectical understanding of faith and doubt in Levertov and Dickinson.

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Beena Job

To

the memory

of

my Father

K.V.Job

Abbreviations used in the study:

Denise Levertov's works:

WE	*With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads*
JL	*The Jacob's Ladder*
OT	*O Taste and See*
SD	*The Sorrow Dance*
RA	*Relearning the Alphabet*
SA	*To Stay Alive*
F	*Footprints*
FD	*The Freeing of the Dust*
LF	*Life in the Forest*
CEP	*Collected Earlier Poems 1940-1960*
CB	*Candles in Babylon*
OP	*Oblique Prayers*
BW	*Breathing the Water*
DH	*A Door in the Hive*
ET	*Evening Train*
SW	*The Sands of the Well*
SS	*The Stream and the Sapphire*
GU	*This Great Unknowing: Last Poems*
NSE	*New and Selected Essays*

Conversations *Conversations with Denise Levertov*

Emily Dickinson's works:

Letters *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*

All citations to the poetry of Emily Dickinson are based upon the text established in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, and the poems are identified by the number assigned to them in this text.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Deciphering Denise Levertov and Emily Dickinson:

The Poets in Place

Denise Levertov (1923-1997) was the English-born daughter of a Welsh mother and an Anglo-Russian father, who married the American novelist Mitchell Goodman and later came to stand for so much that is American. She is one of America's most respected and prolific poets, recognized as an important activist-writer who has helped stir the nation's conscience as she voiced the hopes and fears of the twentieth century. Her humanitarian concerns, her sense of social responsibility and her engagement with public concerns resonate through her art. A poet of great skill and craft with a career spanning five decades, she has achieved a double reputation, difficult to maintain in the post-Christian times of the western world, as a respected mainstream poet and a religious poet as well.

In contrast, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) lived an obscure and isolated life in Amherst, a New England community. She had her roots in the Puritanic doctrines and was influenced by Emerson's Transcendentalism and Calvinism's grim dogmas. She lived through a revolutionary period, a time of spiritual unrest, when unbelief had for the first time in history become a lively possibility due to the great transformations in nineteenth-century thought. Her poetry, written over a period of about twenty-five years, is therefore, in large measure about

belief. Dickinson is unique among the major figures of modern culture for the fame she achieved posthumously. From our vantage point more than a century later, she stands as one of the major religious thinkers of her age who created a work of large scale in a language of assertiveness and strength no woman before her had ever used and few women since her have matched.

In spite of their disparate religious legacy and cultural heritage, numerous parallels may be drawn between Levertov and Dickinson. Just as belief is central to Levertov's work, the problem of belief looms large in Dickinson's poetry. They both believed in the power of poetry and this grew directly out of their personal experiences. Other themes that are common to both and closely related to that of belief are the exploration of experience and a fascination for mystery. Levertov explores the mystery of experience and finds the spiritual to be an intensification of the daily event. Her poems press forward on a spiritual journey in order to uncover the nature of self and its destiny. Dickinson analyzed daily experience and turned out lyrics of self-exploration. She also endeavoured to understand the essence of an object and sought the essential moral truths veiled behind material experiences. We find, therefore, that they are both religiously oriented and mystically inclined and their voluminous works are intimate spiritual biographies wherein their inner souls are exposed, a fact that brings them together in the present study.

The primary sources include all the volumes of poetry by Denise Levertov from her first book *The Double Image* through the posthumous collection *This Great Unknowing*, and Thomas H. Johnson's *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.* The remarkable legacy with which Emily Dickinson has endowed us consists in addition to her poetry, her letters, which have been used here as a background to her poems. The study also relies heavily on *New and Selected Essays* by Levertov and *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, a collection of interviews with Levertov edited by Jewel Spears Brooker.

The present introductory chapter entitled "Deciphering Denise Levertov and Emily Dickinson: The Poets in Place" has two sections wherein the poets are considered in relation to their background, and their poems as the consummate expression of a region and a period. Part A – "'Illustrious Ancestors': Familial, Literary and Cultural" – delineates the richness of Levertov's legacy: her mixed heritage, European origins, dual religious legacy and unusual upbringing in an unconventional religious atmosphere. This section also traces the formative influences that determined her life as a poet and shaped her vision of the poet as a politically engaged being, playing the role of a prophet and priest. Part B – "'Vesuvius at Home': Locale, Life and Legacy" – briefly maps out Dickinson's upbringing, education and religious heritage, the cultural and social milieu and the intellectual and literary influences that shaped her

mind. Her intense relationships, love crises, and choice of a life of seclusion are also touched upon.

Chapter 2 – "Levertov: 'Testimonies of Lived Life'" – traces her movement from agnosticism to faith as reflected in her poetry. Though her movement to faith was a gradual progression through almost as many stages as there are collections of her poetry, each collection reflecting a particular stage, for the sake of convenience and ease, the present study considers three significant stages – the periods of agnosticism, transition, and belief.

Chapter 3 – "Dickinson: 'Nimble Believing'" – attempts to look for some pattern in the religious references in Dickinson's poems. The study considers three divisions of her life and works based on poetic productivity – the poetry of her early years, then the middle period of greatest productivity concentrated in a few years, and finally the last stage of continued creative work that spanned two decades.

Chapter 4 titled "Levertov and Dickinson: The Dialectics of Faith" endeavours to make a coherent pattern out of the poems of Levertov and Dickinson and to define their exact religious position. It examines the dialectic of faith and doubt that they enact in their poetry and examines their poetry in the light of the premise that the notion of faith is a key mover in their thought and work. The analysis has been done on three levels – etymological, theological and philosophical.

The final chapter collates the conclusions drawn from this comparative study of the drama of faith and doubt that unfolds in the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson, in which the pattern of resolution and irresolution emerges in their respective works.

A. "Illustrious Ancestors": Familial, Literary and Cultural

> Well, I would like to make,
> thinking some line still taut between me and them,
> poems… (Denise Levertov, *CEP* 78).

Denise Levertov was equipped by birth and political destiny to voice the hopes and fears of the twentieth century. In writing about Levertov's significance among contemporary poets, and mapping out the particular cultural ancestry she perpetuates, Virginia M. Kouidis observes:

> If [. . .] Levertov is unusual among contemporaries for the richness of her familial and literary legacy, she is even more exceptional for the loving and graceful assimilation of that legacy into a poetics of connection. Love expresses itself in her generous and fearless exploration of the resources of the past; grace in her seamless transformation of the past's moral and aesthetic lessons into present relevance. [. . .] Levertov's version of the literary lineage that runs, erratically, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to William Carlos Williams continues to offer our poetry and culture "the long

> stem of connection" it so badly needs. (Wagner-Martin 254-255)

Levertov valued no other legacy so much as that bequeathed by her family. In an autobiographical essay written for *Contemporary Authors*, she acknowledges, "[. . .] virtually all the elements which determined my life as a poet were there in the character and circumstances of my childhood " (Vol. 178, 320). Her parents, Paul and Beatrice Levertoff, were themselves writers. Her father was a scholarly Russian Jew, who had read the New Testament while preparing for the life of a rabbi at Konigsberg, and had become a Christian as a result, and later, an Anglican priest. From the age of eighteen, he devoted his life toward the unification of Judaism and Christianity. Her mother was a Welsh woman with a "strong sense of history" and a keen appreciation of life (*NSE* 260). She was teaching in a girls' secondary school run by the Scottish church in Constantinople when she met and married Paul Levertoff. They settled in England where Denise was born on October 24, 1923, in Ilford, Essex.

Rabbi Schneour Zalman, one of Levertov's paternal ancestors, was a noted Hasid. His tales were told to the family by her father and also recorded by Martin Buber in his *Tales of the Hasidism: The Early Masters*. Angel Jones of Mold, a mystic tailor and preacher, is another ancestor in her mother's line. Because of this multicultural background, the visionary and the mystical are important elements in Levertov's heritage. The poet herself speaks of the significant influence of "inherited tendencies" and

the "cultural milieu" of her family that were very strong factors in her development:

> My father's Hasidic ancestry, his being steeped in Jewish and Christian scholarship and mysticism, his fervor and eloquence as a preacher, were factors built into my cells [. . .]. Similarly, my mother's Welsh intensity and lyric feeling for nature were not just the air I breathed but, surely, were in the body I breathed with. (*NSE* 258)

Levertov did lessons at home and so had a great deal of time to read and play, and a freedom to wander the neighbourhood. To use her own words, she "grew up in an environment which nurtured the imaginative, language-oriented potential" that was "an inherited gift" (*NSE* 261). Her mother, who was her principal tutor in all things, passed the visionary heritage to Denise. She took her to parks, and as a poem records, "It was she / who taught me to look" (*LF* 24). It was in this cherished childhood landscape that Levertov learned to attend to nature's large and small splendours. This landscape echoed with immediate family history and a fabled ancestral past and continued to offer her a sustaining connection to all new landscapes:

> [. . .] an old map
> made long before I was born shows ancient
> rights of way where I walked when I was ten burning with
> desire

> for the world's great splendors, a child who traced voyages
> indelibly all over the atlas, who now in a far country
> remembers the first river, the first
> field, bricks and lumber dumped in it ready for building,
> that new smell, and remembers
> the walls of the garden, the first light. (*JL* 22)

Formative, too, was the quantity of books in her house and the fact that everyone read constantly and wrote as well. Her mother and her sister Olga would read to her. The rhythms of the King James Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer* were a presence in her life. It was thanks to her sister that Denise began reading innovative poets like Auden, MacNeice, Day Lewis and Eliot by the time she was twelve. All of this served to help her discover her poetic vocation quite early and she began writing poems at four or five, dictating them to Olga before she learned to write. She even sent some poems to Eliot when she was twelve, to which he replied with a letter of advice. Looking at art – particularly paintings – hearing good music and formal ballet lessons were other formative influences that had an effect on her writing. Levertov acknowledges her indebtedness to her family thus:

> The basic, primary love of looking comes to me from my mother [. . .]. From my father I think I got a meditative and intellectual bent [. . .] My sister conveyed to me a sense of exciting contemporary ideas and experiments [. . .]. From all

> three I got a sense of commitment to righteous causes – to issues of peace and justice [. . .] and [. . .] a strong religious impulse together with a powerful impression of the inviolable sincerity of their convictions – and thus of the serious nature of religious faith and practice, which I always hated to see mocked or sneered at even in my most doubting periods. (*Contemporary Authors* 322)

We see here the influences she absorbed that were to shape her poetry as well as her vision of the poet as a politically engaged being. It is thus easy to understand the course taken by her poetic career and the themes Levertov chose to write on – nature, love, politics, war and peace, solitude, community, ecology, and religion. She brought a lot of passion and energy to her poetry, for she was passionate about life and living. She thought of poetry as a power or force beyond the poet, of which the poet is a servant, and sometimes used the altar image in her work for she saw the poet as playing the role of a prophet and priest. So too, the terminology of religion and myth was very natural to her. Her mixed heritage, European origins, dual religious legacy and unusual upbringing in quite a religious though unconventional atmosphere, accounts for the amount of religious imagery that comes up in her poems.

Humanitarian politics too came into her life early. It came, she says, in her essay titled "Autobiographical Sketch," from "seeing my father on a soapbox protesting Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia; my

father and sister both on soap-boxes protesting Britain's lack of support for Spain; my mother canvassing long before those events for the League of Nations Union" (*NSE* 262). During World War II, Levertov pursued nurse's training and spent three years as a civilian nurse at several hospitals in the London area, during which time she continued to write poetry. Her early verse is often described as neo-romantic, having been influenced by the romanticism prevalent in Britain during the War. Her first book of poems, *The Double Image*, published just after the war in 1946, "showed indications of the militant pacifist she was to become" (*Contemporary Authors* 317).

In 1948, Levertov married the American writer Mitchell Goodman whom she had met in Paris and her son Nikolai was born in 1949. Right after her marriage, she went to the United States where she immersed herself in American life and letters and studied the American modernist poets. This move was crucial to her development as a postmodern poet. Her husband's friendship with Robert Creeley led to her involvement with the Black Mountain poets. She was influenced by Charles Olson's aesthetics, and her correspondence and conversations with Robert Duncan. While her poetry appeared in Projectivist-oriented magazines such as *The Black Mountain Review* and she was linked to the Beats by various anthologies, she gradually began to develop the style that was to make her an internationally respected American poet. In 1956, she became an American citizen. Levertov first made her mark as a poet in the

late 1950s and her poetry was recognized as distinctive and brilliant. Her first U.S. book, *Here and Now* (1958) and the second, *Overland to the Islands* (1959), launched her as an American poet. She received several prizes for her work, and soon became Poetry Editor of *The Nation*. By the beginning of the 1960s, she was widely recognized as one of the most accomplished poets of her generation.

Levertov's American poetic voice was indebted to an early generation of poets – William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, H. D. and Wallace Stevens. The most illustrious of her ancestors in the literary lineage is Williams who more than any other became her mentor and the inspiration for her poetry. She was greatly influenced by the immediacy and vitality of his objective verse and her later work reveals this. His influence is also clearly seen in the area of theme. Williams was a humanitarian, and the sentiments and the human concerns of his work encouraged Levertov in her own choice of themes. Harry Marten observes in *Understanding Denise Levertov*, "Williams' influence was most profoundly felt in Levertov's sympathy for the workings of his imagination, his conviction of the interconnectedness of the ordinary with the sensuous and intuitive" (11). However, her concern with the spiritual takes her beyond Williams' sensuality. Her work also reveals the impact of Rilke, the early twentieth century German poet, whose work she had been reading for several years before she went to America. "Thus," she says, "all the useful and marvelously stimulating technical and aesthetic

tendencies that I came upon in the 1950s were absorbed into a ground prepared not only by my English and European cultural background in general but more particularly by Rilke's concept of the artist's task – a serious, indeed a lofty, concept [. . .]"(*NSE* 231). Rilke was "an important influence," a "mentor" (*NSE* 231) whose poems were important to her as Marten points out, not only for their "elegant beauty," but also "because they so clearly embody Rilke's stated convictions that poems are not simply feelings but experiences and that the pursuit of art is an almost religious activity" (19).

Levertov has always admitted that Hasidism had given her since childhood "a sense of marvels, of wonder" (*Conversations* 126). She first heard the Hasidic tales as a child from her father, and she reencountered them in the fifties through her reading of Martin Buber's books. Hasidism is a Jewish mystical sect that sees God as immanent in creation and emphasizes the holiness of the "here and now". Buber describes the Hasidic belief as "joy in the world as it is, in life as it is, in every hour of life in this world, as that hour is [. . .] hasidism shows men the way to God who dwells in them 'in the midst of their uncleannesses'"(qtd. in Wagner 26). At the core of Hasidic teachings is the concept of a life of fervour, of exalted joy. According to Joan F. Hallisey, "Hasidism, unlike pantheism, made manifest the reflection of the divine in the ordinary and revealed the 'sparks of God that glimmer in all beings and in all things'" (165).

In Hasidism, "there was a recognition and joy in the physical world. And a sense of wonder at creation" (*Conversations* 126). In Levertov's poetry one clearly feels not only the Hasidic sense of wonder and joy in the physical world, but also a "sense of the sacred glimpsed in and through the particular instance of the momentary, the secular, the worldly" (Hallisey 165). Without doubt it is her love of the material world that makes believable her vision of the spiritual.

In trying to represent the world as it is, Levertov describes the natural environment and the commonplace routines of human experience. Simultaneously, she tries to understand the disorders that threaten to overcome human potential. She suggests that in order to understand the world one must understand the self. In her early work, therefore, she explores her relationship to her ancestors, her parents, other members of her family and her domestic responsibilities, and also examines the relationship of the individual to the world. In 1959, Levertov became a New Directions author when its editor James Laughlin detected her unique voice in *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (1959). In this collection she endeavours to know the world in all its variety and delineates the nature of man's relationship with the natural world and with his created environment.

With the onset of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s, Levertov's social consciousness began to inform both her poetry and her private life more profoundly. Her poems during this period take

their subjects directly from contemporary social issues and centre on the appropriate inner response to the issue. *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961), and *O Taste and See* (1964) for instance, reveal the degree of involvement she has in social issues. They contain poems that are more emphatically social, whereby she seeks to awaken her readers to social responsibilities.

The early 1960s also marks the middle of Levertov's life and a point of transition from a private to a public person. It was during this time that she began what was to be a series of academic appointments. Teaching brought her into contact with the student generation, and with political activism on the various campuses. In an interview featured in *Conversations With Denise Levertov,* she admits to William Packard that if it wasn't for teaching, she might have found herself "very isolated politically" (37). During the 1960s and 1970s, she and her husband were deeply involved in the campus protests against the war in Vietnam, speaking at campus rallies and public demonstrations. She was briefly jailed on several occasions for civil disobedience. Her response to critics and friends who felt she was sacrificing her poetic gifts by making her poetry socially useful was that there could be no "separation between so-called political poetry and so-called private poetry in an artist, who is in both cases writing out of his inner life" (*Conversations* 31).

The Sorrow Dance (1966), *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), and *To Stay Alive*, (1971) document Levertov's attempt to expand the realm of poetry to encompass social and political themes. From writing meditative and

lyrical poems, she moves on to writing poems on war and other political disasters. Major blocks of her poetry in these collections vividly present the horror of war and passionately maintain the immorality of involvement, reflecting her political concerns and her anguish over public policy. Harry Marten remarks:

> Widely acclaimed as one of America's most skilled, intelligent, and innovative poets, she is recognized, too, as an important activist-writer whose response in words and actions to "Life at War" (*Sorrow* 79) in Vietnam, Latin America, Detroit, and elsewhere, has helped stir the nation's conscience. (3)

The anti-war movement was actually part of a larger social upheaval that included the feminist movement and the Civil Rights movement. Levertov, however, says little about the Civil Rights movement, and she did not actively participate in the feminist movement. Her poetry, nonetheless, includes many poems about the situation of women, poems that may or may not be feminist in intent, but are clearly feminist in thrust. Many feminists, consequently, have claimed her as a source of inspiration. In an interview with Fay Zwicky, Levertov objects to the term and the concept, "Women's Poetry," which limits readership. She remarks, "I feel that the Arts always have transcended and must transcend gender" (*Conversations* 117).

The Footprints (1972) and *Freeing of the Dust* (1975) offer powerful social observations and commentary without reducing experience to mere propaganda. They show her suffering a loss of authenticity, of poetic vision and poetic power – a consequence of the evil she encounters with the onset of war. While they reveal the violence and the chaos, the anguish and terror of the times, her poems cast a light into the dark. This was also a painful time for her personally, as she and Goodman were divorced in 1974, and her collections of this time contain many poems that explore such topics as her divorce, her son, and feminine themes. However, as she admits to Janet Tassel, "Divorce doesn't have to be acrimonious" (*Conversations* 128), and her poems reveal her sensitivity and understanding as she broaches the subject. In this context, it is to be noted that though Levertov wrote many poems of a personal nature, she didn't consider herself as a confessional poet. As she understood it, "the confessional poem has as its motivational force the desire to *unburden* the poet of something which he or she finds oppressive" and posed the danger of reducing a work of art simply into a process of purgation (*Conversations* 97). She believed firmly that the poet is both 'maker' and 'instrument' and poetry a 'power.' She had no patience with those who viewed "art as some sort of exercise in narcissism or therapy for the artist" (*Conversations* 128). *The Freeing of the Dust*, the last of her five collections on the war, reveals a cessation of struggle wherein she knows a new peace and hope. The answers to the many questions troubling her

come from within, as the spirit of renewal in her private life leads to her rediscovery of herself.

Levertov travelled extensively and her travels beyond England began after the war when she worked as an *au pair* girl in Switzerland, Holland, and France. After her marriage, she lived in Italy, France, Mexico, and New York. In the 1960s, when she was involved in the protest against the war in Vietnam, she travelled to Moscow, and in 1972, she and fellow poet Muriel Rukeyser went to Hanoi. In West Somerville, which is where she lived after her divorce, she felt increasingly cut off from nature, and on her return from a trip to Europe in 1988, she moved to Seattle. There she lived in a house close to Lake Washington and to a beautiful park, from where she was afforded a view of Mount Rainier, which was a source of inspiration to her in her last years, and offered an intimate and nurturing relationship with nature, as did the landscape of her childhood. However, as Janet Tassel observes, "Levertov has not only traveled the voyager's miles; more important, she sees herself as a pilgrim in the country of art, repeatedly introducing in her work the theme of life as a pilgrimage" (*Conversations* 128). She begins her poem "Overland to the Islands" thus: "Let's go – much as that dog goes, / intently haphazard." A good deal of her poetry is characterized by this "haphazard" movement in a journey for its own sake, with "every step an arrival" (*CEP* 55).

And so we find in her pilgrimage in the "country of art," that from poems which deal with matters of current affairs and public policy Levertov reaches further still, composing poems that deal with private events and take as their primary subject the relationship of man to a spiritual presence, thus defining an important theme that amidst chaos there is an essential order linking all experience. The seed of change is most clearly seen in *Life in the Forest* (1978), a threshold book that offers new directions. At the heart of the collection are a series of poems that describe the death of the poet's mother that reveal a vision of energy that outlasts the body and some sense of design even in the face of death. This collection speaks of the spirit of coherence amidst chaos. Her encounter with death brings on a wrestle with doubt, the nature of identity, commitment, and change. She gradually comes to acknowledge that life is change and that the past gives shape and definition to the present.

The subject of belief is central to most of her poems. A celebration of mystery has also been a constant theme of her poetry. And as Levertov explores the mystery of experience she finds the spiritual to be an intensification of the daily event. In her book *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition,* Suzanne Juhasz describes Levertov's poems as "rites moving around an experience, with the insight of words granting it significance, even holiness" (61). Her later works have evolved toward a vision of the mysteries of human experience that confirms religious conviction and offer her poetry of belief

for this "Age of Terror" (*CB* 98). *Candles in Babylon* (1982) speaks of the importance of faith that will not deny doubt. *Oblique Prayers* (1984) contains revelations of spiritual conviction and suggests a complex harmony of all created things. There is a clear movement toward explicit religious and spiritual concerns here and in the following volumes. *Breathing the Water* (1987) celebrates man's relationship to nature and affirms the connection between the physical and the spiritual. In these collections we see how the poet develops her vision of the mysteries of human experience into a statement of religious conviction and faith.

The poems in *A Door in the Hive* (1989) are truly lyrics while speaking of political and religious affairs. *Evening Train* (1992) published in the year she moved to Seattle, is a collection that "reveals an important transition", according to *World Literature Today* reviewer Daisy Aldan, "toward what some have called 'the last plateau': that is, the consciousness of entering into the years of aging, which she [experienced] and [expressed] with sensitivity and grace" (qtd. in *Contemporary Authors* 318). This collection carries the pilgrimage of her poetry into new territory with her meditations on the timeless and the timely.

Sands of the Well (1994), shows Levertov at the height of her powers and she takes the reader to a fresh awareness of the "Primary Wonder"(*SW* 129). Her journey brings her ultimately to prayer, as she is lost in contemplation. *The Life Around Us* (1997), Levertov's response to 'the green world,' is a selection of poems on nature in which as Levertov

writes in the foreword, "celebration and fear of loss are necessarily conjoined" (xii). *The Stream and the Sapphire* (1997) presents a collection of poems on religious themes originally published in seven separate volumes, which traces her pilgrimage of faith. It was on December 20, 1997 that she died from complications of lymphoma. *The Great Unknowing: Last Poems* published posthumously in 1999 displays the passion, lyrical prowess, and spiritual jubilation that filled Levertov's final days. They shine with the artistry of a writer at the height of her powers, testifying to the words of a reviewer for *World Literature Today* on the jacket of *Sands of the Well*: "Levertov [. . .] fulfills the eternal mission of the true Poet: to be a receptacle of Divine Grace and the 'spender of that Grace to humanity.' "

Levertov felt a sense of privilege and an attendant moral obligation in being a poet and teacher, and the child of a socially conscious family. She believed that a poet's role stems from the fact that he "has received a gift, the gift of poetry, and he is obliged to serve his gift, to be a voice" (*Conversations* 86). Thus conscience and circumstance virtually forced her into the politics of the anti-war movement, and into the broader anti-nuclear, environmental, and social justice concerns which evolved from it. Also, as she tells Sybil Estess, for her, "writing poetry, receiving it, is a religious experience" (*Conversations* 96). We find therefore, that hers is a poetry that is "in search of significance underneath and beyond the succession of temporal events: a poetry which attests to the "deep spiritual

longing" [. . .] increasingly manifest in recent American poetry" (*NSE* 4). The inclusion of political, social, ethical and religious themes in her poetry has resulted in a lot of adverse criticism for this "Christian anarcho-socialist" as she dubbed herself, and her detractors dismiss her as a propagandist. Such criticism did not bother her in the least as is proved by her conviction: "My politics and my muse happen to get along well together" (*Conversations* 132). And so Levertov continued her pilgrimage till her death, carefully crafting and honing fine works of art, all the while singing with a clear voice that was committed to acute observation and engagement with all the beauty, mystery and pain of earthly life. Her poems "written on the road to an imagined destination of faith", and "addressing doubts and hopes rather than proclaiming certainties" (*NSE* 257), live on and continue to give hope to their readers.

> The gods die every day
> but sovereign poems go on breathing
> in a counter-rhythm that mocks
> the frenzy of weapons, their impudent power. (*CEP* 130)

B. "Vesuvius at Home": Locale, Life and Legacy

> Behind Me – dips Eternity –
> Before Me – Immortality –
> Myself – the Term between – (Emily Dickinson, Poem 721)

Emily Dickinson wrote over a period of about twenty-five years, having no audience for the public performance of her life or work. At a

time when women enjoyed virtually no intellectual freedom, Dickinson chose to carve out her own role. As Roger Lundin remarks in his book *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*,

> This woman who loved letters because they gave her "the mind without corporeal friend" lived the most intensely focused inner life of any major figure in American history. In doing so, she discovered what Blaise Pascal once memorably termed the "greatness and wretchedness" of humanity. And in living her extraordinary life as she did, Dickinson was able to practice an art of belief that eventually made her the greatest of all American poets and one of the most brilliantly enigmatic religious thinkers the country has ever known. (5-6)

The enigmatic and reclusive Emily Dickinson has been much mythologized by posterity. As the legend goes, she dressed only in white, shied away from publishing her work, and almost never left the grounds of the family home. The creation and perpetuation of this "myth of Emily" can be attributed to many of her early biographers, playwrights and novelists in their attempts to arrive at cogent reasons for the life-style of this "New England Nun" in white, cloistered behind the walls of her father's house. Paul J Ferlazzo remarks in his book *Emily Dickinson* that though she was "Trapped by an era considered intellectually dogmatic and emotionally limited, the poet triumphs through her writing, which

outlives the age and proves to be timeless" (13). Later scholarly and academic studies of the poet have revealed that the real woman and poet may prove to be more interesting, and certainly more important than the myth.

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, a small New England farm community with a staunch Puritan culture, where evangelical devoutness permeated every action. The future poet was reared according to strict Puritan doctrine tinged with transcendental idealism. Her compulsive interest in death, as well as her numerous poems on the religious experience and God, reveals her inescapable heritage. J. B. Pickard points out in *Emily Dickinson: An Introduction and Interpretation* that the tensions resulting from the clash of her perceptive, inquiring mind with the rigidly orthodox community produced some of her finest poems. He remarks:

> Though she was repelled by Calvinism's grim dogmas and spent her life rebelling against them, she never escaped its eschatological emphasis. She was continually preoccupied with death, resurrection, immortality, and judgement and never ceased examining the undeniable reality of God. Her almost obsessive concern with death [. . .], fascination with pain, and contemplation of religious experience reveal her attachment to basic Calvinism. (8)

We find that Emily Dickinson was raised in Puritan orthodoxy, only to develop a liberal spirit that turned away from inherited beliefs through a desire to understand and appreciate the larger world around her.

It is surprising that there is hardly any mention in Emily Dickinson's poetry of her ancestors, for it was indeed a rich family history to which she could have turned her attention, if she had chosen to do so. Hers was the eighth generation of a family that had lived in New England since the great Puritan migration of the seventeenth century. Her ancestry can be traced to the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony when one of her ancestors, Nathaniel Dickinson, was among the four hundred or so settlers who sailed to the New World in the migration that began in 1630. He was a courageous and God-fearing visionary, and his descendants took root in the area of Amherst. For many generations the Dickinsons farmed the land, remaining active in civic affairs and committed to the covenantal faith of their Puritan ancestors. However, Emily Dickinson's grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, entered college and graduated. He became deeply religious after a serious illness and joined the West Church of Amherst, in time becoming its deacon. As a Trinitarian, he had bound himself to a conservative brand of religious commitment. The Trinitarian belief that religious ideas and practices must not be understood only intellectually, but also experientially, encouraged what has been called the fervent spirit of religious revivalism, "The Great Awakening," which coursed through New England – and Amherst – in

Emily Dickinson's day. After his stint at ministry, Samuel Fowler Dickinson turned his attention to law, thus setting the course for his family. The stage for Emily Dickinson's life was actually set when her grandfather left the ministry and entered the law in Amherst at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Emily was the middle child in a closely-knit family. Her father Edward was a leading citizen and lawyer, a stern man, totally devoted to his work, authoritarian in his relationship with his wife and children. Emily saw him as a heroic and admirable figure. As George F. Whicher puts it in *This was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson*, "His gods were her gods" (27). She stood in awe of him as a child, and anticipated his will as a grown woman. His influence on Emily, particularly one that would greatly affect her life and work is clearly seen in an observation made by Jack L. Capps in his book *Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836 – 1886*: "One of Emily's difficulties was inherited from her father: an unyielding devotion to truth, an absolute integrity that would never permit her to profess a thing that she did not sincerely believe (29). Her mother Emily Norcross Dickinson was fearful, meek, and utterly submissive. Their relationship was complex and ambivalent. Yet her mother was always present in her life, an unhappy, shy woman whose ineffectuality and submissiveness provided no model for her brilliant daughter. "My Mother does not care for thought", Emily once wrote about her (*Letters* 404). Still, she spent much of her time nursing her lovingly through years

of invalidism, and she wrote with much affection about her. Emily had a close and understanding relationship with her older brother Austin. His wife Sue Gilbert had been a schoolmate of Emily's at Amherst Academy. Emily accepted Sue as a sister and trusted friend for many years, but later they gradually drifted apart. Lavinia, Emily's younger sister was devoted to her, protecting her privacy and sharing her confidences.

Very little is known of Emily Dickinson's childhood. She grew up in a secure, well ordered family. At an early age she began learning music. A crucial event during these years is the family's move from the homestead to a house close to the centre of the town and beside a cemetery. It is small wonder that Emily grew up conscious of death, for funeral processions passed the Dickinson house on the way to the cemetery.

Emily Dickinson attended Amherst Academy for seven years starting from 1840. Her training in mathematics, astronomy and science was extraordinarily thorough for a young woman of her day. She was a brilliant student, had friendship with other students and visited the homes of friends and neighbours. It was here that she met the young ladies who were to remain, along with those from home, her long-standing friends: Abiah Root, Harriet Merril, Sarah Tracy, Emily Fowler (Noah Webster's granddaughter), the Gilbert sisters (Sue was to become her brother Austin's wife), and Jane Humphrey. During her last term at the Academy she came under the influence of the young principal,

Leonard Humphrey, whom she somewhat idolized and considered as one of her first "masters." His sudden death in 1850 was her first affliction and one she found hard to bear.

Poised between childhood and maturity, she attended Mt. Holyoke Academy for one year, but she had no desire to continue there. It was while she was there that she met Benjamin F. Newton who had come to Amherst for an apprenticeship in her father's law firm. He exposed her to the world of thought and writing from which she had been sheltered and gave her Lydia Child's socially radical book, *Letters from New York* and also a copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poems. Newton was another early master or "Preceptor," as she called him. He acknowledged her potential as a poet and encouraged her in her writing.

When during the last years of her schooling several religious revivals took place at Amherst Academy and at Mt. Holyoke, Emily found herself twice at a crossroads. However she resisted all 'converting influences' strenuously and with lonely defiance. Her ability to say "no" was already well developed at that time. Though it released her from what she believed was an imprisonment in dogma, it did not however, free her from feelings of guilt. The fact that many of her friends had undergone the conversion to which she herself could not submit also caused her much grief. She confessed her turmoil to Abiah Root:

> I was almost persuaded to be a Christian. I thought I never again could be thoughtless and worldly – and I can say that

> I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior. [. . .] There is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world can never fill. I am far from being thoughtless upon the subject of religion. I continually hear Christ saying to me Daughter give me thine heart. [. . .] I hope at some time the heavenly gates will be opened to receive me and the angels will consent to call me sister. I am continually putting off becoming a Christian. (*Letters* 27)

Her letters display her suffering and open envy of those who could find peace by submitting to orthodox conversion. But final conversion was repugnant to her questioning, pragmatic mind. It is not clear why she veered away from professing an orthodox belief although she was intensely concerned with the salvation of her soul and deeply aware of spiritual reality. As her childhood and formal education come to an end, we find that "her spiritual courage and integrity had been tested by two severe religious experiences out of which she had somehow preserved her uncommitted position," and that "it had toughened her delicate spirit for the emotional crises that lay ahead" (Pickard 17). She was now ready to enter the tumultuous years of the 1850s, which brought full emotional maturity and final poetic development.

Emily's life after returning from Mount Holyoke was in general satisfying, filled with the daily round of household activities. Gerda

Lerner quite astutely points out in her book *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* that

> While the outward events of her life were quite conventional during this time, her inner development was intense. The crisis over religion and her refusal to go the way of her family and friends by experiencing "conversion" were certainly momentous for her future work. Her "wrestle with God," as her biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff described her lifelong struggle, began in this negative decision. In her religious battles she confronted a patriarchal God who had turned his face away from humankind and refused to reveal his meanings. Her deepest fears over abandonment and loss of love resonated in her poems as despair over the absence of God. (183-184)

During her twenties Emily Dickinson lived much like her younger sister Lavinia – she played the piano, visited neighbours, entertained a number of suitors and took walks in the garden with them. Her father moved his family back into "Homestead," the house on Main Street in Amherst, which henceforth would be the place of residence for Emily. Newton's death in 1853 came as a shattering blow, raising again the eternal dilemma of her life, the relation of death to immortality. His death stopped her writing for years by her own admission. In general, her life until the middle 1850s remained outwardly normal and filled with new

friendships. The revival that converted her father and Sue passed her by while her attendance at church became more and more rare. She took the first hesitant steps toward seclusion by refusing to go from home unless forced and became increasingly jealous of her privacy. Perhaps the death of Newton occasioned this desire for solitude. She kept in touch with the outer world through her correspondence. As Pickard notes, "The woman was changing, slowly moving toward the love crisis whose white heat was to forge her untempered spirit" (22).

There have been so many farfetched stories fabricated about her love crises that it is almost impossible to identify the man. Emily Dickinson's letters and poetry indicate some climactic emotional experience during 1860 – 1862, which has been presented in Theodora Ward's *The Capsule of the Mind*. Pickard summarizes the pattern of her love crises thus:

> Reading the poems and letters chronologically from the late 1850s – 1865, one finds a detailed record of a growing emotional attachment. Fed by impossible hopes and increasing erotic desire, this passion burned most intensely at a dramatic summer meeting – only to be extinguished by sudden separation. During the succeeding desolate months, she strove to mend the charred bits of her shattered emotions. Gradually she accepted the loss and began to analyze the experience with surprising detachment. In the

> final stage, personal renunciation was transformed into spiritual triumph. (22)

Dickinson herself refers repeatedly to a deep crisis which occurred somewhere between 1858 and 1862, which brought her close to madness, and from which she gradually recovered. The years following upon this period of her greatest suffering are the years of her most intensive creativity. From all the material available we can reconstruct the various elements that must have brought on this crisis. First, there was the disillusionment about her relationship with her father, who doted on her brother Austin and never gave her what she most wanted from him – the recognition of her worth as an intellectual equal. Then there was her passionate love relationship with Susan Gilbert who later married Austin, a fact that was experienced by Emily as a betrayal. A second passionate love for Kate Anthon also ended in rejection, a greater disappointment for Emily, because Kate and Susan remained close friends. However, the three "Master" letters are the strongest evidence that her painful rejection in love came from a man. Her biographers have variously focused on the Rev. Charles Wadsworth or on the editor Samuel Bowles, both married men, as the object of these letters. Gerda Lerner poses the possibility that "Master" was a fictive character and remarks thus:

> The comment she made in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson suggests her felt need for a "Master" in her life who could contain the frightening, dynamic forces which at

> that time seemed to threaten her sanity: "I have no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize – my little Force explodes – and leaves me bare and charred –" The mystery remains. (188)

Her fear that she was going blind because of a visual impairment she suffered, and the steady deterioration of her mother's health are probably two additional conditions that helped to bring on the depression and crisis. Though we will never know the actual causes of the crisis that nearly killed Dickinson and brought her to the brink of madness, there is no doubt that she freed herself by writing some of the greatest poetry ever written by a woman. The sense of power and victory over fear she experienced after these struggles is reflected in her work:

> 'Tis so appalling — it exhilarates —
> So over Horror, it half Captivates —
> The Soul stares after it, secure —
> To know the worst, leaves no dread more — (Poem 281)

Emily Dickinson became in the last decades of her life, a near recluse in her father's house, seeing only her closest relatives and seldom leaving her room. She cultivated notable eccentricities, such as dressing only in white and speaking even to close friends only from behind a half-opened door. Her carefully calculated stance of the recluse and introvert freed her from unwanted social obligations, from the need to explain her refusal to get married and from many of the domestic obligations

expected of young women of her class. Gerda Lerner points out her proximity in the choice and style of life, with several of the great women mystics – Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Christine Ebner and Julian of Norwich, whose power derived from their rejection of the "normal" life of women, from their chastity, their enclosure, their concentration on the inner self and its visions (181). It is to be noted that in several of her poems Emily Dickinson refers to herself as a "nun," and in her work there are many references to herself as serving mysteries beyond her own comprehension.

There is a lot of critical and biographical material on Emily Dickinson. Both critics and biographers have been preoccupied with explaining her decision to live the life of a recluse. While earlier critics have based their explanation on unrequited love, recent feminist critics have tried to trace her strong love relationships with one or more women through her poems and letters. Commenting on Dickinson's deliberate and carefully considered choice of seclusion and the life of a poet, Lerner remarks:

> She had alternatives and chose her life and did so not in bitterness and delusion but in ecstatic creativity and celebration of her hard-won powers. What she won and what she created was the conscious life of the mind, the world in which she was "Empress … Queen," the equal of

> the heroes of myth and literature, a soul free to argue with God and negotiate the terms of her dialogue. (182)

The period from 1866 to her death was the period of her most reclusive life, for she no longer left the grounds of her father's house. She continued her active involvement with her family and with a few close friends. She even encouraged new friendships, such as with Helen Hunt Jackson and Mabel Loomis Todd, both of whom admired her work. Mabel Todd would later be the driving force in arranging for posthumous publication of her poems. In the last decade of her life, Emily Dickinson gave full and joyous expression to her love for Judge Otis Lord, an old family friend, though she rejected his proposal of marriage. The remaining years brought repeated encounters with the death of loved ones. After several years of illness, she died in 1886.

> She had taken loss, disappointment and abandonment through death and absence and turned them into renunciation, transforming them into sources of power [. . .] Renunciation of self was transformed into the immense discipline which could disdain what it could not gain and thus triumph over desire. It was out of this renunciation – which the mystics expressed through their chastity and their mortification of the flesh – that she could gain the arrogance of the God-wrestler, the divine Creator and the keeper of mysteries. (Lerner 190 - 191)

Even as Dickinson moved deeper into seclusion, she maintained contact with the world through her highly selective encounters, her correspondence, and through periodicals and books. In this manner, as Roger Lundin says, "While the actual circumference of Emily Dickinson's life continued to contract [. . .], her imaginative circumference expanded even larger" (193). The correlation of her reading with her letters and poems affords a significant means of understanding the intellectual and literary influences affecting both the poetry and the poet. It was through her reading that she gained the vicarious experience and perspective that made possible the perceptive observations and penetrating analyses characteristic of her poetry. Her fondness for books and reading developed long before she sequestered herself in the homestead, and the reading interests that she manifested in her adolescent and young life were not inhibited by the seclusion of later years. During the seclusion her closest companions were her Bible, Watt's *Psalms and Hymns*, Shakespeare, the seventeenth-century Metaphysicals, Emerson, Dickens, George Eliot, and the Brownings. She also read the daily newspapers and several periodicals. In this manner she was able "to exploit her physical isolation and achieve an intellectual expansion that might otherwise have been impossible" (Capps 145).

Emily Dickinson's mind was formed during the three decades before the Civil War, and thereafter was protected from all shaping influences. Speaking of her relations with time and place, Whicher notes:

"Her mental climate was much the same as Emerson's. What she actually represents is the last surprising bloom [. . .] of New England's flowering time" (153). Two of the strongest currents of the age that came to a confluence in her poetry are the Puritan tradition in which she was nurtured, and the spiritual unrest, typified by Emerson, which was everywhere eroding custom. Like most New Englanders of her time, Dickinson was saturated in the Bible from early childhood. The use she made of it is an index to the elements of Puritanism that were most valid to her. For the Trinitarians, the Bible was the basis of faith and it was also a source of much of Emily's inspiration. Its images, rhythms, figures of speech, verbal and musical patterns, made their way into her letters, and infiltrated the very texture of her poetry. Biblical phrases were always at her tongue's end, and certain Old Testament characters like Jacob, Moses and David were vivid to her imagination. Emily Dickinson's familiarity with the Bible was an inescapable consequence of her New England upbringing. However, she was dexterous in her use of it in a highly individual fashion. Regarding the references to the Scriptures in her letters and her poetry, Bettina L. Knapp remarks in *Emily Dickinson* that there were other reasons for Emily's emphasis on Biblical quotations.

> Not only was Church ideology based on the Bible, but its preoccupations, scrutinized by the Protestants of New England, were closely linked with the questions in Emily's own inquisitive mind. Her intellectual maturation and the

> sounding out of a personal and individual ethic revolved around such notions as truth and unity of purpose and being. Even more essential was her need to understand better humankind's relationship with Nature, with God/Christ, concepts such as good and evil, the notion of immortality and resurrection. Most assiduously, her thoughts probe the biggest Mystery of them all – Life and Death. (25-26)

America witnessed a shift of sensibility between the time of Dickinson's birth and death. When she was born, the intellectual landscape was still ruled by a benevolent Deity. By the time of her death, Darwin's theory of evolution had shattered the argument from design. So the time when Emily came into maturity was a time of spiritual unrest when "confidence in the truth of revelation, though still firmly affirmed, had become hollow at the core. Though the fabric of Puritan belief seemed as unshakable as ever, its foundations were sapped" (Whicher 63). James Turner wrote a book in 1985 called *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* in which he makes a powerful and convincing argument that open unbelief becomes a lively intellectual and social possibility between 1850 and 1880 in America. Turner's point is that until the early and mid-1800s, there had been isolated atheists and unbelievers in the western world. For complex reasons, it becomes an

acceptable and plausible possibility in the mid and late 19th century in America and in the western world (44, 4).

One of the consequences of this, is that the experience of Belief seems inevitably in the second half of the 19th century to incorporate within itself the possibilities of Unbelief. That is, Doubt and Unbelief are not things that one gets over, or that are antithetical to Faith and Belief, but they become for some individuals part of the identity of Belief and Faith. This is increasingly the case in the 20th century and it is a present reality of spiritual experience for Catholics and Protestants throughout the western world. Dickinson is a forerunner there.

Thomas Moore in his spiritual books such as *Care of the Soul* and *The Soul's Religion*, sees religion not as a set of Beliefs, but as a deep engagement with everyday life – made possible through the practices of Emptiness and Unbelief. Emptiness is an idea discussed in many different religions. In Buddhism, the term 'sunyata' is used for 'emptiness' – and in Christianity the word 'kenosis' is sometimes used. And Emily Dickinson's poetry may be taken as an illustration of this idea of religion as an engagement with life through the practices of 'emptiness' and 'unbelief'. "With her numerous poems about God and faith" says Roger Lundin, she "demonstrated an impressive grasp of intellectual history. She realized that she was living through a revolutionary period, when unbelief had for the first time in history become a lively possibility [. . .] Dickinson lived through that revolution and contributed to it (150-151).

Dickinson's work goes far beyond self-exploration as Gerda Lerner remarks.

> Dickinson's poems, read in their entirety and read along with her letters, reveal her as a major thinker who created a work of large scale. Like her predecessors, the medieval mystics, Dickinson was concerned with the large, metaphysical questions: Man's relationship to God, to death and to Redemption. Unlike them, she was not sustained or supported by an institutional framework of explanation — she rejected both the Church and the Calvinist theology in which she was raised. In their place she developed a loving and ultimately healing nature philosophy, and she wrote of love, friendship and nurturance, of rejection, betrayal and loss. (190)

In fact, what gave verve to Dickinson's "beliefs" was the theological innovation of her day. She revelled in the kind of new idea of God and in the new faces of God that emerged in 19th century New England. There was a whole movement of evolutionary theology based on the study of science resulting in a sense of wonder at the grandeur of the universe. And even before Darwin, New England scientists had articulated an evolutionary theology that reconciled the new discoveries of science with religion. The general theological drift of the late nineteenth century American culture is beautifully captured in this classic expression

given by H. Richard Niebuhr: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" (185). Increasing numbers of people were attempting to find in the 'worship of humanity' and the 'service of man,' a form of religion. However, as Lundin remarks, when the secular transformation of religious belief began in earnest in Amherst circles after the Civil War, "Dickinson was no more in harmony with it than she had been with the Whig revivalism of her early adulthood." And her letters "attest to her passion for the perennial questions about language, consciousness, and God" though "the emerging positivism of her day was ready to dismiss such questions as irrelevant [. . .]." He concludes, "Dickinson's reputation has flourished because she apprehended the truth in ways that the rationalism, scientism, and sentimentalism of her age – and ours – could not and cannot begin to understand" (Lundin 219-220).

Unlike her contemporaries – the transcendentalist writers Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman – who had discovered the Sublime within the self and in communion with nature – it seems that Dickinson's poetry would grope at Belief – and at God – for all of her life. This separates her rather significantly from Thoreau, and very significantly from Whitman. In a famous passage of "Song of Myself", Whitman calls all the gods of eastern and western theism "old cautious hucksters", and he said "[. . .] they bore mites as for unfledged birds/ who have now to

rise and fly and sing for themselves." This is a transcendental passage par excellence, celebrating the power of the individual to assume the prerogatives of the now deceased or departed deity. Dickinson did not have that sublime and serene optimism. She was more troubled than they were, and so many of her poems express some combination of confusion and lament about the decline. One of the best is a poem about the ebbing of belief called "Those – dying then", written near the end of her life in the early 1880s, where she says that God's "Hand is amputated now / And God cannot be found –" And this poem expresses Dickinson's profound sadness and sense of consternation and confusion over this, for "The abdication of Belief / Makes the Behaviour small –" (Poem 1551). This is one of the most telling descriptions of a consequence of the loss of faith or the loss of Christian narrative. She knew that in losing this story as she had known it, she was losing something important.

Emily Dickinson produced an awesome body of work – 1,775 poems – of which fewer than twenty were published during her lifetime and most of these without her permission. This was not due to shyness or over sensitivity, as many of her interpreters have declared, but it was another deliberate choice she made. She began writing in 1849, at age nineteen. In 1854 she wrote to her friend Jane Humphrey: "I have dared to do strange things — bold things, and have asked for no advice from any" (*Letters* 95). She made clear in references in other letters that "the strange" and "bold things" were connected with her decision to live a poet's life.

This decision was, for her, a momentous turning point and a new beginning.

For Emily Dickinson, christening by water in the country church was superseded by a new baptism – one in which she gave herself freely to the call of Poetry, which is the "Crown" she chooses:

[. . . . . .]

Baptized, before, without the choice,

But this time, consciously, of Grace —

Unto supremest name —

Called to my Full — The Crescent dropped —

Existence's whole Arc, filled up,

With one small Diadem.

My second Rank — too small the first —

Crowned — Crowing — on my Father's breast —

A half unconscious Queen —

But this time — Adequate — Erect,

With Will to choose, or to reject,

And I choose, just a Crown — (Poem 508)

No longer a creature defined by others and named by them, or the child on her father's breast, conscious and "called to my Full," she expresses her vocation, her search for the "one small Diadem" – Poetry.

Sometime late in the 1850s Dickinson began a number of attempts to get her poems published. She sent poems to Samuel Bowles, editor of

the *Springfield Republican*, a weekly of the 1840s, who finally published four of them. In 1862 she approached Higginson with several letters, asking for his support, his literary advice, his judgement upon her work. Though he was unable to appreciate her unique gifts, he responded with some encouragement, but advised her against hurrying into print. She had also submitted a few poems to friendly editors, who published them with alterations in punctuation and words, to her horror. All of this strengthened her decision to give up the quest for publication rather than to accommodate her style and craft to the demands of the market. With this ultimate refusal she freed herself to write as her talent dictated.

In Dickinson's reckoning, poetry ranked above all other goals to be sought, and even included "the Heaven of God" (Poem 569), and from the time of her acknowledgement of her vocation, expressed her ambition and her pride in a language of assertiveness and strength. We see that her meekness and her quiet conventional life were highly deceptive, for beneath it rocked a fire. Referring to herself as "a volcano," as "Vesuvius at Home" she wrote:

> On my volcano grows the Grass
>
> A meditative spot —
>
> An acre for a Bird to choose
>
> Would be the General thought —

How red the Fire rocks below —

How insecure the sod

Did I disclose

Would populate with awe my solitude. (Poem 1677)

"No other person in American history has become so famous in death after having been so anonymous in life" (Lundin 5). Yet, Emily Dickinson remains an enigma. After her death in 1886, her sister discovered her poems – almost two thousand of them — sewn neatly into 40 bundles or fascicles, and locked inside a chest in her bedroom. They were, to use her own words, "[. . .] my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me –" (Poem 441). In 1857 Dickinson had begun to create "packets" of her poems, arranging them in groups of up to twenty and sewing them neatly together. Between 1858 and 1861 she composed fewer than a hundred poems a year. The next three years brought an astonishing outburst of creativity: 1862 — 366 poems; 1863 — 141 poems; 1864 — 174 poems; 1865 — 85 poems. Thereafter no single year produced more than fifty poems.

Poetic creation, for Dickinson, was like the opening of doors and windows onto an unknown and frightening world – "I've seen a Dying Eye / Run round and round a Room" (Poem 547) – leading on through inner circular paths of memory, recollection, contradiction, where nothing is fixed. "I dwell in Possibility," Dickinson wrote, and her inner world was a fortress "Impregnable of Eye" (Poem 657), where secretly and

privately she forged on, “How powerful the Stimulus / Of an Hermetic Mind” (Poem 711).

> A Word made Flesh [. . .]
>
> A Word that breathes distinctly
>
> Has not the power to die [. . .] (Poem 1651)

Chapter 2

Levertov: "Testimonies of lived life"

Denise Levertov's familial religious legacy and literary lineage, we have seen, made it difficult for her to become anything but a believer. She was, one may say, predestined to come to the faith. A chronological study of her poetry offers readers a clear reflection of the evolution that she had undergone in her spiritual life. Her work traces her movement from agnosticism to faith, a specific Christian faith in the reality of God who accomplished his unsurpassable act of revelation in Jesus Christ. In an article entitled "A Poet's View" in *Religion and Intellectual Life* (1984), we have a statement by the poet herself, of this turn that is so evident in her later poetry:

> I have been engaging, then, during the last few years, in my own version of the Pascalian wager, and finding that an avowal if Christian faith is not incompatible with my aesthetic nor with my political stance, since as an artist I was already in the service of the transcendent, and since Christian ethics (however betrayed in past and present history) uphold the same values I seek in a politics of racial and economic justice and nonviolence. (*NSE* 243)

Levertov also says that the relation between her religious and her intellectual position appears "to be a process". She speaks of "a slow and continuing personal evolution [. . .] although the direction of [her]

development has [. . .] been consistent" (*NSE* 239-240). Supposing her poetry to be a reflection, at least in part, of her spiritual evolution, one may mark out the various stages or phases involved in the process.

Levertov states: "In the matter of religion [. . .] I have moved in the last few years from a regretful skepticism [. . .] to a position of Christian belief. [. . .] [T]he movement has been [. . .] gradual and continuous [. . .] (*NSE* 241-242). Though her movement to faith was a gradual progression through almost as many stages as there are collections of her poetry, each collection reflecting a particular stage, for the sake of convenience and ease, the present study considers three significant stages – the periods of agnosticism, transition, and belief.

Levertov's is a poetry of exploration, an endeavour to decipher daily experience. From the very beginning of her poetic career, she emphasizes "the incapacity of reason alone to comprehend experience, and considers Imagination the chief of human faculties" (*NSE* 246). In her poetry of exploration, Levertov seeks to discover the mystery that lies beyond the surface of things and in the process gains an increasing conviction that the exercise of the imagination moves one toward faith. Her thematic concerns are reflected in the lines:

> I like to find
> what's not found
> at once, but lies
> within something of another nature,
> in repose, distinct. (*WE* 17)

As she explores her daily experience of the world and the mystery behind things in her early collections, in what seems in retrospect her period of agnosticism, she is concerned with an internal and natural mystery rather than a transcendent or metaphysical one. The influence of Hasidism is most conspicuous in this early phase of Levertov's spiritual life.

Levertov's concern, as she explores every aspect and event in her daily life, is not merely with the event but with the meaning of an experience. She believes here, as throughout her career, that every experience must have a meaning and that all experience relates in some way to the truth which she refers to as the "the authentic"(*JL* 59). We see, therefore, that a search for the authentic underlies all her work. It is only an experience with meaning that she considers a proper subject for a poem. Thus, through poetry, she attempts to reach to the heart of things. As N. E. Condini remarks in "Embracing Old Gods": "With polished style, Miss Levertov pries into things, objects, plants, to their last detail, their most hidden secret" (*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 28: 242).

Levertov's encounter with truth leads to her affirmation of joy in the physical world. As an agnostic, she perceives merely the truths of change and coherence, and places faith in the inevitability of joy renewed. She believes too, in the recreating and renewing power of Nature, which for her is Truth. She perceives an order and significance behind the surface chaos in the world, and an accord among living things. Here there is no talk of God or religion even though she has a sense of otherness, of the common bond of

humanity, and gives spiritual significance to the natural exercise of pity, mercy, peace, and love.

Levertov's truths in *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* are the truths of change and coherence that are revealed in small as well as grand moments. The poem "Matins" from the *Jacob's Ladder* clearly expresses Levertov's ideas about poetry and meaning and throws light on her search for the authentic. The poem is initiated by the memory of a dream that happens just before waking and offers the poet shadows of the authentic whose nature is imprecisely recognized:

> It thrusts up close. Exactly in dreams
> it has you off-guard, you
> recognize it before you have time.
> For a second before waking
> the alarm bell is a red conical hat, it
> takes form. (*JL* 59)

The shadow of the dream persists as the poet takes up her morning activities and she seeks to recognize the authentic:

> The authentic! I said
> rising from the toilet seat.
> The radiator in rhythmic knockings
> spoke of the rising steam.
> The authentic, I said
> breaking the handle of my hairbrush as I

brushed my hair in

rhythmic strokes: That's it,

that's joy, it's always

a recognition, the known

appearing fully itself, and

more itself than one knew. (*JL* 59)

The feminine experiences of the morning world are used to reach "Marvelous Truth" itself**.**

Marvelous Truth, confront us

at every turn,

in every guise, iron ball,

egg, dark horse, shadow,

cloud

of breath on the air

dwell

in our steaming bathrooms, kitchens full of

things to be done, the

ordinary streets.

Thrust close your smile

that we know you, terrible joy. (*JL* 62)

Levertov explores every aspect of the world around in her quest for the real. She believes, as she writes in "A Straw Swan Under the Christmas Tree", that

> All trivial parts of
> world-about-us speak in their forms
> of themselves and their counterparts! (*WE* 32)

Truth and reality – the authentic – are to be encountered in everyday life. In order to do so, one must also be sensitive to the other side of experience, to the dreams and visions that the mind knows, and be able to relate the two. Only in this way, the poem has taught her, can a person know "terrible joy". As Levertov writes in "Some Notes on Organic Form,"

> A religious devotion to truth, to the splendor of the authentic, involves the writer in a process rewarding in itself; but when that devotion brings us to undreamed abysses and we find ourselves sailing slowly over them and landing on the other side – that's ecstasy. (*NSE* 73)

It is from her Hasidic roots that Levertov inherits this sense of joy in the physical world. The affirmation of joy in her early poetry marks a stage in her movement to faith, for Hasidism is a Jewish mystical sect that sees God as immanent in creation and shows men the way to a God who dwells in their midst. It is interesting to note here that Levertov later comes to a position of Christian (Christ-centred) belief, that Christ's name – Emmanuel – means 'God with us', and that his birth was announced as "good news of great joy that shall be for all the people" (Luke 2:10).

In her early collections from *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* through *Relearning the Alphabet*, Levertov produces a detailed record of

experience in which the perceiving mind, confronting the apparent ordinariness of the world, is continually surprised by joy. However, for Levertov the agnostic, the joy that she attains through her encounter with truth in everyday life is not a religious joy. As Richard Howard points out, "for her the poem is a sacramental transaction, permitting, even enforcing access to a released state of being, an ecstatic awareness that is not concomitant to a religion, with its stern implications of community and service, as to a gnosis" (*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 5: 246).

Levertov's poetry is one of revolution where she seeks new ways of affirming joy. In "The Wife", one of many poems where she writes about her relationship with her husband, she says:

> I don't stop to ask myself
> Do I love him? but
> laugh for joy. (*WE* 48)

Many of her earlier poems are hymns to joy, which the poet even in her latest stage considers the best protection against the aridity of war and the painful memories associated with it. While writing on her early political poetry in "Revolutionary Love: Denise Levertov and the Poetics of Politics," Sandra M. Gilbert aptly remarks, "In an age of psychic anxiety and metaphysical angst, Denise Levertov's most revolutionary gesture is probably her persistent articulation of joy – joy in the self, delight in life, sheer pleasure in pure being" (*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 66: 235).

It is from Hasidism that Levertov inherits a deep-rooted humanism and an ethical concern and an equally deep-rooted respect for the creation, this world, as an abode of holiness. *With Eyes at the Back of our Heads*, *The Jacob's Ladder*, and *O Taste and See* impress us with her serene delight in the world and pleasure in making poems that celebrate the world. There is a vague sense of social malaise, though, as she begins to confront evil in the world. This is significant with regard to Levertov's movement to Christian faith, for it stemmed naturally and inevitably from her humanitarian concerns and her sense of social responsibility. Beginning with *The Jacob's Ladder* we see her writing poems that take their subjects directly from contemporary social issues and centre on the appropriate inner response to the issue. As we understand from the collections of poems that follow, hers was "a politics of racial and economic justice and non-violence" (*NSE* 243). In her early poetry, though, evil is conceived merely as the absence of good. "During the Eichmann Trial" is a poem in which her social ethical concern is very evident. Here she characterizes the man who ordered the murder of millions of people in Nazi concentration camps as a

> pitiful man whom none
> pity, whom all
> must pity if they look
> into their own face. (*JL* 63)

Using the words of St. Paul from the Epistle to the Romans she implies that we are all "members / one of another." She asks every man to look up "from

his being" to the being of others. This sense of "otherness" has Hasidic roots. What makes Eichmann a murderer is his inability to see this common bond of humanity:

> He stands
> isolate in a bullet proof
> witness-stand of glass,
> a cage where we may view
> ourselves, an apparition
> telling us something he
> does not know: we are members
> one of another. (*JL* 65)

A recurrent theme in Levertov that has Hasidic roots is about being where we are and still doing all we can. She believed in fulfilling "the poet's total involvement in life," for the "earthly life, that miracle of being" is something that poetry "conserves and celebrates" (*NSE* 136). In the poem "Sparks" in the collection *O Taste and See*, she includes lines from the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible to state her own convictions:

> Whatsoever thy hand
> findeth to do, do it with thy might:
> [. . . . . .]
> Prepare for this world as thou
> shouldst live forever.' (*OT* 15)

The concern of living life to the fullest is central to her work. With a truly Epicurean perspective, she believes that only life experienced completely can enrich man. This concept is the major theme of *O Taste and See*, the title poem of which begins: "The world is / not with us enough / O taste and see." Life may be ordinary but man must move deeper into the present day, tasting and seeing

> [. . .] all that lives
> to the imagination's tongue,
>
> grief, mercy, language,
> tangerine, weather, to
> breathe them, bite,
> savor, chew, swallow, transform
>
> into our flesh our
> deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,
> living in the orchard and being
>
> hungry, and plucking
> the fruit. (*OT* 53)

In the words of "a woman with crooked heels" in the poem "February Evening in New York,"

> 'You know, I'm telling you, what I love best
> is life. I love Life! Even if I ever get
> to be old and wheezy – or limp! You know?
> Limping along? – I'd still . . .' (*WE* 31)

As Linda Welshimer Wagner opines in "Matters of the Here and Now," Levertov's poems speak consistently for her solemn view of life: "She sees life as renewing, joyful, majestic; a promise to be held tenderly; a duty to be performed earnestly; and her poetry, as an art originating in, and expressive of that mysteriously compelling vision" (*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 5: 247).

Sandra M. Gilbert believes that Levertov's delight in existence depends on the steady celebratory patience of the believer who trusts that if you wait long enough, if you abide despite forebodings, the confirming moment of epiphany will arrive. "Thus she assimilates [. . .] metaphysical anxieties [. . .] into a larger pattern based on faith in the inevitability of joy renewed" (*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 66: 239). For instance, she marvels at the way she can carry on despite the "Terror" she has experienced:

> If I remember, how is it
> my face shows
> barely a line? Am I
> a monster, to sing
> in the wind on this sunny hill
> and not taste the dust always,
> and not hear
> that rending, that retching?
> How did morning come, and the days
> that followed, and quiet nights? (*WE* 36)

Levertov's value of the present life stems from her assumption that the world is orderly and that man, animal and spirit all partake in this great order of which nature itself is the best revelation. She writes thus:

> The religious sense – pantheism – the impulse to kneel – seems to me basic human reality… the kind of Christianity George Herbert wrote about [. . .] At the same time I feel with Thoreau that "The love of Nature and the fullest perception of the revelation which she is to man is not incompatible with the belief in the peculiar revelation of the Bible."(qtd. in Wagner 41)

Levertov's poetry is concerned with seeing into experience and discovering the order and significance that is there behind the surface chaos, an instinct gained from her poet's faith. It is, therefore, a poetry of the eye; of the mental and spiritual eye. In the title poem of *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* Levertov points the way to see with our whole sight. With eyes at the back of our heads, one is better able to recognize and imagine essential interrelationships; one is enabled to see in unexpected directions and thereby handle the chaos in the world around. Here Levertov is writing less about heightened external sight than about inner vision.

It is because of her strong faith in innate order that images of nature have always dominated Levertov's poems. She shares with Wordsworth a sense of the importance of man's relationship to nature. However, as Karl Malkoff observes in *Crowell's Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry,*

> [. . .] while Wordsworth is concerned primarily with a reality unmarred by civilization, Levertov's interest extends to the entire sensory world. More important, where Wordsworth seeks in nature permanent forms that relate significantly to human experience, Levertov is committed to the act of perceiving in and of itself. She is involved with "[. . .] all that lives / to the imagination's tongue," she wishes to "breathe them, bite, / savor, chew, swallow, transform / into our flesh our / deaths [. . .]" (176)

Levertov writes in "A Poet's View," that an "acknowledgement, and celebration, of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme" of her poetry from its very beginnings (*NSE* 146). With the publication of *O Taste and See* Levertov's interest in the meditative, the spiritual, and the mystical grows clearer. "The religious response to a mystery is celebration, not explanation," says Paul A. Lacey in *The Inner War: Forms and Themes in Recent American Poetry* (114). A good portion of Levertov's poetry is given to celebrating colours and flavours. Says George Bowering in his article "Denise Levertov":

> The celebration of the senses is not done under the eye of a reproachful or paternal God. The modern poet does not often call God by that name except for irony or rhetoric. Denise Levertov seeks unstated spiritual significance in emotional honesty, precise attention to the natural exercise of pity, mercy,

> peace and love. Not that God is dead, unless by that is meant that he no longer wears the Talmudic and Mosaic disguises and fright-beards. (Gelpi 245)

In the period of agnosticism, Levertov hardly ever speaks of the God of the Old Testament, but brings pagan gods into her poetry. In "The Prayer" she says:

> At Delphi I prayed
> to Apollo
> that he maintain in me
> the flame of the poem
> and I drank of the brackish
> spring there [. . .]
> until at dusk
> among the stones of the goatpaths
> breathing dust
> I questioned my faith, or
> within it wondered
> if the god mocked me [. . .]
>
> I think sometimes not Apollo heard me
> but a different god. (*OT* 55)

In "Earth Psalm" she worships the mortal after saying that she "could replace / God for awhile":

God is replaced awhile,

awhile I can turn from that slow embrace

to worship 'mortal', the summoned

god who has speech, who has wit

wrapped in sad pelt and without hope of heaven [. . .] (*OT* 60)

A study of the early collections of the first phase dealt with so far reveals, on the one hand, poems that reflect on the sources of art and imagination, and on the other, poems that press forward on a spiritual journey whose purpose is to uncover the nature of self and its destiny. In the title poem of *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* for instance, we are given a parable of the inner life, a metaphorical presentation of spiritual pilgrimage in the individual. Levertov looks for ways of attaining spiritual wholeness in a world that is fragmented and chaotic. Her quest for the authentic and her exploration of experience leads her ultimately to the recognition of her own person, a ready awareness of her self. In this early phase of Levertov's career, her poems reflect her agnosticism. However, they also reveal the seeds of her movement to faith. At the end of this phase though, the search is still on for she only reaches a stage wherein God is "replaced awhile" and she turns "to worship mortal" and acknowledge the truths of Nature, change and coherence (*OT* 60).

While Levertov's early work devotes its attention to the balanced seeing and savouring of life, because of the Vietnam War, the same cannot be said of the volumes – *The Sorrow Dance*, *Relearning the Alphabet*, and

To Stay Alive. The war casts a shadow over her, resulting in a loss of authenticity. Eventually, though, as *Footprints*, *The Freeing of the Dust* and *Life in the Forest* reveal, through struggle and growth Levertov gains a new spiritual understanding.

The *Sorrow Dance* speaks of sorrow and the dominant tone is grief, not only in poems about the death of Olga, the poet's sister, and the Vietnam War, but even in the poems rejoicing in the natural world. In this collection, we get "Perspectives" (*SD* 65) on everyday life as well as portraits of "Life at War" (*SD* 79) in our lives. "The Pulse" and "Life at War" set out her primary theme on war – the loss of poetic vision and poetic power. In "The Closed World" she writes, "[. . .] the blinds are down over my windows, / my doors are shut" (*SD* 62). This is the consequence of personal sorrow at the death of her sister, and the horrors she perceives in the world, in particular, the Vietnam War. The feeling flowing out of her poems on war reveals that she has encountered evil in a way it had not been encountered before, and the effect has been profound. For instance, "Life at War" presents the paradox that Man, "whose flesh /responds to a caress, whose eyes / are flowers that perceive the stars," can feel nothing more than "mere regret" about

> [. . .] the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk
> runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,
> transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,
> implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gullies. (*SD* 80)

However, for Levertov, the dance of sorrow does not dispel joy. "Knowledge" of hideous crimes of war, she writes, "jostles for space / in our bodies along with all we / go on knowing of joy, of love":

> Our nerve filaments twitch with its presence
> day and night,
> nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,
> nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,
> the deep intelligence living at peace would have. (*SD* 80)

Levertov points toward a way of comprehending the violence of war that modern men "have breathed the grits of" all their lives, their "dreams / coated with it, the imagination / filmed over with the gray filth of it" (*SD* 79). Through her exploration of public events, family memories, and personal relationships in this collection, she points toward a way of comprehending the violence of war, and enables her readers to recognize their human flaws as well as possibilities:

> The honey of man is
> the task we're set to: to be
> 'more ourselves'
> in the making: (*SD* 82)

In *Relearning the Alphabet*, most poems are devoted to terror, despair, sorrow, anger, and pain, although joy is the emotion she cherishes, and she has written a number of love poems. The poet is helpless in the face of the mysteries she perceives in the present. The ineffective struggle against the

war brings a new desolation and emptiness, and hopelessness echoes throughout this collection. In "Biafra" she writes:

> no hope: Don't know
>
> what to do: Do nothing. (*RA* 18)

In "An Interim" she writes:

> While the war drags on, always worse,
>
> The soul dwindles sometimes to an ant
>
> Rapid upon a cracked surface; (*RA* 21)

There is also a longing for death surfacing through the book. In James Mersmann's opinion:

> Flirtation with death seems part of a desire to escape the burden of guilt and inadequacy imposed by the war and the culture – "(Unlived life / of which one can die)" [. . .] it is part of the dark night of the soul forcing it toward the necessary cessation of struggle, the passivity needed for the rekindling of the fire. (105)

Eventually, Levertov's joy-seeking temperament prompts her toward losing anger, sorrow, and despair in an effort to create conditions more conducive to joy. Following the confusion and questioning of earlier poems like "From a Notebook", "Relearning the Alphabet" feels more satisfying and heartening. At the beginning of the poem "Relearning the Alphabet", Levertov is estranged from self and world and suffers loss of authenticity. She has changed continents and cultures and is "without a terrain in which,

to which, I belong" (*RA* 97). However, the dominant tone here is optimistic and the poem begins and ends with the key words in Levertov's earlier poetry – "joy" and "praise".

As a result of the war and the revolution, Levertov gains a new spiritual understanding. Certain poems of *Relearning the Alphabet* finally show the spiritual depth expected from a poet with such a strong Hasidic background. Through defeat and death of the will, Levertov relearns a new peace and hope and a sense of human possibility. Her spiritual heritage helps her to bring on the new light. It is indeed a spiritual autobiography, for, as Lacey remarks:

> In "Relearning the Alphabet" the final relinquishment occurs, the recognition that "acts of magic" and "articles of faith" are "rules of the will graceless / faithless," and that she must yield all desire, all yearning for vision or wisdom, before the treasure will disclose itself. And the treasure is a new trust, a recognition that holiness is both in the world and in the self. (131)

To Stay Alive reveals Levertov's growing bitterness about the war and the state of the American soul. The anti-Vietnam war poems reveal a righteous indignation and an uncompromising moral zeal. Commenting on this collection, Marie Borroff writes, "The time-honored impulse to celebrate, to wonder, to sing is basic in her, and this impulse is, literally, disturbed by the knowledge that an inassimilable evil exists which must be hated and

which must be fought on the level of action (rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 2: 243).

The poetic sequence "Staying Alive" reveals Levertov's struggle to find a proper order and place for her poems and for her life. She sees herself as a poet in a world that requires revolutionaries. However, as a poet, she is unable to be the kind of revolutionary she wants to be. *To Stay Alive* is a record of her struggle to reconcile these two roles and to choose between "Revolution or Death" (*SA* 28). In "Prologue: An Interim" she pronounces herself guilty of being a poet in a time when poetry seems useless: "And all I can bring forth out of my anger is a few flippant rhymes" (*SA* 25). She feels that her poetry is insignificant against the ultimate horror of the war and the detrimental effect that the war has on the language, the only tool she thinks she can use well.

To Stay Alive reveals the many questions troubling her and the answers come finally, from within herself, through her personal experience of both the physical, external world and the spiritual or internal world. In spite of her growing bitterness and sense of helplessness, we find that Levertov's humanity is still very much warm and alive. As Juhasz observes, "Only through an engagement with herself, sensual and spiritual events show her, can she participate in the actions of others, can those actions have any meaning for her" (81).

Footprints, her next collection, is all about understanding the times and surviving them. The prosaic poems record impressions and talk about

experiences, while the political poems are simply statements of the poet's convictions. For Levertov, the artist's involvement with public affairs is part of a total involvement with the life he lives and the world in which he lives it. *Footprints* openly shows struggle and growth while taking a tough look at harsh contemporary events. The book also picks up threads of her work, which had been partially set aside in favour of the urgency of political commitment prevailing in *Relearning the Alphabet* and *To Stay Alive*. Regarding her choice of materials here Richard Pevear remarks:

> The imagistic and dream-vision poems in *Footprints* have a natural piety that tends towards animism. [. . .] They also contain reveries about a primitive, magical life [. . .]. Behind all of this there is an awareness of the essential relationship between the struggle for a more authentic vision and the struggle for a more authentic world [. . .]. (rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 3: 293)

The Freeing of the Dust written after Levertov's trip to North Vietnam with fellow poet Muriel Rukeyser is "a book about throwing open the doors and windows of the imagination and letting in the air, noise and stampede of the 'life of others,'" according to Bonnie Costello in her article "Flooded with Otherness" (*Parnassus* 8: 206). It contains poems about a way of looking at life that we never before met in her work. The political poems are placed between two sections that deal with private themes to show how public events interrupt our lives. In this collection, we find that Levertov has

changed. There is an acceptance of limits, without the bitterness expected from a disillusioned humane idealist. "Rather," says David Ignatow "there is a sweetness, a tenderness towards life; a change rises from her poems that is inspiring to read. For Levertov, the circle of human frailty has been completed and forgiven and even blessed, because of life [. . .]" (rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 8: 348). Much of the rancour of her former social poetry has mellowed and bitterness has given way to a tranquility of "A Place of Kindness" where

> [. . .] someone slow is moving,
> stumbling from door to chair
> to sit there patiently
> doing nothing but be,
> enjoying the quiet and warmth, (*FD* 32)

Even the Vietnamese poems in this book emphasize reflective scenes. While being there shocks the senses, deepens the rage, and burns images of loss into the poet's consciousness, she also gains a view of the quiet moments that surround the horrific. She can see what it means "To live / beyond survival," even amidst the devastations of war. Commenting on the more quiet, satisfied tone of the poems in *The Freeing of the Dust*, Linda Wagner remarks in a review of this collection:

> Such a change from relative stridency to careful repose suggests not that Levertov's views have changed but rather that this collection of poems expresses the core of any writer's

> effectiveness: the humanity that forces one to take stands, the 'angst' of seeing and living in a world that seldom meets ideal standards, but too the joy of glimpsing fulfillment at least occasionally. (Wagner-Martin 36)

Just as the poet's expanding outer experience deepens her public understanding, the intensity of private experiences deepens her discovery of herself. At about this time she confronts her own dissolving marriage in the early 1970s, and amidst the pain finds the same spirit of renewal. Her verses at this time are not self-indulgent revelations but dignified poems revealing her experience of living at "Crosspurposes" (*FD* 54), "Divorcing"(*FD* 66), and of "Living Alone" (*FD* 59). Having explored in *The Freeing of the Dust* the need to look outward to the world to know another, and inward to comprehend and accept the self, she comes to a recognition in recounting a "Conversation in Moscow" (*FD* 85) that:

> we mustn't, any of us, lose touch with the source,
> pretend it's not there, cover over
> the mineshaft of passion
> despair somberly tolls its bell
> from the depths of,
> and wildest joy
> sings out of too,
> flashing
> the scales of its laughing,
> improbable music,
> grief and delight entwined in the dark down there. (*FD* 91)

Life in the Forest is a stock taking book in which we find transitions as well as continuations, and everywhere in this splendid collection we find the seed of change. In this, her most autobiographical book, Levertov rediscovers beginnings amidst endings, and speaks of living as a daughter, mother, writer, teacher, with others and alone, and suggests that we are constantly changing.

In this collection, which is not primarily political, the political poems appear in a section called "Continuum," and reveal the concern of the poet for the brutality she sees about her and her deep reverence for the human body and spirit. She cannot bear that mankind keeps refusing its potentials for understanding, for greatness, and that human beings become vessels of violence and degradation. As Diane Wakoski says in "Song of Herself," the poem "Continuum" expresses Levertov's

> [. . .] connecting, joining belief – both in human faith and in the anger that human beings' lapses from faith provoke. Another dimension of her sense of life as process, life as testing ground, is that human kind draws from, and in turn sustains the natural world. Many of her metaphors are drawn from nature, and many of her most effective allegories conjoin the natural and the human. (Wagner-Martin 55)

"Continuum" begins with the description of a beetle representative of the voice of the commonplace poet:

Some beetle trilling

its midnight utterance.

Voice of the scarabee,

dungroller,

working survivor . . . (*LF* 63)

There is in Levertov an insistence on the need to watch nature as it incessantly recreates life according to N. E. Condini. Nature is truth, for Levertov, and this concept is taken up again in *Life in the Forest* where "mother and the forest symbol – stand for the inevitability of death and the permanence of creation" (*Contemporary Literary Criticism* 28:242).

Central to this collection are a series of poems about the death of her mother, dying "at home, yet far away from home, / thousands of miles of earth and sea, and ninety years / from her roots" (*LF* 26). Levertov knows that the physical marks individuals make on their environments – reflections of themselves and their values – rarely outlast them and sometimes disappear beforehand. She depicts the rapid disintegration of the garden her mother had created after only a few weeks of neglect during her mother's illness in the poem "Death in Mexico". While the landscape – an embodiment of the archetypal Garden – is returning to its natural jungle state, Levertov sees in its ruin a primitive reality:

Gardens vanish. She was an alien here,

as I am.

[. . . . . .]

Old gods

took back their own. (*LF* 33)

"This is what must be feared," remarks Diane Wakoski:

> that in death, in each personal death, civilization as we know it dies. Perhaps the "old gods" are the body, the physical world, always there and always with a primitive power and potentially dangerous capability. Like all mystics, Levertov believes in a God or the knowledge of a God within oneself, which is beyond doctrine and organized religion. Sometimes this God takes the face of art or civilization or government or human will, but the marrying of those two elements, the body and the spirit, must be a marrying of the "old gods" and the personal god. "Life in the forest" will always be dangerous and primitive, but we cannot resist the beauty of the snake. (Wagner-Martin 56)

As Levertov explores the implications of mortality, she withdraws into herself and wrestles with her doubts, contemplating the nature of identity, commitment and change. In her pain, she offers up a "Death Psalm" to the Lord of mysteries," seeking to reconcile herself to death. Though she does not get an answer to the injustice of death, in the process of looking deeply into the mystery, she communicates the harsh reality of old age and death and offers a rewarding vision of human experience. The portrait of her mother's final years presents a picture of life's spirit that will last beyond the

moment. Even in the harsh realities of ageing and in the face of death, Levertov confirms some sense of design:

> Acknowledging that life is change, sometimes wondrous, sometimes hurtful, the poet seems to confirm in her act of remembering and formal artistic creation that a life that was fully lived can still be a living presence to the uncertain seekers who survive. The woman who "remembered her griefs. /[. . .] remembered her happinesses. / [. . .] / unfolding the design of her identity" ("Death Psalm" 39), leaves a glimpse of that design which passes into readers' lives. (Marten 157)

Elsewhere in *Life in the Forest* Levertov examines the physical, emotional, and intellectual threads of which a life is woven. Remembering moments spent with a friend on the West Heath ("Notes," *LF* 34), she recognizes that the past never vanishes into the present, but rather continues to give it shape and definition, both changing and changed by current needs. All the past experiences add to the meaning of the adult poet's life now. Consistently, in all her books of poems Levertov has proven herself a poet of changes who recognized that the poet's task is "to clarify [. . .] not answers but the existence and nature of questions" (*The Poet in the World* 45).

As we progress through the collections dealt with in this transitional phase of Levertov's career as a poet, we see a reflection in her work, of her struggle and growth through self-doubt and self-alienation, desolation and despair – through a veritable dark night of the soul – till she is at the

threshold of belief. As Levertov says in an interview in February 1986 for *Sojourners*, she gradually finds herself strongly possessing "that sense of so much being "in bud" – so many things being in the beginning of growth, the first shoots of some different consciousness, of moral evolution, despite the fact that we go on more and more effectively doing the awful things that human beings do" (*Conversations* 151). And so we find that the poetry corresponding to the last part of her period of transition shows Levertov at the beginning of growth, with a mystical belief in a God within herself.

The spirit of coherence in the midst of change that emerges in *Life in the Forest* bursts forth in Levertov's works of the 1980s and the 1990s – *Candles in Babylon*, *Oblique Prayers*, *Breathing the Water*, *Evening Train*, *Sands of the Well* and *This Great Unknowing*. In these, as though in a logical extension of her exploration of the mystery of experience, Levertov is seen moving towards a position of Christian belief. In an interview, Levertov has described herself as writing "poetry that articulates engaged emotion and belief"(qtd. in Marten 147). All the poems of these volumes do not make the subject of belief central. But even those poems on subjects such as family, politics and aesthetics often reveal a perception of forces beyond the individual that are part of the shape of experience. We see how slowly and steadily, her works evolve toward a vision of the mysteries of human experience that confirms religious conviction. Levertov believed that it is by the exercise of the imagination that "one moves toward faith," for "the imagination [. . .] is the perceptive organ through which it is possible [. . .] to

experience God" (*NSE* 246). As Marten observes, "The intensity and breadth of the conviction that there are forces larger than man which the poet can experience through the imagination reveals a new spirituality in her treatment of self in relation to other, private perception in relation to public experience (147). In her poetry of the 1980s and 90s, Levertov develops her vision of the mysteries of human experience into a statement of religious conviction and faith. As central poems of each volume suggest, the poet, having looked deeply to see both inner and outer realities, arrives at a kind of spiritual reckoning. As she explains in an article in *Religion and Intellectual Life*:

> [. . .] all in the creative act, experience mystery. The concept of "inspiration" presupposes a power which enters the individual and is not a personal attribute; and it is linked to a view of the artist's life as one of obedience to a vocation. David Jones wrote in one of his essays of the artist's impulse to gratuitously set up altars to the unknown god; and I alluded to the passage from what was then an agnostic standpoint. Later that unknown began to be defined for me as God and further, as God revealed in the Incarnation. (*NSE* 241)

In her political poems in these collections we notice that a more hopeful bridge replaces the emblematic gulf between simultaneous good and evil dominating her earlier political poetry. The theme of schism, of the human alienation from self and nature that underlies the section "Age of

Terror" in *Candles in Babylon* (71) actually offers hope. The long poem "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" (*CB* 108) offers a clear view of the force of Levertov's new beliefs. The figure of the Apostle Thomas, the doubting Thomas of the Gospel according to John, is an ideal choice to reveal the nature of Levertov's faith. In her 1990 essay "Work that Enfaiths" Levertov states that as she became more and more occupied with "questions of belief," she began to embark on what she calls "do-it-yourself theology" in an attempt to clarify her mind. This took place sometimes in poems, and she cites "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" as one such instance. This poem which she had thought of as "an agnostic Mass" (*NSE* 250), says that individuals "live in terror / of what [they] know," but they live in greater terror "of what [they] do not know [. . .]." However, the opening "Kyrie" section declares that "our hope lies" precisely "in the unknown, / in our unknowing." From the prayer that the "deep, remote unknown, / [. . .] / Have mercy upon us" (*CB* 108), Levertov moves to the second section "Gloria" where she bids her reader to "Praise / [. . .] the unknown" which:

> [. . .] gives us
>
> still,
>
> in the shadows of death,
>
> our daily life,
>
> and the dream still
>
> of goodwill, of peace on earth. (*CB* 109)

In the "Credo" section Levertov clarifies her faith and its relationship to the example of the Apostle Thomas:

> [. . .] I believe and
> interrupt my belief with
> doubt. I doubt and
> interrupt my doubt with belief. Be,
> beloved, threatened world. (*CB* 110)

In the "Sanctus," Levertov praises the God-given human power of imagination to comprehend harmonies even while admitting anxiety and doubt:

> all that Imagination
> has wrought, has rendered,
> striving, in throes of epiphany –
>
> naming, forming, – to give
> to the Vast Loneliness
> a hearth, a locus – (*CB* 111)

In the "Benedictus" Levertov is humbled before the mystery of transubstantiation: "The word / chose to become / flesh. In the blur of flesh / we bow, baffled"(*CB* 113). And faced with the frailty of "a shivering God," she places faith in mankind in the "Agnus Dei", offering "something human" to "shield" this "defenseless" God (*CB* 115). She began composing this poem as an aesthetic exercise, as an "experiment in structure," reasoning that if so many musical composers had mined the structure of the mass for

their art, she could do so in a poem. Several months into the process, when she had arrived at the Agnus Dei, as she says in her 1990 essay "Work That Enfaiths," she discovered herself "to be in a different relationship to the material and to the liturgical form [. . .]. The experience of writing the poem – that long swim through waters of unknown depth – had been also a conversion process" (*NSE* 250). Throughout *Candles in Babylon*, Levertov affirms struggle, hope and a capacity for imaginative vision, which enable us to reach toward the immortal. And in the last poem "The Many Mansions", she confirms for her readers that there are places for all manner and degrees of belief in God's "house" (*CB* 116). In these three collections, we see that Levertov has come to a position of Christian belief. However, the poems in these collections show that she is still ridden with doubts, and God is referred to mostly as a presence or force that unites all experience. As with Whitman and other American mystics, her discovery of God here seems to be a discovery of God in herself, and an attempt to understand how that self is a natural part of the world.

Though she is able to conclude *Candles in Babylon* on an optimistic note, she carries her struggle against despair into *Oblique Prayers*. Levertov comes to a recognition of a "happiness" that is "provisional":

> I know this happiness
> is provisional:
> the looming presences –
> great suffering, great fear –

[. . . . . .]

but ineluctable this shimmering

of wind in the blue leaves:

this flood of stillness

widening the lake of sky:

this need to dance,

this need to kneel:

this mystery: (*OP* 86)

Oblique Prayers is divided into four sections, each with a thematic arrangement of poems that endeavour to define the darkness and embrace faith. The volume opens with the mystery of "Decipherings" of daily experience wherein we find poems of personal reflection, and progresses to the religious vision of the final section "Of God and of the Gods." The poem "Decipherings" gives direction to the rest of the volume. In it the poet asserts her need for a stable moral centre. The second section "Prisoners" treats historical and political themes and offers insight into the ways in which individuals are prisoners of history. Section three contains translations of fourteen poems by the French poet Jean Joubert that offer revelations of spiritual conviction and suggest a harmony of all created things. Levertov, as we have already seen, had an underlying belief in a great design and a potential harmony, and the translations from Joubert "offer a nearly perfect vehicle for her to confirm the conviction of design,

suggesting that it is not simply her own quaint obsession" (Marten 169). However, Joubert's spirituality is pantheistic while Levertov's, even as she is sympathetic to his revelation of man's place in nature's design, reveals a faith that is more directly Christian.

Oblique Prayers in its final section explores the nature of God with spiritual speculations and meditative lyrics, and holds some of Levertov's most delicate seeing and some subtle moments of religious ecstasy as in the poem "Of Rivers":

> Rivers remember
>
> [. . . . . .]
>
> a touch
>
> shuddering them forth,
>
> a voice
>
> intoning them into
>
> their ebbing and flood:
>
> [. . . . . .]
>
> That remembrance
>
> gives them their way
>
> to know, in unknowing flowing,
>
> the God of the gods, whom the gods
>
> themselves have not imagined. (*OP* 71)

In this collection the poet addresses a different darkness as she says in the title poem "Oblique Prayers" – "Not the profound *dark / night of the soul /*

[. . .] but gray, / a place / without clear outlines" (*OP* 82). The book ends in stillness and peace, with Levertov's discovery that "A gratitude / had begun to sing in me" (*OP* 85). In the last poem "Passage," the pilgrim-poet celebrates the power of the Spirit that has inspired her journey all along the way. She acknowledges the creative strength of the Spirit – "breath, *ruach*, light that is witness and by which we witness." We are led to understand that "the spirit that walked upon the face of the waters" at the time of creation is present still, moving over the meadow of long grass, for, even now, "green shines to silver where the spirit passes," inviting us to bow and sing with the "grasses" that "cry hosanna" (*OP* 87).

In an interview with Joan F. Hallisey in 1986, Levertov says that her "faith is at best fragile" and that "there is a deep hope implied in the words, "With God all things are possible"" (*Conversations* 151). Coming a year after this confession, *Breathing the Water* reveals Levertov as a religious poet. This book celebrates man's creative relationship to nature, and affirms a connection between the physical and the spiritual. The work clearly reveals the impact of Rilke who, as already mentioned, pursued art as an almost religious activity. She presents variations on poems and themes by Rilke, conversations with medieval visionaries like Caedmon and Lady Julian of Norwich, and observations on religious painting, architecture and writing, thereby suggesting that ordinary lives can be transformed by divine revelation.

Levertov shares Rilke's conviction that true piety contains "something of invention" and that "our relationship to God presupposes a certain 'creativity,' and certain 'inventive genius'" (qtd. in Marten 178). She believes that the poet's visionary task is to perceive and communicate divine mystery in the natural world. In "Variation on a Theme by Rilke," the old monk comments on depictions of Christ by various artists:

> not one is a fancy, a willed fiction,
> each of them shows us exactly
> the manifold countenance
> of the Holy One, Blessed be He. (*BW* 71)

In the same poem Levertov writes, "From the divine twilight, neither dark nor day, / blossoms the morning." And she reveals her recognition that man's creativity is dependent upon God's:

> [. . .]. Thus the Infinite
> plays, and in grace
> gives us clues to His mystery. (*BW* 71)

The poet also urges the reader, in yet another reflection, to remain open to spiritual experience, and to see with her a spiritual plan, and realize that in our very restlessness "God's flight circles us"(*BW* 83).

"The Servant Girl at Emmaus" is a poem inspired by a painting by Velasquez, which focuses on a black servant girl looking at Christ taking a meal and recognizing him. Levertov shares through the poem her certainty that the spiritual is revealed in the physical:

Those who had brought this stranger home to their table
don't recognize yet with whom they sit.
But she in the kitchen, [. . .]
swings around and sees
the light around him
and is sure. (*BW* 66)

In "Caedmon" Levertov retells Bede's history of how the illiterate Christian poet Caedmon received the gift of song. Suggesting that spirit, word, music, and dance are inevitably linked, Levertov's Caedmon reveals man in active, creative harmony with himself and with forces beyond himself. Caedmon describes the event by saying how

the sudden angel affrighted me – [. . .]
[. . .] and nothing was burning,
nothing but I, as that hand of fire
touched my lips and scorched my tongue
and pulled my voice
into the ring of the dance. (*BW* 65)

Though Levertov would never call herself a mystic, she was extremely interested in "mystical experience," specifically Christian mystical experience as she admits in an interview with Terrell Crouch in 1986. She has written a whole bunch of poems about Julian of Norwich (*Conversations* 159). In "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416" and "On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX" she explores the relationship between the

human and the divine and contemplates the nature of knowledge. She suggests that the knowledge that the medieval woman gains through faith and imagination may be truer than the truth gained by the modern woman through science and reason. Julian sees a "little thing" no smaller than a hazelnut and understands the mystery of "all that is made" (*BW* 75). Living amidst the skepticism of the twentieth century, Levertov asserts that Julian's desire for the "wounds" of "compassion," "contrition" and "longing with my will for God," is "not, five centuries early, neurosis" (*BW* 76). It is rather her urge to perceive God's presence in the world and to recognize his kinship with man. Julian knew suffering and confusion:

> She lived in dark times, as we do:
> war, and Black Death, hunger, strife,
> torture, massacre. She knew
> all of this, she felt it (*BW* 81)

However, she responded with joy, and Levertov, torn by the pain and terrors of her age takes courage:

> [. . .] Julian, Julian –
> I turn to you:
> you clung to joy through tears and sweat
> rolled down your face [. . .]
> [. . .] your certainty
> of finite mercy, witnessed
> with your own eyes, with outward sight
> in your small room with inward sight

in your untrammeled spirit –

knowledge we long to share:

Love was his meaning. (*BW* 82)

Throughout *Breathing the Water*, Levertov attempts to reveal the interrelationship of physical and spiritual life, and the power of the poet's imagination to transform literary and natural objects. Though she has come to a position of Christian belief, her poems still reveal her search for a deeper faith and a clearer vision; for Simeon's certitude of knowing new life as he holds the infant Jesus in his arms, for the "depth / of faith he drew on, / turning illumined / towards deep night" (*BW* 70).

A Door in the Hive, her next collection, contains much artistic continuity and also reveals the new directions her work has taken. It attempts further explorations into the nature of knowledge, humanity, and into the mysteries of faith. The influence of Rilke continues as she writes many more variations on his themes that explore the implications of faith. So too, pieces like "El Salvador: Requiem and Invocation" and "Land of Death-Squads" show her continuing concern with political disorders and the horrors of the world. Her belief that we are all members, one of another is seen afresh in "All": "The body being savaged / is alive. It is our own" (*DH* 45). However, not many people feel the same way. "It is not / our heart, we think [. . .]. / It is the world's, poor world, but I, / am other" (*DH* 46). Levertov says that in the midst of the horrifying visions of war, "We utter the words / we are one / but their truth / is not real to us" (*DH* 47). She invites her readers to unite and pray "for the dead," "for faith," and "for

hope" (*DH* 39). Her quest for the truth is still on, but with a difference. She begins to look beyond nature and to the Spirit to waken man's understanding:

> Lift us, Spirit, impel
> our rising
> into that knowledge.
> Make truth real to us,
> flame on our lips. (*DH* 47)

A Door in the Hive bears testimony to Levertov's deepening faith as she writes poems centered on the person and teachings of Christ. The poem "Nativity: An Altarpiece" where Levertov paints the picture of "the living Child Himself" shedding "the glow of light that illumines the byre" (*DH* 91), shows her acceptance as truth that the infant Jesus is God. A celebration of mystery has been a favourite theme with Levertov and poems like "On the Mystery of the Incarnation," "Annunciation," and "Ikon: The Harrowing of Hell" find her dwelling on the sacred mysteries surrounding the life of Christ and offering the reader spiritual insights as well.

If in her earlier collections of the 1980s Levertov perceives a divine presence or a sense of holiness made manifest, in *A Door in the Hive* she comes to recognize this presence as the person of Christ who is Spirit, who is God. "On the Mystery of the Incarnation" speaks of the word made flesh in Christ:

> It's when we face for a moment
> the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know

that taint on ourselves, that awe

cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:

[. . . . . .]

[. . .] to this creature vainly sure

it and no other is god-like, God

(out of compassion for our ugly failure to evolve) entrusts,

as guest, as brother,

the Word. (*DH* 50)

Many poems in this collection like "Flickering Mind" and St. Thomas Didymus" are autobiographical and reveal a phase in Levertov's spiritual life where she vacillates between belief and unbelief. "Flickering Mind" says that "belief was a joy" for her at first but now she eludes God's presence: "Not you, / it is I am absent." When she describes God as "the unchanging presence, in whom all / moves and changes," she is rephrasing Acts 17:28, "for in Him we live and move and exist." She asks the Lord:

How can I focus my flickering, perceive

at the fountain's heart

the sapphire I know is there? (*DH* 64)

What sustains her and clears the way for new commitments of belief is her faith as a poet in the "truth of imagination" as Keats calls it. For in "following the road of imagination," she has come to see "certain analogies, and also some interaction, between the journey of art and the journey of faith" (*NSE* 248-249). In the poem "St. Thomas Didymus" she continues her exploration of faith and doubt. The reference here is to Mark 9:16-29 where

Jesus heals a boy possessed with a spirit that makes him mute and throws him into convulsions. When the boy's father approaches Jesus for help, Jesus says, "All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the father cries out, "I do believe: help my unbelief." In the poem Levertov recognizes in the boy's father her "twin," for, she says, his cry, "Lord, I believe, help thou / mine unbelief" is what my heart / sighed with each beat, my breath silently / cried in and out [. . .]" (*DH* 101). Later when she hears of Golgotha and of Christ's resurrection, her cry is still the same. She needs, like Thomas Didymus, "the touch / of blood" to tell her the truth. As Levertov writes in "Work that Enfaiths,"

> "Even his meeting with the risen Christ does not suffice to give him certitude as long as it is visual alone; it is the concreteness of touch, of flesh and blood, which frees him at last. He is moved from tenuous belief to an illuminated conviction in which he can rest, like Lady Julian, from the nagging need for explanation." (*NSE* 254)

Similarly, when Levertov's hand "entered the unhealed wound," she feels light streaming into her and is led beyond her nagging doubts to the borderlands, where such questions do not apply:

> I witnessed
>
> all things quicken to color, to
>
> form,
>
> my question

not answered but given

its part

in a vast unfolding design lit

by a risen sun. (*DH* 103)

This light of faith shines through in *Evening Train* written even as she enters the evening of her life and the forty-sixth year of her career as a poet endeavouring to bring hope and praise. Here she attempts further self-definition. At the beginning of the collection she recognizes that she must "still / grow in the dark like a root / not ready, not ready at all" (*ET* 41). Here again, as in all her previous collections, we have poems on most of her time-tested themes. The largest of the eight sections of poems in this collection is entitled "Witnessing from Afar." In it, Levertov explores a variety of social violations and abuses, from the first poem's critique of environmental degradation to the final poem's revisiting of the Babel myth. Looming over all the social ills mentioned in this section is the 1991 Gulf War whose further "refining" of "the machines of destruction", of the so called "art of war" (*ET* 79), leads to an eruption of apocalyptic language fully equivalent to anything written during the time of the Vietnam War: "the world's raw gash / reopened, the whole world / a valley of streaming blood" (*ET* 80). "The Certainty" of war and death remains and in the poem "In California during the Gulf War" she comments: "And when it was claimed / that war had ended, it had not ended" (*ET* 84). She also writes on nature and environmental issues as in "Tragic Error" where she laments the looting and pillaging of the earth. Even such poems contain echoes from the

Bible: "The earth is the Lord's, we garbled, / and the fullness thereof [. . .] (*ET* 69).

Levertov reveals her familiarity with the teachings of Christ in the New Testament in poems like "What the Figtree Said", where "Christ the Poet / who spoke in images" uses the barren fig tree as a metaphor for his friends who failed "to bring forth / what is within them" (*ET* 111). Offering this original insight, Levertov speaks of the need to bring forth human fruits of compassion and comprehension.

Levertov presents an unusual picture of a God who suffers for the sins of man, and yet pursues man out of his great love. "Contraband" suggests that although a wall has risen between men and God because they tasted of the tree of life and reason, God,

> through the slit where the barrier doesn't
> quite touch the ground, manages still
> to squeeze in – as filtered light,
> splinters of fire, a strain of music [. . .] (*ET* 112)

To the impressive series of Christ poems that precede it, *Evening Train* makes several important contributions. "Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis" begins with a reflection on Christ's physical appearance, and moves quickly to its primary concern: the ultimate "burden of [Christ's] humanness". Levertov goes beyond trying to plumb the depths of Christ's suffering, stressing His very willingness to suffer. She says that even the greatest painters fail to show Christ's "face, in extremis," tasting "the humiliation of dread,"

"wanting to let the whole thing go," "longing / to simply cease, to not be." How long and how deeply she has pondered over the passion of Christ is revealed in her declaration that "Incarnation's heaviest weight" was "this sickened desire to renege," for,

> Sublime acceptance, to be absolute, had to have welled
> up from those depths where purpose
> drifted for mortal moments. (*ET* 114)

Thus Christ serves as a model. By willingly shouldering the pain of the world, He urges us to move beyond self-destructive behaviour, and teaches us the necessity of facing up to the obligations that define our life and age and not "to renege, / to step back" from our responsibilities.

"Ascension" is another poem where Levertov's imagination throws light on the mystery of Incarnation and on the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven. In an unusual reflection, she wonders if the Ascension could not have been as arduous as Christ's return from Sheol at His resurrection. She highlights Christ's mixed emotions at his Ascension:

> Expulsion,
> liberation,
> last
> Self-joined task
> of Incarnation
> He again
> Fathering Himself.

Seed – case

splitting,

He again

Mothering His birth:

torture and bliss. (*ET* 115-116)

Many of the poems in *Evening Train* look out toward Mount Rainier, part of the landscape of her new Seattle home in the Northwest. Levertov finds, in the veilings and unveilings of Rainier, an emblem of the presence of God and of the need for human constancy of attention. "Morning Mist" begins with the mountain's invisibility. Though "we equate / God with these absences," "God // is imaged / as well or better / in the white stillness // resting everywhere" (*ET* 5). Thus the encounter with God takes place in stillness or silence, which is to be found "everywhere." She says of the mountain that "its vanishings / are needful, as silence is to music" (*ET* 94). She observes that whether the mountain is hidden in "veils / of cloud" or whether she herself is hidden in "veils of inattention," the mountain and the poet remain in a relationship of "witnessing presence" (*ET* 97).

The volume's final word is reserved for a section entitled "The Tide" – a grouping that brings together the two imaginative acts through which Levertov's world has sought to sustain itself: the writing of poetry and Christian faith. Here we find an intense, imaginative appropriation of Christian scripture in an attempt to establish some kind of balance to humankind's suicidal destructiveness. In the title poem, the penultimate

poem of this collection, Levertov, reflecting upon her faith, is constantly brought back to her doubt: "In this emptiness / there seems no Presence" (*ET* 117). She conjures up "a myriad images / of faith," like faith when God's presence is not felt in the emptiness, or faith when God wants "something quite different" for man or may be even "nothing at all"(*ET* 117). Levertov reveals the depth and conviction of her faith when she arrives at a true understanding of what it means to have faith, what it means to truly believe. The poem is an imaginative reworking of a Biblical passage: James 2: 14-16. The Book of James, with its emphasis on "good works," is best understood through the analogy of motion. When a person becomes a Christian, new life begins, and inevitably that life must express itself through "spiritual motion" or good deeds. In James's words, "faith without deeds is dead" (2:26). The poem under consideration reveals that Levertov has come to understand that genuine faith in Christ should always result in actions that demonstrate that faith. Having all the correct beliefs about God will hardly suffice: even demons believe in God. Therefore, James says: "Do not merely listen to the word [. . .]. Do what it says" (1:22). Levertov goes on to write, in lines that echo Matthew Arnold's "sea of faith" image:

> Faith's a tide, it seems, ebbs and flows responsive
> to action and inaction.
> Remain in stasis, blown sand
> stings your face, anemones
> shrivel in rock pools no wave renews. (*ET* 118)

If she can transcend "stasis" and continually renew her faith, she will be able to hold absence in a cup:

> Clean the littered beach, clear the lines of a forming poem,
> the waters flood inward.
> Dull stones again fulfill
> their glowing destinies, and emptiness
> is a cup, and holds
> the ocean. (*ET* 118)

Only in a vision of utter emptiness can the presence of God be perceived. She is in a state of not knowing, of knowing that she does not know. And in embracing the paradox of faith, Levertov gains a spiritual strength.

The last poem of *Evening Train* finds Levertov "Suspended" in the void even as her hand slips on the rich silk of God's garment. She says that the "everlasting arms" that her sister Olga loved to remember "must have upheld my leaden weight" for "I have not plummeted" (*ET* 119). The book closes thus, with this picture of the poet waiting in darkness for the light, feeling "nothing" yet holding on by a literal thread to her faith.

There transpired some events of great significance for Levertov the poet in the period between the writing of her 1990 essay "Work that Enfaiths" and the writing of *Sands of the Well* (1996), her last collection before her death. She moved to Seattle, was baptized a Catholic, and did the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Thus we find that this book, the poet's first exclusively Northwest collection, has a defining spiritual perspective, and

reveals a new sensibility generated perhaps by her change in locale. In an interview Levertov told Ed Block, that when she did the Spiritual Exercises,

> [. . .] what really struck me was how much of what St. Ignatius recommended resembles what a poet does anyway. As a religious exercise, he recommends imagining oneself a witness of Gospel events and noting every physical detail that one can conceive. And in writing poetry, one must do the same thing – one must observe (or re-observe, re-collect) - every concrete detail of your subject, whether or not you ultimately include all of them in the poem. (7)

Consequently, coming at the end of a life of close attention, *Sands of the Well* shows Levertov at the height of her powers, and graced with new depths of awe. In eight sections – "Crow Spring," "Sojourns in the Parallel World," "It Should Be Visible," "Anamnesis," "Representations," "Raga," "A South Wind," and "Close to a Lake" – the book represents her familiar interests: nature, the arts, autobiographical memories, political protest, Christian myth and belief. In a poem entitled "For Those Whom the Gods Love Less," in this collection Levertov writes:

> When you discover
> your new work travels the ground you had traversed
> decades ago, you wonder, panicked,
> 'Have I outlived my vocation? Said already
> all that was mine to say?' (*SW* 96)

She goes on to propose a remedy – to remember the great ones like Cezanne and James, and "the way / radiant epiphanies recur, recur / [. . .]. And then, look, / some inflection of light, some wing of shadow / is other, unvoiced. You can, you must / proceed" (*SW* 96). And so we find that as Levertov's new work travels the ground she had traversed in the past, 'radiant epiphanies recur', and she does proceed.

We note particularly that there are only four poems of social critique, and what is more, the very tone of her protest seems to have changed. In "Some Affinities of Content" (1991), Levertov remarks on her poetry of social engagement thus: "But this didactic role [. . .] was undertaken as a further obligation of social conscience, not from personal choice; for my interest has always been elsewhere" (*NSE* 4). In *Sands of the Well*, she seems to be for once, following her interest rather than her obligation, attested further by her turn to Christianity, to a religiosity foreshadowed in *Oblique Prayers*. She goes on to explain after the admission cited above, that of late she has "more and more [. . .] sought [. . .] a poetry that, while it does not attempt to ignore or deny the ocean of crisis in which we swim, is itself "on pilgrimage," as it were, in search of significance underneath and beyond the succession of temporal events." *Sands of the Well* suggests that her newfound faith is part of the reason the "ocean of crisis" and the darker elements of the poet's consciousness do not exert more sway. She retains an overall calm, a "leisure of mind" (*ET* 23), "to live in what happens, not in the telling," recognizing that the task before her is just "to be" (*ET* 61). Levertov even

devotes an entire section to what she calls "Sojourns in the Parallel World," a world "[w]e call [. . .] 'Nature,'" a world "devoid / of our preoccupations, free / from apprehension" (*SW* 49). Thus a celebration of "being" runs throughout this volume.

In this collection we also see how her poetic talent continues to shape her life in line with what she says in a speech to a group of students in 1979 published in her 1981 prose collection, *Light up the Cave*:

> I think the people that go on writing all their lives are those for whom that process is itself utterly fascinating. For the poet, not having written a poem, but the experience of writing it, is what matters. And somehow, if your gift goes on growing and making its demand on you, you will try to find the ways of living that will be most suitable for you as individuals to go on doing your work in poetry – you will find your talent giving shape to your lives. (79)

The last section of *Sands in the Well*, which deals mainly with matters of faith, shows how Levertov's talent gives shape to her life. Her long study of the nature of spiritual insight here finds an ever more active professed engagement. 'In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being' the first poem of this section – "Close to a Lake" – calls to mind an earlier poem, 'The Avowal,' where she expresses her desire "[. . .] to attain / freefall, and float / into Creator Spirit's deep embrace, / knowing no effort earns / that all-surrounding grace" (*OP* 76). Here at the height of her poetic career and even

as she attains great heights of spiritual understanding, she speaks in all humility of her inability to attain freefall, yet with no hint of doubt in the all-encompassing "God / the air enveloping the whole / globe of being":

> [. . .] only the saints
> take flight. We cower
> in cliff-crevice or edge out gingerly
> on branches close to the nest. The wind
> marks the passage of holy ones riding
> that ocean of air. Slowly their wake
> reaches us, rocks us.
> But storm or still,
> Numb or poised in attention,
> We inhale, exhale, inhale,
> encompassed, encompassed. (*SW* 107)

It is interesting to note that the title of this poem is taken from Acts 17:28, where the Apostle Paul, on seeing an 'Altar to the Unknown God' speaks to a gathering of philosophers and thinkers in the sophisticated university city of Athens, and makes known to them this unknown God. Preaching the good news of Jesus and the resurrection, Paul speaks of God the Creator who wants that men should seek him and reach out for him and find him though he is not far from each one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being." This poem then could be seen as Levertov's witness to the once unknown God of her days of agnosticism, who was

unveiled to her through the exercise of her imagination and of her poetic faculties.

In "The Beginning of Wisdom" we have an explication of Proverbs 9: 10 – "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding", with reference to Levertov's life and spirituality. In this poem as in many others we find mirrored her dignity, integrity and grace, and most of all, an indomitable and humble spirit. For the poet, with knowledge of God there comes understanding and the realization that it is he who has brought her so far, and in all humility she acknowledges:

> I am so small, a speck of dust
>
> moving across the huge world.
>
> [. . . . . .]
>
> I know so little. (*SW* 109)

As she advances in her spiritual journey we see her undergoing a change in perspective, as illustrated by a comparison of two poems, the last poem of *Evening Train*, and one from the next collection *Sands of the Well*. In "Suspended" she says, "**I** had grasped God's garment in the void / but my hand slipped / on the rich silk of it." (*ET* 24) and in her address to God in the poem "The Beginning of Wisdom" in she writes, "**You** hold / onto my smallness. / How do you grasp it, / how does it not / slip away? " (emphasis added), (*SW* 109). "Psalm Fragments" speaks of "clinging to a God / for whom one does / nothing," and makes the change all the more

clear: “I do nothing, I give You / nothing. Yet You hold me // minute by minute / from falling” (*SW* 118).

In “Some Affinities of Content” (1991), Denise Levertov speaks of a “deep spiritual longing” in writers and readers which makes irrelevant the kind of literary criticism “which treats works of art as if they were diagrams or merely means provided for the exercise of analysis, rather than what they are: testimonies of lived life, which is what writers have a vocation to give, and readers [. . .] have a need to receive” (*NSE* 21).

The poem, “Conversion of Brother Lawrence” (*SW* 111-13) is a powerful testimony of the lived life, expressed and mediated through her poetic craft, and allows Levertov to project herself into the mystic's life, and, in the making of the poem, to discern what she lacks. The poem holds before us the possibility of a poet's way which is also the saint's way, and demonstrates how relinquishment can become transformation. Brother Lawrence, like Caedmon, whose story Levertov tells in *Breathing the Water*, is an awkward, medieval menial, who through divine grace, experiences an awakening. This gentle monk with a joyful spirit discovers and follows a pure and uncomplicated way to walk continually in the presence of God. His conversion though, is not occasioned by a fiery visitation as in the Caedmon story, but by a “more-than-green voice” speaking from a “leafless tree” (*SW* 111).

Levertov's imaginative projection into Brother Lawrence's life takes the form of an Ignatian colloquy through which she frames questions and

arrives at discoveries. What she needs from this colloquy is a way through her darkness, an encouragement to think of work in new ways, reasons to trust Brother Lawrence's joy. As she places him, God did not relieve Brother Lawrence of his hardships, but rather accompanied him on a life-journey which was like the long hard roads of war. Even while his "soul felt darkened, heavy and worthless," her imagined Brother Lawrence discovered that God never abandoned him, and he entered into "the unending 'silent secret conversation', / the life of steadfast attention"(*SW* 112).

As the two activities, prayer and work, become one in his life, Brother Lawrence seems like the artist; but Levertov argues: "Your secret was not the craftsman's delight in process, / which doesn't distinguish work from pleasure – " (*SW* 112). His daily work itself (which was largely scut-work in the kitchen) was not the way into the presence of God, but was merely what he did while in His presence. Where the Presence shone, "there life was, and abundantly; it touched / your dullest task, and the task was easy." For Brother Lawrence, the task at hand is not artifact-making but a different kind of attention:

> Joyful, absorbed,
>
> you 'practiced the presence of God' as a musician
>
> practices hour after hour his art:
>
> 'A stone before the carver,'
>
> you 'entered into yourself.' (*SW* 113)

As we come to the volume's title poem, where she describes the descent of "golden particles" of sand in a well till finally the "water's / absolute transparence / is complete," we see that the utter clarity of inner transparency is what awakens the poet's wonder:

> Is this
> the place where
> you are brought in meditation?
> Transparency
> seen for itself
> as if its quality
> were not, after all,
> to enable
> perception not of itself? (*SW* 124)

"Surely it is this culminating recognition of the sacred significance of transparency itself, of 'being' prior to and beyond all individual presences, all actions, all responsibilities, that marks *Sands of the Well* as an important development in Levertov's spiritual quest," as Edward Zlotkowski so pertinently remarks (9).

In *Sands of the Well*, as the review on its jacket says, "Levertov allows the reader to sense the complexity under her perfect clarity of surface, and her music and precision bear us along to a new awareness of the 'Primary Wonder'":

[. . .] And then

once more the quiet mystery

is present to me, the throng's clamor

recedes: the mystery

that there is anything, anything at all,

let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,

rather than void: and that O Lord,

Creator, Hallowed One, You still,

Hour by hour sustain it. (*SW* 129)

At her death in 1997, Levertov left a notebook containing forty unfinished poems. A note on the text by Paul A. Lacey explains that these poems, published under the title *This Great Unknowing*, are placed as they appeared in her notebook, roughly chronologically. If Levertov had lived to see them published, she would have followed her usual practice of organizing them into thematic groups. So, the collection does not benefit from that final poetic touch, although several clear themes emerge in these luminous poems. The spiritual focus that runs throughout *Sands of the Well* continues with greater depth in this posthumous collection, with her characteristic restlessness giving way to a more quiet, satisfied, self-contained voice and with the achievement of a beautiful balance of the tremendous joy and celebration associated with her first American poetry and the sadness and even anger associated with her politically engaged poetry.

Though they represent her last writing, there is nothing elegiac about these poems. Instead, they are direct, relaxed, immediate, showing the willingness to experiment and the playfulness of a writer completely at ease with her craft. They range from light observations of small things, like her own large ears in the poem "Elephant Ears" to serious reflections on global matters such as the rate of extinction of animal species in "A Hundred a Day" and meditations on the nature of God in "Moments of Joy." Moving through all of them is Levertov's earthly romanticism, linking animal and mineral, human and natural, with metaphors built on a vision of connections. In "A Clearing" Levertov defines a poem in a way that sums up her method neatly: "inspiration; starting with the given; / unexpected harmonies; revelations" (*GU* 55). All of these poems are grounded in exact observation, and move through imaginative metaphors to moments of insight and even revelation.

Connecting elements of nature with features of human culture produces some of Levertov's most original metaphors. In the first poem of the collection, "From Below," she compares walking among giant redwoods to a child under the table listening to the conversation of the adults above. "The minds of people, the minds of trees / equally remote" (*GU* 3), Levertov reflects, aptly giving life to the cliché of the redwood as forest elder. In another poem, "Celebration," she describes a "young virtuoso of a day" (*GU* 5), and in one of several poems of Mount Rainier, she describes the mountain surrounded by "curly cherub clouds," as "a frowning / humorless

old poet, / sullen among the *putti*" (*GU* 34). For Levertov, the gap between nature and human culture is always navigable by the imagination.

Levertov, as has already been mentioned, has achieved a double reputation, difficult to maintain on the post-Christian times of the western world, as a respected mainstream poet and as a religious poet as well. Few contemporary poets would be able to use words like 'holiness' and 'prayer' without deconstructing or recontextualizing them, but Levertov does. She is frankly and openly religious, but without dogmatism or sentimentality, making her religious verse interesting and engaging even for the most secular of readers. The title of the book *This Great Unknowing* is from the poem "Translucence," in which Levertov defines saintliness as a kind of "half-opaque whiteness" of souls unaware of their holiness, "always trying / to share our joy as if it were cake or water, / something ordinary, not rare at all" (*GU* 48). In her best poems, religious insight appears from within the details of physical images.

A series of poems titled "Feet" is one of the best in the collection; filled with humour, close observations of the human world, and original metaphors. In the "Feet" poems, Levertov is "writing the body," as feminists have urged women to do, beginning with images of real feet, their aches and pains, grit and grime, and, moving outward, embracing the story of Anderson's 'Little Mermaid,' the feet of a homeless man wrapped in plastic, ending with the Maundy Thursday custom of foot washing. With her gift for synthesis, Levertov melds all these images into a satisfying and coherent

whole and shows how the physical experience leads to spiritual understanding.

Levertov's understanding of the role of the poet, of the function of poetry in today's world seems grounded in two statements that she includes in her 1968 lecture "Origins of a Poem" published in *The Poet in the World*: Ibsen's statement, "The task of the poet is to make clear to himself and thereby to others the temporal and eternal questions" (44) and a line from a Toltec poem she had translated, "The true artist maintains dialogue with himself, with his heart" (45). We find therefore, that the poems and the career of Denise Levertov who was, in her own words "by nature, heritage, and as an artist, forever a stranger and pilgrim" (*NSE* 245), are an account of a person preparing for encounter with God, through her attention to the spoken word and her profound understanding of the poem as oral discourse, heart speaking to heart, I to Thou. As she writes in one of her last poems "Immersion,"

> God's abstention is only from human dialects. The holy voice
> utters its woe and glory in myriad musics, in signs and portents.
> Our own words are for us to speak, a way to ask and to answer.
>
> (*GU* 53)

Chapter 3

Dickinson's "Nimble Believing"

Emily Dickinson's poetry as a whole may be regarded as "a running notation on her life" according to Richard Chase (243). Basically she was a religious poet whose concern with the fundamental issues of death, pain, love, and immortality occasioned her finest lyrics. From our vantage point more than a century later, she stands as one of the major religious thinkers of her age. Roger Lundin considers her poetry to be an "art of belief" that demanded practice and skill. We find therefore that "her poetry is in large measure about belief – about the objects of belief and its comforts, as well as belief's great uncertainties. With daring tenacity, she explored the full range of human experience in her reflections upon subjects as God, the Bible, suffering, and immortality" (3). However hard it was to fashion and sustain, belief was essential to Dickinson:

> To lose one's faith – surpass
> The loss of an Estate –
> Because Estates can be
> Replenished – faith cannot –
>
> Inherited with Life –
> Belief – but once – can be –
> Annihilate a single clause –
> And being's Beggary – (Poem 377)

One can make whatever case one wants about Dickinson's beliefs or disbelief by selecting individual poems, letters, or even lines, but the way to reach insight is to look for long-term patterns in her religious references. For as Jane Donahue Eberwein points out in " 'Is Immortality True?' Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals," "Despite variations in tone and imagery, religion remained a centering concern for Dickinson from her first valentine with its comic references to Eden [. . .] to her last letter 'Little Cousins, / Called back. / Emily.'(L 1046)" (Pollak 70). The whole of Emily Dickinson's life was consumed by a struggle with God and a search for answers on issues relating to faith, and her poems and letters show her vacillating between the innumerable points along the continuum from belief to disbelief. Lundin neatly sums up her struggle thus:

> On several occasions, in adolescence and young adulthood, she agonizingly approached the threshold of conversion but never passed over it; and throughout her adult life, in her poems and letters, she brilliantly meditated upon the great perennial questions of God, suffering, the problem of evil, death, and her "Flood subject," immortality. Though she never joined the church – and quit attending it at all around the age of thirty – she wrestled with God all her life. Only months before she died, she called herself 'Pugilist and Poet." Like Jacob, who told the angel, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me," Dickinson would not let go of God. (3-4)

It is difficult to say at what points along the continuum, one may draw the lines of separation between the various stages of development in the life and art of a poet. Though stages of development have their relevance, in most cases such a division would be inappropriate, and sometimes even do great violence to the work itself. It is so with regard to Emily Dickinson's life – with its emotional upheavals and intense spiritual struggles – and with regard to the practice of her art. We cannot divide her work as a poet into periods, for there were no dramatic breaks in her actual development, such as for instance, between doubt and belief and new ways of seeking. The growth and development of her consciousness was far deeper and more complex than any such schematic imposition could cope with. However, for the sake of convenience this study envisages three broad divisions into which her life and works fall.

One is the 'early', relatively conventional Dickinson consisting of her earliest surviving poems and continuing into 1859 (Poems 1 – 152). Then there is the 'middle' Dickinson of passionately intense investigation and productivity until 1865 (Poems 153 – 1067). Finally there is a 'late' Dickinson bringing forth poems of fixed irony right up to the early 1880s (Poems 1068 – 1648). A reading of several of her critics, who have stated so implicitly or explicitly, validates this tripartite view. Alongside of this, the challenges to Christian belief that arose in her time, causing what Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls the generational "drift away from God [. . .] the phenomenon of an increasingly secular America" (451), and their influence on her will be considered in tracing Dickinson's spiritual journey.

The Child's faith is new –

Whole – like His Principle –

Wide – like the sunrise

On fresh Eyes –

Never had a Doubt –

Laughs – at a Scruple –

Believes all sham

But Paradise –

Credits the World –

Deems His Dominion

Broadest of Sovereignties –

And Caesar – mean –

In the Comparison –

Baseless Emperor –

Ruler of nought,

Yet swaying all –

Grown bye and bye

To hold mistaken

His pretty estimates

Of Prickly Things

He gains the skill

Sorrowful – as certain –

Men – to anticipate

Instead of Kings – (Poem 637)

This poem depicts the innocence of a child who, with unassuming faith looks at the world with "fresh Eyes." Soon, however, the "grown" child acquires the "skill" that is "Sorrowful" when she understands that she was "mistaken" in taking "pretty estimates / Of Prickly Things." Thus with the coming of consciousness the child's romantic vision is seen in tension with the realistic apprehension of things as they are. This poem throws light on Dickinson's "peculiar burden," as Albert Gelpi points out in "Two Notes on Denise Levertov and the Romantic Tradition," which was "to be a Romantic poet with a Calvinist's sense of things: to know transitory ecstasy in a world tragically fallen and doomed" (91).

Emily's childhood was not very different from that of many New England girls of her period and station. She was reared in keeping with the nineteenth-century ideal of American womanhood. However, her education gave her critical knowledge of the great transformations in nineteenth-century thought, and equipped her in ways not anticipated by her parents. They nurtured expectations that she would be a Christian, attend to household duties, enjoy culture and education in a limited way, and devote herself finally to the role of wife and homemaker – expectations that were frustrated by the originality of her soul. For, "in choosing to devote herself to the pursuit of great art, she challenged and rejected the psychic and social stereotyped images of the woman of her era" (Ferlazzo 28).

It was Benjamin F. Newton who introduced Emily to the world of thought and writing while she was attending Mt. Holyoke Seminary, and encouraged her to dream of a poetic career. With the untimely death of this

young man who was the first to recognize her remarkable verbal dexterity, she lost one of the most encouraging critics she would ever have. She was greatly indebted to this early master, or "Preceptor," as she called him, particularly for introducing her to Emerson. It was from the writings of Emerson that "Dickinson found the liberating notion of self-reliance, the stress on personal experience over tradition, and the concept of poet as "seer" – all of which stirred her poetic ambitions and gave her the support and encouragement she needed to lead the rigorously lonely life she chose" (Ferlazzo 26).

At Mount Holyoke, Dickinson suffered a serious religious crisis, when after much anguish and soul-searching she reached a decision not to be converted. Her resistance was not a sign of unbelief, though, but "involved her experience of revivals, her natural diffidence, and her complex relationship to her family back home" (Lundin 43). Her letters from this time reveal Dickinson's ambivalence, her uncertainty about the deepest subjects of the spirit. She felt guilty about resisting conversion, and was filled with self-recrimination about the opportunities she had missed. In a letter to her friend Abiah Root she confides, "I regret that [. . .] I did not give up and become a Christian" (*Letters* 67). Despite the attraction of conversion, some combination of things held her back. The reason she gave Abiah, "it is hard for me to give up the world" (*Letters* 67), seems ironic in the light of her eventual choice of a nearly conventual hidden life. In a letter to Jane Humphrey, she differentiates herself from her friends who have professed Christ –"I am standing alone in rebellion" (*Letters* 94).

On her return to Amherst, Emily encountered another season of grace in the 1850 revival that drew her father, sister, and Sue (who would become her sister-in-law) into the church, and later her brother Austin. Her letters to her friends during these years after she left Mt. Holyoke reveal great emotional turmoil. She moves gradually from a feeling of being lost, to analyzing her resistance to conformity, to feeling confirmed in her wickedness, intoxication with her spiritual recklessness, and a readiness to accept her lost condition and even risk damnation. In a harsh letter to Sue she goes so far as to write: "[. . .] though [. . .] I shall remain alone, and though in that last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me – there is a darker spirit will not disown its child" (*Letters* 306).

A final fragment the poet left behind at death sums up the mystery of childhood and memory for the adult poet according to Lundin, when she remarks that "memory drapes her lips" (*Letters* 928-929). He finds the image Dickinson employs to describe her adult memory of a lost childhood revealing, for she frequently employed images of dumb silence to depict God, nature and the dead (22). The great divine and natural forces arrayed against her often seemed mute. God often appeared to her to be remote and taciturn like her father, and one of her poems reports:

> I know that He exists.
>
> Somewhere – in Silence –
>
> He has hid his rare life
>
> From our gross eyes. (Poem 338)

Emily identified the patriarchal God with her own father, assigning Him the attributes of coldness and forbiddingness. This made Him far more powerful a figure and also increased her sense of helplessness and torment, for both had failed and injured her. In a memorable line hinting at a relation in her subconscious between her father on earth and in heaven, she addresses God as "Burglar! Banker – Father!" (Poem 49). With her dismissal of this distant God in her decision not to join the church, Emily knew she was spurning a heavenly Father – "Papa above" (Poem 61) – who resembled her earthly one in his shrouded loneliness. However, her opinion at that time was not that settled. So we find her concluding Poem 70 with the "hope" that "the Father in the skies / Will lift his little girl [. . .] / Over the stile of "Pearl"." But we see in another poem written in the same year 1859, a totally different attitude to God, wherein she considers that agony was the price of transport, to be paid to an exacting deity, who meticulously kept his ledgers:

> For each ecstatic instant
> We must in anguish pay
> In keen and quivering ratio
> To the ecstasy.
>
> For each beloved hour
> Sharp pittances of years –
> Bitter contested farthings –
> And coffers heaped with Tears! (Poem 125)

Some of her earliest poems also speak of the shocks of deception and disappointment. A verse from 1859 reads "the days when Birds come back –" as signs of God's treachery as he employs nature to fool us in the beauty of "the days when skies resume / The old – old sophistries of June –" (Poem130).

From Dickinson's letters we learn that her anxieties about faith preceded awareness of romantic and scientific challenges to faith. If we judge by her letters before 1858, the year she began systematically recording her poems, she was already distancing herself from certain aspects of religion while intensifying her focus on others. Dickinson sensed that her critical consciousness had shut her out from the innocence of childhood and had somehow made the assurances of Christian belief unavailable to her in the conventional form. Ferlazzo offers a great insight when he remarks,

> Emily began her adult life, therefore, with the conscience and heart of a Christian but without the faith and hopes that sustained other Christians when they were faced with the suffering and complexity of living. In refusing to "give up the world," she paradoxically withdrew from the world around her; and she began searching for another which she found, finally in her own poetic creations. (28)

However, as Henry W. Wells notes in *Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, she never forgot the God whom as a child she came to know from her elders. She read the Bible often and with enthusiasm. Religion appealed to her, but she acknowledged no leader. No preacher or doctrine won her allegiance

(146). To use her own metaphor, on the seas of life and religion, which at times seemed to her virtually one, she embarked in her little boat alone. Emily was not in communion with the spirit of Calvin, in whose religious persuasions God was feared as a judge, a deity that wreaked vengeance on man for his misdeeds, that over-shadowed man with a sense of doom that haunted his happiness with the accusation of guilt. She therefore "resisted the threats implicit in her religious heritage," going by what Mary James Power writes in her book *In the Name of the Bee: The Significance of Emily Dickinson* (10).

Here she was reflecting the tendencies of her time that were the effects of the Great Awakening that had brought the division of churches within most Protestant denominations. For even as the need for conversion was stressed and revivals encouraged by the Congregationalists who gained prominence in Emily's early years, stern Calvinistic doctrines were gradually modified to accommodate nineteenth-century romantic sensibilities and emerging scientific perspectives. This progressive religious tradition rooted in Puritanism stressed the revelation of scripture and that of nature. Private interpretation of the Bible by lay people was encouraged, and this "antique Volume – / Written by faded Men / At the suggestion of Holy Spectres" (Poem 1545) was being read increasingly as a literary work. That Emily Dickinson "could imagine fresh renderings and even reached the point of referring to the Bible narratives as myth [. . .] reflected the tendencies of her time [. . .]"(Pollak 83).

In addition, new scientific evidence demolished biblical chronologies by proving from evidence of earth itself that this planet must be millions of years old rather than six thousand. Thus "Nature [. . .] manifested the Creator's glory in ways that bridged Enlightenment with romantic modes of understanding" (Pollak 83). This fresh approach looked at science as reinforcing the Bible. That Emily was influenced by the new developments in science may be seen in poems such as the following:

A science – so the Savans say,
"Comparative Anatomy" –
By which a single bone –
Is made a secret to unfold
Of some rare tenant of the mold,
Else perished in the stone –

So to the eye prospective led,
This meekest flower of the mead
Upon a winter's day,
Stands representative in gold
Of Rose and Lily, manifold,
And countless Butterfly! (Poem 100)

Dickinson began writing poetry in earnest in her mid-twenties. From the very beginning of her poetic career, we notice in her an intense fascination with death and immortality and the evanescence of delight – something she acquired through her personal experiences as well as her

immersion in contemporary culture. Her early encounters with death as a child and an adolescent overwhelmed her with the pain of life and shaped her responses to death that would remain with her throughout her adulthood. The death of Benjamin Newton was particularly harrowing, and was the first of many that would make her passionately protective of those she loved and jealous of the God who stole them from her. Over the years, starting with the death of Newton, Emily came to doubt the character of God. In a poem written only a few years after Newton's death we find her responding to the loss and suffering with resignation and supplication:

> Twice have I stood a beggar
> Before the door of God!
>
> Angels – twice descending
> Reimbursed my store -
> Burglar! Banker! Father!
> I am poor once more! (Poem 49)

It was the inevitability of death that made life unbearable and heaven necessary for the adult Dickinson, who was consumed by the sense that finitude was the fundamental human dilemma. William R. Sherwood remarks in *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson* that the "sense of discrepancy between the appearance of an object and the meaning of it was for Emily Dickinson at no time more graphically and grotesquely apparent than in the presence of death" (43). We find her ironically contrasting human grief with the joy of those who have assumed

the perspective of eternity sometimes, and at others comparing human corruption with the incorruptibility for which corruption was the prerequisite. “She was mute from transport – / I – from agony – ” (Poem 27). However, as we examine all of Dickinson’s poetry of the early years, we find that “irony represented for her a momentary respite from her vacillations between hope and despair, rather than a stratagem consciously chosen to provide her with a vantage point from which to dominate and to fuse the contradictions she perceived and felt in her experience” (Sherwood 44). Though death is the subject of some poems and a part of the content of many of them during this period, it is never in itself the centre of interest. Either “Death [is] but our rapt attention / To Immortality” (Poem 7), or death is examined as a possible mode of response to the pressures and restrictions of living.

Dickinson’s longing to believe in eternal life is characterized in one of her early poems “These are the days when Birds come back” in which the bright beauty of an Autumn day almost entices the speaker to believe that it’s June, and that she could be part of an eternal summer. But, as a leaf drops, the poem swings wistfully between belief and unbelief.

> These are the days when Birds come back –
>
> A very few – a Bird or two –
>
> To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume
The old – old sophistries of June –
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee –
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief.

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear –
And softly thro' the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf.

Oh Sacrament of the summer days,
Oh Last Communion of the Haze –
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake –
Thy consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine! (Poem130)

Two of Dickinson's early poems express her sense and her uncertainty that the poet's eye and the flight of his imagination are the only means by which life, death and the mystery beyond may be penetrated.

Once more, my now bewildered Dove
Bestirs her puzzled wings
Once more her mistress, on the deep
Her troubled question flings –

Thrice to the floating casement

The Patriarch's bird returned,

Courage! My brave Columbia!

There may yet be *Land*! (Poem 48)

Here she uses, as she often does, the sea to symbolize the flux of time within which the living and dead sail, and the land to symbolize the destination on the other side.

Whether my bark went down at sea –

Whether she met with gales –

Whether to isles enchanted

She bent her docile sails –

By what mystic mooring

She is held today –

This is the errand of the eye

Out upon the Bay. (Poem 52)

We also see a prevailing sense of helplessness and dependence in the young poet that is expressed by the way she assumes the roles of the pilgrim, the beggar and the child during this early period before she recognized that her art was the mode through which she would triumph over conditions of living: "Nobody knows this little Rose – / It might a pilgrim be" (Poem 35); "Twice have I stood a beggar / Before the door of God!" (Poem 49) "Papa above!" (Poem 61) The roles assumed reveal images of helplessness, poverty of resources, and of dependence. Though she had

not yet "made the formal renunciation, the reticence, the sense of isolation, the mistrust of the outside world, the feelings at once of exclusiveness and helplessness are already evident in the poetry of these early years of her career" (Sherwood 66). Dickinson's gradual assumption of solitude coincided closely with the discovery of her poetic calling. Her feelings at once of isolation, defenselessness, superiority, resentfulness and uniqueness were probably generated by "the circumstances of her family life and the sense simultaneously of exclusiveness and ostracism generated by her poetic ambitions [. . .]" (Sherwood 21). It was by writing poetry that she gradually learned to convert her defeats into victories and her deprivations into abundance.

One of the most anthologized of Emily Dickinson's poems, and one that is generally held to be representative of her best work and her characteristic attitude is Poem 67 written in 1859.

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed,
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated – dying -

On whose forbidden ear

The distant strains of triumph

Burst agonized and clear.

The poem affirms that the consciousness learns best from negative example and that a life of renunciation and deprivation is one to be chosen because it is dedicated to understanding rather than reward. Here suffering exists not to demonstrate God's superiority or to prepare us to appreciate His future benevolence by contrast, but to increase our comprehension of experience. In this way Emily Dickinson explains and justifies suffering and raises it from being a state of humiliation, to an act of dignity. This poem shows very clearly her belief that "all that could be known at all was known by antithesis" (Whicher 301).

This was Emily's way of coping with life, of surviving, for it made submission to suffering and deprivation "a choice of the intelligence rather than an act of abnegation and an admission of helplessness" (Sherwood 62). It preserved and reinforced that sense of exclusiveness and uniqueness that she had revealed in 1849 when she refused to profess membership in the Congregational Church. As Sherwood observes,

> To use consciousness, for which the evidence was clearly identifiable, rather than grace as the criterion for membership in an "elect" must have appealed to this woman who had scrutinized the skies and flowers of Amherst [. . .] for evidence

> of the immortality that a staunchly Congregationalist community was always ready to assure her existed. (63)

For she believed that attainment is realised not through acquisition, but through consciousness, and that knowledge is taught not by experiences, but by what experience fails to provide –

> Water is taught by thirst.
>
> Land – by the Oceans passed.
>
> Transport – by throe –
>
> Peace – by its battles told –
>
> Love, by Memorial Mold –
>
> Birds, by the Snow. (Poem135)

Dickinson found herself unsuited to the calling of a missionary, a teacher, or a wife and homemaker – options that were open to young women of her time and age. In the choices she made and refused as a young adult, she set herself on a course that would lead her away from these options and into solitude. We see her gradually turning her back on the church or the ordered world of orthodoxy, and her face toward poetry, the world of infinite aesthetic possibilities. As Lundin observes:

> To remain viable, orthodox faith needed the support of history, science, and the suspension of critical belief, while poetry demanded only an unassailable belief in the unimpeachable self. [. . .] The life of conventional faith and practice called for assent to a body of doctrine and active participation in the life

> of the church, but the poetic imagination demanded nothing more than a spirit of reverie. (61)

So we find this young woman who was born and bred in the then stable belief system of Calvinist Christianity gradually withdrawing from Sunday meetings as her letters document. As one of her later poems would declare: "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church – / I keep it, staying at home" (Poem 324).

Emily Dickinson's faith of the early years was fragile and the poetry expresses a desperate need for faith. As Sherwood sees it, for Emily Dickinson, the writing of the poetry of the early years is an act of pride, "a pitting of the resources of human consciousness against the obscurantism of God" (45). Here is an illustration:

> Just lost, when I was saved!
> Just felt the world go by!
> Just girt me with the onset for Eternity,
> When breath blew back,
> And on the other side
> I heard recede the disappointed tide!
>
> Therefore, as one returned, I feel
> Odd secrets of the line to tell!
> Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores -
> Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
> Before the Seal!

Next time to stay!

Next time the things to see

By Ear unheard,

Unscrutinized by the Eye –

Next time to tarry,

While the Ages steal –

Slow tramp the Centuries,

And the Cycles wheel! (Poem 160)

Since Dickinson knew no want at home and did not have to worry about her own sustenance, she was able to embark on a journey of self-definition that would carry her ever deeper into herself, a journey that would last a life-time, with her choice to remain at home. 'Home' for her, was a safe haven and she maintained an active social life in the beginning. We find that as she approached the age of thirty, "having laid one after another of her intense relationships into her 'box of Phantoms [. . .] unto the Resurrection,' Emily Dickinson slowly retreated to the confines of the Homestead and the precincts of her own consciousness" (Lundin 98), crafting poems that are a testament to the ability of the human consciousness "to distill a plenitude of riches from which would seem to be a paucity of experience" and that illuminate "how the imagination can enrich and surmount the conditions of a drastically circumscribed life" (Sherwood 66).Thus at the end of the first phase of Dickinson's life and work, we find that "by forsaking the social world and its allotted roles for the sake of the

infinite possibilities of the inner life," she has "set out to map the uncharted territories of consciousness" (Lundin 74).

Dare you see a Soul at the 'White Heat'?
Then crouch within the door –
Red – is the Fire's common tint –
But when the vivid Ore

Has vanquished Flame's condition –
It quivers from the Forge
Without a color, but the light
Of unanointed blaze – (Poem 365)

The second phase finds Dickinson the poet sequestered at home, "a Soul at the 'White Heat,' " crafting, "through the medium of the written and printed word [. . .] a means of securing the sheltered stability of home while also enjoying the exquisite liberty of inner exploration" (Lundin 65). She successfully lived out her calling as a poet over the last thirty years of her life without any access to the outside world, save that which her reading and correspondence provided. While others roamed the world in search of volcanoes "in Sicily and South America" she wrote,

A lava step at any time
Am I inclined to climb –
A crater I may contemplate
Vesuvius at Home. (Poem 1705)

Dickinson reached a peak of productivity in her early thirties, when she wrote more than 350 poems in a single year, 1862. She had put an end to her social life and had become a recluse by 1860 when the Civil War was about to begin. The period from 1858 to 1862 proved as trying to her personally as it was to be for the nation politically, for it was a time of personal trauma, theological upheaval and great national peril. Her letters from this period make repeated references to pain and serve as the best source of information about her life during her most prolific years. "Much has occurred, dear Uncle, since my writing you," she wrote to Joseph Sweetser in the summer of 1858, "– so much – that I stagger as I write, in its sharp remembrance. [. . .] Today has been so glad without, and yet so grieved within – I cannot always see the light – please tell me if it shines"(*Letters* 335). Commenting on this traumatic period in her life Lundin remarks:

> In these wrenching years, Emily Dickinson's "grand theater of the mind" played out its acts against the colossal backdrop of the Civil War. In the period when Dickinson was experiencing an unspecified "terror" of disappointment and "a woe that made me tremble," and while she was forging hundreds of poems in the "white heat" of anguish, the war was searing the nation's consciousness and devouring its sons. (121)

Across the country, the horrors of war fostered doubts about divine mercy. The four years of slaughter evoked crises of faith that prompted widespread rejection of Calvinistic beliefs. On occasion, the shock of battle registered

itself upon Dickinson in her Amherst seclusion, as when her brother's dear friend Frazer Stearns was killed. However the war was not her most pressing concern at the time and when she did refer to the conflict, it was often for the purpose of using it as a metaphor for a more primary grief as the following poem illustrates:

> The Battle fought between the Soul
> And no Man – is the One
> Of all the Battles prevalent –
> By far the Greater One – (Poem 594)

The war mostly served to give her fresh images to describe "The Battle fought between the Soul / And no Man." As Pickard observes, "Her own suffering taught her that pain and deprivation, rather than happiness constituted the essence of life. She eschewed the conventional supports of home, society, and religion to fight alone on life's hardest battleground – within the human soul. Unflinchingly she faced the inner challenges and struggled to wrest spiritual victory from emotional defeat" (122).

In the search for the reasons behind Dickinson's reticence and her need for privacy, leading to retreat, Sherwood offers an insight:

> For Emily Dickinson the self can only endure in a world with which it cannot, except through art, find meaningful connection. She affirms life but not living. "To be alive – is Power" (Poem 384) but to live is to suffer, and the way to stay alive is to endure and to hide one's suffering from the world that caused it, lest vitality be compromised. (53)

Very early in her life as a poet, Emily had come to look upon pain as the proof of her vocation. In the pursuit of her vocation, she chose a life of renunciation and retreat by refusing to marry or publish. In this manner she could indulge in possibilities and develop her work, hidden from the sight of the public's eye. Solitude, however, exacted a heavy price and her pain was intense. As she writes in Poem 772, the "Essential Oils" of her poetry had to be "wrung" from her pain, because "The Attar from the Rose / Be not expressed by Suns – alone – / It is the gift of screws –" The following poem clearly shows Emily's strategy for enduring in the face of suffering and her view of consciousness:

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

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

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

Except Thyself may be

Thine Enemy –

Captivity is Consciousness –

So's Liberty. (Poem 384)

From the period – 1858 to 1865 – more than 125 letters have survived including the three "Master" letters. Taken together, they provide a picture of Dickinson's passion and pain at this harried time. Whatever its sources, sorrow staggered her repeatedly in these years. Critics and biographers have tried to pinpoint what specific trauma assailed her and have reached different conclusions. Ultimately, it seems pointless to attempt to locate the specific traumas that initiated the desolation and radical freedom that gave rise to the self-creation of her poems. What we need to do, according to Gregory Orr in "Poetry as Survival," is to recognize that the poet's trauma initiates "the struggle of transformation that leads to the richly proliferating and glorious incarnations of the poems"(1). Though it is not clear what hurt Emily Dickinson so, we do know that something hurt her with enormous force, again and again:

It struck me – every Day –

The Lightning was as new

As if the Cloud that instant slit

And let the Fire through –

It burned me – in the Night–

It Blistered to My Dream –

It sickened fresh upon my sight –

With every Morn that came –

I thought that Storm – was brief –

The Maddest – quickest by –

But Nature lost the Date of This –

And left it in the Sky – (Poem 362)

We know too that she responded bravely, that she loved to "buffet the sea!" What she meant was an inner sea: the sea of subjectivity, of the rise and fall, the ebb and flow and wild, wave-torn storms of the emotional life. Some of her poems articulate despair and fear of madness:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

And Mourners to and fro

Kept treading – treading – till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,

A Service, like a Drum –

Kept beating – beating – till I thought

My Mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box

And creak across my Soul

With those same Boots of Lead, again,

Then Space – began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,

And Being, but an Ear,

And I, and Silence, some strange Race

Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,

And I dropped down, and down –

And hit a World, at every plunge,

And Finished knowing – then – (Poem 280)

Some poems speak of desolation and agony:

The Heart asks Pleasure – first –

And then – Excuse from Pain –

And then – those little Anodynes

That deaden suffering –

And then – to go to sleep –

And then – if it should be

The will of its Inquisitor

The privilege to die – (Poem 536)

Emily Dickinson's poetry is one of survival, of the stabilizing of self through poetic ordering. As Gregory Orr says, "[. . .] subjectivity is so rampant and intense for Dickinson [. . .] that subjectivity itself could be said to constitute her trauma," so excruciatingly volatile was her emotional life and so deep

her solitude (1). And she responds to this curious threat with the defiant free will of creativity exemplified by the writing of poems:

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me "still" –

Still! Could themself have peeped –
And seen my Brain – go round –
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason – in the Pound –

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Abolish his Captivity –
And laugh – No more have I – (Poem 613)

With intense creativity, Dickinson probed the character of God in numerous poems written during the Civil War. Borrowing freely from the biblical imagery and the hymn tradition of the Christian faith, she composed poems that alternate in tone between irony and devotion. Read selectively, these poems could support any conceivable claim about her beliefs. However, taken in their entirety, they project Dickinson as a great thinker who had a keen sense of the peculiar ambiguities of belief in her time. Many of these poems reveal that she had moments in which she felt distanced from God. In “I know that He exists” (Poem 338) her belief in God’s

existence seems clouded by a belief in His possible treacherous qualities. In "I meant to have but modest needs" (Poem 476) the speaker blames herself even more for having once shown a "childish " faith than she blames God for having promptly rejected her. Though Dickinson often despairs that access to God is possible, at the heart of her poetry and her prayer is her desire to know God. She has a little poem that is a definition of prayer that "sums up the Apparatus / Comprised in Prayer – ":

> Prayer is the little implement
> Through which Men reach
> Where presence – is denied them.
> They fling their Speech
>
> By means of it – in God's Ear –
> If then He hear –
> This sums up the Apparatus
> Comprised in Prayer – (Poem 438)

In the poems from this period as Lundin points out, "the hiddenness of God becomes a form of absence, and the absence a source of pain. [. . .] For most devotional poets, prayer reveals the presence of God; in Dickinson's poems, it often discloses his absence" (148). Her frustration with the uncertainty of prayer finds voice in several of the twenty poems or more she wrote on prayer in the early 1860s, making God seem a colossal hypocrite, a supernatural swindler who instructs men to pray without any intentions of answering them.

Of course – I – prayed –

And did God Care?

He cared as much as on the Air

A Bird – had stamped her foot –

And cried "Give Me" –

My Reason – Life –

I had not had – but for Yourself –

'Twere better Charity

To leave me in the Atom's Tomb –

Merry, and Nought, and Gay, and numb –

Than this smart misery. (Poem 376)

This poem reveals how distant Emily felt herself to be from the comfort of formal prayer. She stands on the precipice of despair, suffering the anguish of God's cold shoulder. Abandoned and scorned, she even prefers nonexistence: " 'Twere better Charity / To leave me in the Atom's Tomb – / [. . .] / Than this smart misery." There is no more authentic prayer than that of a wounded soul and in this poem, Emily's frustration is her prayer. For as John Delli Carpini observes in *Poetry as Prayer: Emily Dickinson*, "The desolation we sometimes experience when we feel God's absence is, ironically, the powerful desire for God's presence" (92). Her doubt is expressed in the second quatrain, "If then He hear –", and in the somewhat futile gesture of "flinging." God's deafness did not stop her, though; it made her to shout the louder. In spite of her doubts, and despite God's remoteness and seemingly unfeeling nature, she yearned for Him.

Dickinson had little understanding of prayer as a personal communication with God. She often conceived of prayer as a desperate human attempt to reach into the silence. So prayer is not so much communication, as a fumbling human effort to establish at least a one way line of address to a God who seems silent – seems not to speak. However, she has a great poem that describes an instance of awe that is not confined by religion, or by church, but is something more than both of those.

My period had come for Prayer –
No other art – would do –
My Tactics missed a rudiment –
Creator – Was it you?"

God grows above – so those who pray
Horizons must – ascend –
And so I stepped upon the North
To see this Curious Friend –

His House was not – no sign had He –
By Chimney – nor by Door
Could I infer his Residence –
Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler –
Were all that I could see –

Infinitude – Had'st Thou no Face

That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended –

Creation stopped – for Me –

But awed beyond my errand –

I worshipped – did not "pray" – (Poem 564)

This is a perfect Dickinson poem on prayer. It begins with the desire to pray and ends with abandonment of prayer and the replacement of prayer by worship. Dickinson begins by making an attempt at prayer as a way of finding God. But she cannot get her quarry, she cannot find God, by her own lights: "His House was not – no sign had He – /By Chimney – nor by Door – Could I infer his residence –" This leads to a sense of frustration and she speaks to God: "Infinitude – Had'st Thou no Face/That I might look on Thee?" But here the tension yields an unexpected boon, a gift, for instead of the poet finding God, God finds her. "The silence condescended – /Creation stopped – for me –" And she is overtaken by something that is much bigger, more natural, more elemental: "I worshipped – did not 'pray.' Praying – at least in this poem – is a piece of religion while worship transcends religion.

Some of the poems of this period express a stoic patience when God does not answer; others are the screeches of a child when she does not hear what she expects. Her poetic mission was to express the truth she suffered painfully to discover and her poems bear the mark of her mental agony, the spiritual anguish she endured while attempting to find a clue to the mystery

of life. Though her human fear of loss, abandonment, loneliness, and death shook her faith in a providential and benevolent God, this, however, did not prevent her from praying: "The Martyr Poets – did not tell – /But wrought their Pang in syllable –" (Poem 544). "Somehow, prayer fixed in her a moment of clarity at the center of life's agitation, or as Frost defines a poem, 'a momentary stay against confusion.' Whenever Emily found this kind of faith, she discovered a valuable treasure" (Carpini 41). Dickinson also prayed for others, as she mentions in several letters, and she would often slip a line or two of comforting verse, if those she wrote to were ill or experiencing pain of some kind. Carpini observes that "many of her poems are prayers [. . .] the record of her ongoing dialogue with God," and that reading her poems "is eavesdropping on her holy conversation" (6).

As the years passed, her approach to the deity toned down, becoming simpler and less cerebral. Christ's Incarnation in particular appealed to her sensibility. His agreeing to take on human form, made her see him as more accessible than God the Father. In Jesus of Nazareth, the poet found some of the warmth, personality, closeness, and compassion that she could not find in the Creator, the Father, the first person of the Godhead. Though Dickinson wrestled with God the Father, and wrote many poems expressing doubt or anger at Him, she was drawn irresistibly to Jesus the Son. While she questioned God the Father's presence and justice though not his existence, to the end of her life, Dickinson rarely wavered in her expressions of love for this "Tender Pioneer" (Poem 698). She was drawn to Jesus, to the humanity of this one who was "acquainted with Grief" (*Letters* 837). In the

suffering of Jesus she detected a truth that she could believe without a doubt. "Í like a look of Agony, / Because I know it's true – "(Poem 241). As Lundin writes: "If God the Father was often her foe, God the Son was her trustworthy friend" (318).

There are several poems in which Emily addresses Jesus. She "reserved a unique place for Jesus in her affections" and "apprehended him most fully in the singular intensity of human suffering" (Lundin 172). Often during her most prolific years and in times of difficulty, she detected parallels between the crucifixion of Jesus who renounced heaven and took suffering upon himself, and her own renunciation of marriage and public life. Jesus for her was a divine "Preceptor" who she believed, knew her pain: the loss of friends in death and her struggle to believe.

> At least – to pray – is left
> Oh Jesus – in the Air –
> I know not which thy chamber is –
> I'm knocking – everywhere – (Poem 502).

Dickinson's poems not only reflect her journey to discover God, they also speak to us. "Where Thou art – that – is Home –" (Poem 725) is one such poem where unusually for her, she asks no questions, makes no demands, but simply enjoys the pleasure of being "at home" with God. "I scarce esteem Location's Name" she writes, for "Home" is not a place. Home is where God is. Knowing how important the concept of "home " was to Dickinson, representing sanctuary, acceptance and security in the unpredictable world of "Bondage," "Imprisonment," and "Sentence," the

poem reveals her belief that security and contentment are to be found in God.

Knapp captures Emily Dickinson's approach to God in a telling manner:

> We find that Dickinson's view of God [. . .] was neither complacent nor confident. On the contrary, it was marked with contention, defiance, and continuous oscillation. Nevertheless, her thoughts, her life, and breath – her very being – were deeply imbued in biblical utterances, hymns and the prayers of her day, which found their way into her poems in words of love, anger, or irony toward God. (128)

In the second and most productive phase of Dickinson's life as a poet we see that religion continued to be a centring concern for her despite the variations in tone and imagery. "Vexed by a distant and forbidding Father-God, heartened by his pioneering Son, and comforted by the Spirit whose presence became palpable for her in the play of words, Dickinson poured her life into poetry in these years" (Lundin 181). We also recognize that ambivalence was more than a poetic strategy for Dickinson, for it went to the heart of her uncertainty about life. As Lundin observes:

> Emily Dickinson's seclusion freed her to explore and endure the full range of her ambivalence about a number of weighty matters. For every poem of hers that questions the nature or existence of God, another affirms the goodness of the Divine character and power. For every lyric that celebrates the eternity

> of art, another sees poetry as merely one more mortal creation. [. . .] Dickinson [is] engaged in [. . .] shuttling "a hundred times an Hour" between belief and disbelief, between infinite possibilities and tragic realities [. . .] (139)

After surviving the physical and emotional harrowing of the Civil War period, Emily Dickinson spent the better part of a decade trying to restore order to her emotional life.

> After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
> The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
> The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
> And Yesterday, or Centuries before?
>
> The Feet, mechanical, go round –
> Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
> A Wooden way
> Regardless grown,
> A Quartz contentment, like a stone –
>
> This is the Hour of Lead –
> Remembered, if outlived,
> As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
> First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go – (Poem 341)

Exhausted by the ordeals of the previous years, she entered a period of relative silence and inactivity. Though she wrote almost a thousand poems in the five years from 1860 to 1865, she composed only a hundred or so

between 1865 and 1870, and little is known of her activities during these years. So much so that some critics have gone so far as to say she was psychologically dormant. Further, as a consequence of her inner turmoil, Dickinson's poetic production and letter writing slackened significantly after 1865. The letters from the decade between 1865 and 1875 indicate that she spent these years "seeking to experience the simple 'ecstasy of living' that she considered 'joy enough.' In her normal round of activities, she savoured 'the Happiness / That too competes with heaven –' [. . .] simple pleasures brought the poet contentment in these quiet years" (Lundin 222). Such was her savouring of everyday life that she could plead, "Oh Sumptuous moment / Slower go / That I may gloat on thee –" (Poem 1125), and could even wonder if heaven were necessary:

> Immortal is an ample word
> When what we need is by
> But when it leaves us for a time
> 'Tis a necessity.
>
> Of heaven above the firmest proof
> We fundamental know
> Except for its marauding Hand
> It had been Heaven below. (Poem 1205)

However, the equilibrium that Dickinson had reestablished by the mid 1870s was soon shattered, beginning with the death of her father in 1874. We find death taking an enormous toll on her emotional and physical

resources in the final years of her life. Two of the contenders for the recipient of the "master" letters, Samuel Bowles, one of Dickinson's most distinguished male friends, and the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, "her dearest earthly friend" (*Letters* 764), died in 1878 and 1882 respectively. The death of her mother in 1882 sapped her of emotional strength. She lost her nephew Gilbert in 1883, the only man she ever seriously considered marrying, Otis Phillips Lord, in 1884 and her beloved friend Helen Hunt Jackson in 1885. The "Dyings" as she called them, "struck her hard, and their cumulative effect was to drain and dishearten her in a way that no other suffering had done" (Lundin 224). Although Dickinson never came to accept death whose territory she had traversed so often, she was beginning to grow accustomed to it. With her letters that affirmed the promises of the Christian faith she comforted those who lost their dear ones, even as she lamented her own losses. In reassuring them, she strengthened herself, for as Lundin observes, "in assuring others" of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, "she steadied her own wavering faith" (236).

In 1884, she fell ill, exhibiting all the symptoms of a nervous breakdown. Vivian R. Pollak and Marianne Noble remark that whether she died of Bright's disease, or of heart disease and hypertension, "Dickinson's final years were riven by their elegiac tenor" (Pollak 53). Other such observations made by critics about her last days are a striking revelation of where Dickinson stands with regard to faith at the close of her life. "Even less than the earlier periods of her life were these last years a time of serenity" observes Chase. "If her last years display some of the qualities of a

ripe fruition, they display as many of an exacerbated and terrifying anxiety" (301). According to Knapp, "Having suffered through the demise of so many members of her family, Dickinson at the end of her days divested herself of all expectations concerning any future hopes for a blissful state in an eventual reuniting with God" (129). Lundin succinctly sums up her situation. "She remained, as she styled herself in a letter only a month before she died, both a "Pugilist and Poet," one who wrestled with God and who continued to write in his shadow until the very end" (243).

Dickinson's struggle with God was connected to the many challenges that arose to Christian belief in her lifetime. Hers was a struggle to salvage faith in an age of upheavals. The little Emily who grew up with constant reinforcement of church teachings at home, in school and in peer relationships and was taught to rely "wholly upon the arm of God" (*Letters* 31) went on to write that God's "Hand is amputated":

> Those - dying – then,
> Knew where they went –
> They went to God's Right Hand –
> That Hand is amputated now
> And God cannot be found –
> The abdication of a Belief
> Makes the behavior small –
> Better an ignis fatuus
> Than no illume at all – (Poem 1551)

The power in the poem is not just in its confession that God seems absent, or disabled, but in its awareness of how tragic that is, of how much is lost in a world where God's hand is amputated. "The abdication of Belief/Makes the behavior small –" And then, to drive the point still deeper, she says that even an elusive faith – an ignis fatuus, something like a will-o-the-wisp – is better, "than no illume at all." Biographers and critics read this poem as Dickinson's response to losses she shared with others of her time. According to Wells, she "embodies in a heightened form the fatality of her age, wherein religion became less a normal function of the human soul than an agonizing problem" (144). Throughout the civilized world, the foundations of faith were shaken. Most thinking men and women vacillated with considerable spiritual discomfort between moods of zealous belief, ardent disbelief, and worst of all, skepticism, confusion and dismay. Emily expressed all these moods repeatedly and with unique poignancy.

What, then, caused this ebbing, this "Abdication of Belief"? Who, or what lopped that saving arm of God? Eberwein offers an answer:

> Culprits usually arraigned include romanticism in both its Transcendental and sentimental manifestations, a scientific revolution spurred by Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, and theological rethinking unleashed by the European biblical scholarship known as the Higher Criticism. Another crisis unsettling belief was the Civil War. [. . .] In her childhood, belief seemed all but inevitable; by the time she died in 1886, agnosticism and even atheism had become easier positions to

> justify intellectually. If Dickinson were to cling to faith, it had to be in a wounded God. (Pollak 68-69)

Dickinson's attitude to this dilemma and the uncertainty it entailed varied as she coped with a disposition that could neither believe nor be comfortable in unbelief. At times she could be playful, "on subjects of which we know nothing [. . .] we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble"(*Letters* 728). Then in desperation she could write a poem that treats the soul's relationship with God as a "fond Ambush" – a cruel game of hide-and-seek (Poem 338). At another time she says that Jesus has "Wrung me – with Anguish – / But I never doubted him –" and she pledges devotion even while she is tormented by Jesus (Poem 497). Her poems articulate dramatically varying and ephemeral moods and accommodate statements that range from "I know that he exists" (Poem 338) and "My Faith is larger than the hills" (Poem 766), to "He strained my faith" (Poem 497), and "Where is Jesus gone?" (Poem 158). At turns, for Dickinson, God seemed to have an "amputated hand," (Poem 1551) or be a "distant, stately lover" (Poem 357) but then would "condescend" (Poem 564) unbidden to startle her into awestruck worship. Even a single four-line poem could accommodate her ambivalent attitude:

> My Maker – let me be
> Enamored most of thee –
> But nearer this
> I more should miss – (Poem 1403)

Dickinson's biographies show that she had many moments in which she felt cut off from support or comfort from God or her friends. She apparently has such a moment, her faith obviously at a very low point as she writes a poem on the duplicity of God's actions. We find her angrily speaking to God in a challenging, aggressive tone:

"Heavenly Father" – take to thee
The supreme iniquity
Fashioned by thy candid hand
In a moment contraband –
Though to trust us – seem to us
More respectful – "We are Dust" –
We apologize to thee
For thine own Duplicity - (Poem 1461)

Many of her poems express similar thoughts. In the "Bible is an antique Volume" (Poem 1545) she questions the effectiveness of God's word. The word "God" itself is not used in many such poems but there are some poems that are more direct. "Of God we ask one favor" (Poem 1601) holds a bitter complaint about a harsh and unforgiving God; in the short poem "God is indeed a jealous God –" (Poem 1719) she attributes a traditionally human vice to His character; in "Apparently with no surprise" (Poem 1624) she sees not only indifference, but maliciousness in God's treatment of one of her beloved flowers. In each of these poems she makes a statement about her religious disillusion, while at the same time appearing to have accepted this condition. Dickinson struggled mightily with the idea of God. It was not so

much that she doubted God's existence as that she lamented God's distance, His absence, and apparent lack of interest in humankind.

Dickinson's writing thus brilliantly expresses tensions between doubt and faith in the nineteenth-century Western world that was subjected to unsettling intellectual and cultural pressures that eventually brought about "America's transition from the pietistic fervor of the Second Great Awakening to post-Darwinian skepticism" (Pollak 70). She was one of "the first to trace the trajectory of God's decline" throughout the Western world like her contemporaries Fyodor Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche (Lundin 4).

It is obvious from her poetry that Dickinson was very much at odds with conventional Christianity – and with its God. She wondered a great deal about God, and it was generally a dark wondering. She referred to God once as an "eclipse" whom others referred to as "Father" (*Letters* 404). As Wells observes, "Emily was neither an ordinary woman nor a docile believer. Like no one else, either man or woman, she stuck pins in God" (145). "God", as a word in the poetry, is a rather unsavoury character. He is a burglar, a banker, a rival, and an assassin. He is sometimes a stately lover and sometimes a tormentor who just fumbles at your spirit. Sometimes he is simply death. There are poems that express a more conventional view of God, but they are certainly in the minority. Dickinson's notions with regard to God evolved continuously throughout her life. Although during her early twenties and thirties she was antagonistic to the rigid Congregationalism of Amherst and the powerful conversion movement to which it gave rise, she

never denied or even doubted the existence of God. As Murray Bodo wrote to me in an email interview, "With Emily Dickinson, as with Levertov, I believe the skepticism is over religion more than over God and God's existence" (see Appendix). In fact, she strained always to experience God's existence as through this simile:

I never saw a Moor –
I never saw the Sea –
Yet I know how the Heather looks
And what the Billow be.

I never spoke with God
Nor visited in Heaven –
Yet certain I am about the spot
As if the Checks were given – (Poem 1052)

Dickinson could not accept certain aspects of Christian dogma such as Original sin, the Resurrection, the notion of a loving God, and the efficacy of prayer. Primary among them was the notion of a caring and loving God. One of the major frustrations of Emily, according to Wells, was her inability really to love God. The personal God was unavailable to "this heir of Calvin who found the Calvinistic God so unlovable". As a puritan she felt the loss of this estrangement from an approachable divinity. Her poetry testifies to this loss and its consequences. "With an almost shocking boldness, she applied to her lover the terms and sentiments commonly ascribed to Jesus. Her father [. . .] became an analogue for God the Father [. . .] And for Emily, as for Blake, the Holy Spirit commonly became art" (82).

Untouched by the transcendentalist assumption of sympathy, even of identity between God and man, she retained from the Puritan conception of life a sharp sense of the struggle between Divine will and human pride. And as a child of her time she resented deeply the tyranny of an absolute God. Independence and autonomy were of prime importance to her – these she refused to yield, even to divinity. Therefore she found it impossible to drown her sorrows, like many of her friends did, in complete submersion in the Godhead, which would entail giving up what she prized most.

The whole instruction of the Church displeased Dickinson and she finds the God of the Old Testament particularly revolting. She discovers the Bible to be "an antique volume" (Poem 1545) full of lies, and "Faith," she observes, "is a fine invention for gentlemen who see" (Poem 185). She prefers, rather, the microscope of truthful private observation. Another thing she found unacceptable was Christ's promise of renewal and love, since suffering and sickness were rampant in the world she knew. Neither could she accept the efficacy of prayer. As Knapp observes, "The pledges given in both the Old and New Testaments were viewed by Dickinson as corruptive and brutal deceptions. For these reasons, and because God the Father was impassible and remote, she felt abandoned by him" (128). The doctrine of Original sin, and the total depravity of man, that was at the heart of Calvinism was something she could not subscribe to and her writings reveal little consciousness of sin. Eberwein cites her non-acceptance of the fundamental premise of the fall as one of the reasons why she proved resistant to conversion pressures (Pollak 78).

However, Dickinson has written some beautiful poems about the person and life of Christ that present a view of Jesus the Son not so much as sacrificial Lord, but sympathetic example and brave pioneer. She thinks of the example Jesus set in expressing terror, joy and suffering, and finds courage in that. Her understanding of Jesus has something to do with the Cross – but not so much the Cross as an act in the divine economy of salvation, but rather, of the cross as a supreme example of human compassion and possibly divine compassion. She struggled to believe that in the Crucifixion something beautiful and powerful was going on in the very heart and mind of God and in the dynamics of the eternal relationship between God and humanity and she made an effort to apprehend God through the sufferings of Jesus. In "Emily Dickinson: Jesus, the Tender Pioneer" a sermon preached at Plymouth Congregational Church, the Rev. James Gertmenian points out:

> Emily Dickinson's life spanned the time when Charles Darwin was publishing his seismic discoveries and Biblical scholars were developing the historical-critical method that pulled the rug out from under a literal reading of scripture. It was a time when the faith of many was being shaken. In such a time, Jesus became, for Dickinson, the one who, alone, could make sense of belief.

Poem 1433 illustrates this by showing how Jesus lived in the same condition we do, having to cross the same bridge, with many of the same temptations of doubt. If the higher criticism of the Bible and evolutionary theory had

created chasms for her faith, Jesus himself had nonetheless in his faithfulness, even to death, made it across and "pronounced [the bridge] firm".

> How brittle are the Piers
> On which our Faith doth tread –
> No Bridge below doth totter so –
> Yet none hath such a Crowd.
> It is as old as God –
> Indeed –'twas built by him –
> He sent His Son to test the Plank –
> And he pronounced it firm. (Poem 1433)

This Jesus that Emily presents does not go through death for us, or instead of us, but ahead of us, to show the way and to keep our hearts steady, and to give us courage so we can venture out into life and into death. In a sense, then, in the true fashion of Emerson, Dickinson describes a Jesus who does not save us by virtue of his unique divinity but who saves us by exciting in us our own divinity. "To a significant extent, she followed the lead of Ralph Waldo Emerson and others as they sought to feed the life of the spirit by drawing from the fathomless depths of the self" observes Lundin. "In dwelling so exclusively on the humanity of Jesus, however, Dickinson also exposed the limits of the romantic turn in theology and culture." For though in her most expansive moods she saw those inner resources as more than sufficient to nourish the soul, when suffering scorched her life and parched her spirit, "Dickinson learned the true poverty of human divinity" (4).

It is easy to work when the soul is at play –
But when the soul is in pain –
The hearing him put his playthings up
Makes work difficult – then – (Poem 244)

"The Soul should always stand ajar," Dickinson wrote in Poem 1055, and she was without doubt one attuned to the spiritual world and open to its meaning. Her life, her work and her prayer were a response to these intimations:

The Only News I know
Is Bulletins all Day
From Immortality.

The Only Shows I see –
Tomorrow and Today –
Perchance Eternity –

The Only One I meet
Is God – The Only Street –
Existence – This traversed

If Other News there be –
Or Admirable Show –
I'll tell it You – (Poem 827)

As we have seen earlier, Dickinson's desire for intellectual assurance that was independently achieved kept her back from a commitment to Christ. Similarly, her nature poems refuse what would be unconfirmed

though comfortable assertions. Emily Dickinson has written more than 500 poems on the subject of nature. In some of them she shares with her romantic and transcendental contemporaries and predecessors the belief that a mystical bond exists between man and nature and that nature reveals to man things about mankind and the universe. The common widespread view is that the transcendental doctrines did not satisfy her deepest level of questioning concerning nature (as with religious belief), and her struggle to define nature in transcendental terms is not altogether a successful one. In others she declares that a separation exists between man and nature and that nature is at the core indifferent toward the life and interests of mankind (mirroring her experience of God). There is a third category of nature poems where she affirms the sheer joy and the appreciation she feels in the variety and spectacle of nature. However, "Unlike other nature poets who might permit their feelings to lead to their faith, Dickinson never abandoned her clear-eyed observation aided by reason" (Ferlazzo 99).

In "Dew - is the Freshest in the Grass" (1097) she uses the analogy of a travelling circus to express the idea that we live outside of nature and are permitted to observe, experience, and enjoy it. We are not allowed to enter into its secret, though. In "What mystery pervades a well!" (Poem 1400) Dickinson states the idea that as much as we may wish to enter and learn of nature from behind the scenes, we cannot gain admittance. Man and nature are strangers. In the final stanza, she suggests what it is about nature that makes it awesome and unknowable:

To pity those that know her not

Is helped by the regret

That those who know her, know her less

The nearer her they get (Poem 1400)

She was aware that the real mystery of nature is the mystery of existence itself. While nature may give her occasional joys, in the last analysis it reminded her of the impermanence of things and of her own mortality. For Dickinson, when an individual became a part of nature, when he entered the "haunted house," he was going to meet his death. Ferlazzo contrasts this attitude with that of Walt Whitman who perceived a merge with nature in optimistic terms as part of the gentle and orderly process of life:

> His corpse, placed in the ground enters the process of nature and becomes renewed: he grows again as grass. Whitman affirms this relationship between nature and death, and he finds unity and immortality awaiting him. Dickinson, on the other hand, is unsure of immortality and suspicious of nature, and is unwilling to believe and affirm what she cannot test for certain. She will allow herself, at best, only cool skepticism. (102)

All through her life and in major portions of her poetry, Emily Dickinson wrestled with the twin themes – death and immortality. Beginning with the loss of Ben Newton, death frequently intruded on her family and her circle of friends, and when the Civil War erupted, she had regularly to take account of human fragility and mortality. The losses were

personal and deep for Dickinson. It was here that Jesus became the "Tender Pioneer" (Poem 698) who makes possible a passage that would otherwise cause us to shrink in fear. In an 1862 letter, she reported to her preceptor, Thomas Higginson: "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* 404). And when the fear came over her – as it often did – Dickinson wrote about immortality as a way of coping:

> Surrounded by death, by darkness, writing poetry became for her an act of courage meant to affirm her fragile life. With her great creative spirit, she transformed human frailty, fear, and anxiety into the highest levels of art: and she wrote away a measure of her terror by facing it squarely. (Ferlazzo 42)

Speculation about immortality is Dickinson's point of departure for many of her most intense deliberations on Belief. The 'Glimmering Frontier' (Poem 696) and what lay beyond it was a subject that constantly occupied her. And it isn't to say that her position was one without a struggle. She says, "The Soul has bandaged moments – / When too afraid to stir – / She feels some ghastly Fright come up / and look at her" (Poem 512). And she struggles in the poetry with this ever-present sense of death without personal afterlife. According to Lundin, "Of all the articles of the Christian creed, the one she most fervently longed to believe was that of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting [. . .]" (236).

> Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –
>
> Untouched by Morning –

And untouched by Noon –
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection –
Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone!

Grand go the Years – in the Crescent – above them –
Worlds scoop their Arcs –
And Firmaments – row –
Diadems – drop – and Doges – surrender –
Soundless as dots – on a Disc of Snow – (Poem 216)

This seems to capture so much of both her Belief and her Unbelief. The position of the dead awaiting their resurrection is placed in the new context of the newly discovered geological time. For by 1859 when she wrote this poem, geological discoveries had made geological time seem far more vast and extensive than it had ever seemed before. And in this poem, Dickinson imagines those who have died and await the resurrection, not as being denied that resurrection but as having to wait – as having to be patient.

Dickinson understands the to-ing and fro-ing of Belief and Doubt in religious experience. It is this flexible faith, which keeps guessing, keeps refusing to be pinned down, that resonates in Dickinson's writing as a poetics of "wonder", or "nimble believing." Wonder is the moment of knowing one's ignorance – of knowing that one does not know: "Wonder – is not precisely Knowing / And not precisely Knowing not – "(Poem 1331). In Poem 1434 written in her later years she says, "Go not too near a house of

rose/ Nor try to tie the butterfly/ Nor climb the burrows of ecstasy/ For in insecurity to lie/ Is joy's ensuring quality." Writing was certainly Dickinson's way of keeping alive that sense of wonder, or nimble believing, and a means of surviving crises.

Emily Dickinson's "nimble believing" is firmly rooted in the here and now, rather than the "beyond." Dickinson lived with enormous intensity, "a Soul at the White Heat" (Poem 365). She was deeply engaged in this world, embracing a belief in 'secular holiness', rubbing together the sticks of belief and unbelief, confidence and doubt, hope and resignation, to produce the spark, the kindling, the flame, the blaze, the white heat of faith. Spirituality is often thought of as 'high' and 'sublime' rather than 'deep'. What we find in Emily Dickinson is the expression of a deep spirituality. As the Rev. James Gertmenian remarks in "Emily Dickinson: Jesus, the Tender Pioneer," "certainty about God's presence and care eluded her, so she lived in the "white heat" of the questions all through her life." He goes on to say that this "condition of 'white heat,' – the tension between certainty and doubt – while not the most comfortable circumstance in which to live, is, in fact, the true territory of faith." As she said, "Too much of proof affronts Belief" (Poem 1228).

In Dickinson's world of "secular holiness", the language of conventional Christianity often works alongside a romantic spirituality. This allows her to indulge her pagan slant on Belief. "The Bible is an antique Volume –" has, as its final stanza: "Had but the Tale a warbling Teller – / All the Boys would come – / Orpheus' Sermon captivated – / It did not

condemn –" (Poem 1545). Orpheus, a pagan, was a singer who charmed the world. The pagan religions are able to see the sacredness and the spiritual in every single dimension of life, without exception. It is interesting to note here, that Emily Dickinson called herself "pagan" on several occasions. Part of the paganism is to appreciate the complexities and contradictions in life, and to be able to find a place for all of these things. And this is clearly an integral part of Emily Dickinson's creed.

A question often raised in Dickinson studies is one regarding Calvinist piety in her poetry. In answer, every conceivable type of tentative conclusion has been suggested. On the one hand, according to Sherwood, in 1862, the Calvinist God chastened Dickinson, imbued her with grace, and received in return her "poetic oaths of fidelity and declarations of love" (191). He therefore attempts to establish all of the poems from 1862 on as demonstrations of Calvinist piety. At the other extreme, we have Hyatt Howe Waggoner who contends, "Emily began by not being certain she could believe the dogmas and ended (in 1859) by being certain that she couldn't" (85). Between these extremes there is a wide middle ground.

So too, resolving the question regarding Emily Dickinson's faith is problematical. Several Dickinson scholars have made strong arguments for the likelihood that she did actually experience the kind of conversion her culture had prepared her to expect, basing their case on close readings of groups of poems. William R. Sherwood, strongly influenced by Thomas Johnson's chronology for the poems, locates her conversion in 1862, the year Johnson thought to be the poet's most productive. "In 1862," he argues,

"Emily Dickinson did not have a crack-up [. . .] but a conversion, and [. . .] it was precisely the variety of conversion that both her inclinations and her traditions had prepared her for and against which she had fought so vigorously at [. . .] Mt. Holyoke in 1848" (138). Dorothy F. Oberhaus reads Fascicle 40 (dated 1864) as "a three-part meditation" that reveals itself as "a simple conversion narrative" confirming the poet's developing relationship with Jesus (4, 14). Cynthia Griffin Wolff organizes her critical biography around the motif of Dickinson as a Jacob figure wrestling with God. However, she finds evidence of midlife experience validating early flickers of hope. "By the mid-1860s or early 1870s," Wolff declares, "well before Father's death, a new poetry of faith had emerged" (504). While most other scholars are content to rest in uncertainty, Eberwein states, "she underwent a transforming experience of artistic empowerment in the 1850s that paralleled the religious experiences of her companions." Finding significance in the fact that the year she began arranging her poems in fascicles was 1858, the last great revival year across the United States before the Civil War, she goes on to say that "Dickinson dispensed with the life-defining ritual of conversion in any way her neighbors would recognize, yet she somehow distilled from cultural convention a visionary and life-renewing creative energy" (Pollak 78).

Thus we find that on the one hand we have a number of plausible arguments put forth by critics like Oberhaus who infers that Fascicle 40 is a "simple conversion narrative" that relates how Emily "gives in" to Jesus (14, 19), or Sherwood who concludes, "After 1862," the year of her supposed

conversion, she "was pledged to God, her loyalties and assumptions fixed" (179). At the other extreme we have Gary Sloan who uses strong language to denounce this "Pagan Sphinx" as he calls her in "Emily Dickinson: Pagan Sphinx": "Dickinson's enigmatic nature shrouds her evolution from Christian manqué to pagan. She had histrionic propensities that obscure the line between her true beliefs and those she feigned. [. . .] she struck poses and adopted personas. [. . .] My guess is she died an agnostic." A few years before she died, Dickinson herself wrote thus: "On subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say *Beings,* we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble" (*Letter*s 750). It is this letter that helps us best in understanding her final position regarding faith. For as James McIntosh declares,

> 'Nimble Believing,' that is believing for intense moments in a spiritual life without permanently subscribing to any received system of belief, is a key experience, an obsessive subject, and a stimulus to expression for Dickinson [. . .] Dickinson's Christian education affected her profoundly, and her desire for a humane intuitive faith motivates and enlivens her poetry. (1)

Whatever the truth may be, the middle ground chosen by the majority of Dickinson scholars seems to be the only possible conclusion to be drawn in the absence of solid evidence either for or against the case. As Wells rightly says, "No fundamental position can be found in her poetry concerning the faith" (145). For Dickinson's art of "nimble believing" poses more questions than it affirms. As she once wrote, "my business is

circumference" (*Letters* 268). We can only try to follow her as she goes about her "business", and discover as we follow, that there is no fixed position towards Belief for us to rest on. Because for Emily Dickinson, the intellect never reaches "conclusion": it moves unceasingly towards the Unknown – in human nature, in the natural world, and in the Divine. There *is* something beyond, she asserts, even through her fear and though she couldn't quite believe in the "Heaven further on"(*Poem* 388), despite opiate assurances from the pulpit:

> This World is not Conclusion.
>
> A Species stands beyond –
>
> Invisible, as Music –
>
> But positive, as Sound –
>
> It beckons, and it baffles –
>
> Philosophy – don't know –
>
> And through a Riddle, at the last –
>
> Sagacity, must go –
>
> To guess it, puzzles scholars –
>
> To gain it, Men have borne
>
> Contempt of Generations
>
> And Crucifixion, shown –
>
> Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
>
> Blushes, if any see –
>
> Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
>
> And asks a Vane, the way,

Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –

Strong Hallelujahs roll –

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth

That nibbles at the soul – (Poem 501)

Chapter 4

Levertov and Dickinson: The Dialectics of Faith

In Denise Levertov and Emily Dickinson we have two poets characterized above all by the integrity of their hearts. Dickinson showed, to use Capps' words, "unabashed directness and honesty in spiritual matters," though of course (and perhaps because) she did not have an immediate audience to contend with (46). She was modern in that she dared to question "the faith of her fathers", unable to emulate her neighbours' easy acceptance of the patterns of traditional faith. Her integrity is revealed in her refusal to accept the easy, facile answers provided by orthodox theology.

Similarly, Levertov was exemplary as Lorrie Smith writes in "Songs of Experience: Denise Levertov's Political Poetry," in her "courage to speak from a clear and ideological position when much American poetry remain[ed] hermetic and socially disengaged" (232). The late 20th century was a sceptical time, with God's Nietzschean death having been noted a long time ago. Living and writing in such a time, Levertov believed that "the basis of every work of art" as Rilke says, is to "keep our inward conscience clear and to know whether we can take responsibility for our own creative experiences just as they stand in all their truthfulness and absoluteness (*NSE* 237). Convinced that the "sense of spiritual hunger" was a "counterforce or unconscious reaction" to the "technological euphoria" and "rationalist optimism of the 20th century", she wrote explicitly Christian poems even at the risk of losing part of her readership, as she tells Nicholas O'Connell in a

final interview in 1997 just before her death (344). Emily's remark to Sue holds good for both these poets: "To be singular under plural circumstances is a becoming heroism –"(*Letters* 651).

Critics have encountered difficulties in classifying both Levertov and Dickinson and in trying to define their exact religious position. The evolutionary, metamorphic quality of Levertov's work made it difficult to categorize. Until around 1988, her politics and a stance, which embraced no specific religious doctrine or set of religious observance, confused the issue. For instance, Margaret Randall, in her review of *Breathing the Water* in 1988 says, "Recently, one critic termed her "Christian" (with a capital C). I disagree" (Wagner-Martin 52). The tumult over Levertov's political work in the 1960s and 1970s obscured the cohesiveness and integrity of her work. What has unified her work from the beginning is a profound sense of the mystical, of life as a spiritual quest. Perhaps her search has always looked like an aesthetic rather than a religious quest, though from the beginning she has spoken of God and never seemed to be unwilling to label her own journey as spiritual. As Diane Wakoski says in "Song of Herself," "What becomes apparent in *Breathing the Water* is that a distinct mystical religious vision has informed the poetry from the every beginning, and a struggle to understand God's meaning for the world" (Wagner-Martin 55). The last four volumes include more poems with religious elements, such as Biblical references and themes, allusions to the numinous and so forth. In spite of this apparent change in direction, neither her theory nor her practice is

radically altered as she creates what Anne Colclough Little calls "her song of agony and doubt, praise and hope" (10).

With Emily Dickinson, however, there is no consensus of opinion at all because of what Donald E. Thackrey calls her "amazing inconsistency of intellectual position (Sewall 51). The situation was also made complex by the "many mysteries of incompatibility, of absent centres, which we encounter in her" and the "absence of strategy, the [. . .] lack of guiding purpose [. . .] in her poetry" as John Robinson puts it in his book *Emily Dickinson: Looking to Canaan* (69). Unlike Levertov the activist whose work is a "testimony of lived life," Dickinson the recluse guarded secrets so well that it is almost impossible to recreate the life out of which her poetry was made. Was her poetry the expression of life lived or life repressed? Does she tell of experience or wish? What made her suffer and rejoice so, and who is it she loved with such intensity? She seems to adopt a variety of masks. While speaking of "our belated recognition that the "real" Emily Dickinson can never be fully located," Vivian R. Pollak and Marianne Noble in their brief biography of Dickinson observe that "'It is finished' can never be said of us" (*Letters* 613), so long as we recognize that some Emily Dickinsons are more real than others (Pollak 54). Also Dickinson's was a poetry of craftsmanship rather than that of confession. To make a coherent pattern out of her poems is therefore very difficult. Though her exact religious position is difficult to define – at times she appears as believer, sceptic, agnostic, or heretic – we find that her poetry is haunted by religious metaphors and religious themes.

This difficulty may be partly overcome by an examination of the etymologies of certain key words in this study such as 'doubt' and 'scepticism', 'faith' and 'belief,' which would facilitate a deeper understanding of the religious positions of Levertov and Dickinson as revealed in their works. 'Doubt' from the Latin 'dubitare' means to 'hesitate, waver in opinion' (related to 'dubius' 'uncertain'), originally 'to have to choose between two things.' 'Sceptic' from Latin 'scepticus', literally means, 'inquiring, reflective.' The word has now come to mean 'one who instinctively or habitually doubts, questions, or disagrees with assertions or generally accepted conclusions.' There are numerous moments of doubt in the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson, revealed as a wavering of opinion or belief, a lack of conviction, of trust or confidence, or an uncertainty in certain matters of traditional religion. Dickinson's poems also show her often as a sceptic, as one who habitually doubts, questions, or suspends judgment upon generally accepted religious doctrines, and Levertov's poems reveal her struggle between faith and doubt as she moves "from a regretful skepticism [. . .] to a position of Christian belief" (*NSE* 241).

The Hebrew word for 'faith' is 'pistis' which connotes confidence, fidelity, guarantee and loyalty. One meaning of faith is the Latin word, 'assensus' which means 'assent': faith as believing something to be true, as giving one's mental assent to something. The opposite of faith as belief is doubt, and in its stronger form disbelief. Within this understanding of faith, if one has doubts, one does not have much faith. A second meaning of faith

and one that has rich meaning for our time is the Latin word ‘fidelitas’ or ‘fidelity’: faith as faithfulness to a relationship. In a religious context, it means faith as faithfulness to a relationship with God, which has very little to do with beliefs but goes deeper. The third meaning of faith is the Latin word ‘fiducia’ or ‘trust’; faith as a radical trust in God, which is not very much concerned with beliefs at all. The opposite of faith as trust is mistrust or, as the teachings of Jesus makes clear, ‘anxiety’ or ‘worry’. In a famous passage (Matt 6 / Luke 12), Jesus says, “Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. [. . .] Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.” In these metaphors Jesus invites his hearers to see reality as characterized by a cosmic generosity. Calling them “you of little faith” he exhorts them not to worry. Here we see that little faith and anxiety go together. The rich meanings of these words and the fine distinctions that arise between them help to qualify the drama of faith and doubt that unfolds in the works of Dickinson and Levertov and to explain the nuances of the despair and pain they experience.

The Latin word ‘credo’ from which we get the word ‘creed’ is translated into English, as ‘I believe.’ The meaning of the Latin word ‘credo’ is ‘I give my heart to.’ So saying the Apostles’ Creed means giving one's heart to God and entering into a relationship of personal allegiance, not to the statements, but to the one about whom these statements are made. The

English word 'belief' comes from the West Germanic word 'ga-laubon' meaning 'dear, esteemed.' Belief used to mean 'trust in God,' while faith merely meant 'loyalty to a person based on promise or duty' (a sense preserved in 'keep one's faith' and in the common usage of 'faithful,' 'faithless,' which contain no notion of divinity). Faith, gradually took on the religious sense, and belief has today become limited to 'mental acceptance.'

Within this understanding of belief, Levertov's commitment in the Catholic Church and acceptance of the creeds in the last years of her life (in spite of certain misgivings/points of contention) may be interpreted as the giving of her heart to a God whom she trusted and held dear, in a relationship of personal allegiance. Such a happy confluence is not seen in Dickinson, but that is not to undermine her faith. Dickinson's inability to accept the creeds of the Calvinist tradition can be seen as her inability to believe (in the sense of giving her mental assent to the statements), and not necessarily a repudiation of the person about whom the statements are made. Consider her prayer: "If Blame be my side – forfeit Me – / But doom me not to forfeit Thee –" (Poem 775). She never repudiated God. As Levertov observes, "The doubts of a wholly secular mind and its life-experience have no context, no ground, no substantial referents. Belief has to accompany doubt for doubt to be serious" (*NSE* 16). The honest expression of Dickinson's doubts, in fact, gives credence to her faith. She was constantly wary of beliefs in as much as beliefs represent rationalizations of the mysteries of life. "Too much proof," she wrote, "affronts belief"(Poem 1228),

and she was little convinced either by doctrine or by theological reasoning. As Power sees it, "she left the traditional church of New England, not in the spirit of the moderns because she lost the faith, but because she wanted to preserve it" (39). So also Robinson notes, "the tradition had captured her imagination but not her assent [. . .] Her sense is of the traditions inadequacies but she still needs its supports" (84).

Levertov's poem "The Tide" implies a difference between belief, an intellectual assent, and faith, an imaginative assent. The poem in its final section argues that faith and poetry are linked.

> Faith's a tide, it seems, ebbs and flows responsive
> to action and inaction. Remain in stasis,
> blown sand stings your face, anemones
> shrivel in rock pools no wave renews.
> Clean the littered beach, clear
> the lines of a forming poem,
> the waters flood inward.
> Dull stones again fulfill
> their glowing destinies, and emptiness
> is a cup, and holds
> the ocean. (*ET* 118)

Faith is not willed into existence any more than the tide is willed onto the shore: faith reveals itself through chosen acts, just as a poem's form reveals itself through content. Cleaning the beach and clearing the lines of a poem

are acts of faith and of imagination. Such acts of faith reveal the inner glow of a dull stone, the joy overflowing a cup of emptiness. In her essay "Work that Enfaiths" (*NSE* 247) Levertov notes that this distinction between belief and faith is the basis of "Flickering Mind":

> I stop
>
> to think about you, and my mind
>
> at once
>
> like a minnow darts away,
>
> [. . . . . .]
>
> How can I focus my flickering, perceive
>
> at the fountain's heart
>
> the sapphire I know is there? (*DH* 64)

Every poem, then, is an act of faith. According to Levertov, "Every work of art [. . .] enters a stage of improvisation as soon as the artist moves from thinking about it to beginning to form its concrete reality. That step [. . .] resembles moving from intellectual assent to opening the acts of daily life to permeation by religious faith," to what Dickinson means by "The Soul should always stand ajar" (Poem 1055). And Levertov sees that "such permeation is 'faith that works'" (*NSE* 249).

The understanding thus gained from an etymological analysis may be augmented by a theological analysis. Karl Rahner in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* puts forward a few theological presuppositions regarding the way to faith. An analysis of the poetry of Levertov and

Dickinson on the basis of these presuppositions brings into sharp relief certain distinctions in their faith experience. To begin with Rahner says,

> As a result of God's universal salvific will and the offer of the supernatural grace of faith as an abiding feature of man's mode of existence as a person, every human being is always (even previous to the explicit preaching of the Christian message) potentially a believer and already in possession [. . .] of what he is to believe: God's direct self – communication in Christ. (310)

Levertov has a similar thought attributed to Pascal, as the subtitle of her poem "For the Asking" in her posthumous collection: "You would not seek Me if you did not already possess Me" (*GU* 4). Coming to the faith, then, is "the endeavour to develop this already existing faith into its full Christological and ecclesiastical, explicit, social, consciously professed form. This endeavour can and should link up with all the elements of faith already present" (Rahner 310). As far as Levertov and Dickinson are concerned, the richness of their familial heritage and religious legacy were to all appearances most conducive to a flowering of faith in its fullness as outlined above. Blessed, in addition, with great powers of imagination and poetic talent, the undercurrents of their personal destinies showed promise of carrying them to a fruition of faith in the God whom they so ardently pursued all their lives as evidenced in their writing.

In Levertov's poetry we have a clear reflection of the various factors that eventually led her to faith. Even in the midst of the "anger abroad in the world" in which she lived "because of God's silence," she was able all through her life to discern God's "holy voice" that "utters its woe and glory in myriad musics, in signs and portents." Her poems were for her, "a way to ask and to answer" (*GU* 52). And having accepted "as guest, as brother, / the Word" (*GU* 18), we find her with her final commitment to the Catholic Church, blossoming "out of [herself], giving / nothing imperfect, withholding nothing!" (*GU* 12) In Dickinson's poetry however, and in the little we know of her life, the contributing factors are not followed through to their resolution in a conversion in the traditional sense. In other words, we do not find a resolution of her faith in its "full Christological and ecclesiastical, explicit, social, consciously professed form"(Rahner 310). Rather, she seems to work in the opposite direction, first moving out from the Congregational church, and so from a faith that is socially professed, and then diligently applying herself to a life long struggle with doubt and faith. She tells us that though she did not "keep the Sabbath going to church" she did hear "God [preach]" and "so instead of getting to Heaven, at last," she was "going, all along" (Poem 324). Conversely, in another poem she states that she "left the Place with all [her] might" and "threw [her] prayer away" having "grown shrewder" (Poem 476). She appears to have lived out her days in the "Sweet Skepticism of the Heart / That knows – and does not know" (Poem 1413).

The second presupposition Rahner puts forward is that "Conversion to faith is always a process with many stages"(310). This is true in Levertov's case. Her poetry clearly reflects the various phases in the process of her conversion to Christian faith. As we have already seen, at the beginning of her poetic career, we have her exploring daily experience and the mystery behind things in her search for the authentic. Her encounter with truth leads to her affirmation of joy. This is the period of her scepticism bordering on pantheism, which slowly gives way to agnosticism, where she perceives merely the truths of change and coherence and places faith in joy. There is no mention of God or religion, though she reveals a sense of otherness. In the next stage, she suffers a loss of authenticity, poetic vision and power. She struggles and grows to experience a new peace and hope. The seed of change is seen clearly in *Life in the Forest*, where her encounter with death assails her with doubt. In this period of transition, she moves from the recognition of a spiritual presence to a mystical belief in a God within herself. The greatest shift in her career comes with the collection *Candles in Babylon*, where the "experience of writing the poem" on "doubting Thomas" was for Levertov, "also a conversion process" (*NSE* 250). The collections from this one onwards offer her poetry of belief, with every succeeding collection bringing her a step closer to faith. From "mere shaky belief"(*NSE* 255), her faith develops into its Christological form with her recognition of Christ in the Incarnation. Gradually we find her surmounting her doubts, moving to a new stage of illumination in *Sands of the Well* where, as Murray

Bodo says in his article for *Image* titled "Denise Levertov: A Memoir and Appreciation," the "closing series of poems shade gracefully into prayer".

No such linear growth or evolution of faith marked by stages can be traced in Dickinson's work. The only divisions into which her work falls has nothing whatsoever to do with her faith – we have the poetry of her early years, then the middle period of greatest productivity concentrated in a few years, and finally the last stage of continued creative work that spanned two decades. Occasionally her desire for affirmation, her imaginative power, and her heritage from a phenomenally sensitive childhood enabled her to write in full confirmation of Christian attitudes and beliefs. Such poems culled from across thirty years of creative output only serve to show isolated moments of spiritual insight. In contrast, there are a greater number of poems that reveal myriads of moods that range from playful scepticism to utmost despair. It is therefore difficult to distinguish periods or stages of spiritual change or achievement. The greatest impediment is that there is no sure evidence to confirm her spiritual conversion at any point. As Rahner sees it, "Faith is never awakened by someone having something committed to him purely from outside, addressed solely to his naked understanding as such" (311). The truth of this statement is seen in Dickinson's life. The many converting influences on her, particularly at Mount Holyoke and at the time of the Revival of 1950 could not convince her. Neither could all the fiery sermons she heard:

Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –

Strong Hallelujahs roll –

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth

That nibbles at the soul – (Poem 501)

It was the independence of mind she maintained that made her resist all importuning to join the church. However, a sense of anxiety over her spiritual intransigence remained and as Charles R. Anderson opines in *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise,* "of all the Dickinson family, she is the only one whose entire career was devoted to a quest for religious truth" (259). As we have already seen, several Dickinson scholars like Sherwood, Oberhaus and Wolff have made strong arguments for the likelihood that she did experience a conversion, and Eberwein argues for a transforming experience of artistic empowerment that paralleled religious experience. Lundin's words of caution are wisely given: "[. . .] while no single poem of Dickinson can or should be read as though it were a straight transcription of her mind, the poems should not be read, either separately or in the aggregate, as though they offered scant clues as to the beliefs and doubts of this woman [. . .]" (293). In other words, we can never be sure with regard to her actual spiritual stance at any given point.

A third presupposition regarding the way to faith that Rahner offers follows.

> An approach to faith presupposes that a human being who is to be led to faith already has a starting point and that from it

> and from the very nature of that starting point, there exists a transition to the further reality of faith in whole or in part. The implication: that the realities and truths of faith are interconnected, and that there is therefore a connection also between what is always a prior datum and what has to be believed anew and expressly. (Rahner 310-311)

The starting point for Levertov is her Russian Jewish ancestry and the Hasidic and Anglican spiritual traditions from where she brings a concern with the spiritual, the ritual, and the religious element of living, and which are the sources of her fascination with the mysteriousness of the material world. As for the connection between "a prior datum and what has to be believed anew," we are able to discern four major threads running simultaneously and persistently through all of Levertov's collections that trace her "transition to the further reality of faith" – a celebration of mystery, a search for the authentic, her belief in the power of the imagination, and her political engagement.

An acknowledgment and celebration of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme of Levertov's poetry from its very beginnings. Levertov explores the mystery of experience and finds the spiritual to be an intensification of the daily event. Her poems are "rites moving around an experience, with the insight of words granting it significance, even holiness" (Juhasz 61). In "A Poet's View" Levertov admits, "the experience, as a poet,

of being at times a channel for something beyond my own limitations was [. . .] an open door to specifically religious experience (*NSE* 242).

"God is only known as God when he is known as the incomprehensible and is acknowledged in his incomprehensibility. [. . .] This incomprehensibility is essential and permanent and stems from the nature of God himself who is the absolute mystery" (Rahner 16). Levertov's path to a knowledge and experience of God who is the absolute mystery can be seen as the natural consequence of her peculiar response to mystery as articulated in her poem "The Novices". Here a man and a boy go into the forest in responsiveness to a call to perform something without understanding it, as a duty: they are to tug out of the earth a great iron chain which is attached at the other end to an oak tree. The tutelary spirit of the place appears and tells them not to perform the strenuous task but to "look about them / and see [. . .] and not ask what that chain was."

> To leave the open fields
> and enter the forest,
> that was the rite.
> Knowing there was mystery, they could go.
> Go back now! And he receded
> Among the multitude of forms,
> The twists and shadows they saw now, listening
> To the hum of the world's wood. (*OTS* 57)

Such was Levertov's response, her assent to the mystery of Christianity.

Much of Levertov's work in the last two decades of her life was inspired by a Christian imagination responding to the paradox of Incarnation in contrapuntal voices of faith, assurance and doubt. In her insightful and comprehensive examination of Levertov's "poetry of incarnation," Denise E. Lynch points out that the Jesuit "Teilhard de Chardin's paradoxical belief that human imperfection can enter into communion with divine perfection" informs much of Levertov's later poetry (5). Levertov's understanding of the Incarnation and its meaning for salvation gives her faith in a divinity both transcendent and immanent. "Faith is man's comprehensive 'Yes' to God revealing himself as man's saviour in Christ. [. . .] To be a Christian is to accept the truth of the mystery of Christ (the death and resurrection of the Son of God) and its meaning for salvation," says theologian Juan Alfaro (Rahner 313-314). Faith is a fundamental human choice, a decision wherein man submits to God's salvific love revealed in the Incarnation of Jesus. "On the Mystery of the Incarnation" (*DH* 50) reveals the depth of Levertov's probing of this mystery. "Annunciation" (*DH* 86), offers an interesting insight to Mary's "Yes" to God: "But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions / courage [. . .] She was free / to accept or to refuse, choice / integral to humanness." And when called to this momentous destiny to be the mother of God, "she did not quail" but perceived the astounding ministry she was offered "to carry [. . .] nine months of Eternity" and "Bravest of all humans, [. . .] Consent, / courage unparalleled, / opened her utterly" (*DH* 86). Thus

we see how from her exploration of the mystery of experience in her earliest poetry, Levertov proceeds to exploring the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Resurrection, till it leads to her acknowledgment of God the absolute mystery in his incomprehensibility. It ultimately takes her into the fold of the Church where she feels "nourished" by the "Catholic liturgy and mystical tradition"(*Conversations* 180). Embracing Christianity is a natural evolution for Levertov, since her exploration of the mystery of experience leads to a conviction that the spiritual is the intensification of the daily event and that the values of Christianity are not incompatible with the values that she has always sought.

Likewise, Levertov's search for the authentic, "Marvelous Truth" (*JL* 62) can be traced to its smooth and natural resolution. In her early collections she explores every aspect of her daily experience of the world in her search for the truth. She believes here as throughout her career that every experience relates in some way to the truth. As an agnostic she perceives merely the truths of change and coherence, and in the recreating and renewing power of Nature, which for her is truth. In the second stage of her transition, she encounters darkness and doubt, and struggles and grows to attain a new peace and hope, and begins to see the truth of a God within herself. The third stage that offers her poetry of belief shows her coming gradually to a position of belief in "the truth" of Christ (John 14:6).

With regard to the third thread, that of Levertov's belief in the power of the imagination, we find that her "poems have been addressing doubts

and hopes rather than proclaiming certainties" and her readers are let into the process as she is engaged in building up her own belief step by step. She remarks thus: "They are poems written on the road to an imagined destination of faith. That imagination of faith acts as yeast in my life as a writer" (*NSE* 257). While endeavouring to decipher daily experience she "emphasizes the incapacity of reason alone [. . .] to comprehend experience, and considers Imagination the chief of human faculties" (*NSE* 246). This is significant where her movement to faith is concerned, for as the theologian Jorg Splett says,

> The act of religious knowledge is a "decision" and a "leap", so unheralded that no justification of it can be given, nor can it be explained in any rational way. The element of knowledge in the religious act is referred to a special faculty not reducible to any other, a "feeling" and experience which are described in various ways, but which do not include intellect, argument and justification but are expressly opposed to them. (Rahner 15)

Speaking of her move from scepticism to faith, Levertov has no rational explanation to give: "it seems somewhat exaggerated to call "intellectual" either my previous doubts [. . .] or my more recent sense of their irrelevance. I have not solved by a reasoning process the problems which had always stood in my way" (*NSE* 242).

"God is not an object among other objects of experience which under certain circumstances one may fail to discover, but is necessarily affirmed in the accomplishment of man's intellectual and moral activity, even if he is explicitly denied, or not named, or is met with under quite conceptual modes of expression" (Rahner 311). As an artist Levertov had always believed that she was "in the service of the transcendent" (*NSE* 143). As we have already seen, she held "Imagination" to be "the chief of human faculties." She believed that it must therefore be "by the exercise of that faculty that one moves towards faith" and that "the imagination, which synergizes intellect, emotion and instinct, is the perceptive organ through which it is possible [. . .] to experience God" (*NSE* 246). And as she followed the "road of imagination," in "the decisions of the day" as well as in the "decisions of a poem in the making," she began "to see certain analogies [. . .] between the journey of art and the journey of faith" (*NSE* 248).

As already noted, while writing the poem "A Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" (*CB* 108), she was changed from agnostic to believer. "The experience of writing the poem – that long swim through waters of unknown depth – had also been a conversion process" (*NSE* 250). The rest of her life from this point onwards was spent exploring a radical Christian unorthodoxy and the tenuous ligament between belief, doubt and grace. For instance, as she confesses in "Work that Enfaiths," writing a libretto about El Salvador where she dwelt on the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero helped her to stop making a fuss in her mind about various points of doubt, and so

engage in a Pascalian wager that paid off. So too, it was through the creative process that she "worked through to a theological explanation" of a "substantial stumbling block, the suffering of the innocent and the consequent question of God's nonintervention" (*NSE* 250-251). There are several such instances of "the interaction of artistic labor and incipient faith" as in the writing of "Standoff," "The Annunciation," "On the Parables of the Mustard Seed," "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich," "St. Thomas Didymus" and several other poems featured in a collection of her religious poems, *The Stream and the Sapphire*. Levertov confesses: "The writing of each of these poems has brought me a little bit closer to faith as distinct from mere shaky belief. Thus for me the subject is really reversed: not "faith that works" but "work that enfaiths" (*NSE* 255).

In his book *Poetry as Prayer: Denise Levertov*, Murray Bodo describes Levertov's journey to God as two fold. "It is a journey by way of metaphors drawn from nature, drawn from the complexity of the human heart with its propensity for good and evil, its conflicts and failures and triumphs, as well as a journey through the social and political triumphs and calamities of her time" (99). This brings us to the fourth thread that runs through her poetry – that of her political engagement. Having been born into a socially conscious family with a literary bend, she was as involved in politics as she was in poetry, bringing the same energy and passion to both. The obligation of social conscience and the circumstances of her life forced her into the politics of the anti-war movement and into anti-nuclear, environmental, and social

justice concerns. Major blocks of her poetry vividly present the horror of war, and also reflect her political concerns and her anguish over public policy. The problem of suffering, and the question of God's nonintervention troubled Levertov not so much in relation to individual instances like we find in Dickinson, as in regard to the global panorama of oppression and violence. Here we see how Levertov's belief in the power of the imagination lifts her above her pain, helps her overcome despair and articulate a poetry of praise. In 'Poetry, Prophecy and Survival" she says, "Affliction is more apt to suffocate the imagination than to stimulate it" (*NSE* 145). Perhaps this explains the fallow period of Dickinson's life after the short period of intense creativity. This is substantiated by Lundin's remark, "As a consequence of her inner turmoil, Dickinson's poetic production and letter writing slackened significantly after 1865" (221). Levertov however believed that "The action of imagination, if unsmothered, is to lift the crushed mind out from under the weight of affliction. The intellect by itself may point out the source of suffering: but the imagination illuminates it: by that light it becomes more comprehensible" (*NSE* 145).

To speak of sorrow
works upon it
moves it from its
crouched place barring
the way to and from the soul's hall – (*SD* 53).

The angst of seeing and living in a world that seldom meets ideal standards forced Levertov to take stands. Her movement to Christian faith stemmed naturally and inevitably from her humanitarian concerns and her sense of social responsibility. Eventually, we see how her politics, her striving for justice and mercy, leads her to experience the fellowship of belief in the Catholic Church: "The process of moving from agnosticism to belief has been for me profoundly influenced by such people as Archbishop Romero, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and other people [. . .] whose commitment to peace and justice is absolutely outstanding" (*Conversations* 176). Levertov thus affirms God in the accomplishment of her intellectual and moral activity and her poems continue to give hope to a war-torn and fragmented world:

> The gods die every day
> but sovereign poems go on breathing
> in a counter-rhythm that mocks
> the frenzy of weapons, their impudent power. (*WE* 73)

An analysis of Dickinson's work based on the third presupposition of Rahner's with regard to "a starting point," "a transition to the further reality of faith" and "a connection also between what is always a prior datum and what has to be believed anew and expressly" (Rahner 310-311) shows that the starting point for her is the New England tradition of moral Calvinism that sets a frame for her thought. Unlike Levertov, she neglected her ancestral past, and Lundin points out a curious fact that there is but one

reference to her ancestry in all of her poems and letters. “Neither the traditions of the church nor the legacies of her ancestors interested her greatly. Because she had not known them directly, she had no memory of them. For her, memory meant the recollection of intense experiences or encounters rather than rituals of general commemoration” (8).

In Poem 285 Dickinson says that she sees ‘New Englandly’. By this she might have referred to the fact that it was the hymn books of Isaac Watts which gave her the models for her verse forms or that the descendents of Calvin had set a frame for her thought. We have already seen in an earlier chapter that Emily Dickinson was “at the disturbed confluence of two very powerful cultural traditions – that of New England Puritanism, which was waning, and that of New England Romanticism” (Robinson 34). The influence of the Puritan legacy and the Romantic inheritance on her mind was great. “The preference of intuition or feeling to reason, the mistrust of explanation, [. . .] the belief in prospects of Nature, the choice of solitude, the suspicion of society, the belief in organic meaning and veneration of awesome forces are all signs in her of the workings of a Romantic inheritance” (Robinson 90). The legacy of Calvinism was to remain with her all her life. One of its essential principles, which saw mankind as divided into ‘the Elect’ and the Damned taught that humanity was predestined, totally in the hands of God. It is no wonder then, that “Puritanism released the energy of uncertainty” observes Robinson, giving us an explanation for Emily Dickinson’s ambivalent attitude. “[. . .] what made Puritanism into a

dynamic system was a double scale of time and a dual sense of place – both of which show powerfully in Emily Dickinson's poetry" (36).

Coming to maturity at a time when its structure of dogmas was falling into collapse, the theology of Puritanism failed to provide satisfactory answers, and Dickinson's writing reveals her self-possessed mockery of the terms on which those beliefs were handed down to her. And out of her need to construct a private religion through the poetic imagination, she "struck out on her own road of spiritual pioneering" (Anderson 260). *Sacramentum Mundi* states that "God is [. . .] necessarily affirmed in the accomplishment of man's intellectual and moral activity, even if he is explicitly denied, or not named, or is met with under quite conceptual modes of expression" (Rahner 311). There is evidence that Dickinson had epiphanies of direct encounter with the infinite that inspired poems like "Better than Music! / For I – who heard it" (Poem 503). "Although offering no definitive proof of her spiritual condition, such ecstatic experiences support conjecture that Dickinson herself experienced the transition from fallen humanity's state of natural depravity to a state of grace" (Pollak 75). Oberhaus argues persuasively that Poem 964 is Dickinson's conversion narrative. This is a succinctly phrased dialogue between the poet and Jesus at the end of which, unusually for Dickinson, there is a resolution in her silent acquiescence denoted by the abrupt end to the conversation with Jesus' invitation: "Occupy my House."

"Unto Me?" I do not know you –

Where may be your House?

"I am Jesus – Late of Judea –
Now of Paradise" –

Wagons – have you – to convey me?
This is far from Thence –

"Arms of Mine – sufficient Phaeton –
Trust Omnipotence" –

I am spotted – "I am Pardon" –
I am small – "The least
Is esteemed in Heaven the Chiefest –
Occupy my House" –

However, as Robinson remarks: "If at times – and especially in 1862 – she went down on her knees, she did not stay there for very long" (71). For certain influences of her childhood and adolescent experiences remained to colour the whole of her life. These are revealed as connecting threads linking her poetry written over a span of three decades. For instance, her adolescent responses to death (which was a regular presence at the time) taught her to doubt the character of God, while her education, and in particular her interest in science had a lasting influence in developing her sceptical turn of mind.

In "A Poet's View," Levertov says, "To believe, as an artist, in inspiration of the intuitive, to know that without Imagination [. . .] no

amount of acquired craft or scholarship or of brilliant reasoning will suffice, is to live with a door of one's life open to the transcendent, the numinous. Not every artist, clearly, acknowledges that fact – yet all, in the creative act, experience mystery" (48). Emily believed this too:

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

She seems to be speaking here of spiritual vigilance that is so vital to a life of faith and doubt. 'The Only News I know," she writes in another poem, "Is bulletins all Day / From Immortality" (Poem 827). Dickinson was always attuned to the spiritual world, open to its meaning and anxious to understand the mystery of God. This is a significant factor in analyzing her spiritual life, for the reality of God and the centrality of Jesus (seeing Jesus as the decisive disclosure of God), are elements central to Christian faith.

The image of the Deity in Dickinson's poems appears divided and reveals a profound ambivalence towards God. Many of her poems focus on the discrepancy between God's alleged love, bounty, and omnipotence and her experience of what seems to be his indifference, arbitrariness, and even

malice. Though there are poems that contain childlike statements of faith, the predominant tone in the majority of the poems about God remains one of scepticism, disillusionment and bitterness.

The poet appears to long for certainty of God's love and goodness, but is too intellectually honest and acutely aware of the contradictions of her own religious experience to be capable of any 'simple faith.' In some of these poems she seems to be keenly aware of what she called "the underside of his divinity," that she was dealing with a "thrifty Deity," the universe being a "Gambol / Of His authority" (Poem 724). Her strongest denouncement of God is in a poem where she sees Abraham as a flattering sycophant and God as a despot who has to be humoured like an ill-tempered dog, a mastiff (Poem 1317).

During the Civil War period she probes the character of God in numerous poems and her tone alternates between devastating irony and sincere devotion. The God who emerges from these poems is an unrevealed God who does not answer, a God who she knows "exists / Somewhere – in silence" a God who has "hid his rare life / From our gross eyes" (Poem 338). Lundin notes that this "belief in the hiddenness of God was a central part of Dickinson's Protestant heritage" (147).

What we have in Dickinson's poems is a record of her struggle to come to terms with this unknown God by confrontation, accusation, questioning and complaint, for she is unable to resolve the contradictions in her image of God. Neither can her readers and critics arrive at any resolution

regarding her religious stance. We can only conclude with Marilyn C. Teichert's remark in "The Divine Adversary: The Image of God in Three ED Poems," that in the context of all the religious poems of Dickinson, what expressions of faith there are acquire "the paradoxical character of the outcry of the man in the Gospel (Mark 9:24): "Oh, Lord, I believe! Help Thou mine unbelief!" (21)

Faith as Christian faith means fellowship with the person of, and in the knowledge of Christ, for the revelation of God culminates in Jesus Christ. Dickinson's divided attitude to God arises from her difficulty in seeing Jesus as the decisive disclosure of God – the compassionate, loving, humble Christ as a revelation of the wrathful, vengeful, jealous God of the Old Testament. This image of the Christian God is profoundly paradoxical. For while Dickinson is unable to relate to God the Father and sees in him an adversary, she turns with confidence to Jesus in whom she sees a trustworthy friend. She is drawn irresistibly to Jesus who is the Word breaking the silence of God. She had a great affection for Christ though it was marked by a cautious ambivalence that emphasized his human rather than divine qualities. She frequently compares her suffering with the suffering of Christ. "In times of trauma, it comforted her to know that her trials had the 'Flavours of that Old Crucifixion'" (Lundin 173). What sustained her during her moments of trial according to Knapp was "her humanized image of Christ whom she saw as the mediating force between the finite and the infinite" (129). So too when she gropes with doubts

regarding death and immortality, Jesus becomes the divine "Preceptor," because he has gone before us, the "Tender Pioneer, " who has tested "the Plank" and "pronounced it firm" (Poem 698).

Dickinson's poems on the person of Christ so often glossed over by critics project her as a pilgrim soul persistently engaged in a struggle for faith. However, for Dickinson the crucifixion is important as an example of suffering love, not as an act of atonement. This is a problem that Lundin identifies in her understanding of Christ, which is also a point of contrast between her and Levertov. The "Emersonian view of Jesus" as the example of human finitude seemed convincing to her at times, which, "by pressing the point of Jesus' humanity" made him "something less than a God who could forgive sins and raise the dead," someone "trapped with us in our finitude in a universe of death" (Lundin 176, 239-240).

Levertov on the contrary, understood well the meaning of God's salvific love revealed in the Incarnation – the paradox of perfection within imperfection, of infinity within finitude. She accepted the significance of the Crucifixion for salvation. In her poems, it is not the enormity of Christ's pain that is stressed, but his very willingness to suffer, to shoulder the pain of the world. By assuming humankind's burden, Christ helps us move beyond self-destructive behaviour; teaches the necessity of "sublime acceptance" in facing up to obligations (*SS* 73). Jesus is the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Significantly, her conversion happens while she is working on the "Agnus Dei" (Lamb of God) section of her "agnostic

mass" (*NSE* 250). So while Dickinson believes that though only "One Crucifixion is recorded," "As many be / As Persons" (Poem 553), to the question, "Why single out this agony?" Levertov arrives through Julian of Norwich, at an answer: That "among all the tortured / One only is 'King of Grief'" for "*the oneing / with the Godhead* opened Him utterly / to the pain of all minds, all bodies" (*SS* 75-76). And though Dickinson was often unable to "[work] through to a theological explanation" of many of her religious doubts, her writing of each of these Christ poems brings her closer to "faith that works" unlike Levertov for whom it is her "work that Enfaiths" (*NSE* 255).

According to Kevin Vanhoozer, "[. . .] it is God's address to us in Jesus Christ that draws us forward eschatologically towards our destiny as human creatures" (183). Juan Alfaro delineates a faith that is centred in the mystery of Christ thus:

> It looks beyond the world and death in eager anticipation of eternal life in the encounter with the risen Christ. [. . .] Through faith man experiences and possesses himself in a new dimension; his consciousness of being present to himself is now set within the a priori horizon of ordination for eternity. The believer in time, is on a pilgrimage toward eternity [. . .] that is, on the way to meet the Lord." (Rahner 321)

An examination of the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson in the light of this Christocentric vision of faith reveals their eschatological vision and

consequently their faith as Christians. Eschatology – the doctrine of the last things ('eschatos' is the Greek for 'end') identified as resurrection, judgement, heaven and hell – is a central Christian doctrine and conditions every other article of faith. Both poets were interested in this "final piece in the jigsaw of Christian belief" (Fergusson 226), though perhaps in Dickinson's case her interest bordered on obsession, so much so, that the whole focus of her work seems to be on the last things. The "Glimmering Frontier" (Poem 696) and what lay beyond it was a subject that constantly preoccupied her. So much so, that Chase remarks that in her last years "the poet was intoxicated with eternity, if not by God" (308-309).

David Fergusson in an essay titled "Eschatology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* points to an eschatological turn evident in modern theology. "When it distracts from the here and now, or, even worse, is used to license present sufferings it becomes, orally and politically suspect" and raises "fears of a theological rationale for environmental complacency or even exploitation (227). Eschatology generally understood as 'pie in the sky when you die,' during the time of Emily Dickinson, had come to be viewed with suspicion by the time of Levertov.

What Levertov does in her poetry of political, social and ecological engagement has analogies with what Fergusson describes as the "task of a responsible eschatology" – "to demonstrate that Christian hope for the future bestows a significance upon the present time and instills a sense of responsibility within the church for the world [. . .] and enable an effective

and sober Christian witness" (227-228). This is particularly significant at the present time when certain trends have eroded secular confidence in the future such as fears of a nuclear catastrophe, threats to the environment and the politics of the Middle East. All of these are serious concerns in Levertov's poetry. She understood the obligation of writers, "to acknowledge their potential influence on the lives of others" (*NSE* 136). In her poetry of the war, she brings in the weight of her moral and spiritual powers, and we find her singing in dark times, amidst suffering and pain as in "Staying Alive" (*SA* 127).

Dickinson too writes about singing "To keep the Dark away" (Poem 850). And though she never warmed to the subject of war, she concludes a letter to her cousins as they were faced with the fury of war with the plea, "Let's love better, children, it's most that's left to do" (*Letters* 398). Dickinson was well aware of the task and reach of a poet:

> The Martyr Poets – did not tell –
> But wrought their pang in syllable –
> That when their mortal name be numb –
> Their mortal fate – encourage some – (Poem 544).

In Levertov and Dickinson then, we see two poets who have (to borrow Rilke's words) "worked their way fully into their tasks" (qtd. in *NSE* 237).

Nevertheless, a great distinction emerges in a comparative study of the two poets with regard to what Marcus Borg calls "a way of seeing." In his sermon "Faith Not Belief," Borg, a biblical and Jesus scholar and

Professor of Religion and Culture says that faith is "a way of seeing the whole – a way of seeing the whole of what is." The "way of seeing" revealed in the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson follows the same pattern observed so far in other matters – resolution and irresolution respectively. Borg shares an exposition by the 20th century American theologian H. Richard Neibuhr who in his book *The Responsible Self* speaks of three ways of seeing the whole. One is to see the whole as hostile and threatening. The second way, and probably the most common secular way of seeing the whole that has emerged in the last 300 years in Western culture, is to see the whole as indifferent. It may be full of wonder, but ultimately the cosmos is indifferent to human life. Yet another way is to see the whole as life giving, nourishing and gracious, as bringing us forth in a quite spectacular way, perhaps in ways we cannot understand. According to Neibuhr, faith is seeing the whole in this manner, even as we are aware of the brutality, the horror and suffering that abound in the world.

Levertov, being temperamentally optimistic, had always believed in the innate order and coherence of things. However the onset of war disturbs her and she struggles to make sense of the chaos around her. God appears to be the author of paradoxes, at once loving yet aloof, benevolent creator of a world filled with misery and pain. As she confronts war and the darkness of human misery, she refuses to be confounded and tries to understand as Lady Julian does, the immensity of God's love. She tries to see the darkness as a source of rest. She struggles like Julian and Job to understand God in

order to be able to accept contradiction. As Wakoski says, her struggle, and the goal of her vision have been "to find a God in this intermingling of flesh and spirit" (Wagner-Martin 58). She turns to Julian for faith in which she can rest from the nagging need for explanation; to learn what Julian learned in one of her "showings": "that there is a divine plan, both temporal and transcendent, which will account for the unchecked miseries of the world, a plan which our finite minds are incapable of grasping. God informs her [. . .] that 'All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'" (*NSE* 252). We see here in Levertov, the truth of Fergusson's statement:

> Confidence in the future is not a particular esoteric insight. It is a function of faith in God – Father, Son and Spirit – and a way of expressing the significance of that faith for the future of the world. Amidst the presence of injustice, suffering and death, Christian faith [. . .] must take the form of hope for the future. Such a hopeful conviction about the end of the world and its people is demanded by belief in creation's continuing status as loved by God, redeemed by Christ and brought to fulfillment by the Spirit. It is a belief properly expressed not in unwarranted speculation but in prayer, praise and Christian service. (242)

Levertov thus comes to see the whole in the way Neibuhr advocates, "as life giving, nourishing and gracious, as bringing us forth in a quite spectacular way" as testified by the collections of her poems written over a

period of fifty years. They trace her journey to order and revisioning, as she gradually moves from the rancour and bitterness of her early poetry of engagement to affirmation, and tranquility, enabled at last to articulate the celebratory and life-affirming values that shine through in her religious poems. Her endeavour all along is to

> try to redeem
> the human vision
> from cesspits where human hands
> have thrown it [. . .] (*LF* 59)

As a young adult, Dickinson seems to take comfort in the argument from design and there are a few mediocre poems that are restatements of transcendental notions regarding nature. But this "Child's faith" is soon lost. Knapp speaks of the "grimness of Dickinson's vision" (130). Unlike Emerson who viewed the forces of nature as friendly, Dickinson looks upon them as hostile. She considers them agents of Divinity who set up their traps and deceits to lure her into believing in nature's continuous beneficence. Nature threatens to obliterate the identity of man, and images of violence, engulfment and drowning abound. A minor category of her poems shows belief in a mystical bond existing between man and nature. For the most part, though, nature is inscrutable, and she believes that nature is at the core indifferent towards the life and interests of mankind. Poem 1624 written late in her life speaks of Nature's cosmic indifference:

Apparently with no surprise,

To any happy Flower

The Frost beheads it at its play –

In accidental power –

The blonde Assassin passes on –

The Sun proceeds unmoved

To measure off another Day

For an approving God.

Further, Nature serves to remind her of the impermanence of things and of her own mortality. As she sees it, "Creation" is merely "the Gambol of [God's] Authority."

The Perished Patterns murmur –

But His Perturbless Plan

Proceed – inserting Here – a Sun –

There – leaving out a Man – (Poem 724)

As Ferlazzo perceives it, "Dickinson [. . .] is unsure of immortality and suspicious of nature, and is unwilling to believe and affirm what she cannot test for certain; she will allow herself, at best, only cool skepticism" (102).

This cannot however, be taken as a final statement regarding Dickinson's vision of creation and the future. "Faith – is the Pierless Bridge" she writes, "Supporting what We see / Unto the Scene that We do not – [. . .] To Our far, vacillating Feet / A first Necessity" (Poem 915). In spite of all her misgivings and uncertainty about the future, Dickinson never abdicated

hope: "I reason – Earth is short – / And Anguish – absolute – / And many hurt, / [. . .] // I reason, that in Heaven – Somehow it will be even – Some new Equation, given –" (Poem 301). She continued to hope for immortality, especially as death's depredations struck closer and closer. And when her mother died in 1882, she wrote, "I believe we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker – that the One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power still farther to surprise that which He has caused. Beyond that all is silence" (*Letter*s 750). "Like Sisyphus, Dickinson seems reconciled never to know, never to be certain of anything except of death" (Knapp 139).

The peculiarities in the faith of Levertov and Dickinson that have emerged so far become clear when we situate them in the religious and intellectual milieu of their times. In his book *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, Lesslie Newbigin delineates the postmodern religious situation. He starts his exposition with St. Thomas Aquinas who "made a sharp distinction between faith and reason [. . .] Thomas accepted a distinction between things that can be known by reason alone (such as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul) and things that could be known only through divine revelation such as the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity" (17). One consequence of the Thomist scheme however, was that it "puts asunder what Augustine had held together, and as a result of this, knowledge is separated from faith [. . .] In Locke's famous definition, belief is "a persuasion which falls short of knowledge." This dichotomy has run deep in our culture to this day" (18).

This seems to underline the basic difference in the faith experience of Levertov and Dickinson. While a study of their writing, both poetry and prose, reveals that Levertov's pilgrimage took her along a path similar to the one delineated by Augustine, Dickinson seems to have taken the route of Thomas. While Levertov took faith as the way to knowledge, corresponding to Augustine's dictum – "I believe in order to know," Dickinson took the road of doubt to certainty, though she has left posterity to wonder if she did get there. In her essay, "Affinities of Content" (1991) Levertov quotes Oscar de Lubicz Miloz: "To wait for faith in order to be able to pray is to put the cart before the horse. Our way leads from the physical to the spiritual" (*NSE* 17). This reminds her of a prayer of St. Anselm which says, "I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand; and what is more, I believe that unless I do believe I shall not understand" (*NSE* 17). What disparity between Levertov's "heavy cry": "Lord, / I believe, / help thou mine unbelief." (*DH* 101), and Dickinson's "'Faith' bleats – to understand!" (Poem 313).

A second consequence that Newbigin notes, and one that has great significance as far as this study is concerned is that the Thomist scheme creates a "cleavage between two conceptions of God" which is a "dilemma [that] has remained at the heart of Christian thinking in the "developed" world to this day" (18-19). The God whose existence is demonstrable by the methods of philosophical argument is not easily recognizable as the God who encounters us in the Bible. Dickinson had a problem accepting this God

– the "Burglar! Banker – Father!" (Poem 49) of her early years, the "Swindler" (Poem 476), the stingy God (Poem 791) and "A Force Illegible" (Poem 820) of her middle years, or the "Heavenly Father" she accuses of "Duplicity" (Poem 1461), and "the jealous God" (Poem 1719) of her last years. He is certainly not the Trinity of Christian faith. It is almost impossible to conceive that this God could become incarnate in a particular human being. The God Dickinson knows is what Newbigin calls "the God of the Philosophers – more a construct of the human mind – an idol." For her the God who encounters us in the biblical story seems to be what Newbigin describes as "a primitive anthropomorphic misunderstanding appropriate to an early stage in human development but to be left behind in a more developed society"(19).

On the contrary, Levertov, on the strength of the testimony of her poems, came to know the God who meets us in the Bible as the true and living God, the one who meets us in the person of Jesus Christ. As she acknowledges in "A Poet's View", the "unknown began to be defined for me as God, and further, as God revealed in the Incarnation" (*NSE* 241). There is no stronger argument in this respect than her poem "On the Mystery of the Incarnation":

> It's when we face for a moment
> the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
> the taint in our own selves, that awe
> cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:

not to a flower, not to a dolphin,

to no innocent form but to this creature vainly sure

it and no other is god-like, God

out of compassion for our ugly failure to evolve entrusts,

as guest, as brother,

the Word. (*DH* 50)

Newbigin identifies a third consequence of the Thomist synthesis. If philosophy has to be called in "to underpin that knowledge of God" which tradition claimed "comes by revelation," then it is assumed that the "philosophical proofs for the existence of God must be invulnerable. But they are not." For the "shaking of old and (apparently) secure foundations by the findings of the new science" has resulted in scepticism which became dominant in the intellectual life of the West by the beginning of the 17th century (19). Born into this intellectual climate of the Enlightenment as we have seen in an earlier chapter, in the specific context of a deeply traditional Calvinistic family, Dickinson, in a poem beginning "Going to Heaven" says, "I'm glad I don't believe it" (Poem 77). Given her situation, Dickinson's scepticism comes as no surprise:

"Faith" is a fine invention

When Gentlemen can see –

But Microscopes are prudent

In an Emergency. (Poem 185)

The 17th and 18th centuries saw a rapid development of the new science. The whole universe could, it seemed, be understood with the clarity of Mathematics. A model of reality was put forward that did not depend on divine revelation or faith, resulting in a renunciation of the authority of religion, something anticipated by Dickinson and accepted as normal by the time of Levertov – a time in which the seemingly assured assumptions inherited from the Enlightenment are being deconstructed. The assumptions of the modern scientific worldview can no longer be taken as secure foundation. According to Newbigin we are in "a world which the Chinese writer Carver Yu has summarized in the phrase "technological optimism and literary despair"(46). On the one hand we witness the unstoppable dynamism of our science-based technology and on the other, the bleak nihilism and hopelessness that is reflected in the literature, art, and drama of our society. He further remarks, "while both faith and critical reason have necessary roles to play in the enterprise of knowing, modern man has renounced the first of these and left himself bereft of the possibility of knowing anything" (48).

Levertov, however, longed for the kind of faith where she could 'know.' "On the surface, such a faith may seem a contradiction, for if we know, we have no need for faith. But the knowing underlined here is to *know in faith*, faith itself gives us knowledge of that which we cannot know without it" (Bodo 104). And *Sands of the Well* and *This Great Unknowing* provide ample proof that she did 'know' her Redeemer in her last years.

That faith and doubt is a daunting and confusing topic in its breadth and complexity, and in the intensity with which it is experienced goes without saying. The study so far has proved that it is also a topic concerning confusion. Therefore in approaching faith, one needs a certain method or style of thinking to foster greater clarity and deeper understanding. It is here that the Kierkegaardian and Hegelian matrices facilitate a dialectical understanding of faith and doubt in Levertov and Dickinson. The undialectical understanding of faith and doubt conceives them as two separate entities. Dialectically understood, there is only the unity of faith and doubt – with either one of them dominating. The unity of faith and its other – doubt. We can therefore speak of faith where doubt predominates or faith where faith predominates. What follows is an analysis of the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson using the Kierkegaardian matrix as outlined in William McDonald's article on Søren Kierkegaard in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

The evolution of Denise Levertov's faith follows a pattern that resembles the dialectical progression of existential stages that we find in Kierkegaard's doctrine of the three stages on the way of life: "The first is the aesthetic, which gives way to the ethical, which gives way to the religious" (McDonald, par. 3). Thus it is possible to find analogues between the three hierarchical levels of individual existence recognized by Kierkegaard and the three stages in the evolution of Levertov's faith that this study identifies. Kierkegaard describes the transition from one stage to the other as a crisis, as

a breach of continuity. In *Something About Kierkegaard*, David F. Swenson explains what Kierkegaard means by the breach of continuity between the stages:

> 1) The values in each stage are determined by specific passions or enthusiasms, qualitatively different. 2) A personality whose life is in the one sphere cannot by a mere process of reflection transport himself into the other; for this a passionate resolution of the will is necessary. 3) The change from one sphere to the other is never necessary, but always contingent; if it presents itself as possible, it also presents itself as possible of non-realization" (162-163).

Levertov's early poetry up to the collection *To Stay Alive* can be seen as roughly corresponding to the aesthetic stage. For Kierkegaard, living in the immediate moment is what characterizes an aesthetic life" (McDonald, par. 3). In the first three collections of her poems we have what Ralph J. Mills calls her "poetry of the immediate" (*Contemporary Literary Criticism* vol. 2, 243). Here she devotes attention to the balanced savouring and seeing of life in poems that explore domestic spaces and imagined territories. It is significant that Levertov's first volume is titled *Here and Now*. The aesthetic stage of existence is characterized by "immersion in sensuous experience" (McDonald, par. 3). This characteristic marks her first five American volumes, where "the celebration of life is obvious in the sensual imagery that often focuses on light and energy," as Anne Colclough Little says in her

article "Old Impulses, New Expressions" (1). The speaker feels "an idiot joy" (*HN* 17), "a shiver, a delight / that what is passing / is here" (*OTS* 39), and a voice overheard expresses exuberance as it says, "You know, I'm telling you, what I love best / is life. I love life!" (*WE* 31). Another characteristic feature of the aesthetic perspective is that it "transforms quotidian dullness into a richly poetic world by whatever means it can" (McDonald par. 3). The prime motive for the aesthete is the transformation of the boring into the interesting. Such a transformation of quotidian dullness is noted by Mills in "Denise Levertov: The Poetry of the Immediate": "The quotidian reality [. . .] Denise Levertov revels in, carves and hammers into lyric poems of precise beauty. As celebrations and rituals lifted from the midst of contemporary life in its actual concreteness, her poems are unsurpassed [. . .] (243).

Levertov's reference to her early period of "regretful skepticism" in an essay (*NSE* 241) is noteworthy, for scepticism is a chief feature typical to the aesthetic sphere. There are many degrees of aesthetic experience according to Kierkegaard. At the limits of this type of existence, there is immense pain and despair and sometimes a consciousness that life is meaningless and has no purpose (McDonald par. 3). We have seen how the war casts a shadow over Levertov, resulting in a loss of authenticity, a loss of poetic vision and poetic power. She writes, "[. . .] the blinds are down over my windows, / my doors are shut" (*SD* 62). In some poems we notice how the ineffective struggle against the war brings desolation, and emptiness. Hopelessness echoes throughout *Relearning the Alphabet*.

Mersmann comments on the effects of war on Levertov: "[. . .] vision is clouded, form is broken, balance is impossible, and the psyche is unable to throw off its illness and sorrow" (85-86). In *To Stay Alive*, the last collection of the period that corresponds to the aesthetic stage, Levertov is, according to Marie Borroff in *The Yale Review*, "disturbed by the knowledge that an unassimilable evil exists which must be hated and which must be fought on the level of action" (243).

This is significant with regard to Levertov's transition to the second level of existence in Kierkegaard's way of life – the ethical. This sphere is where for him, an individual begins to take on a true direction in life and begins to assert an awareness of good and evil. Levertov sees war as the ultimate disorder. The feeling flowing out of her poems on war in her period of transition to the threshold of belief reveals that she has encountered evil in a way it had not been encountered before. She wonders that man can feel nothing more than "mere regret" about "the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk / runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies, / transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments" (*SD* 80).

"In order to raise oneself beyond the merely aesthetic life which is a drifting in imagination, possibility and sensation, one needs to make a commitment. That is, the aesthete needs to choose the ethical, which entails a commitment to communication and decision procedures" (McDonald par. 4). For society, this level of existence begins when one takes on the greater obligations of marriage and other social duties. According to Kierkegaard,

one's actions at this ethical level of existence have a consistency and coherence that they lacked in the previous sphere of existence. Levertov believes that the artist's involvement with public affairs is part of a total commitment with the life he lives and the world in which he lives it. *Footprints* contains statements of the poet's convictions and in *Life in the Forest* Levertov implements her poetic rationale "that parts of a life have a necessary and tolerable coherence" (Costello 199).

For Kierkegaard, the ethical is supremely important and it calls individuals to take account of their lives and to scrutinize their actions in terms of universal and absolute demands. These demands are made in such a way that each individual must respond – to be authentic – in a truly committed, passionate consciousness. Levertov was always aware of her mentor Rilke's "emphasis on "experience," on living one's life with attention, [. . .] balanced by an equal emphasis on the doing of one's art work, a zeal for the doing of it [. . .]" (*NSE* 235). Further, as Richard Pevear notes, there was also "an awareness of the essential relationship between the struggle for a more authentic vision and the struggle for a more authentic world" behind Levertov's choice of materials in *Footprints* (293). *The Freeing of the Dust* contains poems of a way of life that have never before been met in her work. She explores the need to look outward to the world to know another, and inward to comprehend and accept the self. In line with Kierkegaard's view, the meaning of her life comes down to living out her beliefs in an honest, passionate, and devoted way. *Life in the Forest*, the last

volume of this period of transition, finds Levertov strongly possessing "that sense of so much being 'in bud' – so many things being in the beginning of growth, the first shoots of some different consciousness, of moral evolution, [. . .] the deep hope implied in the words, 'With God all things are possible' " (*Conversations* 151). This is quite in tune with Kierkegaard's conviction that "without a religious intervention and background, the realization of the ethical ideal is [. . .] impossible. It then becomes the function of ethics to develop a receptivity for religion, a sense of need for it, while religion is for its part a means of restoring to the personality the integrity of its ethical consciousness " (Swenson 166).

The period of Levertov's poetry of belief, beginning with *Candles in Babylon* corresponds to the religious sphere of Kierkegaard, which is the highest stage in human existence. The theologian Jorg Splett says, "The act of religious knowledge is a 'decision' and a 'leap' [. . .]" (Rahner 15). Kierkegaard refers to it as "the leap *par excellence* by which the religious passion which in Christianity is called faith, emerges" (Swenson 163). This "leap" that Levertov makes in the course of her writing of the poem "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" gives her a faith that will not deny doubt. Of the two types of religiousness Kierkegaard distinguishes within this stage, Levertov's corresponds to the type characterized by the realization that the individual is sinful. Through revelation and in direct relationship with the paradox that is Jesus Christ in time, she begins to see that her eternal salvation rests on a paradox – God, the transcendent, coming

into time in human form to redeem human beings. For Kierkegaard, the very notion of this occurring was scandalous to human reason for "we must believe by virtue of the absurd" (McDonald, par. 5). In her essay "A Poet's View," Levertov says how she began to see the "stumbling blocks" that stood in her way to faith "as absurd." She wondered if by beginning "to act as if [she] did beleve," faith would follow, and with it "some way to deal intellectually with the troublesome mysteries and paradoxes" (*NSE* 242). Faith is a miracle, a gift from God. And Eternal Truth enters time in the instant Levertov recognises "a shivering God" in "a wisp of damp wool" – the Lamb of God (*CB* 114-115). The condition for realizing truth for the Christian is a gift from God, but its realization is a task which must be repeatedly performed by the individual believer. Levertov understands the necessity of action well. As she tells Smith in an interview, the incarnation implies "the cooperation of man" (*Conversations* 141). The poem ends with the affirmation that we must bear the responsibility for the suffering of the world, and make the light of Christ stronger: "Let's try / if something human still / can shield you, / spark / of remote light" (*CB* 115).

For Kierkegaard, faith is a matter of lived experience, of constant striving within an individual's existence. Levertov's collections from *Oblique Prayer* to *This Great Unknowing* are undoubtedly "testimonies of lived life" (*NSE* 21). The faith presented in the "Mass" as a faint glimmer of light surrounded by infinite darkness grows with her striving. In *Breathing the Water*, what seemed tentative in "Mass" is confirmed, bringing about her

conversion to a more orthodox Christianity. In "St. Thomas Didymus" (*DH* 107), an understanding of the Resurrection helps her to make sense of suffering. *A Door in the Hive* and *Evening Train* take her to a new stage of illumination.

According to Kierkegaard, the aesthetic and the ethical are both annulled and preserved in their synthesis in the religious stage. As far as the aesthetic stage of existence is concerned what is preserved in the higher religious stage is the sense of infinite possibility made available through the imagination. The unfolding of this "infinite possibility" is what we witness in Levertov's final collections *Sands of the Well* and *This Great Unknowing*. As Kathleen Norris says in her essay "Denise Levertov: Work that Enfaiths," "Levertov, in both her life and work, epitomizes the poet's path to religious formation. [. . .] even when she remained in doubt as to the truth of the Christian vision, she had faith in what Keats called the work of the imagination. And in her long apprentice as a poet she came to see that the one discipline prepared her for the other" (1).

Even though Dickinson's work does not reveal such a linear progression of spiritual evolution or a pattern that corresponds to the stages on the way of life repesented by Kierkegaard, a few observations made on the basis of this matrix are revealing. One characteristic of the aestheic stage according to Kierkegaard is the "valorization of possibility over actuality"(McDonald, par. 3). There are as already mentioned, many degrees of aesthetic existence at the limits of which is a consciousness that life is

meaningless and has no purpose. The person lives simply for possibilities – and arranges his or her life around a rich fantasy life, at the same time, however, there is immense pain and despair. Dickinson "roamed the regions of boundless possibilities" as Lundin observes (21), or as she herself puts it, "I dwell in Possibility" (Poem 657). And her words, "Safe Despair it is that raves – / Agony is frugal" (Poem 1243) speak for themselves of the immense pain and despair that marked her life. In Kierkegaard's opinion, the aesthete uses artifice, arbitrariness, irony, and wilful imagination to recreate the world in his own image. All these are applicable to Dickinson's art.

What Swenson states with regard to the aesthetic stage is noteworthy.

> Whoever finds the meaning of life in the aesthetic, is bound to postulate an external or uncertain condition, as for example, prosperity or good fortune, success, etc., a condition [. . .] beyond his control. Or if he seeks the meaning of life in something within the personality, as in the unfolding of a talent then he still posts a condition which is relatively external, since the condition is not given in and through his own will merely. (167-168)

It is interesting to speculate what place success and fame had for Dickinson, whose life was set apart for her poetic vocation, for certainly they eluded her in her lifetime. She did not publish her poems but believed that "Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man" (Poem 709) and that "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed. / To comprehend a nectar /

Requires sorest need" (Poem 67). However, the careful way in which she gathered her poems together in fascicles seems to denote a desire to secure recognition after death. It is worth mentioning a point that Lundin notes in this regard: "Fame was much on Dickinson's mind in early adulthood. The deeper her solitude became, the more she dwelt upon the topic. It provided the vital links connecting her renunciation of the world, her poetic endeavours, and her longing for [. . .] immortality" (109).

Also for one like Emily Dickinson, a multiple personality almost, who defies understanding, who lived out her life in seclusion to pursue her poetic talent and who knew pain and despair so intensely, the following statements seem to assume some significance. The aesthetic sphere also includes among others, those who "seek the meaning of life in the successful development of [. . .] a poetic talent," those who "seek to enjoy the power to dispense with enjoyment, who throw away the opportunities for pleasure in order to enjoy this freedom," those who choose "the plain and simple pleasure of the plain and simple life, as offering the greatest promise of security," and "the highly complicated personality who perceives the vanity of life and enjoys a reflection upon his own despair" (Swenson 167-168). A type of aestheticism is also criticized from the point of view of ethics. It is seen to be emptily self-serving and escapist. It is a despairing means of avoiding commitment and communal existence.

We have already seen that for Kierkegaard, "The change from one sphere to the other is never necessary, but always contingent; if it presents

itself as possible, it also presents itself as possible of non-realization" (Swenson 163). We find such a "non-realization" in Dickinson, and Kierkegaard's dialectic provides pointers to the reasons behind this. We do not find an awareness of good and evil in Dickinson; nor do we find the consistency and coherence of actions that are characteristic of the ethical stage. Neither does she take on the greater obligations of marriage and other social duties. Also, for Kierkegaard,

> In order to raise oneself beyond the merely aesthetic life which is a drifting in imagination, possibility and sensation, one needs to make a commitment. That is, the aesthete needs to choose the ethical, which entails a commitment to communication and decision procedures. (McDonald, par. 4)

The necessary conditions of making a commitment and choosing in this sense were impediments Dickinson seemingly could not surmount, just as she could not make a commitment to Christ while at Mount Holyoke, and as she could not commit herself to the publication of her work, for whatever reasons. Even in the writing of her poems, she had the "habit of depositing throughout her manuscripts alternate words or phrases without an indication of a final choice" as Lundin points out, and "choosing not to choose," shuttled between "infinite possibilities and tragic realities" (140).

Dickinson would surely have agreed with Kierkegaard that Christian faith is not a matter of regurgitating church dogma but a matter of individual subjective passion, which cannot be mediated by the clergy or by

human artefacts. Kierkegaard also believed that "Faith is the most important task to be achieved by a human being, because only on the basis of faith does an individual have a chance to become a true self. This self is the life-work which God judges for eternity" (McDonald, par. 5). The individual is thereby subject to an enormous burden of responsibility, for upon one's existential choices hangs ones eternal salvation or damnation. "Anxiety or dread (*Angst*) is the presentiment of this terrible responsibility when the individual stands at the threshold of momentous existential choice" (McDonald, par. 5). Anxiety is a two-sided emotion: on one side is the dread burden of choosing for eternity; on the other side is the exhilaration of freedom in choosing oneself. For Kierkegaard, choice occurs in the instant, which is the point at which time and eternity intersect — for the individual creates through temporal choice a self which will be judged for eternity. And "[. . .] unless this self acknowledges a 'power which constituted it,' it falls into a despair which undoes its selfhood." (McDonald par. 5). A question that arises is whether Dickinson's apparent inablity to choose (in spite of the fact that she was consumed by 'Eternity') is the reason behind much of her despair. That her deliberation on the question of conversion caused great anxiety and that she regretted her inability to make a commitment we have already seen. "Remorse is cureless" she writes, "the disease / Not even God – can heal" (Poem 744).

Christian dogma, according to Kierkegaard, embodies paradoxes which are offensive to reason. The central paradox is the assertion that the

eternal, infinite, transcendent God simultaneously became incarnated as a temporal, finite, human being (Jesus). There are two possible attitudes we can adopt to this assertion, viz. we can have faith, or we can take offense. What we cannot do, according to Kierkegaard, is believe by virtue of reason. If we choose faith we must suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason.

What Dickinson's response was is open to conjecture. Wolff firmly believes, "Emily Dickinson finally came into an estate of faith, not by virtue of the Resurrection, but of the Incarnation" (265), and Marcus K. Billson says that it is possible to see her dialectic as "a 'movement' in the Kierkegaardian sense, a gesture toward accepting the irrational," for while she "continually faces the absurd with bravery," she "does not shy away from the awful uncertainty of doubt" (84). On the other hand, Lundin says that her emphasis on "the humanity of Jesus seems on the verge of eliminating any sense we might have of his divinity" (177) and Donna Dickenson observes, "Redemption through Christ is one component of Dickinson's belief [. . .] but it is vitiated by scepticism" (93). Once again we are stymied by Dickinson's ambivalence and the disparate views presented by critics and biographers.

While Dickinson would doubtless have believed with Kierkegaard that the impulse towards an awareness of a transcendent power in the universe is what religion is supposed to stand for, she would not have subscribed to his principle that religion has a social and an individual (not just personal) dimension and that it begins with the individual and his or

her awareness of sinfulness. Perhaps this was the greatest impediment for Dickinson. Lundin points to "the sense she shared with her Enlightenment and romantic predecessors that finitude rather than sin was the fundamental human dilemma" (29). And two years before her death in 1884, she wrote: "Of God we ask one favor, / That we may be forgiven – / For what, he is presumed to know - / The Crime, from us, is hidden –" (Poem 1601).

Kierkegaard saw scientific knowledge as the greatest obstacle to human redemption. The possibility that this could have proved an impediment for Dickinson cannot be ruled out, for in Lundin's view, "the natural sciences" had the most lasting influence in "developing her skeptical turn of mind" (31). In Dickinson's words, "'Faith' is a fine invention" indeed, "But microscopes are prudent / In an Emergency" (Poem 185).

The question remains, what then is to be made of all those poems that speak of her struggle "To mend each tattered Faith" (Poem 1442) in a "religion / That doubts as fervently as it believes" (Poem 1144)? What of her claim that she was "Given in Marriage unto [the] Celestial Host – / Bride of the Father and the Son / Bride of the Holy Ghost" (Poem 817)? There are many who like Anderson believe, "The final direction of her poetry, and the pressures that created it, can only be described as religious, using that word in its 'dimension of depth'" (283). For Kierkegaard, the true meaning of Christianity is the individual standing alone before and in the presence of a transcendent God. Even if Dickinson was unable to effect the transition to the higher levels of existence, in a manner that is observable in her poetry,

she appears to have lived always in the presence of God, whose "triple Lenses" (Poem 895) she could never escape. The one possible conclusion is that articulated by Teichert: "The only resolution for her lies in the very persistence with which she remains engaged in the spiritual struggle" (26).

If Kierkegaard considers scientific knowledge as the greatest obstacle to human redemption, Hegelianism promises absolute knowledge that is available by virtue of a science of knowledge. Accordingly, anyone capable of following the dialectical progression of the concepts of Hegel's logic would have access to the mind of God. Though Levertov and Dickinson did not follow such a logic, the focus of their lives was on 'knowing' God. Lawrence Dickey in his essay "Hegel on Religion and Philosophy" explains: "Hegel claimed that "the substance" of the Christian religion and his philosophy were "the same." The only difference was that the truth of the relationship between man and God was being expressed in two different "languages" – one the language of "feeling and piety" that registered the deep need of mankind in general for religion, and the other, that of "scientific cognition" which sought the "scientific ascertainment of [religious] truth," raising faith to the level of knowledge (309).

In an essay titled "Hegel's Dialectical Method" Michael Forster says that one function of Hegel's dialectical method is "the task of leading the individual from his uneducated standpoint to knowledge" and that Hegel refers to the course of his discipline as "a pathway of doubt, or more precisely, [. . .] that of despair" for the individual educated (Forster 134). The

life and work of Levertov and Dickinson proceed along such a pathway of doubt and despair. Analyses of the development of thought in their works as they engage themselves in a search for God and for the truths of religion reveal some resemblance to the Hegelian matrix because of the dialectic through which their belief works. It is envisaged therefore, that the understanding and application of the dialectical process outlined by Hegel would aid a comparative study of the dialectics of faith in Levertov and Dickinson, though by dialectic no sharply defined Hegelian matrix is intended. What is meant rather, is that mental process which can accept uncertainties and live with them, that operation of the mind, which allows for movement and constant change and a possibility of growth.

Two basic ideas of Hegel's thought are the primacy of the mind or Spirit and the dialectical movement. The mind or the Spirit is posited as the absolute primary basis and everything else as its own developing moments or appearances. It is therefore at the root of becoming. The dialectical process – a process that involves the three stages of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis, lays out the path that the becoming must follow. One's thinking must follow this dialectical path in order to attain the absolute truth.

The thesis is the undeveloped quiet beginning of the process; anti-thesis, which is its negation is already hidden in the thesis and sets the latter in motion; the synthesis leads the two contradictions to a deeper unity. This movement is an endless process because every synthesis appears on a higher plane as a thesis. In this process the lower form is negated in the higher; but

it is also preserved in it, since it has been carried over to the higher form. This dialectical process goes on until the oppositions are overcome and reconciled in a higher form. The transcended parts constitute the stages of evolution.

Hegel's basic insight is that in the world of experience, the mind meets with various types of differences, oppositions and contradictions: as a result it proceeds to seek to construct a unified whole. Opposition presents itself at different times. In whatever way or ways the problem may present itself, the fundamental concern of reason is the same, namely, to overcome the broken harmony of life and to attain a unified synthesis of reality.

What makes Dickinson's faith dynamic is her constant vacillation. She refuses to settle for facile answers and lives always poised between hope and despair. Her movement is not progressive in the Hegelian sense. More often than not, as belief is confronted by doubt, there is no resolution in a synthesis. Rather what we have, as thesis confronts antithesis, is an impasse. This is a characteristic of certain Dickinson poems where the movement is "from belief to questioning and disjunction" (Porter 91). Concerning Dickinson's wavering, Albert Gelpi notes that she "could not be certain when to believe and when to pull back. The poems and letters shift from statement to counterstatement to restatement with a restlessness that would allow her only fleeting ease" (53-54). She is thus unable "to attain a unified synthesis of reality" in the Hegelian sense, at least not in a way that is immediately evident from her poems.

In his article "Drama of Doubt, Dialectics of Faith" Marcus K. Billson remarks, "What is immediately apparent in Dickinson's poetry is the inability of faith to preclude doubt. Emily Dickinson's faith is forever tempered by doubt and her unbelief threaded with belief. Such a paradoxical and inconsistent state of mind is the essence of her spiritual dilemma, and its tension provides the substance for her dialectics of faith" (83).

As one reads all the poems of Emily Dickinson, one can witness her ever-present preoccupation with doubt, and experience the suspense of her mind as it meets with various types of differences, oppositions and contradictions, and as it challenges the mysteries of the universe. She is never settled and secure in her belief and this trait is often confusing to the reader. A close chronological study of her poems reveals that her views of God, faith, suffering, death, heaven, immortality, eternity, etc., are constantly shifting to the very end. The movement though not conspicuously progressive in the Hegelian sense resembles it in its oscillation, its continuous fluctuation. As Whicher observes:

> In examining the complex pattern of Emily Dickinson's thought we must guard ourselves from attributing to her an undue consistency or an undue solemnity. Her states of mind were not progressive, but approximately simultaneous. She did not move in a systematic fashion from one intellectual position to another, nor set herself to defend a single point of

> view. Her delight was to test all conceivable points of view in turn. [. . .] A mood of faith that possessed her in the morning might become a matter of delicate mockery in the afternoon; a piercing grief could be sublimated overnight into a rapture of spiritual purgation [. . .] Hence a reader who looks to her for a simple attitude invariably finds her inconsistent. (305)

An examination of Dickinson's poems on God, would illustrate this. What strikes us is the coexistence of belief and doubt, contradiction, reverence and scoffing throughout her work. In the early period (till 1861), we find poems where she cries out like a beggar to God, "Burglar! Banker – Father!" to reimburse her store (Poem 49), and requests "Papa above!" to reserve a "Mansion" for her in his kingdom (Poem 61), that she may stand "At that grand 'Right Hand!'" (Poem 168). There is an awareness of a clash between her will and God's: "Grant me, Oh Lord, a sunny mind – / Thy windy will to bear!" (Poem 131); "I omit to pray "Father, thy will be done" today / For my will goes the other way" (Poem 103). She also points out the silence of God – "I have a King, who does not speak" (Poem 103) and the death of children reveals His callousness – "Sparrows, unnoticed by the Father" (Poem 141). Her suffering is already evident before an exacting Deity: "For each ecstatic instant / We must an anguish pay" (Poem 125).

In her most prolific years from 1862 to 1865, we have one of her best poems on prayer – "My period had come for Prayer" where she says, "[. . .] awed beyond my errand / I worshipped – did not "pray" – " (Poem 565).

She is "the Soul that hath a Guest" (Poem 674), and as "Bride of the Father and the Son / Bride of the Holy Ghost" (Poem 817) she says "The Soul should always stand ajar" for the "accomplished Guest" (Poem 1055). In contrast to such poems of affirmation we find a number conceived in a purely sceptical mood. She says, "Of course – I prayed - / And did God Care?"(Poem 376) But soon "grown shrewder" from having been swindled, she "scans the Skies / With suspicious Air" (Poem 476) for she has lost the "Child's faith" that "Never had a Doubt" and learnt "Men – to anticipate / Instead of Kings –"(Poem 637). God, the "distant – stately Lover" (Poem 357), the Soul's "Guest" is simultaneously "A Force illegible" (Poem 820), "Adamant," "a God of Flint"(Poem 1076).

As Dickinson continues to write in the next decades till her death, she prays "My Maker – let me be / Enamored most of thee"(Poem 1403). Soon however, a sense of dishonesty and double-dealing produced her most contemptuously rebellious poem of all – "Heavenly Father"(Poem 1461). The withering sarcasm of some of her earlier poems is to be found in 1884 in "Apparently with no surprise"(Poem 1624), which speaks of the indifference of a Deity casually, bureaucratically carrying out his pet schemes. "Yet" as Teichert remarks, "for all her defiance and bitterness over God's seeming indifference, the poet remains God's child" (25). We find that there is no final word but ambivalence to characterize Emily Dickinson's relationship to God. As Whicher says, "she was able to be both doubter and devotee in a fashion that puzzles more single-minded readers" (292). She contradicts

God, and she insults him; she imputes base motives to His actions and accuses Him, but still she does not turn away. Her predicament is like that of Peter who says, "Master, to whom else shall we go? You have the message of eternal life" (John 6:68). Citing her earliest poem addressing God where she calls Him "Burglar! Banker – Father!" (Poem 49), Sherwood observes:

> The multiple and contradictory aspects of God revealed in this poem anticipate the difficulty Emily Dickinson would have in arriving at a fixed and consistent conception of God and of her attitude toward Him. If much of Emily Dickinson's early poetry is understood as the expression of successive attempts and failures to construct such a position, and if the resentment that underlies so many of her early poems of devotion to God and the suspicion, fear and skepticism behind those which joyously affirm and exult in immortality are kept in mind, her vacillations and apparent contradictions become more comprehensible. (57)

"Faith" is for Dickinson's "vacillating feet," "A first Necessity" (Poem 915). Dickinson's many poems on faith substantiate this, with the exception of the earliest, written in 1860, the oft quoted "'Faith' is a fine invention" (Poem 185). In 1862, she uses her motif of reversals to say: "'Faith' bleats – to understand"(Poem 313). Only in doubt can she know the sweet possibilities of faith. A poem that reveals how much she valued faith is Poem 377 – "To lose one's faith – surpass / The loss of an Estate [. . .] Belief –

but once – can be - Annihilate a single clause – And Being's – Beggary –" In 1863 she declares: "My faith is larger than the hills"(Poem 766).

Dickinson's dictum is explained in a poem written in 1872: "Too much of Proof affronts Belief" (Poem 1228). Lundin notes that this explains her unfavourable treatment of Thomas in her poetry. His faith was dependent on evidence. As she sees it, "Thomas' faith in Anatomy was stronger than his faith in faith" (*Letters* 373). That a heavy-handed analysis of mystical matters very often destroys the subject is the theme of an earlier poem on "Sceptic Thomas" beginning, "Split the Lark – and you'll find the Music" (Poem 861). If Dickinson finds no merit in Thomas' faith, she rates even lower Abraham's simple unproblematic faith, his obedience and blind loyalty in "Abraham to kill him" (Poem 1317). A third biblical character who underwent trials of faith like Thomas and Abraham is Peter. Peter was capable of the greatest statements of faith followed by the most appalling acts of disbelief. Dickinson finds his inconsistency reassuring (Poem 193). Peter doubted while walking on the water. He denied Christ in a cowardly manner though he had ample proof about Christ. This is what makes his faith meritorious. "Could I do aught else – to Thee?" Emily asks in Poem 203. In honestly expressing her doubt like Peter, she gives greater credence to her faith.

Dickinson found Revelation 2:10 too business-like to accept: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." For her true faith serves without the incentive of reward and she criticizes the

verse from revelation on that basis in " 'Faithful to the end' Amended" (Poem 1357).

Dickinson's stance regarding religious matters is beautifully captured in this poem written in 1877.

> Sweet Skepticism of the heart –
> That knows – and does not know –
> And tosses like a Fleet of balm –
> Affronted by the snow –
> Invites and then retards the Truth
> Lest Certainty be sere
> Compared with the delicious throe
> Of transport thrilled with Fear – (Poem 1413).

Though she could not accept conventional religion, Dickinson retained an unshakable trust in God's actual reality. She continually reexamined older, fundamental concepts like death, resurrection, heaven and immortality, but was unable to come to a resolution. Dickinson finds dubious the Christian explanation of death and the need of a heaven. The idea of sin she finds nonsensical:

> Is Heaven an Exchequer?
> They speak of what we owe –
> But that negotiation
> I'm not a Party to – (Poem 1270)

Her stance in this poem written in 1872, has not changed from the one in Poem 62 written in 1859: " 'Sown in corruption'! / Not so fast! /Apostle is askew!" she says referring to St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians 1:15. A major omission from her poems is the sense of sin. She is not troubled by guilt. Though the preachers of the Calvinist tradition preached sermons spouting 'brimstone and fire,' that gripped her imagination, she doubted its authenticity, and for her, the balance tips away from condemnation toward innocence. In the Calvinist tradition into which Dickinson was born, there is no escape from the past that bequeaths on mankind the sin of Adam, and the focus is on the future with its possibility of Damnation or Bliss. This perhaps is the reason why for Dickinson a major emphasis and orientation is on the future, which is a reference point she steers by.

The future – Eternity – is where for her the deepest reality lies. "Throughout her life the ultimate mystery of immortality perplexed and intrigued her," remarks Pickard and "Especially in her later years, the problem obsessed her, but she remained a doubter till her death" (36). Death was another problem that puzzled her as evidenced by the large number of poems on the theme. In spite of all her probing she could not solve the problem of finitude. For though at times Jesus' death and resurrection gave hope that each human may break the bond of mortality, in other moods she felt that in life "All but Death, can be Adjusted." All else can be "repaired," "settled," or "dissolved," but "Death – unto itself – Exception – / Is exempt from Change –" (Poem 749).

Irresolution is a pattern evident in several individual poems. For instance, in "A Word made Flesh" (Poem 1651), the second stanza does not resolve the question of faith that the poem raises. It merely "reiterates Emily Dickinson's belief in the strength and dignity of the well-chosen word" (Capps 52). Similarly, Dickinson's irresoluteness comes through in "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (Poem 216), which has two versions. One version of the poem concludes with a humanistic view while the other proposes a scientific view, with the result that faith in resurrection is left hanging in the air.

David Porter speaks of a structural shift that characterizes many Dickinson poems. "Poems alter beneath our eyes, slip to a perspective quite different from the disarming ones with which they begin" (89-90). "The World is not Conclusion" (Poem 501), one of her most important poems about belief, begins by offering the hope that there is a world beyond. Then bit-by-bit, her poem inexorably undermines all bases for faith. Commenting on the concluding lines of the poem Helen MacNeil observes:

> Dickinson's in-biting tooth is one of the great poetic images of spiritual torment, comparable in intensity to Herbert's description of inner conflict in 'Affliction' in which he writes, 'My thoughts are all a case of knives.' In Herbert's poem faith finally returns; in Dickinson's, the last image is of the silent gnawing of doubt. (86)

Dickinson's own words speak of her predicament: "the Balance /[. . .] tips so frequent, [. . .] / It takes me all the while to poise – / And then – it doesn't stay – (Poem 576). However, as Eberwein points out, "Even if the right arm Christians had earlier relied on for salvation had been amputated, the left one somehow pulled the sluice to release the flow of grace that sustained Emily Dickinson in 'the Balm of that Religion / That doubts – as fervently as it believes' " (Pollak 96).

Denise Levertov's pilgrimage of faith also proceeds along a "pathway of doubt" as in Hegel's dialectical method (Forster 134). Her work shows her "walking in doubt" (*SS* 3) and traces her struggle "to let faith unfold in her life" as Bodo says, "the way a poem unfolds, line by line, image by image" (Bodo 103). Her search for the authentic, which was a main concern in her work during her period of agnosticism, leads her through what in retrospect appears like a dialectical progression towards the absolute truth. The path that her becoming follows is conditioned primarily by the problem of human suffering, and she "drifts [. . .] on murmuring currents of doubt and praise" (*SS* 4). Anne Colclough Little points to a duality in Levertov – her capacity for joy and her anguish over suffering (1). Her attempt to define the eternal questions that troubled her concerning joy and suffering weaves thematic threads of unity through her work.

Hasidism had given her a sense of the immanence of the divine and wonder and joy in creation. In the early stages of her poetic career, truth and reality – the authentic – are to be encountered in everyday life. "All trivial

parts of / world-about-us speak in their forms / of themselves and their counterparts!" (*WE* 32). By being sensitive to the other side of experience, to dreams and visions, she is able to relate the two, as the poem teaches her, thereby coming to know "terrible joy." Thus we find poems that celebrate the world and in which evil is merely good in abeyance.

However one can sense the beginning of the struggle to face the conflict between her innate sense of joy and her awareness of suffering: "Who can be happy while the wind recounts / its long sagas of sorrow?" (*CEP* 25). With the war, she becomes aware of "the banality of evil" and the inclusion of explicit issues in her later poetry gives concrete shape to the vague sense of social malaise that is evident in her early poems. Aware of both joy and suffering, she asks, "Am I / a monster, to sing / in the wind on this sunny hill / and not taste the dust always, / and not hear / that rending, that retching?" (*WE* 36) Gradually "she assimilates [. . .] metaphysical anxieties [. . .] into a larger pattern based on faith in the inevitability of joy renewed" (Gilbert 235). The sense of "otherness," of the common bond of humanity comes through in *The Jacob's Ladder*. Seeing her kinship with others who cause pain Levertov says, "I multitude, I tyrant, / I angel, I you, you / world, battlefield" (*JL* 30). She comes to understand that as a poet who knows happiness yet shares human guilt, it is her task to dispel suffering – "to sing of death as before / and life, [. . .] so no devil may enter" (*JL* 31).

Soon however, the Vietnam War casts a shadow over her, resulting in a loss of authenticity. *The Sorrow Dance* speaks of sorrow, even in poems that celebrate the natural world, where joy and the awareness of mortality support one another. Levertov finds her poetics of order disturbed and her innate belief in the coherence of things shaken as she perceives the chaos, experiences anguish and terror, and encounters evil and darkness in death. Levertov is helpless as she faces the violence of war, which for her is the ultimate disorder. As seen earlier, "the conflict between her impulse to joy and her impulse to lamentation" continues (Little 3). As she struggles and grows, Levertov learns that joy does not arise from the elimination of the negative forces in the world, but from seeing them truly in their tension with the positive and she embraces grief and delight: "I saw Paradise in the dust of the street" (*SD* 72). She points toward a way of comprehending the violence of war with her new spiritual understanding. It is her spiritual heritage that helps her to bring on the new light in *Relearning the Alphabet*.

The next three volumes reveal the many questions troubling her. The chief of these is the question of the duality of human nature – the capacity for joy and love and the capacity for evil, for she sees humans as "mirrored forms of a God we felt as good" (*SD* 80). Here we identify the beginning of a struggle that she later identifies as a major "barrier" to her crossing "the threshold of faith" (*NSE* 242) – "the suffering of the innocent and the consequent question of God's nonintervention" especially "in regard to the global panorama of oppression and violence" (*NSE* 251). *The Freeing of the*

Dust reveals that Levertov has attained "a more realistic vision which can include fluctuation and polarity without a nostalgic yearning for complete synthesis" (Smith 226). She moves to a clearer understanding of the opposites which pull her, not merely surviving but staying alive in the fullest sense: "To live / beyond survival," even amidst the devastations of war (*FD* 35). *Life in the Forest* speaks of the death of her mother and her struggle with serious doubts and anxieties till she sees some sense of design even in the face of the worst vision of life's ending. And as she steps across the threshold to belief, she carries with her the ever-present conflict between her innate sense of joy and the awareness of suffering:

> I know this happiness
> is provisional:
>
> the looming presences –
>
> great suffering, great fear –
>
> withdraw only
>
> into peripheral vision:
>
> but ineluctable this shimmering
> of wind in the blue leaves:
> this flood of stillness
> widening the lake of the sky:
> this need to dance,
> this need to kneel:
> this mystery: (*OP* 86)

In the 1980s her work shows the dialectical progression of her vision of the mysteries of human experience and the emergence of Christian faith as a defining concern. Even in those poems that are not essentially concerned with issues of belief, she "perceives energies that seem with almost religious power to radiate through and unite experiences" (Marten 162). However, despite her understanding of the relationship of joy and suffering, Levertov still sometimes feels the conflict. The poem "Unresolved," for example, ends in a failure to resolve the conflict, as she says: "We know no synthesis" (*CB* 105).

Levertov's new poetry of belief for an "Age of Terror" is most vividly realised in the sequence "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" (*CB* 108). Lorrie Smith describes the sequence as "a contrapuntal exploration of faith and doubt in the nuclear age" and says that "like Christian faith itself, Levertov's poetic mass assimilates knowledge of evil and counters it with hope and praise. [. . .] The poem succumbs neither to transcendental ecstasy nor to absolute despair, but rests with an acceptance of fluctuating and irreconcilable extremes" (228–229). Here she asks once again how she can reconcile the apparently disparate impulses to celebrate and to grieve for the pain she sees in the world. And she raises more directly the relationship between God and suffering: "the discrepancy between the suffering of the innocent, on the one hand, and the assertions that God is just and merciful on the other" (*NSE* 242).

"The Mass is an appropriate vehicle through which to seek reconciliation between joy and sorrow because it is an act of remembrance of the suffering of the incarnate Christ and a celebration of the eternal triumph of His spirit" (Little 6). Levertov's poem – "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" – therefore, signals the carrying over of a main concern of her poetry so far to a higher stage of evolution with her discovery of the importance of the incarnation to the conflict between joy and suffering (though its full meaning is not yet clear) and her realization of the role human beings play. The conflict also leads her to examine the relationship between the longing for faith and the tendency to doubt. The last poem of the collection "The Many Mansions" confirms that there are places for all manner and degrees of belief in God's "house" (*CB* 116).

Levertov carries her struggle against despair into *Oblique Prayers* where her poetry embraces both anguish and affirmation. "She is at a place in her pilgrimage where she offers up not only continuing visions of our dark time, but the light of language and faith" (Marten 149). In the first poem of the volume, "Decipherings" Levertov asserts her need for a stable moral centre. This gives direction to the rest of the book which progresses towards the religious vision of the final section "Of God and of the Gods" where she floats "into Creator Spirit's deep embrace" (*OP* 76). In "St. Peter and the Angel," Levertov offers a deep insight through Peter's realization following his deliverance from prison, that he "must be / the key now, to the next door, / the next terrors of freedom and joy" (*OP* 79). From our

vantage point we see that this is her realization too; this is what she does through her poetry that offers hope in a time of "terror." In the last poem "Passage," the speaker addresses a darkness out of which light has broken anew.

In *Breathing the Water* she recognizes this light as the light of Christ. Like the servant-girl at Emmaus she "sees / the light around him / and is sure" (*BW* 66). The significance of Christ's suffering begins to dawn on her: "Every sorrow and desolation / He saw, and sorrowed in kinship" (*BW* 69). She longs for Simeon's "certitude" the "depth / of faith he drew on" when he first recognizes the infant Jesus and experiences new life (*BW* 70). Levertov's struggle to understand God's meaning and intentions for the world reaches a new plane as she turns to Lady Julian who laughed in a vision because "the very / spirit of evil / the Fiend" was "vanquished," but her laughter ended with her awareness of Jesus' "deathly / wounds" and "anguished / heart" which was "the cost / the passion it took to undo / the deeds of malice" (*BW* 79-80). Like Julian she feels "sorrowfully, mournfully, / shaken as men shake / a cloth in the wind" (*BW* 81) and thinks:

> deeds are done so evil, injuries inflicted
> so great, it seems to us
> impossible any good
> can come of them (*BW* 81)

Julian serves as example as she "clung to joy" through "tears and sweat," believing in the "certainty / of infinite mercy" and sure that "Love was [Christ's] meaning" (*BW* 82). Levertov admires Julian for she was not

plagued by doubt but "clung" to her faith "fiercely" (*BW* 82). By joining the conflict between celebration and suffering to the issue of faith, Levertov reaches the most satisfying resolution so far. This collection establishes that what appears all along as an aesthetic quest is indeed a religious one. Her search for the authentic leads her to Christ, and she begins to see a spiritual plan, and to realize that in our very restlessness "God's flight circles us" (*BW* 83).

Though at first "belief was a joy" she "kept in secret," Levertov soon finds herself eluding God's presence, as her "mind [. . .] like a minnow darts away." With her realization "Lord, not you, / it is I who am absent," comes the desire – to "focus [her] flickering" (*DH* 64). A fundamental concern of hers namely, to overcome the broken harmony of life and to attain a unified synthesis of reality, finds a resolution in the poem "St. Thomas Didymus". Thomas' doubt serves as a metaphor for Levertov's struggle. The question of suffering "throbbed like a stealthy cancer" within him and Thomas' cry when he was told of Jesus' resurrection was "Lord, / I believe, / help thou mine unbelief" (*DH* 102). There was a "manifold knot" in him "that willed to possess all knowledge" and when his hand "entered the unhealed wound" of the risen Christ, he felt "light streaming" into him. The knot that bound him unraveled and he witnessed "all things quicken to color, to form," his question "not answered but given / its part / in a vast unfolding design lit / by a risen sun" (*DH* 103).

Once more Levertov brings to resolution the two contradictory impulses of pain and celebration as she learns from Thomas that "through suffering comes faith and with faith comes celebration" (Little 9). For Levertov the poet, the resurrection is "metaphor [. . .] grounded in dust, grit, / heavy / carnal clay," and she opens to the "symbol's power [. . .] convinced of its ground, / its roots / in bone and blood." She too needs to "feel / the pulse in the wound / to believe" that "with God all things are possible" (*SW* 115).

Though the inner conflict between faith and doubt finds a new resolution in "The Tide" by joining faith to action, Levertov, like Emily Dickinson, is troubled by the absence and silence of God: "In this emptiness / there seems no Presence" (*ET* 117). In *Sands of the Well* though, we see that she has gained a fresh perspective of this silence of God. As she listens to "the sound of rushing waters" and "a dove's crooning," she experiences "over the continuo / under the dove's soliloquy, / [his] hospitable silence" (*SW* 126). Though her "soul felt darkened, heavy, worthless," she discovers like Brother Lawrence that God "never abandoned you but walked / at your side" (*SW* 111). Often she finds herself in God's "gossamer hammock / that swings by one / elastic thread to thin / twigs that could, that should / break but don't" (*SW* 117). She looks at a world gripped by terror and torn by suffering, accusing God for all the misery till, "running out of accusation / we deny [God's] existence" (*SW* 117), and she comes to understand "God's

love for the world" which she describes as a "Vast / flood of mercy / flung on resistance" (*SW* 127).

For Hegel, the goal towards which the developing absolute progresses, is pure self-consciousness. At the highest stage of the development, the Absolute is pure Spirit, which Hegel characterizes as self-thinking thought (thought that is totally transparent to itself). Interestingly, in the title poem of *Sands of the Well*, which shows Levertov at the height of her poetic powers she wonders:

> Is this
> the place where you
> are brought in meditation?
> Transparency
> seen for itself –
> as if the quality
> were not, after all,
> to enable
> perception *not* of itself? (124)

"Surely it is this culminating recognition of the sacred significance of transparency itself, of "being" prior to and beyond all the individual presences, all actions, all responsibilities, that marks *Sands of the Well* as an important development in Levertov's spiritual quest," as Edward Zlotkowski says in his article "Presence and Transparency: A Reading of Levertov's Sands of the Well" (9).

The posthumous collection has a poem on St. Augustine where Levertov says, "The walls, with each thought, / each feeling, each word he set down, / expanded, unnoticed: the roof / rose, and a skylight opened" (*GU* 4). These words could very well be applied to Levertov, for throughout her long career "with each thought, / each feeling, each word [she] set down," the "mean partitions" of her soul were knocked down, and "the oppressive ceilings" raised, thereby enabling her "to welcome [. . .] God." Hers was truly a "life of steadfast attention" as she "practiced the presence of God" in the writing of her poems (*SW* 111). "Abba!" is her joyful exclamation in one of the very last poems, and we find her "deeply glad to be found" by God: "Lord, sometimes: / You seek, and I find" (*GU* 60).

Throughout her career, Levertov's endeavour as she meets with various types of differences, oppositions and contradictions has been to seek to construct a unified whole. Sometimes the recurrence of these conflicts in poem after poem gives the impression that she is unable to resolve them. However, each time, these oppositions are overcome and reconciled in a higher form as in the Hegelian matrix, enabling us to see the transcended parts as constituting the stages of her spiritual evolution. Though often her question at every stage is "not answered but given / its part / in a vast unfolding design lit / by a risen sun" (*DH* 103), it is heartening that in a world where "everything is threatened," Denise Levertov's search leads her to a place where "absolute transparence / is complete" (*SW* 124). On the other hand, Emily Dickinson's quest is more a seeking than a finding, and her question all the time countered with "A bland uncertainty" (Poem 1646).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Great indeed is the legacy Levertov and Dickinson have bequeathed to a restless and troubled modern age. Levertov gives us hope with her poetry that is in the main quiet and contemplative, but becomes fierce and impassioned "in the face of the world's injustice and inhumanity, in the face of war and torture and prejudice" (Bodo 17). Dickinson's "sense of the anguish of personal existence and the fragility of all life [. . .] reflects our own helpless state of mind when we witness the tortuous social evils which plague our world and an environment which appears to be progressively worsening" (Ferlazzo 150). Nevertheless, courage and the will to endure the exclusions and self-denials the mind must make to preserve its identity and stability shine through Dickinson's poetry.

What Levertov and Dickinson do for their readers is allow them to experience "Truth's Superb surprise" (Poem 1129). This seemingly simple task is, of course, a gift. As Emily tells us, "This was a poet – It is that / Distills amazing sense / From ordinary Meanings –" (Poem 448). In Levertov and Dickinson we have two dedicated spirits who, though often isolated by truth and by their art, allowed the powers of their creative imagination to flow freely like a mountain waterfall, speaking not only of their own experience, but of the human condition, taking their readers on

a journey of loving attention. Their poems are more than a sum total of their words; their poems are who they are, for they "lived" their art.

Through a chronological study of Levertov's poetry one is able to delineate a linear movement from agnosticism to faith that leads to a resolution, as well as a corresponding poetic development towards maturity. Participating in a symposium on myth in 1967, Levertov identified "the sense of *life as a pilgrimage*" as the myth informing "all of my work from the very beginning" (*Poet in the World* 62-63). The early collections of the period of agnosticism reveal poems that reflect on the sources of art and imagination as well as poems that press forward on a spiritual journey the purpose of which is to uncover the nature of self and its destiny. Levertov looks for ways of attaining spiritual wholeness in a world that is fragmented and chaotic. A search for the authentic underlies her work and her encounter with truth leads to her affirmation of joy in the physical world. Her quest leads her ultimately to the recognition of her own person, a ready awareness of her self and an increasing conviction that the exercise of the imagination moves one toward faith.

In the second phase, she suffers a loss of authenticity as war casts a shadow over her. She wrestles with her doubts, contemplating the nature of identity, commitment and change. Eventually, through struggle and growth she gains a new spiritual understanding. The collections of the transitional phase reveal her struggle and growth through self-doubt and

self-alienation, desolation and despair, till she is at the threshold of belief, at the beginning of growth, with a mystical belief in a God within herself.

In the works of the third phase, as though in a logical extension of her exploration of the mystery of experience, Levertov is seen moving towards a position of Christian belief. At first God is referred to mostly as a presence or force that unites all experience. *Breathing the Water* reveals Levertov as a religious poet searching for a deeper faith and a clearer vision. The subsequent volumes bear testimony to her deepening faith as she writes poems centred on Christ. They also contain poems that reveal a phase in her spiritual life where she vacillates between belief and unbelief. *Sands of the Well,* her last book before her death, has a defining spiritual perspective as a consequence of her doing the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises and her conversion to Catholicism. The spiritual focus is found in greater depth in the posthumous collection *This Great Unknowing*.

Similarly, Dickinson expended her whole life upon the poetry that described a long pilgrimage to faith. A firm exposition of Dickinson's pilgrim's progress of the soul, unlike that of Levertov's, is hampered by the fact that the dating of many poems is dubious, and even when the chronological order is somewhat established, we can still not be sure that the time of composition did not postdate materially the moment of emotion. So too there is the distressing difficulty of correlating specific poems with events and crises in the poet's life. In addition, for us, a penalty of her solitude is her silence concerning the theories underlying

her art. Unlike in the case of Levertov, there survive no prefaces or any synthesis of her poetic principles, but only here and there flash illuminating implications in a letter or in hints within the poetry itself. Through critical efforts to distinguish between fact and speculation, between knowledge and myths about Dickinson, we arrive at a gratifying and haunting record of human experience.

Like Levertov, Dickinson too had a fascination for mystery, which is seen in her poems on the mystery of immortality, death, and eternity as well as that of seasonal processes in nature. She never identified nature with the divine but contemplated the external world and examined man's relation to the world of natural phenomena to understand better man's inner soul. It is in the poems where she plumbs the depths of the mystery of death and immortality that we see her vacillating between faith and doubt. Levertov too, has a series of poems on death where she seeks to reconcile herself to this baffling phenomenon, and in the process of looking deeply into the mystery of death, she offers a rewarding vision of human experience.

Unlike Levertov who affirms God in the accomplishment of her intellectual and moral activity and in the exercise of her imagination, Dickinson remains a doubter throughout with her back and forth movements from scepticism to faith. This is reflected in her poetry wherein there is no poetic development towards maturity, or as Austin Warren puts it, no "late manner so integrally held that she could not, in

conscience, deviate therefrom" (Sewall 103). However, her vacillation cannot be used to refute the religious depth and perceptive insight into spiritual reality that her poetry reveals. As Richard Wilbur puts it, "her poetry, with its articulate faithfulness to inner and outer truth, its insistence on maximum consciousness, is not an avoidance of life, but an eccentric mastery of it" (Sewall 136). Given the variety of Dickinson's attitudes and moods, it is easy to select evidence to "prove" that she held certain views. But such patterns can be dogmatic and distorting. Her final thoughts on many subjects are hard to know. It is with this caution in mind that this study has been conducted.

Dickinson's poems and letters from the first phase reveal her ambivalence, her uncertainty about the deepest subjects of the spirit, her vacillations between hope and despair. Her critical consciousness somehow made the assurances of Christian belief unavailable to her in the conventional form. We notice in her an intense fascination with death and immortality and the evanescence of delight, and she was consumed by the sense that finitude was the fundamental human dilemma. Dickinson's faith of the early years was fragile and the poetry expresses a desperate need for faith.

In the second and most productive phase of Dickinson's life as a poet we see that religion continued to be a centring concern for her despite the variations in tone and imagery. The beginning of this phase was a time of personal trauma as she gives up the conventional supports

of home, society, and religion, to engage in "The Battle fought between the Soul / And no Man" (Poem 594). Dickinson's poems project her as a great thinker who had a keen sense of the peculiar ambiguities of belief in her time. Her view of God was neither complacent nor confident, but marked with contention, defiance, and continuous oscillation. Her poetic mission was to express the truth she strove to discover and her poems bear the mark of the spiritual anguish she endured while attempting to find a clue to the mystery of life. We also recognize that ambivalence was more than a poetic strategy for Dickinson, for it went to the heart of her uncertainty about life.

In the third phase, Dickinson's poetic production and letter writing slackened significantly. Death took an enormous toll on her emotions and health. She struggled to salvage faith in an age of upheavals as she vacillated with considerable spiritual discomfort between belief, disbelief, scepticism, confusion and dismay, and coped with a disposition that could neither believe nor be comfortable in unbelief. Her poems articulate dramatically varying and ephemeral moods as she wrestled with God and continued to write in his shadow till the end.

Thus a pattern of resolution and irresolution emerges from a study of the drama of faith and doubt that unfolds in the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson respectively. The subsequent theological analyses of the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson with regard to the 'way to faith', brings into sharp relief certain distinctions in their faith experience and reinforces

this pattern of resolution and irresolution. Levertov's poetry reflects the factors that eventually lead her to faith in its full and consciously professed form. In Dickinson however, there is no linear evolution of faith or resolution in a conversion. The analysis reveals four major threads running simultaneously through all of Levertov's collections – a search for the authentic that leads to a recognition of "the Truth" of Christ, an exploration of mystery that leads to her acknowledgment of God the absolute mystery, her belief in the power of the imagination whereby she experiences "work that enfaiths", and her political engagement which ultimately leads to a commitment in the Catholic Church. Dickinson's writing testifies to "faith that works" and shows how certain early influences and experiences remained to colour all of her life. For instance, her adolescent responses to death taught her to doubt the character of God, while her education, and interest in science had a lasting influence in developing her sceptical turn of mind.

Likewise, a great distinction emerges in a study of the two poets with regard to the "way of seeing" and eschatological vision revealed in their poetry. Levertov comes to see the whole as life giving, nourishing and gracious, as testified by her poems that trace her journey to order and re-visioning. The grimness of Dickinson's vision reveals her ambivalence in seeing the whole as hostile, inscrutable, indifferent and rarely beneficent. Further, a study based on the postmodern religious situation reveals that the dichotomy between knowledge and faith and the

cleavage between two conceptions of God seem to underline the basic difference in the faith experience of Levertov and Dickinson.

Finally, philosophical analyses based on the Kierkegaardian and Hegelian matrices foster greater clarity through a dialectical understanding of faith and doubt in Levertov and Dickinson. The evolution of Levertov's faith is analogous to the dialectical progression of existential stages found in Kierkegaard's doctrine of the three stages on the way of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. An awareness of evil enables Levertov to make a transition from the aesthetic level characterized by scepticism, to the ethical. A realization of the sinfulness of man and a recognition of the significance of the Incarnation for salvation enables her to make what Kierkegaard refers to as the leap *par excellence* by which faith emerges, and with it, a transition to the religious stage. In Dickinson, though, we find a non-realization of such a change from one sphere to the other, and Kierkegaard's dialectic provides pointers to the impediments to faith – her lack of an awareness of sinfulness and of evil, a lack of consistency and coherence in her actions, and her inability to make commitments and to choose.

The analyses also reveal that the life and work of Levertov and Dickinson proceed along a pathway of doubt and despair, as in the Hegelian dialectical process involving the three stages of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. What makes Dickinson's faith dynamic is her constant vacillation. Her movement is not progressive in the Hegelian

sense. More often than not, as belief is confronted by doubt, there is no resolution in a synthesis. Rather what we have, as thesis confronts antithesis, is an impasse. She is thus unable to attain a unified synthesis of reality in the Hegelian sense. Levertov's search for the authentic follows a dialectical progression towards the absolute truth and her later work shows the emergence of Christian faith as a defining concern. As she seeks to construct a unified whole, the oppositions she meets with are overcome and reconciled in a higher form as in the Hegelian matrix, enabling us to see the transcended parts as constituting the stages of her spiritual evolution. Thus Levertov's search ends in a resolution whereas Dickinson's quest is more a seeking than a finding and so ends in irresolution.

"One of life's greatest challenges" according to John Delli Carpini, "is to so integrate spirituality and religion that our spirit moves us to worship, while our religious practice intensifies our relationship with God" (2). Spirituality and religion are not one and the same. Every human being has a spiritual component, a yearning for the transcendent, but is not necessarily religious. In other words, one may have an active spiritual life, with or without practising one's religion. Spirituality is from the Latin word "spiritus" meaning breath or wind. Therefore living a spiritual life is recognizing and responding to God's breath within us. Religion, on the other hand, is the expression of one's spirituality – the organization, rituals, and practice of one's beliefs. While religion is part of

every person's cultural knapsack, a part of our heritage, spirituality is a conscious choice and develops over a lifetime.

While Levertov was able to strike a balance between the two over a lifetime, with her gradual conversion to Christianity and an orthodox form of belief as she "prayed, worshipped, participated in the rituals of the church" (*NSE* 242), Dickinson avoided doctrine and dogma as she grew older, attending fewer and fewer church services, preferring, instead, to speak with God privately and to ponder life's mysteries in unorthodox ways and places such as in her garden: "It was a short procession, / The Bobolink was there – /An aged Bee addressed us –/ And then we knelt in prayer – " (Poem 18).

Elizabeth Phillips remarks of Dickinson thus: "Had she accepted the shibboleths of conventional Christianity, she would not only have been a different poet but a less disquieting one" (201-202). In Emily's realm of religious thought, we find that both doubt and belief occupy minor places beside a direct and hostile attack upon the orthodox position. It is therefore possible that her poem denouncing the Bible as "an antique Volume" (Poem 1545) may be a complaint against a Puritan interpretation of the Bible. So also, as Budick suggests, the hostility to God often expressed in Dickinson's poetry does not necessarily represent the heart of her deepest felt convictions. She is not "simply venting an irrational antitheological rage. Rather, she is suggesting how an idealist and especially a Christian neoplatonist interpretation of cosmic

organization can, in the end, force us to deny God and abandon faith" (94). However, a great contrast arises in that while Dickinson expressed an apparently heretical rampage against the deity and religion in her poetry, Levertov "hated to see" religious faith and practice "mocked or sneered at even in [her] most doubting periods"(*Contemporary Authors* 322).

Wolff points out that "poetry in America had already begun to change by 1886, and the great poets who came after Emily Dickinson were forced to create their art in a world where God no longer held sway" (537). Speaking of Dickinson who stands at the threshold of modernity, Wolosky says that later poets "could reach toward some resolution of the conflict between human and divine utterance [. . .]. Dickinson, too, attempts such resolutions, but she does so without final success" (Introduction xx). Having dealt with Dickinson's "syntax of contention," her "logos" and the "status of Language," Wolosky concludes:

> The world of Dickinson's poetry remains pressed between the invisible and the visible, the unspoken and the spoken, in a tension she cannot resolve. She can only raise her voice against a divine world and language that clashes with, but asserts its claim upon her own. (171)

In Levertov's early poetry we find an avoidance of "God-talk" which is less and less meaningful to the modern mind, as she produces a body of poetry particularly congenial to the outlook of contemporary

radical theology. With her transition into the final phase of her career, we find her reaffirming her prophetic mode, defending the environment and speaking for the silenced voices of the exploited and helpless. She continued to seek for the numinous, and within both the poems of conscience and the poems of immanence, there arose both a sense of the presence of God, and a sense of His absence or silence. As a new wave of critical opinion sought to discredit her poetics of immanence, she recognized that the shift in critical fashion would nullify the prestige she had won for herself. However, she chose to defy it and began to write explicitly religious poems. We find therefore, as Denise Lynch remarks of her work, that

> The most compelling poems take Levertov's pilgrimage into the mysteries of language and faith, where the Logos is revealed through the flesh of Christian tradition, and even the terror of a nuclear age yields to the numinous moment. (Gelpi 288)

"Levertov was consistently a deep poet from the beginning" says Bodo, and we find a "continuance in her work." Speaking about her deepening faith he remarks,

> [. . .] it both gave a new direction to the content of her poems and chronicled what she called her own slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith. I believe her faith was there like a seed from the beginning and her "conversion"

> gave her a way of articulating what was there from the beginning. Her later poems are like an uncovering of what was there in her soul from the beginning. (Appendix)

Emily Dickinson likewise, undertook a major poetic quest in which she sought to solve the riddles of existence. Her poems therefore, narrate the progress of this quest and reveal her moments of ecstasy, doubt and fear. However, the factor of conscious plan in the poetry of Dickinson is almost negligible unlike what we find in Levertov. So too, it is hard to locate a developing pattern in Dickinson's poems on death, immortality, and religious questions. She wanted to believe in God and immortality and possibly her faith increased in her middle and later years. However, serious expressions of doubt persist, apparently to the very end. Her conflicting views of the divine existed simultaneously and unresolved in her long struggle with faith. Even many of her major poems close on a note of irresolution as they "move from certainty to doubt, from affirmative statement to questioning" (Benfey 16). In contrast, Levertov's poems move from doubt to certainty.

Emily Dickinson's quest is successful, if we measure success by unflagging effort and intellectual honesty rather than by the presence of optimistic "resolution." Dickinson hoped that the ultimate reward of the anguish of art was, if not faith, a deep abiding peace:

> The Martyr Poets – did not tell –
>
> But wrought their Pang in syllable –

That when their mortal name be numb –

Their mortal fate – encourage Some –

The Martyr Painters – never spoke –

Bequeathing – rather – to their Work –

That when their conscious fingers cease –

Some seek in Art – the Art of Peace – (Poem 544)

Levertov's quest successfully ends in resolution with her faith developing into its "full Christological and ecclesiastical, explicit, social, consciously professed form" (Rahner 310), with her "decision to join the church" as she confesses in an interview with Nancy K. Gish in 1990 (*NSE* 180). The contributing factors were her aesthetic, her political stance with her values of racial and economic justice and nonviolence, and her belief in the power of the imagination. People such as Archbishop Romero, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton and many others, mostly Catholic, had a profound influence in strengthening Levertov's commitment to peace and justice and were catalysts for her entry into the Church. This, and the fact that the Catholic Church has modern traditions of high intellectual discourse and major artistic contributions, eventually led to her movement into the Catholic Church. It appears, therefore, that Catholicism played a great role in bringing about such a happy conclusion to her quest, which was also a search for the authentic and a celebration of mystery. We have the words of Father Murray Bodo, who

accompanied her on her spiritual journey for over twenty years as her spiritual mentor and friend.

> Levertov was not one to merely embrace whatever religion was bequeathed to her; she needed to work it through in her own deep search for God, for a religion that addressed the problems of the world that she was most concerned about, and for a religion that reverenced mystery. She found that religion in Catholicism, in its sacramental approach to reality and in its teachings on social justice, especially as she saw them exemplified in Catholics she'd met like the Trappist, Thomas Merton, and Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit activist. Despite her reservations about the hierarchical Church's stance toward women and often toward social issues, especially in Latin America, she was drawn to Catholicism as she saw it lived out in the lives of people she admired and in the dynamic and mystery of the Catholic liturgy and Sacraments. (Appendix)

Concurrent with her coming to Catholicism, Levertov was drawn into the Church's tradition and the circle of believers who have gone before and live on in the communion of saints. This was another contributing factor to the success of her journey of faith, her search for God and religion as testified by her poems on Caedmon, St. Peter, Thomas Didymus, Brother Lawrence and Julian of Norwich.

One of the consistent principles in Levertov's writings and in her life as an activist is that in the final analysis deeds are more important than words, works more powerful than faith. She seemed to favour the Catholic idea of "works that enfaith" rather than the Protestant idea of a faith that works.

> "Works that enfaith" is the very essence of the Sacramental theology of the Catholic Church. It is also a phrase that describes her own life's work, both as a poet and an activist. Every thing she wrote "enfaithed" something she believed in deeply and which was a part of her Faith at the time of the poem's writing. (Bodo, Appendix)

That perhaps Dickinson's Puritan legacy stood in the way of a confident affirmation of belief may be illustrated by the following poem.

All circumstances are the Frame
In which His Face is set –
All Latitudes exist for His
Sufficient Continent –

The Light His Action, and the Dark
The Leisure of His Will –
In Him Existence serve or Set
A Force illegible.

In this poem in which she has created a mortal image of immortality, Blackmur recognizes Dickinson's Protestant heritage and its consequences.

> In the "Dark Leisure of His Will" squirms the protestant, than whom nobody could have been more so [. . .] than Emily Dickinson. [. . .] she had the resignation and the loneliness and the excruciation – she had the characteristic *misery* of Protestantism [. . .]. We cannot say of this woman in white that she ever mastered life – even in loosest metaphor; but we can say that she so dealt with it as to keep it from mastering her – by her protestant self-excruciation in life's name. (Sewall 84-85)

According to Bodo, "With Emily Dickinson, as with Levertov, [. . .] the skepticism is over religion more than over God and God's existence" (Appendix). Scepticism may have several different contexts as we have seen in this study. In a religious context it may refer to a necessary stage, a "dark night of the soul," on the way to belief. In a philosophical context, it may be opposed not to belief, but to certainty. Scepticism is of value, for with great faith comes great doubt which is so necessary for deepening one's faith and growing in wisdom. Rather than a malady or obstacle to overcome or conquer, doubts serve as a useful tool in the development of a person's faith. Perhaps more importantly, they serve as a tool, only on the condition that he has some anchor in place that allows some drift but not too much. Doubts and questions are to be valued like the answers

themselves for they are the precious journey, without which the destination is worthless.

Several critics have argued that Dickinson's scepticism is central to both her temperament and her achievement. "Many types of skepticism and conditions of irony are expressed in her anthology of doubt, those poems which show the soul caught between conflicting tides of faith and disbelief" (Wells 149). In her poems Emily Dickinson reveals not only her religious depth and perceptive insight into spiritual reality but also her artistic ability in employing both scepticism and faith as a strategy to increase the dramatic tension of her poems.

Puritanism held that the divine will was inscrutable and made no sense to man. The Puritan legacy for Dickinson then, would be scepticism not about the existence of God but about his knowability. Citing several Dickinson poems, such as "Wonder – is not precisely Knowing / And not precisely Knowing not –" (Poem 1331) and "Sweet Skepticism of the Heart / That knows – and does not know" (Poem 1413), Benfey remarks: "In these poems knowing is conceived, rather narrowly, as certainty, as it is in most of the 230 instances of "know" [. . .] in her poetry" (14).

If Dickinson wrestled with doubt and faith all her life, Levertov struggled to let faith unfold in her life "the way a poem unfolds, line by line, image by image." As Bodo sees it, "To struggle with faith is itself a kind of faith. It is to admit that there is something to struggle with – namely faith itself – just as Jacob's wrestling with the angel was an

acknowledgement that there was an angel to wrestle with" (103). Neither an unseemly denigration of Dickinson's faith, nor an undue laudation of Levertov's is intended by the conclusions drawn from this comparative study. Nothing is said either to diminish the value or the force of the poetry. The focus of the exercise has been rather on the distinction in the quality or character of their 'knowing.' This is best illustrated by something Levertov narrates in her essay "Work that Enfaiths." She speaks of the faith of her mother, a singer, who "loved Handel's *Messiah* aria, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' and despised any performance of it which, though technically excellent, failed to give the emphasis of conviction to that word, 'know': 'I *know* that my Redeemer liveth'" (*NSE* 247). "Such passionate knowledge" is what constituted faith for Levertov – something she admits she didn't have at the time of writing the essay. It is this distinction in the quality of 'knowing' that enabled Levertov to "attain / free-fall, and float / into Creator Spirit's deep embrace" (*OP* 76), and made possible her confident affirmation of belief in a manner that Dickinson could not achieve.

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Appendix

An Email Interview with Fr. Murray Bodo OFM (July 30, 2007)

Fr. Murray Bodo, a Franciscan priest, was Denise Levertov's spiritual mentor and friend for over twenty years. He is the author of seventeen books, including the international best seller, *Francis, the Journey and the Dream*, and *Poetry as Prayer: Denise Levertov*. He is visiting professor of poetry and visiting scholar in the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure University, New York. His poems have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Mystics Quarterly*, *Cistercian Studies*, *Tracks* (Dublin), *The Cord*, and *St. Anthony Messenger*; and they have been anthologized in *Odd Angles of Heaven: Contemporary Poetry by People of Faith* and *Place of Passage: Contemporary Catholic Poetry*.

1. As a Catholic priest who had a long and close relationship/association with Denise Levertov, I am sure you know aspects of her life and faith unknown to others. I am aware, from a comment she made in an interview by Michael Andre, that Levertov was rather antagonistic to what is called confessional poetry, which seems to exploit the private life. Prior to the sixties, she suppressed the direct autobiographical allusions. However she seems to pull in more actual facts in her later poetry. Would you say this is so? How autobiographical do you think is her poetry especially with regard to her coming to the faith?

Fr. Bodo: What Levertov was against in so-called confessional poetry was the exploitation of the private life without artifice and craft. If the poem

itself was a good poem as an art object, then it would not be a poem she would reject as poem, though that type of poetry was not something she herself liked to read or write. As far as the autobiographical in her poetry, in one sense all of her poetry is autobiographical, drawn from her own experiences. However, in her coming to faith, the reader notices it more because this is a new emphasis in her explorations, as were the so-called war poems of the sixties. One sees, though, from the very beginning an already heightened sensitivity to the ravages of war, as in the poem she wrote in 1940 when she was only 17 years old, "Listening to Distant Guns." And also from the beginning there is a search for the transcendent, especially in nature. A key poem here is "First Love" from her final collection, *This Great Unknowing*. Her contact with the divine was always through the concrete object, as it was in Gerard Manley Hopkins and Julian of Norwich. And yes, the articulation of her religious Faith's journey is more pronounced in the poems toward the end of her life.

2. Denise Levertov was extremely interested in Christian mystical experience and has written a whole bunch of poems about Julian of Norwich. The three aspects of our life – being, increasing and fulfilling – move like a spiral that is deepening and widening at the same time, or as Julian said in Middle English, "forth spredying." Would you say this deepening and widening, this increasing as Levertov spreads forth in God's love, is reflected in her poetry?

Fr. Bodo: Yes, I would; though again, from the very beginning there is ample evidence that she is "forth spredying" even in her early poems. Cf. the poem, "Overland to the Islands," from her 1958 collection of the same name.

3. It was from your article in *Image* that I came to know of her being baptised a Catholic. Her poems reveal a movement from an altar to unknown gods to an awareness of God (capital G) to an understanding of "God as revealed in the Incarnation." Would you throw some light on her deepening understanding of the Incarnation as it figured in her gradual conversion to Christianity that ultimately leads to her commitment as a Catholic?

Fr. Bodo: I believe Levertov was aware of God in the Incarnation from the very beginning. It was not God but religion that scandalized her because of some of the inadequate responses of religion to war and injustice. Her father was the model of the truly religious man for her, a kind, compassionate, deeply social-justice oriented priest. But Levertov was not one to merely embrace whatever religion was bequeathed to her; she needed to work it through in her own deep search for God, for a religion that addressed the problems of the world that she was most concerned about, and for a religion that reverenced mystery. She found that religion in Catholicism, in its sacramental approach to reality and in its teachings on social justice, especially as she saw them exemplified in Catholics she'd met like the Trappist, Thomas Merton, and Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit activist. Despite her reservations about the hierarchical Church's stance toward women and

often toward social issues, especially in Latin America, she was drawn to Catholicism as she saw it lived out in the lives of people she admired and in the dynamic and mystery of the Catholic liturgy and Sacraments.

4. One of the consistent principles in Levertov's writings and in her life as an activist is that in the final analysis deeds are more important than words, works more powerful than faith. She seems to favour the Catholic idea of "works that enfaith" rather than the Protestant idea of a faith that works. Could you comment on this emphasis on works in her personal, political and spiritual life?

Fr. Bodo: Yes, "works that enfaith" was her own articulation of the old dilemma and controversy about faith versus works. "Works that enfaith" is the very essence of the Sacramental theology of the Catholic Church. It is also a phrase that describes her own life's work, both as a poet and an activist. Every thing she wrote "enfaithed" something she believed in deeply and which was a part of her Faith at the time of the poem's writing.

5. Would you agree that the deepening of her faith resulted in a corresponding deepening or maturing as a poet?

Fr. Bodo: Not necessarily. Levertov was consistently a deep poet from the beginning. There is a continuance in her work as she so beautifully renders in her, "For Those Whom the Gods Love Less," from her 1996 collection, *Sands of the Well*. What I will say about her deepening faith is that it both gave a new direction to the content of her poems and chronicled what she

called her own slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith. I believe her faith was there like a seed from the beginning and her "conversion" gave her a way of articulating what was there from the beginning. Her later poems are like an uncovering of what was there in her soul from the beginning. According to her, a further deepening and explicit exploration of faith began with the writing of the poem/libretto, "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus," although the earliest poem in her collection of poems on Religious themes, *The Stream and the Sapphire*, dates from 1978.

6. Through a study of Levertov's poetry one is able to delineate a linear movement from agnosticism to faith that leads to a resolution, as well as a corresponding poetic development towards maturity. Unlike Levertov who affirms God in the accomplishment of her intellectual and moral activity and in the exercise of her imagination, Dickinson remains a doubter throughout with her back and forth movements from scepticism to faith. There is no such linear development or a resolution, and this is reflected in her poetry wherein there is no poetic development towards maturity, no "late manner" so integrally held that she could not, in conscience, deviate therefrom. Would you agree?

Fr. Bodo: With Emily Dickinson, as with Levertov, I believe the skepticism is over religion more than over God and God's existence. Look, for example, at Dickinson's "Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church."