

“Could it be Madness - this?”: Bipolar
Disorder and the Art of Containment in the
Poetry of Emily Dickinson.

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*Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
the degree of Master of Arts in English Studies.
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg: 2007.*

This whole thesis, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own, original work.

Acknowledgement

I should like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor Dr Catherine Woeber, whose expertise and guidance steered me through this project. I am also grateful to Celeste Johns, Abdool Gani (Pietermaritzburg campus library) and Sashni Chetty (Durban campus library) for their kind assistance at all times.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation engages in a critical analysis of the poetry of Emily Dickinson which, to me, suggests that the poet suffered from a type of manic-depression known specifically in psychiatric parlance as bipolar disorder. I argue that although Dickinson experienced much pain and suffering she learnt, through time, to address, understand and contain adversity - that ultimately, she transformed these experiences into the raw materials for poetic creation. Dickinson's poetic achievements are often obscured by a misunderstanding of her mental and emotional constitution. This thesis provides an alternative to the views of those commentators who maintain that Emily Dickinson was insane, neurotic or delusional. I intend, ultimately, to offer the reader a fresh insight into Emily Dickinson's poetry by reading it from the assumption that she suffered from bipolar disorder.

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Introduction

Leon Edel maintains that the researcher, especially one who is drawn towards a posthumous subject, should be able to “recognise the existence of a series of possibilities rather than accept smugly the single answer to any given question projected by himself” (in Anderson:460). This dissertation engages in a critical analysis of the poems of Emily Dickinson, in which I discern strong indications of intermittent and fluctuating mood swings, as well as evidence of traumatic episodes. I speculate on the basis of these poems, augmented by my reading of relevant psychiatric texts, that Emily Dickinson may possibly have suffered from a type of illness which resembles what the World Health Organisation, in its *International Classification of Diseases (ICD)*, classifies as alternating episodes of mania and “severe depressive states, with or without psychotic symptoms” (Grove and Andreasen: 29). In an updated classification, the American Psychiatric Association, in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM – IIR 2002)*, endorses these symptoms and their variants specifically as bipolar disorder (Marneros and Goodwin: 47). Because I lack the professional expertise of the psychologist or the psychiatrist as such, I am not in a position to make any clinical diagnosis of bipolar disorder. I intend, however, to offer the reader a fresh insight into Emily Dickinson’s poetry by reading it from the assumption that she suffered from bipolar disorder.

My abiding concern is with what Dickinson’s poetry reveals of her alternating (not altered) states of mind, as well as the trajectories of her mood swings and the anxieties which follow. The poems which I examine illustrate the extent to which she is able, in stages, to confront painful and traumatic experiences and thereafter transform these into poetic experience. I argue that although these episodes initially caused her much pain and suffering they ultimately turned out to be crucial in unlocking and releasing her latent poetic energies; that, as she grew older, she learnt to address, understand and contain these episodes, at a time when psychiatry as a discipline was still unknown. In the final

analysis, Emily Dickinson did not yield to those forces which threatened to de-stabilize and disorientate her emotional and mental well-being; on the contrary, she turned the raw materials of her suffering into poetic excellence. Her poems, therefore, represent the pillars which hold this thesis together.

A study of this nature, inevitably, pulls together the several strands of converging theoretical and critical discourses, some of which have the potential to clash and resist each other at meeting point. The researcher, therefore, needs to be painstakingly conscious of the potential pitfalls and land mines which, from time to time, are to be encountered along the way. The reader is aware, no doubt, that there are several methodologies which one might employ to in order undertake a critical analysis of literary texts, particularly poetry. In my analysis of Emily Dickinson's poetry, I am conscious of, and draw selectively on, the principles underlying the theoretical approaches postulated by some of the major schools of literary theory and criticism. Foremost, in this regard, is the influence of the Anglo-American school of New Criticism. I am also cognisant of the theoretical assumptions put forth by the theorists of Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction. Although I do not engage directly with these theoretical approaches, their influence may be detected from time to time. Since my primary concern in this thesis is centred exclusively on the emotional dimension, and by implication on the mental health of Emily Dickinson, my approach is grounded firmly in psycho-analytical theory. The first step, therefore, is to negotiate the relationship between psychoanalysis and literary studies in the context of this study.

Norman Holland makes a telling point about the psychoanalytical approach to literary studies:

In the largest sense, all criticism is psychological criticism, since all criticism and theory proceed from assumptions about the psychology of humans who make or experience or are portrayed in literature. When Plato speaks of poetry enfeebling the mind or of poetic creation as a divine madness, when Aristotle writes of catharsis or Coleridge of imagination, they are making psychological statements. (29)

Psychoanalysis on its own, however, is too broad and too complex an approach and if its application is to have any significant relevance to this particular project, there is a definite need for refinement and selectivity of its key components. And this is where, I believe, the convergence between psychoanalysis and literary studies is helpful. To offer a very broad idea of the traditional psychoanalytical setting, pioneered by the Viennese neurologist Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth century: the patient or analysand, troubled by mental and emotional problems, recalls and relates segments of his or her personal history to the analyst who, out of this one-on-one interaction, the “talking cure”, attempts to diagnose the root cause of these afflictions and thereafter proceeds to work out a therapeutic programme to rehabilitate the patient (Lapsley 66). Through these psychoanalytical sessions, Freud made an important discovery which was to revolutionize the way in which the human mind was to be conceived of in the years to follow. The neurologist identified a dimension of the mind, which he called the “unconscious”, and described this as the site where all our desires, anxieties and conflicts are not only repressed but struggle, continuously, to break through and emerge into consciousness. Lapsley, fittingly, refers to Freud’s discovery as a “Copernican revolution in European thought” (67). Psychoanalytical theory was to find its way into the sphere of literary studies, reinforced by the underlying assumption that the unconscious plays a decisive role in the genesis and production of literary texts:

Freud’s task, therefore, is to describe the ‘unconscious dexterity’, the talent which the unconscious has for transforming impulse, hidden motives, ‘intentions’, instinctual forces (the many names for what causes movement in the psyche) into verbal and visual forms. (Suprenant :203)

Further, Ruth Parkin-Gounelas discusses “how gaps or silences in texts may be seen to represent the unconscious, and ... the different configurations of psychoanalytical theory provide structures through which texts are to be read”(xii). This will be explored in greater detail when, in my analysis of the poems, I discuss Dickinson’s unconventional use of punctuation (particularly dashes), her run-on lines and her often ambiguous and inconclusive endings as part of her poetic

strategies.

Future psychoanalysts, particularly Jacques Lacan, would elaborate on Freud's work on the unconscious by proposing a linguistic representation of his theory. By adapting the famous Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's model of the signifier and the signified, Lacan argued that

[t]he importance accorded to signifiers (their belonging to a constraining, signifying chain which nevertheless comprises possibilities of freedom) allows for a comparison of the functioning of language with literature and poetry, which prepares the ground for the comparison between unconscious processes and language (literature and poetry, for Lacan, provided a theoretical and practical model for the psychoanalyst). (Suprenant: 207)

It is most interesting, according to Morris Dickstein, that Freud on his seventieth birthday, "generously attributed the discovery of the unconscious to the poets, claiming for psychoanalysis only a scientific method by which the unconscious could be studied" (72). The poems of Emily Dickinson which I discuss, and as the reader shall see, evince more than adequately her insight into the working of the mind with regards to consciousness, the unconscious, perception and memory. The work of Freud and Lacan, collectively, foreshadows the context out of which this thesis is to unfold. The next step, having posited the relationship between psychoanalysis and poetry is, I believe, to attempt to negotiate some kind of mediation between psychoanalytic practice and some of the other competing schools of critical discourse, most notably Anglo-American New Criticism. This is to ensure that a measure of compatibility is attained as I read and interpret the poetry of Emily Dickinson from a psychoanalytical perspective by applying, for example, the methodologies of critical analysis propagated by the adherents of New Criticism. To illustrate further: in my reading of a particular poem I sense, through the sheer force of diction and the images employed, strong evidence of a traumatic experience that Dickinson's speaker is describing. By the end of the poem, I am convinced that she overcomes this unpleasant experience instead of yielding to it and that, in my final analysis, she transforms this pain into pleasure by engaging in the art of poetic creation. My reading of the poem is in accordance with the tenets outlined by the leading New

Criticism exponents Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren who describe a poem as being “an organic system of relationships”:

For instance, a poet will use a particular word with a full sense of its qualities, will exploit its suggestive meanings (its connotations) as well as its literal meaning (denotation), will choose a word for how it may sound, and for how it resonates with other words in the poem. (Matterson:167)

In my interpretation of the poem, I am constructing meaning, in a hermeneutic sense, which is directly related to an aspect of the poet’s private life. This, of course, leads me into biographical territory and eventually, to my discussing the poet’s intention in writing the poem. But there appears to be, immediately, a theoretical pitfall here as Bennett and Royle point out that the question of “the intentional fallacy” was to become a “conceptual cornerstone” of Anglo-American New Criticism “which argues that ‘the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a literary work’ - that all we have are ‘the words on the page’ - which may indicate intention but can never finally prove it” (Bennett and Royle:22).

In this study I adopt both psychoanalytical and New Critical approaches. Andrew Bennett refers to “Expressivity” as “the Romantic theory of authorship” when he makes the point that the Romantic as well as the later poets set out to consciously create and compose poetry:

The author, as he or she is increasingly conceived of in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has ideas, feeling, intentions, and desires which emerge in the act of composition and result in a linguistic artefact - a poem, play, novel, essay, or other literary work. The act of composition is seen as a way of representing in language an original, pre-linguistic work, an idea of a work that is constituted in - and as - the author’s consciousness. (49)

With reference to Emily Dickinson, and specifically in the context of her so called “eccentric” lifestyle, I shall show how her creation and use of personas refute any suggestion of the intentional fallacy argument which may be directed towards this study. I hope, then, that by constructing this thesis upon a psychoanalytic pedestal and, by drawing upon New Criticism methodology - against the backdrop of the Romantic theory of authorship - I am successful in blending these competing strands of critical scholarship. But this does not, by any means, herald

closure of the theoretical field as there are areas of the landscape remaining that beg to be demarcated and signposted. This necessitates an incursion into that bypath of psychoanalysis which has come to be called psychobiography as my study, by virtue of the position I have taken, inevitably dips into aspects of biography. Following this incursion, a résumé of the psychiatric condition known as bipolar disorder or manic-depressive illness is imperative.

Pamela Osborne Munter defines psychobiography as the investigation into the “psychological aspects of public persons by competent clinicians using sophisticated assessment techniques” (424).

Although this practice deals mainly with subjects who are no longer alive, it is also used on living people. Clearly, given the strong psychological bias with which the researcher probes into his or her subject, this undertaking is very different from the conventional biography which we have become accustomed to. Munter is sceptical of “unsophisticated” persons, unschooled in clinical theory and practice, who undertake psychobiographical studies. Renowned contemporary psychobiographer William Todd Schultz shares Munter’s scepticism:

Still, biographers are not typically psychobiographers; they have no or little psychological training; they tend to come from a literary background; they often are not well-versed in either theory or psychological research on personality processes. When psychology does find its way into a conventional biography, it usually assumes the form of a kind of tabloid-Freud, a common-sensical application of presupposed sets of motives dating back to childhood trauma. The theory is invisible, its choice rarely explicitly justified. (Schultz:online)

Two points need to be clarified: firstly, as a student of literature I concede, with academic respect, that I am not qualified and, as such, ill-equipped to make any rash psychological proclamations on the life of Emily Dickinson or, for that matter, on any other individual. Secondly, this thesis is not a biographical study but a critical analysis of Dickinson’s poetry which, through the patterning and use of her diction, imagery and stylistic devices, reveals recurrent themes which are of a psychological turn. It is for this reason, with the exception of one or two tangential references, that I do not incorporate any of the vast corpus of Dickinson’s correspondence into this work. Neither do I

approach the poems with any preconceived psychological assumptions, searching for symptoms of mental and emotional aberrations. Conversely, it is the poetry that speaks for itself and, in doing so, shapes my conception and informs my assumptions of *that* one aspect of the poet's psychological make-up: her fluctuating mood swings and her response to those dark and terrible moments which are so vividly described. Nowhere do I attempt to speculate on Emily Dickinson's personality, her private life or her relationship with the few people who were fortunate to have made her acquaintance. I direct the reader's attention, instead, to evidence of Dickinson's abiding concern with, and insight into, the mind: its powers to perceive, the way consciousness works, and the nature of memory - all of which - in the twentieth century, were to be formally incorporated, variously, into those disciplines which would become known as psychology, psychiatry and neurology. My approach, far from being nosological in its construction, is fundamentally a literary one which embraces aspects of psychology. Central to this thesis is the manner in which Emily Dickinson created poetry out of adversity.

Jules Angst *et al.* (109) point out that despite the voluminous research carried out on bipolar disorder for more than a hundred years, there is still controversy and shifting theories about the different range of disorders and their classification. Research in this field is ongoing and the diagnostic criteria of both the World Health Organisation's *International Classification of Diseases (ICD)* and the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* have been reviewed and revised on more than one occasion in recent years. An individual who suffers from bipolar disorder experiences fluctuating mood swings from one extreme to the other - the highs of mania to the lows of depression - in varying degrees and intensities ranging from mild (hypomania) to the severe and beyond, resembling psychosis (Silverstone and Hunt:15). This may occur in alternating periods known as cyclothymia and is often characterized by anxiety disorders and fear. Sufferers are also known to experience both mania and depression in the same episode, known as "mixed states" (Koukopoulos *et al.*:163). Judd and Burrows (77) discuss

“anxiety and panic disorders” as one of the strands of the depression spectrum, and Dickinson’s poems of late 1861 and 1862 suggest, closely, these symptoms of panic attacks. Cyclothymia is discussed further in terms of seasonal affective disorders (SAD) when individuals’ manic-depressive states are influenced by the winter and summer months (Oren and Rosenthal :551). This is interesting, as Wendy Barker’s book *Lunacy of Light* (1987) examines in elaborate detail Dickinson’s use of seasonal light as metaphors. Psychologists Ramsey and Weisberg have devoted an entire study to Dickinson and SAD in attempt to find a correlation between her poetic productivity and what they believe to have been her seasonal affective disorder. Their study, however, is driven by their excessive dependence on statistical data and they assess Dickinson’s poetic output purely by counting the number of anthologies her work appears in and, predictably, they hypothesize that her mood disorders fostered long spells of productivity. As psychologists, and understandably too, they stop short of discussing creativity. Their work is nevertheless very useful. Perhaps the most pertinent of all these insightful observations, for the purpose of this study, is that of Basco and Rush who maintain that the management of bipolar disorder,

[i]f properly implemented, can more often than not lead to a healthy, happy and productive life. It simply takes focus, commitment and, initially, a substantial effort. Over time, less effort is needed, but careful attention will always be needed to keep the conditions in check.
(58)

The poems, particularly those of the post-1865 period illustrate how well Dickinson contained her moods and emotions.

Kenneth Burke in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* addresses the very interesting question of the relationship between the poet and his (her) sickness:

... the poet will naturally tend to write about that which most deeply engrosses him - and nothing more deeply engrosses a man than his *burdens*, including those of a physical nature, such as disease. We win by capitalizing on our debts, by turning our liabilities into assets, by using our burdens as a basis of insight. And so the poet may come to have a “vested interest” in his handicaps; these handicaps may become an integral part of his method ... And it bears again upon the subject of “symbolic action,” with the poet’s burdens symbolic of his style, and his style symbolic of his burdens. I think we should not be far wrong if, seeking the area where states of mind are best available to empirical observation,

we sought for correlations between styles and physical disease (particularly since there is no discomfiture, however mental in origin, that does not have its physiological correlates) ... The true locus of attention is not in the *disease*, but in the *structural powers* by which the poet encompasses it. (17)

Burke makes no mention of Emily Dickinson in his book, but almost every point he raises in the above extract relates directly to Emily Dickinson's poetry: her recurrent descriptions of mental and emotional afflictions, her irrepressible desire to contain these afflictions by turning them into poetic experience, the crafting and development of her technique together with "symbolic action", the deep sense of freedom she feels at having mastered her traumas, her acquisition of self-knowledge and the joy she ultimately expresses at attaining poetic fulfilment. In 1993, Kay Redfield Jamison produced a landmark study, *Touched With Fire: Manic -Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, which attempts to trace the relationship between manic-depressive illness and creativity. Jamison, a psychiatrist and bipolar sufferer, deals specifically with famous novelists and poets who, she believes, suffered from bipolar disorder. She alludes to Dickinson only once, in an epigraph to one of her chapters, and focuses instead on writers such as William Blake, Lord Byron and Virginia Woolf. Jamison sets out, primarily, to establish the relationship between mood disorders and creativity in writers. She points out that the bipolar condition is characterized by intermittent displays of "fierce energy, high mood and quick intelligence; a sense of the visionary and the grand; a restless and feverish temperament with the capacity for vastly darker moods, grimmer energies, and occasionally, bouts of 'madness'"(3). What is particularly interesting is that many of these symptomatic characteristics are to be discerned in the poems of Emily Dickinson.

In another study, parallel to that of Jamison's, Hershman and Lieb present further evidence of the link between creativity and bipolar disorder.

It is inconceivable that a few individuals may possess talents so extraordinary that they successfully compete for recognition as geniuses without the assets provided by manic- depression. For this reason, we believe that manic-depression is almost, but not absolutely essential in genius. (12)

Roger Luckhurst, discussing recent developments that have taken place, states that “trauma theory has only recently, after the mid-1990's, been incorporated into critical theory “when various lines of inquiry converged to make trauma a privileged critical category”. He relates this to the “psychological, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic questions about the nature of traumatic events” (497). Ruth Parkin-Gounelas explains further, “...but in some the trauma of loss can be converted into finding through the creative process. Freud called this sublimation” (56). Harold Bloom explicates the “sublime” in his reading of Freud’s work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where Freud argues that “the psyche strives to master trauma after the event” (174). I am particularly interested in what Luckhurst calls “the paradox of traumatic temporality” in which Freud questioned whether the record of a traumatic event in his patients was “lodged in the unconscious, waiting for recall, or was the very product of that recall”. According to Luckhurst, Freud suggested that it is “*both* these things, impossibly, at the same time” (501). This has a direct bearing on my reading of Emily Dickinson’s poems, particularly, “It struck me everyday” (362), “There is a pain so utter” (599) and “The whole of it came not at once –” (762). In these poems Dickinson describes paradoxically how, in a trace-like state, perception and memory interact to record experience, which is then rewritten by the imaginative faculties culminating in poetic creation.

In April 1862 Emily Dickinson, then thirty-two years old, told her mentor and preceptor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson in a letter, “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 -” (in Sewall :542). To this day, nobody has been able to state precisely what the poet was alluding to in that famous letter and the chances are her meaning will never be known. As a result of the reclusive life she led, many aspects of Dickinson’s private life are veiled in mystery and attempts to probe into these remain inconclusive. For the last twenty-five years of her life or so, the poet never left her home and only maintained contact with a very small circle of relatives and friends, mostly through letters.

Furthermore, she left no memoirs or journals for future scholars and only about seven or eight of her poems were published, anonymously, in her lifetime as she chose not to publish the vast number of poems she had been writing and accumulating in private. It seems that she originally intended to publish her poems in the early 1860s, when she was at the zenith of her creative powers. This is strongly suggested in her initial correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, eminent man of letters and distinguished critic. In her early letters to him, she presents herself as the tentative poet, eager to test her poems in the waters of criticism. This eagerness, however, appears to dissipate in the subsequent years as Dickinson does not express any further desire to publish her work. Whether she was discouraged by Higginson's scepticism, or simply self-conscious and uneasy about her own poetic standards, or whether she simply lost interest, cannot be truly ascertained. One likely reason for her lack of interest in publication was the way in which her poems were conventionalized and changed by editors and publishers. In a letter to Higginson in March 1866, she complained about changes to her poem, "The Snake" (also known as "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass"). Note how she, humorously, defies the conventions of syntax and punctuation to express her objection to editorial interference:

Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me - defeated too
of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one - I had told
you I did not print - I feared you might think me ostensible. (in Sewall:476)

She was therefore not recognized by her contemporary public as an eminent poet - that honour was only to be bestowed upon her posthumously.

A twenty-first century study of a nineteenth-century poet must take into consideration some of the underlying principles of historicism, even though Emily Dickinson's social and historical context is, to say the least, remotely connected with this thesis. John Fischer cautions against pursuing false assumptions that

people are intellectually and psychologically the same at all times, places and circumstances ...
People in various places and times have not merely thought different things, they have thought

them differently ... their deepest emotions, desires and drives may themselves have been transformed ... (in Anderson: 461)

For example, Dickinson's nineteenth-century America, like the rest of the world, was still to make diagnostic and therapeutic discoveries as psychiatry and its related disciplines were still unknown. Edward Shorter notes that the asylum mentality was the order of the day (5). The terms "bipolar disorder" and "manic-depressive" were certainly unheard of, even though symptoms of the illness were detected and described broadly as "hysteria" and "melancholia" as far back as 430 BC by Hippocrates and others (Maneros and Goodwin:3). Elaine Showalter, in *The Female Malady*, describes how it was the norm, historically, to classify any symptom of emotional instability or signs of "other" behaviour by women under the broad, and often misleading, category of hysteria or madness.

These dual images of female insanity - madness as one of the wrongs of women; madness as the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality - suggest the two ways women have been perceived. ... Contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics and social theorists ... have shown how women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature and body, whilst men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture and mind. (3-4)

Feminist critics like Barbara Mossberg, Susan Gubar, Vivian Pollack and Judith Farr, in the Showalter mould, read Dickinson's poetry as being a response to her oppression in a patriarchal society. Emily Dickinson, in her time, escaped these "mad" or "insane" labels simply because very few people actually knew her or came into direct contact with her. To the people of her small backwater town of Amherst, she was no more than the eccentric or idiosyncratic spinster who dressed in white and stayed indoors - nothing unusual or extraordinary at the time to attract curiosity and attention. It was only in the early twentieth century, when her status as a poetic genius was firmly established, that scholars (and others) began probing into her life in earnest, which resulted in a host of theories, some more credible than others, emerging. But, as these issues fall outside the ambit of this study, it is, as Jay Leyda reminds us, to the poetry of Emily Dickinson that we must turn:

Is it really possible that we can be shut away from the full work or real personality of so vital a poet? Can *any* false structure, no matter how buttressed by “family tradition” and scholarly authority, by poetical tributes and pilgrimages, by novels, plays, even two operas and a dance, forever obscure the real person who wrote the poems? ...

The worthiest aim for all Dickinson scholarship of the future is to make it easier for her poetry to speak directly and freshly to every reader. (in Sewall: 10-11)

One of the problems facing the Dickinson scholar is the sheer volume of her *oeuvre* which consists of almost 2000 poems, encompassing the range of existence as diverse as, to quote one of Dickinson’s own expressions, “fin to firmament” (Sewall :553). That the researcher has to be scrupulously selective needs no overstating here. The question of where one really begins becomes complicated when we realize that Dickinson did not date her poems. Thanks to the painstaking editorial and archival work of Thomas H. Johnson’s scholarship (1955), we now have a very good idea of the respective years in which the poems were written. Burke offers a useful way forward through what he calls the “essentializing strategy”:

The critic should adopt a variant of the free-association method ... what he can do is to note the context of imagery and ideas in which an image takes place. He can also note, by such analysis, the kinds of evaluations surrounding the image of a crossing ... Until finally, by noting the ways in which this crossing behaves, what subsidiary imagery accompanies it, what kind of event it grows out of, what kind of event grows out of it, what altered rhythmic and tonal effects characterize it etc., one grasps its significance as motivation. And there is no essential motive offered here. The motive of the work is equated with the structure of interrelationships with the work itself. (266).

My initial engagement with Emily Dickinson, through a random selection of her poems, led me to biographical material. It was in these biographical studies that I encountered a large number of theories which questioned, amongst other things, Dickinson’s sanity and these resisted my own sense of the poet. Having gone through Dickinson’s entire collection in Johnson I have isolated those poems which, through their plain prose sense or primary meaning, are suggestive in some way of emotional or mental crises. Following on, I mined these poems in greater depth and refined my selection according to the thematic and structural guidelines offered by Burke. I have found that, in terms of Johnson’s chronological sequencing of the poems, a distinctive pattern emerges: there is a strong correlation, progressively, between the intensity of the mood swings and the quality of the poetry. I have therefore divided my selection of poems for study into three distinct

periods: the first covers the 1850s up to about 1861 when the first of pendulum-like mood swings of the milder variety are to be seen. Dickinson is clearly in the formative stage of her development as poet in these years. The second and crucial period focuses on 1862, which is Dickinson's most productive and creative year, in which she averages a poem a day. The poetry, here, suggests compellingly that Dickinson suffered the most severe and traumatic experiences during this time. The third period deals broadly with the years 1866 – 1886 during which time the poetry suggests that Dickinson has mastered the art of containment as there are no poems which come anywhere close to the turbulence of 1862. The three chapters which make up this thesis deal, respectively, with each of the periods I have identified. I have incorporated "Vesuvius" into each of the chapter headings as Dickinson uses the volcano as a recurrent image when describing her states of mind. The pervading strand that binds all three chapters together is Dickinson's resilient spirit which refuses to submit to the mental and emotional storms which assail her. The poems show, through all of her highs and lows, how consciously she communes with her muses.

Dickinson did not attach titles to her poems and the standard practice amongst commentators has been to quote the opening line of each poem, followed by its numerical equivalent in parenthesis. I adhere strictly to this method of citation throughout this thesis. There has been much written about Dickinson's use of personas in her poetry and the general feeling amongst critics is that she employs this technique as a stylistic device to deflect attention from herself. Given the passionate nature with which she guarded her privacy, this seems to be a very realistic possibility. I shall discuss, as the thesis unfolds, this apparent disjunction between her desire for privacy and her need to articulate experience poetically. Once again, the watchword in this exercise is, as John A. Garraty in Anderson reminds us, speculation:

No one should object to the use of Freudian techniques if they are explicitly stated as speculations ... Perhaps simply identifying such interpretations as speculations is not enough, but would help readers avoid mistaking speculations for finished conclusions.
(475)

Chapter One

Sleeping Vesuvius

The 1850s, up to about 1861 represents, roughly, Emily Dickinson's early poetry. It was during this stage that the poet, influenced to a large extent by the hymnody she grew accustomed to in her early years in the church, began to experiment with the lyrical form which she was to make her own. There is ample evidence in these early poems of what was to follow in terms of the development of Dickinson's unique stylistic devices, her use of personas, and the emergence of what Suzanne Wilson identifies as

a clearly definable range and distribution of patterns ... A tabulation of the structural characteristics in the entire canon indicates that one major pattern predominates, that several well-defined variations of this pattern are present, and that the chronological distribution of this pattern in its several variations shows experiment and development in technique and consciously suggests artistry. (54)

Numerous studies have been devoted to Dickinson's poetic technique and her artistry and we need not restate here all that has been already said. Sewall's pertinent observation "that although Dickinson was steeped in the Romantic tradition of poetry, ... she never set out to imitate any of the poets she read and ... she disclaimed the conscious use of a 'paint mixed by another person'" (668) is, however, worth citing here. What is of particular significance in this early period is the range of mood swings which recur in the poetry. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to discuss these alternating states of mind and to show how closely they resemble those symptoms of manic depressive illness or bipolar disorder, as set out in the World Health Organisation's *International Classification of Diseases (ICD 1994)* and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM III - 2002)* of the American Psychiatric Association. Central to this is the extent to which Emily Dickinson demonstrates her ability to create poetry out of adversity.

The early poems which I discuss in this chapter show clearly the fluctuating mood swings, ranging from despair to exultation, experienced by Dickinson's speakers. Basco and Rush, in terms of *ICD*

and *DSM III* record that

when depression begins, mood can change from euthymic to sad, blah, blue, empty, anxious, hopeless, irritable. People describe feeling impatient, edgy, nervous, lost, misunderstood, disinterested ... very often they find that they don't care anymore about their activities ... Everything seems difficult and overwhelming. Patients are convinced that there is no point in trying to accomplish anything because a negative outcome is inevitable. (17)

Whilst descriptions of depression, anxiety and loss are to be seen in the poems, there appears to be no indication of disinterest or negativity. Dickinson, on the contrary, refuses to be overwhelmed by adversity and persists in creating poetry, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Describing mania, at the other end of the bipolar spectrum, Silverstone and Hunt observe that there is

an elevation of mood out of keeping with the subject's circumstances or increased irritability. Self reports are often expressed in terms such as 'intense sense of well being', 'too good to be true', 'cheerful in a beautiful world' ... patients may be seen to indulge in behaviours generally associated with a heightened mood such as laughing, singing and dancing. The similarity to states of cheerful drunkenness probably reflects the disinhibition found in both states as much as any change in mood. (16)

As this chapter unfolds, the reader will be able to identify those poems in which Dickinson celebrates life with the exuberance of one who is "divinely intoxicated", to borrow words from "'Twas such a little boat" (107, 1958).

In a study of this nature, it is inevitable that the biographical details of the poet will surface, from time to time. To ensure that these details do not become distractions to the main thrust of my argument I have attempted, as far as possible, to limit my references to them. It is for this reason that I see the vast collection of Dickinson's correspondence as parallel texts. Antoine Compagnon notes that:

Without assumed coherence in the text, that is without intention, a parallelism is too fragile an indication, a random coincidence: one cannot base an interpretation on the probability that the same word may have the same meaning in two different instances.
...

The only intention that counts in an author is his intention to create literature (in the sense that art is intentional) , and the poem itself is sufficient to decide whether the author has succeeded in his intention. (51,56)

This recalls Jay Leyda's call for Dickinson's poetry "to speak directly and freshly to every reader" (in Sewall, 10-11). Heeding Leyda's call, it is primarily to her poetry, then, that we must turn. One

of Dickinson's earliest known poems is the following, written for her brother Austin when she was only twenty-one.

There is another sky
 Ever serene and fair,
 And there is another sunshine
 Though it be darkness there;
 Never mind faded forests, Austin,
 Never mind silent fields -
Here is a little forest,
 Whose leaf is ever green;
 Here is a brighter garden,
 Where not a frost has been;
 In its unfading flowers
 I hear the bright bee hum;
 Prithee, my brother,
 Into *my* garden come! (2, 1851)

Austin was away from home for several years in the 1850s teaching in Boston and thereafter pursuing studies in law at Harvard (Lundin: 67). Dickinson regularly wrote him letters and it would appear that this poem found its way into one her letters at a time when Austin appeared to be feeling depressed and homesick. Johnson has seen it as worthy of publication in his collection, and this is not surprising, as the poem announces Dickinson as a budding poet. It is a poem which exudes youthful energy and optimism. At age twenty-one, Dickinson expresses a deep awareness of her ability to offer love and comfort. She sees herself as a "brighter garden" untouched by the ravages of frost. Her flowers are "unfading" and her leaves are "ever green". She offers her brother love, comfort and solace by inviting him ("Into *my* garden come!"). This poem represents her pristine state of mind and there are no signs, anywhere in the poem, of the emotional storms and struggles which were to assail the young poet from the late 1850's. Here, we see only the gentle and reassuring pastoral- like tones of one who is at peace with herself. Dickinson is clearly aware of two "worlds": the one presently inhabited by Austin and which speaks of "darkness", "faded forests" and "silent fields", and "the world" of brightness and "unfading flowers" which she holds out to him. But is this really as simplistic as it appears to be? Not quite, for with hindsight (through the other poems which we read of this period), we know that there were darker moods and temperaments lodged latent within the poet, waiting to surface. Sewall recounts that the year 1851 had "been the year of deaths among the young people of Amherst,

some of them Emily's close friends" (435). He points out, furthermore, that Dickinson implored her brother, in her regular letters to him, to return home as she was going through a dark period and in need of comfort herself. In this light, "There is another sky" must be seen on two levels: her desire to provide love and comfort to her brother and, underlying this, her own need herself, for his presence. Lines three and four, "And there is another Sunshine, / Though it be darkness there;" present ambiguous possibilities. Could it refer to Austin's "darkness" or the "darkness" she feels amidst her own "sunshine"? It seems to me, looking back in terms of her full poetic development, that the words "darkness" and "sunshine" are important signposts or indicators of the direction in which her thoughts began to take shape; they develop further as the archetypal images which graphically depict her mood swings. Lines three and four also mark the beginning of a technique she was to make her very own; her deliberate play on words ("There") leaving, always, her reader's options open. The word "there" in line four could refer either to the world that Austin inhabits or, to the world of the speaker. The last line, "Into *my* garden come!", may also be read, ambiguously, as her invitation either to give love and support or as a veiled plea calling out for the same, or it could embody both meanings. This tendency to write open-ended lines was to become a feature of Dickinson's style and may possibly represent, at this very early stage, her need to repress what Freud was later to refer to as the anxieties and fears residing in the unconscious. This is one line of thought which this chapter will explore.

Sewall (24) notes that Dickinson often uses the metaphor of the voyage, suggested by the ebb and flow of the sea, to describe the uncertainty of human destiny. The so called "sea" poems of this early period, when read together, would seem to suggest concerns which extend far beyond human destiny. In the following poem, for instance, the speaker meditates on the prospect of eternity which, as we shall see, becomes synonymous with Dickinson's idea of attaining poetic fulfilment.

On this wondrous sea
Sailing silently
Ho! Pilot, ho!

Knowest thou the shore
Where no breakers roar -
Where the storm is o'er?

In the peaceful west
Many the sails at rest -
The anchors fast -
Thither I pilot *thee* -
Land Ho! Eternity!
Ashore at last!

(4, 1853)

Equally important is what these poems tell us about the speaker's state of mind. Here, we find her in one of her quieter, more stable moods contemplating her journey towards eternity, symbolized by the shore at the end of the poem. The sea is "wondrous" and she sails "silently" in anticipation of reaching her destination ("The shore") where there are no roaring "breakers" or violent storms. In an act of self communion, she questions the direction she is taking and exhibits, with comforting reassurance, complete self-command and knowledge of where she is going; the object of her destination being the "peaceful west" towards which she sails. The poem ends on a note of supreme optimism with a firm sense of the speaker's mastery ("Thither I pilot *thee* -"), as she reaches her destination "at last". On the face of it, the poem appears to be no more than the expression of the speaker's desire to transcend one realm of experience for another, until the reader sets out to re-examine stanza two where there is a subtle implication that the "breakers" and storms, unknown on the shores of eternity, are to be encountered only on the sea. This, in turn, begs a reassessment of the entire poem as the idea of the "wondrous sea" in line one opens up new possibilities and hints strongly at a disjunction between what is suggested superficially and what emerges at a deeper level. There are two voices which speak in the poem. The first, in stanza two, questions the pilot in a somewhat quizzical manner for the direction of the shore. The sea, it would appear is not all that "wondrous". In the final stanza, the second voice, which is the reassuring voice of the pilot, assumes control and steers the speaker safely to the shore. As in the previous poem (2), there are indications of undercurrents which lurk beneath the surface structure suggesting the presence of the "divided subject" in Lacanian terms. These

undercurrents are evident in the linguistic features of the poem:

Lacan's related notions of the 'divided subject', of the Other, and of desire, ensue from the structuring role given to language. The movements of desire are detached irreversibly from instinctual contents, but reside in language, over which individuals have no control.
(Suprenant :207)

The tension, implicit, in Poem 4 is conveyed more explicitly in the next poem, written a few years later.

Here, the trajectory of the speaker's mood swings in a markedly different direction.

Adrift! A little boat adrift!
And night is coming down!
Will *no* one guide a little boat
Unto the nearest town?

So Sailors say - on yesterday -
Just as the dusk was brown
One little boat gave up its strife
And gurgled down and down.

So angels say - on yesterday -
Just as the dawn was red
One little boat - o'erspent with gales -
Retrimmed its masts - redecked its sails -
And shot - exultant on! (30, 1858)

The opening lines stand in direct contrast to the concluding lines of the previous poem as they explicitly describe uncertainty and anxiety. Ultimately, the poem is about the struggles of the young poet who is determined to overcome the difficulties which threaten to impede her progress as the boat itself is at risk of not being guided to port. The speaker's sense of misdirection and loss is conveyed through the potency of the opening word "Adrift!" which is repeated in line one. The speaker's fear of losing direction in the darkness of the coming night threatens, ominously, to cast her further adrift. She asks, tentatively, "Will *no* one guide a little boat / Unto the nearest town?" This contrasts sharply with her unshakable confidence at the end of the previous poem. The speaker's anxiety in the first four lines is very similar to the symptoms of manic depression, in its milder form, identified by Judd and Burrows:

Anxiety is generally experienced as unpleasant with a subjective feeling of foreboding. It accompanies any situation which threatens an individual's well-being. Such situations include conflict and other types of frustration, threat of physical harm, threat to self esteem and pressure to perform beyond one's capabilities. Anxiety is regarded as pathological when it is more frequent,

more severe or more persistent than the individual is accustomed to or can tolerate. (77)

The speaker's anxiety shows no signs of becoming pathological. As the poem unfolds, in fact, her anxiety dissipates and the poem ends in exultation. The speaker triumphantly overcomes her fears and, in spite of being "o'erspent with gales -", finds the capacity within herself to adapt to changing circumstances ("Retrimmed its masts - redecked its sails -") and labour on with energy and determination ("And shot -exultant on!"). At this very early stage, Dickinson demonstrates the art of containment: how she is able to turn anxiety into exultation, by refusing to succumb to the forces which threatened to thwart her. Her speaker successfully addresses and overcomes her uncertainties and the climactic last line triumphantly underscores her determination to move on despite adversity.

In "Adrift! A little boat adrift!", the speaker makes references to both "Sailors" and "angels" who relate different tales of the "little boat" which, I believe, is Dickinson's metaphor for the young poet eager to find her way in stormy waters. The "sailors"(ordinary men) speak of the "dusk" and the coming darkness. The boat which they describe succumbs to the stormy waters ("One little boat gave up its strife/And gurgled down and down"). The "angels" (the poet's muses), on the other hand, tell a different story. They speak of the promise of a new dawn and the resilience of the little boat, which overcomes all storms to forge on towards its destination. As this study unfolds, interesting thematic patterns begin to emerge. What we see, in this early stage of Dickinson's development as a poet, is the trajectory of her mood swings which fluctuate between the lows of doubt and uncertainty and the highs of optimism and exultation. Consider, for example, the following poem written a year later:

'Twas such a little - little boat,
That toddled down the bay!
'Twas such a gallant - gallant sea
That beckoned it away!

'Twas such a greedy, greedy wave
That licked it from the Coast -
Nor ever guessed the stately sails
My little craft was *lost*!

(107, 1859)

Where is the commanding and triumphant “pilot” of “Adrift! A little boat adrift!”? There is, clearly, a sense of helplessness and vulnerability on the part of the speaker who feels dwarfed by the enormity of the sea. Note how Dickinson, in stanza one, juxtaposes “little” with “gallant” and repeats these words to reinforce meaning. Per Bech notes that

[t]he mood of depression includes hopelessness and helplessness, which also can be considered as elements of negative cognitions of the future, such as feelings of apprehension. Hence, the quality of depressed mood is not simply a state of sadness. The prevailing element of negative beliefs is a sense of loss. (4)

The image of the “greedy wave” licking the speaker’s boat completes this sense of hopelessness and loss. Metaphorically, her speaker is referring to a negative experience, symbolized by the greedy wave”, which overwhelms her as she “toddled down the bay” without due respect for, or recognition (“Nor ever guessed”) of her “stately sails”. Bech mentions the “prevailing sense of negative beliefs” associated with depression but the speaker’s reference to “stately” in the poem hardly suggests negativity. Underlying this, on the contrary, is an affirmation of the speaker’s sense of pride and recognition of her own worth despite being “licked” by the “greedy wave”. This refusal to submit meekly to these powerful forces which confront her develops into a crucial aspect of Dickinson’s poetry. She deliberately plays on the word “craft” which refers not only to her boat, but to her poetic art and technique as well. Despite adversity, and regardless of her despondency, she does not lose any sense of her stateliness and this is central to the art of containment which informs this thesis. This is to say that, although Dickinson’s poems repeatedly show signs of manic-depression, her speakers do not always demonstrate the behavioural patterns generally seen in sufferers and described in textbooks. Dickinson is, after all, a unique individual.

A psychiatric text never describes manic-depression in terms of a logical exposition of syndromes: each manic-depressive has a unique personality and history. However similarities and patterns are recognisable in the lives and personalities of all manic-depressives. (Hershman and Lieb: 20)

It is significant that the craft in Poem 107 is “*lost*” and not irreparably destroyed or sunk into oblivion. There is always the prospect that it may be re-discovered, as the next poem shows, together with the

mood of exultation which returns to the speaker.

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses - past the headlands -
Into deep Eternity -

Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land? (76, 1859)

“Exultation” and “divine intoxication” are clearly associated with the symptoms of the manic temperament as it is described on the bipolar spectrum. German psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer sums up as follows:

The path over which manic-depression swings is a wide one, namely between cheerfulness and unhappiness ... Not only is the hypo-manic disposition well known to be a peculiarly labile one, which also has leanings in the depressive direction, but many of these cheerful natures have, when we get to know them better, a permanent melancholic element somewhere in the background of their being ... (in Jamison:15)

There is certainly much more than “cheerfulness” in the poem. “Exultation” and “divine intoxication” point suggestively towards poetic inspiration. The speaker, not be daunted, re-discovers her “stately sails” which she now directs towards “deep eternity”. Her calling is a special one, borne out of her quest for poetic fulfilment; hence her desire to transcend the mundane (“Past the houses - past the headlands-”). In stanza two she clearly identifies with “we”; poets distinct from the ordinary other and represented by the sailor who is simply incapable of relishing “divine intoxication” which is the exclusive prerogative of poets and their muses. The poem is an affirmation of Dickinson’s resilient spirit to create poetry despite her battles with what appears, increasingly, to be signs of a manic-depressive temperament. This may be seen in the way she shifts her perception of eternity from one extreme to another over the years. In Poem 4 (1853), eternity is conceived of as being “ashore”. In “Exultation is the going” there is an inversion as the speaker’s idea of eternity is located in the depths of the sea, away from the “headlands”. Is this apparent disjunction one of the results of a manic-depressive temperament which is able to produce these dichotomous shifts in perception, or is there another, unrelated reason for this? We shall see.

The idea of the speaker's smallness, amidst the enormity of the sea ("little" and "gallant" in Poem 107) is an indication of Dickinson's self-conscious nature for she was physically not well built. Besides, she possessed a very timid and shy personality. These attributes, however, pale into obscurity when we consider the scope and strength of her mental faculties and the potency evidenced in her poetry. Even in the image of the proverbial drop in the ocean, Dickinson refuses to be intimidated.

The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea -
 Forgets her own locality -
 As I - toward Thee -
 She knows herself as incense small -
 Yet *small* - she sighs - if *All* - is *All* -
 How *larger* - be?

The Ocean - smiles - at her Conceit -
 But *she*, forgetting Amphitrite -
 Pleads - "Me"?

(284, 1861)

What seems to be an crisis of displacement in the first two lines, turns out to be an affirmation of identity at the end of the poem as the "Drop", unsure of its position ("Forgets her own locality") eventually finds itself. The operative word in the poem is "wrestles". Although she acknowledges how "small" she is, in comparison to the vast sea, she refuses to submit to its power. She probes, almost defiantly, "Yet *small* - she sighs - if *All* - is *All* - / How *larger* - be?". On one level, Dickinson is referring to her physical stature which is like a drop dwarfed by the vast sea. On the other, more significant level, she is alluding to the expanse of her poetical mind which is vaster than the sea. Her later poetry deals extensively with this theme. Here, her reference to Amphitrite (wife of Poseidon, God of the sea) would seem to foreshadow this. The speaker's "conceit" is actually a euphemism for audacity as she resists the power of the ocean in the final line where she protests through the question, "Me"?

Judith Farr describes how deeply Dickinson had "meditated on the significance of death, and in particular, on the process whereby the living became dead" (4). This is not surprising as specialists like Jamison discuss at length the bipolar sufferer's preoccupation, and at times fascination, with

death. Whilst Jamison (41) and others, like Perugi *et al.* (194) specifically link suicide with manic-depression, there are no accounts of Emily Dickinson ever being linked to suicide. She is known, however, to have reacted with depression whenever somebody close to her died. Roger Lundin (26) records how, from her mid-teens, having witnessed at age thirteen the death of her close friend Sophie Holland, she was so overcome and “melancholic” that, as a result of this event, her family had to send her to recover at her aunt’s in Boston for a month. It may well have been this event which shaped, for ever, the direction in which young Dickinson’s mind was to unfold. From this period onwards, Dickinson’s thoughts turn more and more towards death and her perceptions of what lies beyond. This preoccupation develops, as she grows older, into a fascination which she famously called “the flood subject” in one of her letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in the early 1860s (Sewall:548). One begins to see in the poems of the 1850s, the early signs of this preoccupation with the unknown and her anxiety about her own place in the metaphysical scheme of things. Her contemplation of these abstractions in the poems is characterized by a persistent wavering between ambivalent feelings of certainty and the uncertain, hope and despair, contentment and restlessness. As an examination of Dickinson’s so called “death poems” would entail a entire study on its own, I shall restrict my discussion to those poems which evince symptoms of the poet’s manic-depressive temperament and simultaneously relate to the art of poetic creation.

In “If I should cease to bring a Rose”, Dickinson expresses her own fear of dying before she is able to attain poetic fulfilment. The poem recalls Keats’s “When I have fears that I may cease to be”, in which he contemplates the bleak prospect of death before sharing the teeming ideas in his brain with the world.

If I should cease to bring a Rose
Upon a festal day,
'Twill be because *beyond* the Rose
I have been called away -

If I should cease to take the names
 My buds commemorate -
 'Twill be because *Death's* finger
 Claps my murmuring lip! (56, 1858)

The speaker has no doubts about her rich potential ("the names/My buds commemorate"). It is her fear of not fulfilling this potential - of being nipped in the bud - which pervades the poem ('Twill be because *Death's* finger/Claps my murmuring lip!"). Death would deprive her of speaking poetically ("Claps my murmuring lip!"). In another poem, dealing with the same theme (also 1858), the speaker moves from fear to hope and optimism as death has not stood in her way and she is able to produce her poem, symbolized by the rose.

I keep my pledge.
 I was not called -
 Death did not notice me.
 I bring my Rose. (46)

There is another poem to speak about in this context:

Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord
 Then, I am ready to go!
 ...
 Goodbye to the Life I used to live -
 And the World I used to know -
 And kiss the Hills, for me, just once -
 Then - I am ready to go! (279, 1861)

Dickinson's poems, from about 1860, suggest that her mood swings became more intense and there are indications that she began to struggle with these. At the same time her creativity is seen to flower; the poems reveal greater depth and complexity as she strives to perfect her form and structure. It is about this time, as well, that she begins to withdraw from society and is drawn, increasingly, to a life of seclusion. This marks a turning-point as her poetic genius, from here on, begins to unfold in all its potency. Sewall records that

... her anguish, however great, did not prostrate her, a fact which should be kept in mind when one is tempted to pity her. Her production alone, with all the other things she had to do about the house, shows how firmly she kept her faculties under control during a time when many commentators have seen her at the edge of madness and when the theme of poem after

poem is humanity at the limits of its sovereignty. (Sewall:491)

In the poems which follow, we note a departure from the simpler lyrical pieces of the 1850s and discern much darker mood swings which come somewhere near to being psychotic in nature. Sewall's observation that Dickinson "kept her faculties under control" during this very difficult period in her life is worth noting, as the poems demonstrate, without any doubt, her keen sense of self-awareness regarding her mental and emotional state. She shows, repeatedly, that she is equally capable of confronting and containing those forces which threaten her. Despite these traumatic experiences, Dickinson does not waver in her quest for poetic creation. A poem in 1860 reveals that the speaker is conscious of early rumblings within her and she chooses to contain these without drawing attention to herself. Dickinson's use of the volcano is a recurrent motif in her poetry for her potentially volatile state of mind.

I have never seen "Volcanoes"-
But, when Travellers tell
How those old -phlegmatic mountains
Usually so still -

Bear within - appalling Ordnance,
Fire, and smoke, and gun,
Taking Villages for breakfast,
And appalling Men -

If the stillness is Volcanic
In the human face
When upon a pain Titanic
Features keep their place -

(175, 1860)

There are no biographical accounts which speak of Dickinson exhibiting violent outbursts or any forms of psychotic or erratic behaviour normally associated with manic-depressive sufferers. This is a measure of how well she was able to contain the volcanic forces stirring within her. Her poetry certainly justifies this. Just as the mountains wear the facade of stillness and repose, so too does the face of the speaker mask the reality of her mind's explosive possibilities ("Fire, and smoke, and gun"). In the third stanza the speaker consciously wears the volcanic "Stillness" on her face. Despite the

“pain Titanic/Features keep their place -”. “Titanic” refers to the speaker’s pain as well as to her features - the scope of her mental reserves. We may never know what the source of her Titanic pain was and, as much as we might be tempted to speculate, the reasons for this do not form part of this study. What is important is that the poem is the first real indication of the speaker’s consciousness of volatile forces within her and the extent to which she is able to contain these (“Features keep their place -”). Underlying this is the disjunction between the image projected onto the outside world by the speaker, and that which she secretly harbours inside. So with which image does the reader identify? From a Freudian perspective this desire to mask reality would appear to be repression but it is, actually, a containment strategy on the part of the poet. Later, when the volcano does threaten to erupt, we shall see how Dickinson is able to turn pain into poetic experience. Lapley notes:

As Freud observed in ‘Creative Writers and Daydreams’ (1908), to be socially acceptable artworks have to disguise desires through formal devices. Without what Freud termed the ‘fore-pleasure’ afforded by this organisation, there is no aesthetic satisfaction. (71)

Emily Dickinson’s desire to mask her real feelings must be understood in the context of her passionate need to guard her privacy, together with her retreat into a life of seclusion. Her poetry describes, time and again, her determination to come to terms with her volcano by engaging in the art of poetic creation in solitude.

Alone, I cannot be -
For Hosts - do visit me -
Recordless Company -
Who baffle Key -

They have no Robes, nor Names -
No Almanacs - nor Climes -
But general Homes
Like Gnomes -

Their Coming, may be known
By Couriers Within -
Their going - is not -
For they’re never gone - (298, 1861)

The speaker paradoxically describes how she finds companionship in solitude. She is alone but never

lonely - always in the company of her muses who never leave her. These muses are not of the earth ("They have no Robes, nor Names -"). They are "Like Gnomes". Her powerful poetic impulses, embedded deep in her soul ("By Couriers Within -"), are instinctively alert and ever receptive to these "Hosts". Dickinson in the final line re-affirms the influence of her poetic muses. They come to constitute the essence of her being, "For they're never gone". From this position of artistic and inspirational strength, Dickinson's speaker is able to confront what appears to be the threat of bipolar demons (panic attacks, and anxiety disorders) which are clearly evident, with increasing intensity, in the poems between 1860 and 1862. Her decision to enter into the privacy of her own world, as the poem illustrates, is linked inextricably to her desire to commune with her own mind, in the company of her muses. The poetic mind has the capacity to transcend space and time, the irrepressible ability to sing in all circumstances.

I shall keep singing!
 Birds will pass me
 On their way to Yellower Climes -
 Each - with a Robin's expectation -
 I - with my Redbreast -
 And my Rhymes -

Late - when I take my place in summer -
 But - I shall bring a fuller tune -
 Vespers - are sweeter than Matins - Signor -
 Morning - only the seed of Noon - (250, 1861)

In the second stanza, Dickinson's speaker is confident of her ability to improve the quality of her poetry with time ("But - I shall bring a fuller tune -"). Psychiatrist John McDermott speculated in his study that Dickinson suffered from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

Dickinson's affective disorder could be divided into two distinct 4 year blocks. During the first block (1858-1861) Dickinson had Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). McDermott presented data showing that these years were characterized by increased productivity in spring + summer relative to autumn + winter, which he viewed as supporting his diagnosis. (in Ramsey and Weisberg:175)

The evidence in the above poem would seem to support McDermott's hypothesis as the speaker longs for the coming of summer with the prospect of her fertile mind finding itself ("Morning - only the seed

of Noon -"). McDermott, however, located his study within a psychological paradigm and relied heavily on a statistical analysis of the poems, focussing on productivity rather creativity. Ramsey and Weisberg do likewise and do not attempt to explore the manner in which Dickinson responds to the symptoms which are described in her poetry. It is left, thus, to the student of literature to continue probing into this domain.

Though Dickinson did meet regularly with her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert who lived next door to her, by 1860 her withdrawal from society was all but complete. According to Lundin,

she stopped visiting the homes of Amherst neighbours and gave up going to church. She would make two more visits to Boston in 1864 and 1865, but these were for the sole purpose of receiving special care for her eyes. For all practical purposes, Emily Dickinson had become a recluse by 1860. (99)

There was also a distinct shift in the direction her poetry was taking. In her preface to *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, Judith Farr highlights some of these major shifts which break away from the more simple lyrics of 1858-1859. Farr concentrates on Dickinson's

extraordinary richness and detail of her appreciation of nature, the probity and loftiness of her moral sentiments, her tough and delicate emotional perceptions, her contemplation of the many moods of love and the real beauty in her use of language. (vii)

By 1860 the milder mood swings, seen in the poems of 1858-1859, begin to appear in a more severe variation according to the bipolar spectrum. In the poems which follow, there are definite signs of mania alternating frequently with depression. Maneros and Goodwin refer to this as "rapid-cycling: the phenomenon of frequent, or very frequent, recurrence of manic-depressive and mixed episodes" (24). Robert Weisbuch could not have been more accurate when he speaks of "the two Emily Dickinsons: visionary celebrant and sceptical sufferer" (3) and the next two poems which follow are ample justification to support his claim. The reader will recall, in this regard, the Lacanian notion of the "divided subject" cited earlier.

I taste a liquor never brewed -
From Tankards scooped in Pearl -
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air - am I -
 And Debauchee of Dew -
 Reeling - thro endless summer days
 From inns of Molten Blue -

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
 Out of the Foxglove's door -
 When Butterflies - renounce their "drams" -
 I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats -
 And Saints - to windows run -
 To see the little Tippler
 Leaning against the - Sun - (214, 1860)

The speaker celebrates life to the fullest. She is, in the proverbial sense, drunk on life and this is an elaboration of the "divine intoxication" described in Poem 76. There is no self-restraint, only excessive indulgence in what David S. Reynolds calls "the extreme preciousness of her love of nature" (173). This is the beginning of Dickinson's maturity as a poet. Reynolds comments further:

The poem shows the poet adopting and transforming images and themes of popular temperance reform. This transforming process is visible in the opening verse, where she presents an "I" who is a wonderfully fresh avatar of the intemperate temperance advocate. The speaker is both completely drunk and completely temperate. She can exult in her drunkenness because hers is liquor "never brewed" ... (ibid)

In his essay, Reynolds sets out to locate Dickinson in the context of the popular culture of her time, stressing, throughout, that she was conscious about what she was writing, hence his coining of the phrase "avatar of the intemperate temperance advocate". There are definite indications of a manic temperament or a "high" mood swing in the poem. The speaker is, all at once, "Inebriate of Air" and "Debauchee of Dew" removed from the mundane trivialities of earthly concerns. The liquor she imbibes is not of the earth; it is the divine nectar of the Gods: "Not all the Vats upon the Rhine/Yield such an Alcohol!". There is a sense of reckless freedom in stanza two as the speaker is "Reeling" through "endless summer days". Could the word "Molten" relate to the volcanic imagery which I have spoken about earlier? In this mood of exultant celebration, she attracts the attention of her muses - the "Seraphs" and "Saints". The speaker's thirst is unquenchable and she has no intention of relinquishing her desire to revel in the beauties of nature - long after the bees and the butterflies

have had their fill. The high emotion exhibited by the speaker is euphoric and it resembles the description offered by Silverstone and Hunt who refer to the individuals' propensity to express themselves without inhibition (16).

Basco and Rush point out that euphoria, the kind we have seen in the previous poem, is transitory and, sooner or later, is replaced by feelings of gloom at the other end of the bipolar spectrum.

The realities of daily life creep back in ... For few patients are manic episodes always pleasant. Most have had periods of feeling extremely irritable, agitated, anxious, tense and fearful. For some, the pleasant or euphoric mood evolves into irritability as the mania progresses and worsens. (18)

Images of oppression and despair are dominant in "There's a certain Slant of light", but Dickinson, unlike the patients described by Basco and Rush, fights off these negative feelings and, at the end of the poem turns them into something positive.

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons -
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes -

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are -

None may teach it - Any -
'Tis the Seal Despair -
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air -

When it comes, the Landscape listens -
Shadows - hold their breath -
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death - (258, 1861)

The bleak and dreary physical landscape appears to be a metaphor for the speaker's soul and this recalls McDermott's hypothesis of Dickinson's "Seasonal Affective Disorder" during the winter months. At the first moment of perception, the winter afternoon is heavily oppressive, like the "Heft/of Cathedral Tunes". This strong sense of oppression, however, is only a fleeting moment.

The poetic mind of the speaker soon overcomes this feeling of oppression as she firstly meditates on it

and thereafter internalizes it into her consciousness. By reading deeply into this oppressive “Slant of light” she comes to a new understanding of the poetic impulse within her. Although she identifies her mood of despair, she knows that it will not consume her. This transient feeling of oppression allows her to look into her poetic self. She realizes that the bleak landscape has a greater significance for her. The oxymoron in “Heavenly Hurt” is the key to understanding the speaker’s position. The pain of oppression leaves no “scar”. The experience is “Heavenly” only to the poetic mind, endowed with intuitive faculties and therefore able to read into the depth of things (“But internal difference, / Where the Meanings, are -”/None may teach it - Any -”). To the poet, unlike ordinary people, a potentially painful experience becomes “an imperial affliction” (like “Heavenly Hurt”). This is the crucial moment of communion between the poet and her muses (“Sent us of the Air -”), when an oppressive moment is transformed into material for poetic creation. Just how much this experience means to the speaker is suggested in stanza four. At that moment when poetic inspiration does come, time stands still, “the Landscape listens- /Shadows - hold their breath -”. When the muses depart, “’tis like the Distance/On the look of Death -”. The poem is, I believe, about the crucial stage in the conception of ideas for poetic creation – that decisive moment when sensory perception is translated and rewritten into consciousness.

In “There’s a Certain Slant of light”, Dickinson has proceeded according to the strictest canons of romantic aesthetics; she has fixed exactly in her art the specific spiritual state of natural phenomena at a precise moment in time. What is important is not that her approach has changed, but rather that the subject matter has shifted. (Barton: 240).

So whilst it is true that Dickinson’s poems evince strong indications of a manic-depressive disposition or bipolar disorder, it would be unwise to think of her as one who submitted to this illness. That she refers to it as an “imperial affliction” says much about her attitude and her capacity for containing this problem.

The psychiatric texts cited throughout this study quote numerous instances of individuals lapsing into

prolonged and, at times, chronic depression. Dickinson's poems, of course, tell an entirely different story. Many commentators have become so engrossed in their speculative theories about Dickinson's personal life that they, unfortunately, overlook the extent to which the poet was able to confront pain and turn it into artistic currency. Poem 252 ("I can wade Grief -") is probably the best example of the poems of this period which illustrates the resilient spirit with which Dickinson confronts grief. The speaker is like a swimmer braving oncoming pools of water. At the end, grief is turned into power.

I can wade Grief -
 Whole Pools of it -
 I'm used to that -
 But the least push of Joy
 Breaks up my feet -
 And I tip - drunken -
 Let no pebble - smile -
 'Twas the New Liquor -
 That was all.

Power is only Pain -
 Stranded, thro' Discipline,
 Till Weights - will hang -
 Give Balm - to Giants -
 And they'll wilt, like Men -
 Give Himmaleh -
 They'll Carry - Him!

(252, 1861)

Post-Freudian psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has been interested in "the writer's psychic investment in language, how it is that language enables or disables primary psychic processes". She explores Freud's theory of mourning and probes into how "loss, both actual and symbolic, can in fact be seen as a mobilizing affliction, propelling the mourning subject towards signification." (in Parkin-Gounelas:56). This immediately rings a bell as we recall Dickinson's reference to "imperial affliction" in "There's a certain Slant of light". Experience ("I'm used to that -") has taught Dickinson's speaker to "wade Grief" on a massive scale ("Whole Pools of it"). "Grief" is synonymous with the determined and purposive process of wading. At the first indication of "Joy", however, the speaker loses her balance and stumbles ("But the least push of Joy/Breaks up my feet - / And I tip - drunken -"). This juxtaposing of grief with joy is to be expected from one exhibiting signs of a manic-depressive temperament. That

the speaker prefers grief to joy is confirmed in the line: “Power is only Pain - /Stranded thro’ Discipline”. If “Discipline” is to be taken as a synonym for containment and “Power” for poetic creation, then my entire thesis may be summed up in these two revealing lines. Remember that Basco and Rush reminded us earlier that “for few patients are manic episodes always pleasant” (18). Dickinson welcomes grief (“the imperial affliction”) as it gives her Kristeva’s mobilizing power. The soft touch (“Balm”), she maintains, reduces giants to ordinary wilting men. Faced with something formidable, like mountain Himalaya for instance, (“Give Himmaleh -”) brings out the best in giants (“They’ll Carry - Him!”).

Pain and grief do not only unlock Dickinson’s vast reservoir of strength. As twin concepts, they are authentic signposts, an index into the individual’s inner world.

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it’s true -
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe - (241, 1861)

As a poet, Dickinson identifies strongly with that which is “true” and not “sham”. She is close to the Keatsian idea that after sorrow comes wisdom. In his famous letter to his brother George and his wife (April 21, 1819), Keats wrote: “Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways” (102). Jamison writes that “the melancholic side of manic-depressive illness is a source of intolerable suffering, torporous decay, and death” (240). This, of course, is a conclusion arrived at after extensive study and research. The poems which we have looked at suggest, beyond doubt, that Emily Dickinson is an exception to this assertion. She certainly did suffer, as Chapter two will show, but she vehemently resisted “torporous decay and death” during her traumatic years. On the contrary, her depressive temperament fostered creativity and growth.

One of Dickinson's most famous poems, "Wild Nights - Wild Nights!" has been the subject of ongoing speculation.

Wild Nights -Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile -the Winds -
To a Heart in port -
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor -Tonight -
In Thee!

(249, 1861)

Psychoanalysts like John Cody see the poem as an affirmation of the poet's "suppressed and frustrated homoerotic desire" for her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert (386). Judith Farr connects the poem to Dickinson's lover, allegedly the subject of her so called "Master Letters" (228-229). To others, like James L. Dean, the poem represents "her longing for a blissful state to give vent to her exultant state of mind" (91). I acknowledge that the poem is as complex as its meaning is elusive, and I do not wish to enter, here, into the debate about its meaning. Commentators have, rightly, pointed to evidence of Dickinson's maturity as a poet in "Wild Nights - Wild Nights!", citing "its arresting images and powerful passions ... its complexities and ambiguities which tease our attention" and the "rolling rhythms in lines 5 - 9 which add impetus and power to the poem" (Dean 91). What is surprising, nonetheless, is that these critics discuss the poem (and its navigational imagery) in isolation without referring to the other poems written during this period, discussed here earlier, in which Dickinson makes elaborate use of sea imagery. Many turn to and rely heavily on her letters of this period. I include "Wild Nights - Wild Nights!" in this chapter as I see the poem as the culmination of the "divine intoxication" and the high exultation which Dickinson articulates with so much energy in these earlier

poems. The speaker's desire for unbounded freedom ("Done with the Compass - / Done with the Chart!") borders on the manic's propensity for the reckless and the daring, identified by Hershman and Lieb (26). One of Dickinson's stylistic devices, a feature of her poetry, is her deliberate use of ambiguity. In "Wild Nights - Wild Nights!", it remains unclear whether words "thee"/"Thee" in lines two and twelve, respectively, refer to the same subject, be it her lover, the sea, or her muse. The object of her passion is not important here; the manner in which she expresses this passion correlates strongly with the bipolar mind at the height of a mood swing. What is also interesting, is the manner in which she consciously develops her technique: her unconventional use of punctuation (dashes in particular), her run-on lines and her ambiguous and inconclusive closing lines.

If the emotions expressed by Dickinson in "Wild Nights - Wild Nights!" resemble the high point of a mood swing, then the experience recorded in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" must, surely, rank amongst its lowest. The poem may well be an actual enactment, in graphic images, of a near-death experience.

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 were all 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,

And 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 - (280, 1861)

The above poem, more than all the others, comes closest to shedding light on the September 1861 “terror” which Dickinson described in her April 1862 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (see Introduction). Dickinson recounts the dramatic build-up to a traumatic experience, conveyed through a series of auditory images which dominate the poem. Many commentators have dismissed the relevance of this poem to Dickinson’s personal experience by citing her well known use of personas. One such critic is David T. Porter who believes that Dickinson is not relating her own experience (in Cody:29). Cody’s response is worth citing:

But the poem depicts not an event, which can be easily invented, but an experience. We must ask ourselves whether anyone, even a poet, can portray a feeling that he himself has not undergone. And if one grants that this is possible, what could possibly motivate a person to attempt to express what he never felt? ... However, the intense depersonalization expressed in the phrase “I thought - / My mind was going numb” and the sense of estrangement conveyed by the image of the universe resonating with the poet’s projected despair like a mighty tolling bell convey an intensity of disintegration and a confounding of inner experiences with outer reality which reflect a profound insight into the specific pain of the *psychotic state*. Where could this insight have come from if not from Emily Dickinson’s own inner life? [My italics] (292-293)

The speaker’s recollection of these ominous sounds begins with “the treading, treading” of the mourners’ feet, and ends in the climactic “Silence” which precipitates her apparent break with consciousness. In between this, Dickinson’s speaker describes the build up to her break with “Reason”, which is heightened, in stages, by the “beating, beating” of the monotonous drum, the resultant numbing sensation, the “creaking” of the “Boots of Lead”, the oppressive “toll” of the bell and finally, the defining and all-consuming silence - before plunging into what appears to be a new sense of consciousness. The key words in the poem are contained in the last line, “And Finished knowing -”, followed, ambiguously by “then -”, which may refer either to that precise moment of the

“plunge” or, to what followed thereafter. Dickinson chooses, here, to be inconclusive. Whilst the poem describes an oppressive and dark moment, it ends on a positive note. The experience offers the speaker insight and self-knowledge (“And Finished knowing - ”). It is her sense of “knowing” which is central to the poem’s meaning; a further indication that Dickinson refuses to be bewildered and overwhelmed by these experiences. “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” marks a significant turning point. For the first time, we are exposed to her speaker’s state of mind which, in its severity, goes beyond the highs and lows of the mood swings we have seen. Thus far there is something far more serious going on and this would appear to foreshadow the turbulence which the poems of 1862 describe.

Hershman and Lieb note that depression

can give emotional depth to a work and provide [the artist] with the themes that speak to the experience of all mankind. It may compel him to try, through art, to transcend the evils of the human condition and the terrors of death.

Many of the questions that philosophers address are inspired by the depressive’s need to understand the reason for his own suffering. Depression leads people to ask ultimate questions about life, death, good, evil, the nature of man, of the universe, and of God. (16)

Dickinson is no exception in this regard as her poetry embraces, in some form or other, the themes mentioned by Hershman and Lieb. As these are too diverse to discuss in this dissertation, I shall focus, instead, briefly on her conception of God as it is revealed in the early poems of this period. Dickinson’s relationship with God in these poems indicates fluctuating moods of faith and scepticism associated with the manic-depressive’s temperament and it is important that the reader gleans a partial view, at least, of the shape of her mind in this crucial 1858 - 1861 period. By the late 1850s Dickinson, of her own accord, stopped going to church (Lundin:59) but her deep and abiding interest in God and the Bible did not cease. She continued to question her relationship with God and her ever-probing mind, at the same time, kept delving into the mysteries of the universe. By the 1860's the question of

“Immortality” comes to represent the “flood subject” for her. In the 1858-1861 years, we see evidence of Dickinson moving further away from tenets of her traditional Puritanical upbringing. In “Papa above!”, the speaker acknowledges God as her Father (“Papa above”). At the same time, she articulates her feelings of alienation from His protective presence.

Papa above!
 Regard a Mouse
 Overpowered by the Cat!
 Reserve within thy kingdom
 A “Mansion” for the Rat!

Snug in seraphic Cupboards
 To nibble all the day,
 While unsuspecting Cycles
 Wheel solemnly away! (61, 1859)

The speaker appeals to God in the first stanza to extend His mercy and protection to the weak and less powerful (the Mouse) who fall prey to the stronger and more powerful (the Cat). This appeal is tinged with a sense of cynicism in the last two lines of the poem (“While unsuspecting Cycles/ Wheel solemnly away!”). The implication is that the weak and vulnerable, having no protection on earth, must seek refuge in the afterlife, “Snug in seraphic Cupboards”. The last two lines suggest that God is indifferent to suffering throughout the endless cycles of time which “Wheel solemnly away”. Fred D. White points out that “Dickinson’s imagination was naturally histrionic”, that “she changes point of view, role, situation, genre, language, and style with remarkable speed and adroitness.” He cites, as an example, Dickinson’s use of child persona “arguing with God” in “Papa above!” (93). This poem is an interesting example of her fluctuating impressions of God, especially when we recall Poem 214, “I taste a liquor never brewed”, where she celebrates the manifestation of God’s beauty in the natural world. A further example of Dickinson’s ambivalent attitude to God may be seen in Poem 116 where she disputes God’s right to intrude into the private domain of her soul, symbolized by her “garden”. Although the poem is light-hearted (her flippant reference to a law suit against God in the

final stanza has an underlying sense of rebellion), her message is clear: she will strive at all costs to protect her privacy.

I had some things that I called mine -
And God, that he called his,
Till, recently a rival Claim
Disturbed these amities.
The property, my garden,
Which having sown with care,
He claims the pretty acre,
And sends a Bailiff there.

The station of the parties
Forbids publicity,
But Justice is sublimer
Than arms, or pedigree.

I'll institute an "Action" -
I'll vindicate the law -
Jove! Choose your counsel -
I retain "Shaw"! (116, 1859)

In the next poem Dickinson's speaker continues her dialogue with God. We note, once again, the shift in her tone, register and demeanour and recall White's description of her child persona - not in an argumentative mood here, but in one of innocence and pleading.

Savior! I've no one to else to tell -
And so I trouble *thee*.
I am the one forget thee so -
Dost thou remember me? (from: 217, 1861)

Dickinson's complex, and often misunderstood, perception of God extends well into the 1860s, coinciding with this very dark and traumatic period. Throughout this time, she does not relinquish her fascination with the mystery and wonder of God's creative powers, as the following poem shows:

Cocoon above! Cocoon below!
Stealthy Cocoon, why hide you so
What all the world suspect?
An hour, and gay on every tree
Your secret, perched in ecstasy
Defies imprisonment!

An hour in Chrysalis to pass,
Then gay above receding grass
A Butterfly to go!

A moment to interrogate,
 Then wiser than a "Surrogate,"
 The Universe to know! (129, 1859)

Dickinson's desire to fathom the secrets of the "Universe to know!", is characteristic of her poetry.

Underlining this is her fascination at the beauty of everything that lives. It is during these times that the poetic spirit within her is stirred into action.

Snow flakes.
 I counted till they danced so
 Their slippers leaped the town,
 And then I took a pencil
 To note the rebels down.
 And then they grew so jolly
 I did resign the prig,
 And ten of my once stately toes
 Are marshalled for a jig! (36, 1858)

Her reaching after a pencil is a direct response to her poetic calling. She feels the innate need to record one of nature's wonders. At the sight of the snowflakes, she casts aside all inhibitions and dances with delight in celebration ("And ten of my once stately toes / Are marshalled for a jig!").

The reader would have noted that the extract which I quoted from Cody (293), earlier, refers to Dickinson's "psychotic state". Employing the World Health Organisation's *International Classification of Diseases (ICD)* and the American Psychiatric Association's *(DSM) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, Silverstone and Hunt (18) associate psychosis with delusional states of mind, visual as well as auditory hallucinations and schizophrenia. In other words, the psychotic state refers to a condition in which a person loses contact with reality. Individuals are also known to experience mental blocks and may have problems in dealing with their thought processes (18). Throughout my reading of Emily Dickinson's poems I have not, thus far, been able to detect any indications of what may be defined as hallucinations, delusions or other behavioural patterns which suggest breaks with reality. The poems which I have discussed in this chapter suggest to me that Dickinson is at all times in control of her

mental faculties, gains self-knowledge and is able to turn “pain” into “power”. We shall see in the next chapter how she grows in stature as poet, despite experiencing episodes of a far more severe nature.

CHAPTER TWO

AWAKENING VESUVIUS

I call this chapter “Awakening Vesuvius” because Emily Dickinson’s poems of 1862 describe a series of traumatic experiences which resemble what Grove and Andreasen describe as “severe, with or without psychotic symptoms ” on the bipolar spectrum (25). The volcanic stillness, described earlier, seems to explode with full intensity. I intend to show that this awakening Vesuvius, far from being destructive, actually fanned the poetic sparks within Dickinson. The year 1862 saw an amazing proliferation of poetry during this period - Dickinson is said to have written 366 poems in 1862 alone (averaging a poem a day) - which well and truly entrenches her position in English literature and justifies the claims of many that she is one of the great lyrical poets in the language. Jamison and Hershman and Lieb have pointed out the possible links between manic-depression and creativity. In the light of their studies, it is no coincidence that Dickinson experiences the most severe episodes during this period and writes, at the same time, the best poetry of her life.

Emily Dickinson continued right until her death in 1886 to be actively involved in her household chores which included cooking, baking, sewing and gardening. There was, in fact, a time during her mother’s illness and her sister Lavinia’s absence when she efficiently managed the household entirely on her own (Sewall:88). In response to the claims of those commentators who believe that Dickinson was forced into life as a recluse, Roger Lundin narrates Dickinson’s first meeting with Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1870. When pressed by Higginson about her decision to live as a recluse, she replied by telling him, “I find ecstasy in living - the mere sense of living is joy enough” (132). Lundin goes to explain:

At no time did she desire to be free of family or home. More than a century later, we may read Dickinson’s experience as a story of relentless frustration and oppression, but she

did not see it that way. The woman who claimed never to have thought of having 'the slightest approach to such a want' would have been puzzled by the claim of a contemporary critic that "the forces that [Dickinson] felt conspired against her 'real life,' her private life of writing, were her household responsibilities, the demands of her parents, the condescension of brother Austin, and the prescriptions of her Calvinist religion." (133)

It is a paradox that Dickinson, so guarded about her private life, is so explicit in her poems about the mental and emotional traumas which she allows her speakers to describe. We have already seen, near the end of chapter one, her dramatization, in evocative images, of a traumatic episode in "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain".

The title of this thesis incorporates the last line ('Could it be Madness - this?') of Poem 410, "The first Day's Night had come - " and through this poem, I wish to pursue the theme of containment as it unfolds further.

The first Day's Night had come -
And grateful that a thing
So terrible - had been endured -
I told my Soul to sing -

She said her Strings were snapt -
Her Bow - to Atoms blown -
And so to mend her - gave me work
Until another Morn -

And then - a Day as huge
As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled its horror in my face -
Until it blocked my eyes -

My Brain - begun to laugh -
I mumbled - like a fool -
And tho' 'tis Years ago - that Day -
My Brain keeps giggling - still.

And Something's odd - within -
That person that I was -
And this One - do not feel the same -
Could it be Madness - this? (410, 1862)

The poem opens with the coming of metaphorical darkness ("The first Day's Night/...So terrible") which threatens to overwhelm the speaker who, not to be daunted, endures the attack by consciously

attempting to contain it through the art of poetic creation (“I told my Soul to sing - ”). Her creative faculties, at this point, however, are disorientated (“her Strings were snapt - / Her Bow - to Atoms blown -”) and her soul is unable to sing harmoniously. She does not yield, however, to the darkening and ominous forces but proceeds, with determination and perseverance: “And so to mend her - gave me work /Until another Morn -”. Harold Bloom, in discussing Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, with reference to “Theory of Catastrophe”, states that

The greatest shock of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that it ascribes the origin of all human drives to a catastrophe theory of creation (to which I would add: ‘of creativity’) ...
Illness is the ultimate ground of the drive to create, and so while creating the poet sustains relief, and by creating the poet becomes healthy. (185-6)

Dickinson’s speaker’s attempt to create poetry and contain the episode is, however, short-lived for there comes a day when the symptoms of the attack reappear, this time with greater intensity (“Unrolled its horror in my face - / Until it blocked my eyes -”). The result is that the speaker experiences a temporary lapse into an altered state of consciousness which takes her near the edge of insanity (“My Brain - begun to laugh / I mumbled - like a fool -). Bambi Ogram notes of this poem, that “the very fact that she is able to write about the trauma seems to indicate that she is now well and truly recovered” (102). Stanza four justifies Ogram’s observation because what follows is a conscious attempt at analytical introspection by the speaker. She recognises that she has had an extraordinary experience and senses the change that she has undergone (“And Something’s odd - within”). I see this poem as representing a crucial turning point for two reasons. Firstly, the speaker becomes aware of a new dimension to her identity, which she distinctly sets apart from her old self (“That person that I was - / And this One - do not feel the same -”). Does the birth of her new consciousness represent the awakening of the poetic genius within her? Before I explore this more fully, I should like to look at the second reason for the poem’s importance as a turning point. In the last line, the speaker struggles to come to terms with her experience. In asking the decisive question, “Could it be Madness - this?” she

demonstrates, as Ogram has suggested, that she has risen above the situation and is able to interrogate her own sanity. If she were truly mad, delusional or for that matter psychotic, then is it likely that she would have the presence of mind to probe into the depths of her consciousness? This leads me to look more closely at this question of “Madness” as I suspect that it resonates with an underlying, deeper, concern.

The great philosopher Socrates in his speech on divine madness in *Phaedrus*, says that

[m]adness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings ... the men of old who gave things their names saw no disgrace or reproach in madness; otherwise they would not have connected it with the name of the noblest of all arts, the art of discerning the future, and called manic art ... So, according to the evidence provided by our ancestors, madness is a nobler thing than sober sense ... madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human... If a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane companions never reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman.
(in Jamison:51)

Plato, a disciple of Socrates, in his *Ion* also talks of this Dionysian - inspired madness which he says leads to the creation of great art (in Daiches:7). In the following poem, Dickinson seems to be echoing the thoughts of both Socrates and Plato:

Much Madness is divinest sense
To a discerning Eye -
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail -
Assent - and you are sane -
Demur - you're straightway dangerous -
And handled with a Chain - (435, 1862)

In her meditations on sense and sanity, the speaker sets the “discerning Eye -” of the poet apart from the “Majority”. The poet, she says, has special powers of vision which are divinely ordained. These powers are not accessible to the ordinary, human eye. The poet sees the world differently, through a special set of lenses, and is perceived to be “dangerous” by the rest of society. When Dickinson’s speaker asks, in Poem 410, “Could it be Madness - this?”, the chances are that she is not just

questioning her sanity but alluding to poetic inspiration as well. Before pursuing the issue of poetic inspiration, it is necessary to focus on Emily Dickinson's representations of traumatic episodes as seen in her poetry.

According to Roger Luckhurst, trauma relates to the "psychological, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic questions about the nature of traumatic events" (497). The following poem describes in vivid images what Judd and Burrows refer to as a "panic attack" or an "anxiety disorder, more severe or more persistent than the individual is accustomed to" (77).

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 -

(362, 1862)

The intensity and potency of the attack is underlined through the sheer force of the word "struck" in the opening line, as the cloud "let the Fire through -", which "burned" the speaker. The images of fire and burning convey poignantly the speaker's state of mind. There is simply no reprieve as she is assailed night and day. The intensity of the experience is so overwhelming that, it "Blistered" into her dream, thereby intruding into the realms of her sub-conscious state of mind. Although the speaker is traumatized ("It sickened fresh upon my sight"), there is nothing in the poem to suggest hallucinations or delusions. Despite the severity of the attacks, the speaker is conscious at all times - morning, night, as well as in her dream - of what is going on. Time, in this context, dissolves into a state of timelessness as the painful night melts into a new morning ("With every morn that came -") which is

just as agonizing. Whilst in throes of the attack, the speaker assumed, at the time, that the “Storm - was brief - / The Maddest - quickest by -” but, upon reflection, she realizes that the exact date and time is forever lost to her (“But Nature lost the Date of This - / And left it in the Sky -”). Despite this fleeting lapse in her memory, Dickinson’s ability, in the midst of crisis, to internalize and thereafter translate her traumatic experiences into poetry is remarkable. Jamison, who devotes her entire study to the manic- depressive episodes of poets and novelists, chronicles in explicit detail the experiences of several of these writers who relate their experiences in rich and evocative images. The following description of a similar experience by Samuel Taylor Coleridge comes closest, perhaps, to what Dickinson describes:

A powerfully imaginative mind seizes and combines at the same instant, not only two but all the important ideas of its poem or picture; and while it works with any one of them, it is at the same instant working with and modifying all in their relations to it, never losing sight of these bearings on each other; as the motion of a snake’s body goes through all parts at once, and its volition acts at the same time in coils that go contrary ways. (in Jamison: 111)

When we return to Poems 410 and 362 (amongst the many others), in the light of Coleridge’s succinct description, our focus is directed specifically towards an understanding of the workings of the imagination. Although “Nature lost the Date of This - / And left it in the Sky -” the memory of the experience evades the speaker’s consciousness for the moment, but remains imprinted permanently in the speaker’s memory.

Freud and Breuer suggest that it is not so much the traumatic event itself as the *memory* of the trauma that ‘acts like an *agent provocateur* in releasing the symptom’. In other words, a psychological trauma is something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. We have, as it were, nowhere to put it, and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in the mind like an intruder or ghost. (Luckhurst:499)

In “It struck me - every Day -”, the speaker is able, long after her experience, to recount precise details in vivid images. In this respect, Dickinson may be likened to the Romantic poets as she is able, in

stages, graphically to read into her own perceptions, interpret and internalize these into her consciousness and then translate the entire experience by rewriting it into what Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* calls the “primary and secondary imagination”. The former refers to “the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM”. The latter is “an echo of the former, co-existing with conscious will... it dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create ... and to unify” (167). By way of example, Dickinson, in the aftermath of the two potent attacks described in Poems 410 and 362, is able to “recreate .. and to unify” her experience into poetic creation. Through all this, she does not at any stage relinquish her acute sense of her own identity or indeed of her own divinity as poet: “the infinite I AM”.

We find, thus, in the poems of this period, a familiar pattern emerging: concise and imagist-like descriptions of a painful episode followed by the speaker’s introspection, understanding and expression of self-knowledge. Even in the midst of the most severe crisis, Dickinson’s speakers are constantly in touch with consciousness and the reader begins to sense growth that is taking place in the poet as she works at transforming painful experience into art.

There is a pain - so utter -
 It swallows substance up -
 Then covers the Abyss with Trance -
 So Memory can step
 Around - across - upon it -
 As one within a Swoon -
 Goes safely - where an open eye -
 Would drop Him - Bone by Bone. (599, 1862)

In Poem 599, pain is all consuming (“It swallows substance up”) and the speaker is led into a “Trance”- like state. The words “so utter” may be read ambiguously, to suggest Dickinson’s affinity for and skill in her dexterous use of word play. This characteristic turn of phrase refers to, on one level,

the severity of the pain, whilst on another level, it affirms her desire as poet to express herself, to speak through the poem. Pain and memory, the two predominant concerns in the poem, are thereafter set up against each other in a paradoxical relationship: first as binaries and then in a reciprocal interplay.

“Pain”, as it were, sets the stage for what is to follow. Firstly, as a prelude to the drama that is to unfold, it leads the speaker’s consciousness into an altered “Trance”- like state “so Memory” can be activated. In this way, “Pain” paves the way for memory to dominate centre stage (“can step/Around - across - upon it -”). Dickinson carefully draws the fine line between “Trance” and “Memory”- and herein lies the paradox. She is explicitly stating that an altered state of consciousness, like a “Trance” or a “Swoon”, is the prerequisite to “Memory” which may then go “safely - where an open eye - / Would drop Him - Bone by Bone”. This, to me, represents Coleridge’s explication of the primary imagination followed by the secondary imagination which then translates the experience into poetry. To put it more explicitly, for the purpose of this thesis, Dickinson in Poem 599 dramatizes the relationship between a painful experience and creativity and goes on to illustrate how pain becomes the crucial actor in unlocking the creative energy which, hitherto, remained latent within her faculties.

Helen McNeil interprets the speaker’s experience slightly differently:

Pain devours what must once have been the body, then obscures its work by building a trance-like bridge or skin for the personified Memory. This superficially healing repression actually condemns the consciousness to eternal “Swoon” as the alternative to dropping “Bone by Bone” with open eyes into abyss of despair... Yet even when depicting conditions of extreme anguish, Dickinson’s pressure is towards a precise knowledge which only language can give. (180)

McNeil does, however, make a telling comment about Dickinson’s ability, through the sheer power of language, to translate experience into memory and thereafter store the outcome of this as part of her own inner knowledge which is finally recorded as a living poem.

Per Bech points out that panic attacks in some individuals may be recurrent, episodic and cyclic (4).

Over a period of time the individual, especially one who is creatively disposed like Dickinson, is able to internalize her experiences and rewrite them into evocative images.

The Whole of it came not at once -
'Twas Murder by degrees -
A Thrust - and then for Life a chance -
The Bliss to cauterize -

The Cat reprieves the Mouse
She eases from her teeth
Just long enough for Hope to tease -
Then mashes it to death -

'Tis Life's award - to die -
Contenteder if once -
Than dying half - then rallying
For consciouser Eclipse -

(762, 1863)

The description of “Murder by degrees” contrasts sharply with the “Lightning” attacks of Poem 362 but the same burning sensation (“cauterize”) is still vivid in the speaker’s memory. The helpless mouse, caught in the clutches of the powerful cat, recalls Dickinson’s use of the same image in “Papa above!” (Poem 61). Here, her focus is on the futility of promised “Hope” which ends in violent death (“for Hope to tease- / Then mashes it to death -”). In the final stanza, the speaker meditates on life, suffering and death. She acknowledges that death is inevitable (“’Tis Life’s award - to die -”) and seems to suggest that she would be content to die once than “dying half”. This is probably due to the severity of the panic attacks (“Murder by degrees”) and the unbearable life and death suspense which accompanies each episode. During these attacks she feels as helpless and as vulnerable as the mouse that is attacked by the cat. Despite her repeated experience of “dying half”, the poem ends on a positive note. Dickinson does not succumb easily and persistently defies these adversities by “rallying/For consciouser Eclipse”.

Harold Bloom, in his explication of the “sublime” in his reading of Freud’s work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, alludes to Freud’s argument that “the psyche strives to master trauma after the event” (174).

Parkin- Gounelas explains further, "...but in some the trauma of loss can be converted into finding through the creative process. Freud called this sublimation" (56). In Poems 362 and 762 Dickinson describes pain and trauma in the image of lightning and fire. I have deliberately chosen the next poem, "Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat?*" (365), as the starting point for my discussion of Dickinson's ability to transform her traumatic experiences into poetic energy.

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 conditions,
 It quivers from the Forge
 Without a color, but the light
 Of unanointed Blaze.
 Least Village has its Blacksmith
 Whose Anvil's even ring
 Stands symbol for the finer Forge
 That soundless tugs - within -
 Refining these impatient Ores
 With Hammer, and with Blaze
 Until the Designated Light
 Repudiate the Forge - (365, 1862)

In this poem, the process of creatively turning her energy into poetry is conveyed in the graphic image of the village blacksmith working in the fiery furnace of his forge. The poem is a far cry from the earlier lyrical pieces of the 1850s which present her speakers in their respective mood swings. Here, Dickinson exposes the soul in the midst of fire and brimstone. Betsy Erkkila rightly points out that Dickinson "sought to define art as a serious form of labour, craft, and work" and that she "identifies her poetic craft with sacred and unalienated value of labour as 'Art' in an older artisan system" (165). Dickinson dares the reader to enter into the soul of the poet when it experiences its most intense moment, "*at the White Heat*". This is the critical moment when, at the height of her pain and trauma, symbolised by the "Fire's common tint -", she is able to draw upon all her reserves and transform the raw material of her suffering into poetic energy. In this state, the soul becomes the

poet's workshop where the "Ore" represents the very essence of her being. Rather than yield and be consumed by the flames of the "*White Heat*", the poetic spirit within her fights on to contain and vanquish these "conditions". The experience is so intense that the reader has to "crouch within the door -" to observe what is taking place. What follows is that the "Ore" emerges, quivering, from its ordeal "Without a color, but the light/Of unanointed Blaze". This is only the first stage of poetic creation. What must follow is the process of refinement in the "finer Forge" of the poet's consciousness where the "impatient Ores" are hammered and shaped into the "Designated Light". This entails the labour and craft which Erkkila refers to. Dickinson, in this poem, affirms that the act of poetic creation involves hard work. The poet is therefore likened to the lonely blacksmith toiling away at "*White Heat*" in the workshop of her soul, turning the raw materials of suffering into art. Dickinson's courage in the face of adversity is to be seen in all the poems I have discussed thus far. At no point does she yield to or succumb to the forces which repeatedly strike at her with lightning intensity. She confronts these forces boldly and ultimately overcomes them. John Keats, writing before Dickinson's time, stated the following in a letter to J.A. Hessey (October 8, 1818):

That which is creative must create itself - In *Endymion*, I leaped headlong into the Sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, & the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea & and comfortable advice - I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be amongst the greatest. (364)

Similarly, in his "Meditations in Time of Civil War", William Butler Yeats, writing after Dickinson, shows how, out of the hostile landscape of his mind, his 'daemonic rage'(137) can transform itself into artistic brilliance.

An acre of stony ground,
Where the symbolic rose can break in flower (136)

In the poems which follow, Dickinson talks about poetic creation and articulates her own sense of achievement and greatness after facing adversity.

Emily Dickinson's poetry shows that she experienced her most traumatic episodes in 1862. Although psychologists Ramsey and Weisberg caution that their comprehensive study, based on Dickinson's poetic output of this period, is grounded in "correlational data", there is ample evidence, in the poems themselves, to support the view that manic-depression and creativity are linked. It is worth noting that Ramsey and Weisberg do not engage in any critical, literary analysis of the poems. Their criteria is based on the number of Dickinson's poems which have appeared in selected anthologies. This, it needs to be pointed out, is hardly a reliable indication of a poet's development and maturity in terms of the creative and the artistic. It is Jamison's case studies, rather, which have a more direct bearing on Emily Dickinson:

High energy levels and boldness are clearly essential to virtually all creative endeavours; they tend to be characteristic of manic- depressive temperaments as well. Learning through intense, extreme, and painful experiences, and using what has been learnt to add meaning and depth to creative work, is probably the most widely accepted and written-about aspect of the relationship between melancholy, madness and the artistic experience. (114)

There are many of Dickinson's poems of 1862 which describe the "intense, extreme, and painful experiences" that Jamison talks about. Of these, I wish to turn in particular to "The Soul has Bandaged moments -" (512, 1862) mainly because the commentaries I have seen on this poem, thus far, appear to overlook what, in my opinion, is a crucial line; and that is Dickinson's singular reference to the art of poetic creation as a containment strategy in the midst of crisis. Roger Lundin, for example, sees the poem as being descriptive of Dickinson's cycle of "expectation, devastation, and stunned survival" (134) whilst Robert Weisbuch says that in the poem the speaker's soul is

an injured paralytic, a frozen flower, a fair theme in ruin ... Dickinson casts about furiously to describe the horror of these moments, not their cause, and their stated plurality, like the plurality of analogous images, tends towards the law and away from the situation. Somehow sequentially - the poem, like many of Dickinson's best, compounds sequential narrative and classificatory explication - a second kind of moment is described, a moment roughly equivalent both to Joycean epiphanies and typological resurrection. (123)

These commentators, like the others, are justified in seeing it this way. The poem is, after all, constructed around images which convey the speaker's torment and anguish at a very traumatic stage of her life. From the opening stanzas, the speaker's mood is one of hopelessness and despair:

The Soul has Bandaged moments -
When too appalled to stir -
She feels some ghastly Fright come up
And stop to look at her -

Salute her - with long fingers -
Caress her freezing hair -
Sip, Goblin, from the very lips
The Lover - hovered - o'er -
Unworthy, that a thought so mean
Accost a Theme - so - fair -

Fear in its personified presence ("Fright") dominates the opening lines by transfixing the soul into a kind of stasis as it is "too appalled to stir". This ominous sense of foreboding is heightened by the personified image which "salutes" the speaker in an ironic gesture of menacing possibilities. The image of the speaker's "freezing hair" being caressed by the figure of "Fright" completes the soul's bandaged moment.

In the next two stanzas, the speaker resists this ominous presence:

The soul has moments of Escape -
When bursting all the doors -
She dances like a Bomb, abroad
And swings upon the Hours,

As do the Bee - delirious borne -
Long Dungeoned from his Rose -
Touch Liberty - then know no more,
But Noon and Paradise -

What follows is a scenario which is the antithesis of the bondage described in the opening stanzas. The speaker is transported from one end of the bipolar continuum to the other in her "moments of Escape". The verbs and their variants in "bursting", "dances" ("like a Bomb") and "swings" ("upon the Hours") are suggestive of the unbridled joy and freedom which we shared with the speaker in the

earlier poems, most notably “I taste a liquor never brewed” (214) and “Snow flakes” (36). Dickinson’s sense of time and her blurring of spatial and temporal boundaries have been the subject of serious scholarly pursuit. Sharon Cameron in *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*, discusses what she calls Dickinson’s “absence of time” and her move from “temporality in search of visions of the infinite future”. She states, further, that her poems juxtapose time and immortality with “the fervour of hallucination” by bringing them into direct proximity (4 -5). In the same vein, Roger Luckhurst quotes Freud on “the paradox of traumatic temporality” in which he questioned whether the record of a traumatic event in his patients was “lodged in the unconscious, waiting for recall, or was the very product of that recall”. According to Luckhurst, Freud suggested that it is “*both* these things, impossibly, at the same time”(501). Looking closer at the question of temporality in “The Soul has Bandaged moments -”, the speaker describes her fleeting moments of “Escape” in terms of “Hours”. These fleeting moments of freedom would appear to be an eternity (“Touch Liberty - then know no more, / But Noon and Paradise -”) but it is not so. The speaker’s freedom and unbounded joy turn out to be a transient moment (experienced in an hour) as her soul is “retaken”.

The Soul’s retaken moments -
When, Felon led along,
With shackles on the plumed feet,
And staples, in the Song.

We ask: what then is the felonious deed committed? - and the answer becomes obvious: the poet has dared to allow her soul to sing and dance in joyous celebration. The speaker juxtaposes the Blake-like contraries “shackles” with “plumed feet”, and “staples” with “Song”, as the theme of bondage is sustained further. The poem is, ultimately, about the struggle to achieve poetic freedom of expression in the face of those oppressive forces which are determined to “shackle” and “staple” the poet’s soul into silence. Weisbuch identifies a deliberate anomaly (as a stylistic device) in the poem’s structure. In the sixth and final stanza, Dickinson omits what we might expect as the final two lines.

The Horror welcomes her, again,
 These, are not brayed of Tongue - (512, 1862)

According to Weisbuch, these lines are “purposely left unwritten” as “silence is Dickinson’s chief symbol of extra-experiential truth” (124). Parkin-Gounelas points out “how gaps or silences in texts may be seen to represent the unconscious, and ... the different configurations of psychoanalytical theory provide structures through which texts are to be read” (xii). It seems unlikely to me, however, that the silence in this particular text is representative of Dickinson’s unconscious mind. This, to me, represents her masterstroke. Through her deliberate and conscious act of silence, she makes the loudest and the most provocative statement of all. Rather than bray like a donkey about her “horrors”, she chooses quietly to commune with her poetic soul. The final line of the poem therefore becomes her conscious statement of intent amidst the “horrors” that attend upon her. Her feet, though “shackled” retain their plumes, and her poem (“the Song”), despite being “stapled” is alive. The soul is only in a temporary state of bondage. The last two, unspoken lines, are a clear affirmation of the speaker’s determination to sing in celebration of her poetic gift .

In the same year (1862), Dickinson, in recollecting childhood memories, expresses, even more emphatically and categorically, her determination to be a singer of song:

They shut me up in Prose -
 As when a little Girl
 They put me in the Closet -
 Because they liked me “still” -

Still! Could themselves have peeped -
 And seen my Brain - go round -
 They might as well 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 - (613, 1862)

There is an underlying tension in the poem between the desire for poetic freedom which the speaker longs for and the bondage which “they” attempt to impose on her, implicit in the words “shut” and “Captivity” at the beginning and end of the poem, respectively. “Still”, in the first stanza, suggests creative stasis which the speaker resists, as her mind is propelled by poetic motion (“And seen my Brain - go round - ”). Just as the observer, in “Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat?*”, may only “crouch” at the door of the poet’s workshop, so too may the curious spectators in “They shut me up in Prose -” be allowed only to peep into the speaker’s brain. This is territory which is inaccessible to the ordinary eye. It is the sole domain of her muses. The poem is an affirmation of the resilient poetic spirit which refuses to be strait-jacketed and bound by the narrow confines of ordinary prose. Despite its “bandaged moments”, the poetic soul is able to constantly break forth and sing. It is clearly evident then, that Dickinson is consciously highlighting the relationship between her emotional storms and her power to turn suffering into poetic art. It is this resilient spirit, in defiance of that which threatened to oppress her, which led her to retreating from society to pursue the possibility of poetic fulfilment.

This “Possibility” of poetic expression is described poignantly in “I dwell in Possibility -”.

I dwell in Possibility -
 A fairer House than Prose-
 More numerous of Windows -
 Superior - for Doors -

 Of Chambers as the Cedars -
 Impregnable of Eye -
 And for an Everlasting Roof
 The Gambrels of the Sky -

 Of Visitors - the fairest -
 For Occupation - This -
 The spreading wide my narrow Hands
 To gather Paradise -

(657,1862)

Dickinson employs metaphor and metonymy to signify the creative forces which fortify and feed her poetic impulses. Her speaker dwells in a realm of consciousness, uniquely her own (“a fairer House

than Prose”). This “House” is diametrically opposed to the “Closet” of the previous poem. The speaker stresses the superiority of her powers of perception (“of Windows- /Superior”) which are forever open to welcome her muses (“Of Visitors - the fairest -”). It is within the “Chambers” of this house that her imagination is able to creatively fertilize her perceptions and shape the conception, growth and birth of her poems. These “Chambers” constitute the sacred temple of the poet wherein her muses pour out their inspiration. It is “impregnable of Eye ” and inaccessible to those on the outside. Dickinson is aware of the superiority of being a poet, without being presumptuous, egotistical or arrogant. She too is human, hungrily searching after immortality (“The spreading wide my narrow Hands/To gather Paradise -”). This searching, however, is constantly interrupted by the emotional storms which she has to struggle to contain. The reader would have, by this stage, detected the patterns of the mood swings described in the poems where Dickinson’s speakers alternate between fear and anxiety on one hand, and resilience and courage on the other. Central to this, is the determination of these speakers not to yield but continue to engage in the art of poetic creation. The one poem, perhaps more than the others of 1862, that comes closest to describing Dickinson’s attempts at containment of her “Anguish” is, “It ceased to hurt me, though so slow” (584).

It ceased to hurt me, though so slow
 I could not feel the Anguish go -
 But only knew by looking back -
 That something - had benumbed the Track -

Nor when it altered, I could say,
 For I had worn it, every day,
 As constant as the Childish frock -
 I hung upon the Peg, at night.

But not the Grief - that nestled close
 As needles - ladies softly press
 To Cushion Cheeks -
 To keep their place -

Nor what consoled it, I could trace -
 Except, whereas 'twas Wilderness -
 It's better - almost Peace -

(584, 1862)

In all the poems of this period, Dickinson's abiding concern is with memory and, as I have indicated earlier, memory becomes the gateway through which poetic creativity flows. Although she ceases to be hurt, the memory of pain and anguish still lingers. Looking back, the speaker comes to the realization that "something-had benumbed the Track". It is memory, therefore, which enables her to transform and rewrite experience, even though she acknowledges more than once in the poem, that memory of the "Anguish" is fragmented and not as distinct as she would like it to be ("Nor when it altered, I could say," and "Nor what consoled it, I could trace -"). Although the words "For I had worn it, everyday" refer specifically to her becoming accustomed to her pain, likened to the putting on of a garment, there appears to be an underlying meaning to the word "worn" suggesting, ambiguously, a gradual erosion or wearing away of pain. The dualistic meaning of this word "worn" is appropriate in the context of this poem as the speaker is describing the intensity of her painful experience and, simultaneously, her ability to contain and wear out its effects. This idea of containment is developed even further in stanza three where the pain of the needles is absorbed by the "Cushion Cheeks / To keep their place". This is an even more explicit affirmation by the speaker of her remarkable ability to maintain control of her senses. By the end of the poem, there is no doubt that she has managed to negotiate the thorny path of the "Wilderness" and attain what she calls "almost Peace - ". She is not, so to speak, out of the woods as yet and she acknowledges this.

The bipolar condition, as I have stated elsewhere in this thesis, cannot be totally extinguished; it can only be contained as it makes its appearances and re-appearances, sometimes in cyclic patterns and at other times in seasonal episodes of varying degrees and intensities (Oren and Rosenthal: 551).

The next poem seems to sum up this point succinctly:

You cannot put a Fire out -
 A Thing that can ignite
 Can go, itself, without a Fan -
 Upon the slowest Night -

You cannot fold a Flood -
 And put it in a Drawer -
 Because the Winds would find it out -
 And tell your Cedar Floor - (530, 1862)

True to Dickinson's open-ended and ambiguous style, the poem may be read in two ways. This "Fire" symbolizing a manic or bipolar high and emanating from deep within the psyche cannot be smothered. It is a menacing "Thing" that "Can go, itself, without a Fan -" at any given time, even "Upon the slowest Night-". From the other poems discussed earlier, Dickinson, by this time (1862), appears to have a reasonable understanding of the condition and all its implications. It no longer appears as "the unknown". In stanza two, she illustrates the potency of this "Thing" which is able to transform itself from a "Fire" into "a Flood" and which invariably has the uncanny potential to find an outlet and unleash its sheer power. At another level, the speaker is referring the poetic spirit, within her, which cannot be subdued. In this sense, "Fire" is not seen only as agent of destruction but as source of creativity and illumination to her poetic soul as well. It is interesting that Jamison entitled her book *Touched With Fire: Manic- Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* in dealing with creativity. In stanza two, Dickinson switches her metaphor as the "Flood" comes to represent the profusion of ideas which flow from the creative mind. These ideas, she reiterates, cannot be folded and "put in a Drawer" for they will be found out by the "Winds". The poetic muses, like these "Winds", are alive and constantly seeking communion with the poetic soul. The images centred around the elements of fire, water, air, and earth ("Cedar Floor -") suggest that poetic creation is not only natural and spontaneous but a powerful process as well. Dickinson, time and again, associates poetic creation with all that is superior. Her reference to "Cedar Floor -" echoes the description in Poem 657 where she also employs this word. Dickinson's understanding of poetic inspiration extends beyond the "Fire" and

“Flood” metaphors she uses to so much effect in Poem 530. In Poem 711, in what is an antithetical context to that of 530, she reaffirms the scope and sheer magnitude of the poetic mind.

Strong Draughts of Their Refreshing Minds
To drink - enables Mine
Through Desert or the Wilderness
As bore it Sealed Wine -

To go elastic - Or as One
The Camel's trait - attained -
How powerful the Stimulus
Of an Hermetic Mind -

(711, 1863)

After withstanding the turbulent storms of the previous year, and with 366 poems to her name, Dickinson emerges triumphantly to endorse the versatility and power of the poet's mind, which “Through Desert or the Wilderness” is able to drink of “Sealed Wine -” of inspiration. She is able to imbibe ideas with the elastic ease and quickness of perception and internalize experience even in the most difficult and improbable of situations. This is strongly suggested by the image of the proverbial and biblical camel passing through the eye of the needle (“The Camel's trait - attained -”). The last two lines are a supreme affirmation of the power of the poet's “Hermetic Mind” which breaks open the seal of exclusive and vintage wine to drink deeply from the vats of the muses.

This chapter will remain incomplete without an examination of some of those poems in which Dickinson celebrates her gift of poetic endowment; where she celebrates, at times with euphoria, what it means to be a poet.

This was a Poet - It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings -
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door -
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it - before -

Of Pictures, the Discloser -
 The Poet - it is He -
 Entitles Us - by Contrast -
 To ceaseless Poverty -

Of Portion - so unconscious -
 The Robbing - could not harm -
 Himself - to Him - a Fortune -
 Exterior - to Time - (448, 1862)

The poet is able to distill “amazing sense/From ordinary Meanings” - an achievement which is sublime and out of the ordinary. It is this special gift which sets the poet apart from the rest. Dickinson’s speaker, from the outside, acknowledges “ceaseless Poverty -” when compared to the poet who occupies a different realm of existence: beyond the reaches of the mundane and the worldly. The poet, by contrast, is neither bound nor governed by the constraints of time (“Exterior - to Time -”). Besides, the wealth that the poet possesses remains intrinsically locked forever in his or her soul (“Exterior - to Time -”) and inaccessible to robbers.

In the next poem, Dickinson moves from the general to the specific as she acknowledges her own induction into the select society of poets.

It was given to me by the Gods -
 When I was a little Girl -
 They give us Presents most - you know -
 When we are new - and small.
 I kept it in my Hand -
 I never put it down -
 I did not dare to eat - or sleep -
 For fear it would be gone -
 I heard such words as “Rich” -
 When hurrying to school -
 From lips at Corners of the Streets -
 And wrestled with a smile.
 Rich! 'Twas Myself - was rich -
 To take the name of Gold -
 And Gold to own - in solid Bars -
 The Difference - made me bold - (454, 1862)

Helen McNeil (68) notes that Emily Dickinson cherished hopes of being a poet from a young age and cites some of her references to poetic creation in her early letters to her brother Austin who himself had

tried his hand at writing verse. Emily Dickinson never placed any value on materialistic riches - such was the nature of the life she led. In “It was given to me by the Gods -”, she explicates very clearly her own idea of what true wealth means to her and from a very early age, sets herself apart from the others who associate “Rich”, only, with the acquisition of worldly possessions. Dickinson, as a little girl, and poet-to-be, would smile knowingly, content in the knowledge of the unique wealth she possessed. It is this knowledge which makes “The Difference” which makes her “bold”. Writing this poem in 1862 as an adult, and on reflecting on her childhood, Dickinson rightly affirms the boldness which her poetic faculties have given her. It is this boldness, as I have attempted to show throughout this thesis, that enables her to withstand and weather even the most traumatic of experiences. It is the power of poetry which gives her the strength to endure in times of crisis.

Although Dickinson is aware of her own perceived shortcomings in other areas, like the performing arts for instance, her belief in her own poetical abilities is unshakable.

I cannot dance upon my Toes -
 No Man instructed me -
 But oftentimes, among my mind,
 A Glee possesseth me,

That had I Ballet knowledge -
 Would put itself abroad
 In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe -
 Or lay a Prima, mad,

And though I had no Gown of Gauze -
 No Ringleet, to my Hair,
 Nor hopped to Audiences - like Birds,
 One claw upon the Air,

Nor tossed my shape in Eider Balls,
 Nor rolled on wheels of snow
 Till I was out of sight, in sound,
 The House encore me so -

Nor any know I know the Art
 I mention - easy - Here -
 Nor any Placard boast me -
 It's full as Opera -

(326, 1862)

She acknowledges her lack of talent as a dancer and the finesse that a ballet dancer has. She therefore cannot enjoy the adulation, glitter and celebrity status associated with this art. Given the means ("That had I Ballet knowledge -"), she would gladly accept this opportunity. She is not, however, disconcerted or bitter. She is, in fact, possessed by a sense of "Glee" because, within the depths of her own mind, she is conscious that she is the recipient of the divine poetic gift ("Not any know I know the Art") which to her, represents the ultimate and most sublime of all possessions. This surpasses everything else as she knows, instinctively, what it means to be poet. In all Dickinson's poems about poetry she constantly and consciously stresses the poet's exclusive insight into the secrets of the creative process. The final stanza comes very close to being autobiographical as it relates to the reclusive nature of her life and the passion with which she guarded her privacy. Besides, nobody, with possible exception of her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert, really knew about the extent of her poetic genius ("Nor any know I know the Art") - a point that has already been mentioned but is worth repeating.

Socrates and Plato exalted the virtues of "divine madness" as a prerequisite for poetic inspiration. But is this all that is needed for the poetic process to unfold and develop into sublime art? Surely, the poet's ability to engage with language - to shape and mould it through the constant process of trial and error until perfection is reached - is an integral part of this process. To suggest that Dickinson's manic-depressive temperament, as we see it in the poems, precipitated her creative energy and that everything else followed automatically is both simplistic and misleading. Dickinson is aware that much more than divine inspiration is needed, as she is at pains to point out in "Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat?*". Christanne Miller in her comprehensive study *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* describes Dickinson's preoccupation with language as being "both focused and multidimensional" (2). Miller contests the views of many early critics who simply dismissed Dickinson's apparent lack of formal grammatical and syntactical structures and strategies as negligence; a result of what many

regarded as the poet's erratic and unstable states of mind.

The poet's distortions of grammar and syntax as well as her use of "jingling" meter, stanzas, and rhyme may provide a purely formal discipline she needs to be able to articulate chaotic or rebellious feeling and thought. (5)

Miller clearly sees in Dickinson's seemingly haphazard and wayward patterns an underlying strategy at work - a point I made earlier on when discussing the poet's deliberate use of ambiguity and word play and her tendency to leave her endings incomplete and inconclusive.

There are several other poems in the Dickinson *oeuvre* to substantiate the claims I have been making about her mental and emotional states but, given the limits and spatial constraints which inform this thesis, I am obliged to limit my discussion to only one more of these poems, "Essential Oils - are wrung" (675) before concluding this chapter. Poem 675 is crucial for two reasons: firstly it is a poem which has invited varied and interesting interpretations ranging from feminist and psychoanalytical to purely linguistic readings. Secondly, and more important for me, is its direct link to Dickinson's painful experiences and her conscious and strategic attempt to mould and shape language in such a way that these painful episodes are ultimately transformed into living poetic experience.

Essential Oils - are wrung -
The Attar from the Rose
Be not expressed by Suns - alone -
It is the gift of Screws -

The General Rose - decay -
But this - in Lady's Drawer
Make Summer - When the Lady Lie
In Ceaseless Rosemary - (675, 1862)

Dickinson conveys, in two condensed and compact stanzas, the gist of this thesis. On a first and largely literal level, the poem is about the process of extracting the essence of the rose to manufacture perfumes and scents used primarily by women. Probing deeper, however, we find that this is not Dickinson's abiding concern in the poem. She uses this process to describe, metaphorically, the

processes involved in creating poetry. The “Essential Oils” or the “Attar” are therefore the very substance which makes up her poems. “Attar” is actually the highly prized and much-sought-after oil in the perfume-making business. Much more than “divine madness” alone is necessary for poetic creation. Dickinson is only too well aware of this important consideration. She acknowledges that this attar, the essence of living poetry, cannot be “expressed by Suns - alone -” : something else, a sheer effort founded upon diligence and hard work, is required. Dickinson’s use of the word “Screws” is interesting. Literally the word refers to the mechanical instrument that is used to wring (“wrung”) the essential oils from the rose. The word, more significantly, carries with it connotations of something that is very painful and violent and this resonates sharply with “wrung” in line one. Seen in this way, the line “It is the gift of Screws -” is paradoxical, in the sense that “gift” and the association of pain are juxtaposed. Put another way, pain precedes the gift, which in this instance refers to the gift of poetry. We see again, in line three, Dickinson’s skilful and adept use of word play as “expressed” suggests in a dualistic way, the squeezing out of something (similar to “wrung”) and, of course, poetic expression. Pain and the containment of this through the art of poetic creation are therefore synonymous. In the second stanza Dickinson goes on to describe the enduring quality of poetry which, like the essential scent or fragrance, lingers powerfully in its abiding presence long after the poet has ceased to live. Although the rose decays into oblivion, its essence lives on, as a testament to her poetic soul. Miller expresses this point succinctly:

Just as petals must be crushed to produce essence, the woman’s (or poet’s) life is crushed through self-sacrifice or suffering to produce her pure soul; and like a sachet, even in death that soul beautifies or scents all it touches. This poem further implies, however, that the poet (or woman) chooses the conscious suffering of “Screws” over the easy life of “Suns” for the sake of the product (be it poem or healthy family) and of her indirect immortality, even if that immortality is never known beyond the confines of her “Drawer”. (3)

“This was a Poet - It is That” (448), discussed earlier, also uses the metaphor of the rose and attar to

describe the process of poetic creation - only there, Dickinson opts for the much milder verb “Distills” as opposed to “wrung” in Poem 675. The use of these two contrasting words may be a result of the poet’s fluctuating states of mind, swinging from turbulence and violent emotion to moments of peaceful and serene contemplation. The end result, despite these fluctuating and opposing states of mind, is the creation of sublime and enduring poetry. The texts cited in this chapter endorse Dickinson’s liberation as a poet and the latter half of the 1860s and beyond were to signify a much more peaceful, tranquil period which the next chapter sets out to show.

CHAPTER THREE

VESUVIUS AT HOME

Per Bech notes that in the “majority of cases ... depression is a recurrent disorder” and that “only in a minority of cases does depression take on a chronic course or remain a single episode” (4) whilst Monica Ramirez Basco and John Rush in their study point out that with long-term care the bipolar sufferer may be able to lead “a healthy, happy and productive life. It simply takes focus, commitment, and initially a substantial effort. Over time, less effort is needed, but careful attention will always be needed to keep the conditions in check” (58). I show in this chapter that Emily Dickinson, who was not exposed to modern therapeutic treatment and medication, did keep her condition in check. Her poetry of the post-1865 period reveals a much calmer, tranquil temperament and the anxieties and emotional upheavals of the earlier period appear to have subsided in these later years. Although these poems are said to lack the artistic and technical excellence of the 1862-1865 period and do not receive the critical acclaim of those years, they reveal, nevertheless, a mature and penetrative mind which is no longer overcome by fear and anxieties.

The increasing momentum after 1860 reached its peak in 1862 and sustained its full power for three more years. Thereafter throughout her life Emily Dickinson continued to write poetry, but never again with the urgency she experienced in the early 1860's, when she fully developed her “flood subjects” on the themes of living and dying. With paradoxes of extraordinary insight she repeatedly gives relationship to the ideas and experience which exist in time but never are a part of it. (Johnson :viii)

Above all, what is singularly important in the poems of this period is that Dickinson speaks with confidence and assurance about her ability to contain her previous emotional calamities. She demonstrates this by showing a keen awareness into the complexities of the mind; particularly the dualistic way in which memory is able to store images from the past, and simultaneously usher them back into consciousness at intermittent periods.

“Volcanoes be in Sicily” which is undated but belongs to the post-1865 period is reflective of the poet’s mind which has succeeded in containing itself.

Volcanoes be in Sicily
And South America
I judge from my Geography -
Volcanoes nearer here
A Lava step at any time
Am I inclined to climb -
A Crater I may contemplate
Vesuvius at Home. (1705, ?)

The last line of the poem, “Vesuvius at Home”, in the Dickinson tradition, conveys a double meaning. Dickinson acknowledges, on one hand, that powerful volcanic forces still lurk within her (“Volcanoes nearer here/A Lava step at any time”) but she is confident that she is able to control them. In this respect, Vesuvius is at “Home”, safe and under control without any risk of wreaking havoc.

Underlining this, is her knowledge of the latent energy within her. On another level, Dickinson is referring to the fact that she is a recluse who never leaves her home. She is, in a manner of speaking, “Vesuvius” herself, literally staying at home. Despite this, she is not cut off from the world at large. The power of her imaginative faculties and the sheer expanse of her mind enable her to traverse the world from the confines of her room. In this way, she is able to contemplate Vesuvius from “Home”.

The poems in the two previous chapters show how Dickinson, at the height of her manic-depressive episodes, successfully maintains contact with reality - that even in her most traumatic moments her memory is able to record and store all that she perceives and experiences. Now, in the quieter years she is still, no doubt, aware that the fire within her has not been extinguished and that, although it still lurks deep within her, she is able to contain it.

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. (1677, ?)

John Robinson aptly says of this poem that “pride in power joins with pride in concealment” (152). I would add the word “containment” to this description. The poem is about the proverbial case of appearance and reality. More important, it is about Dickinson’s expression of self-knowledge. Those who make up her small and limited circle are under a misapprehension about her real nature. These few people who happen to know her or of her (“the General thought”) are only able to see what they perceive of her outward appearance, suggested by “the Grass” which grows over and covers her real self, the “volcano”. They therefore come to associate this outward appearance with “A meditative spot - /An acre for a Bird to choose”. Dickinson knows, with sharp insight, how wrong they are in their mistaken identity of her real self. Beneath the surface of this seemingly tranquil appearance lies the red “Fire” of what resembles a bipolar volcano.

We recall a much earlier poem, “You cannot put a Fire Out -” (530) in which Dickinson describes the inextinguishable nature of the fire within her. “On my volcano grows the Grass”, written years later, is an elaboration of Poem 530. Whilst the latter of these poems goes on to discuss the transformation of adversity into poetic experience, the former does not do so. This is not surprising in view of the general decline in Dickinson’s poetic aspirations which Johnson has reminded us of. What we see, instead, is Dickinson’s remarkable capacity for recognition and acknowledgment of the latent dangers which she is exposed to. The red fire of the volcano “rocks” menacingly below the surface with explosive and dangerous potentiality. Although the speaker has learnt the art of containment she is not out of the woods, so to speak, as she continues to experience anxious moments. These anxieties, however, when seen in the context of the bipolar spectrum formulated by the experts are of the milder variety. Jules Angst *et al.*, for example, talk about “recurrent brief depression” which is not conceptualized as a

disorder as such, but as comprising essentially “elements of the manic, depressive, and anxiety spectra” (111). The important point to note is that Dickinson is consciously aware of the potential threat to her well-being. This consciousness comes through very clearly in the second stanza as the very grass which covers the volcano is held together by an “insecure sod” which is not anchored firmly in the solid soil of security. This insecurity feeds the speaker’s anxiety which, in its latent form, becomes synonymous with containment and I believe that Dickinson, right until her death in 1886, was aware of this and had to live with the knowledge of it. To glean some sense, as an indication of the measure of how far Dickinson has come from the stormy days of the early 1860's, the reader will do well to return to the earlier poems, particularly 410, 362, and 599.

“On my volcano grows the Grass” is more than an expression of Dickinson’s introspection and self-evaluation of her emotional state. Her speaker also contemplates her position in relation to other people (“the General thought”) who remain in ignorance of the latent forces which lie within her. To disclose this very personal knowledge would “populate with awe” the speaker’s solitude and this is tantamount to an intrusion into her private world which she is so protective of. She prefers thus to guard her privacy and conceal the “Fire” within her. This then raises the very perplexing question of why Dickinson would want to commit her innermost feelings to paper, and in poetic form too, when she clearly expresses her intention to hide the “Fire” from the “General thought”? It would seem that Dickinson, paradoxically, adopts a confessional mode to communicate her innermost feelings but is, at the same time, determined to remain guardedly private. I wish to enter into a brief theoretical digression without dwelling for too long in the realm of literary theory. Andrew Bennett offers an explanation which is useful in attempting to throw light on this problematic issue. As I see strong elements of Romanticism in Dickinson’s poetry I find that Bennett’s view is worth citing.

In the Romantic-expressive theory of authorship, confession - the revelation of an authentic authorial voice, identity, or experience - may be said to constitute one of the dominant modes of literary production. Yet Romantic confession is complicated by the question of audience, by the question of who hears, who reads, and indeed by the question of the addressee of the revelation. (50)

Two points raised earlier in this thesis need to be revisited: firstly, what poetic creation means to Dickinson (“And Gold to own - in solid Bars - /The Difference - made me bold - ”) in Poem 454, and secondly, given the reclusive nature of the poet’s life, few would have been aware of the greatness of her poetry until after her death. So who is Dickinson’s real audience? Bennett comes close to shedding light on this enigmatic question of Dickinson’s authorial intention when he distinguishes the act of confession from what he calls “self-communion” and which appears to be the most likely explanation in the case of Dickinson. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill helped clarify this issue of “self-communion” in his seminal 1883 essay “What is Poetry?”. Drawing mainly on the works of Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, Mill argued that

[t]he peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener ... of an audience, towards which the true poet pays no heed .The elimination of an audience has to do with the idea that literary work is, ideally, a direct repetition, an expression or confession, in speech, of the author’s innermost thoughts or feelings, indeed of his self or soul. The ideal poet communes with him or herself in a solitary, self-involved act of speech: poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols, which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind. (in Bennett: 51)

Seen in the context of John Stuart Mill’s ideas, it would seem that Emily Dickinson created a large part of her poetry without any real consideration of her audience. I am referring here to the serious poems of her high period, not to the ditties or odd pieces of verse she scribbled and included in her letters to close friends and letters. There is ample evidence in these serious poems which describe her determination to pursue her calling and to “Dwell in Possibility” (657) despite attempts to “shut [her] up in Prose” (615). Furthermore, the biographical evidence supports this view of her unconcern with an audience. We recall that she refused to publish the poems of her high period and, according to her

sister Lavinia, Dickinson instructed her to destroy all her papers (which included the poems, of course) after her death. It is, perhaps, through a supreme act of fate that Lavinia, after burning the letters realized, at the decisive moment, the value of the poems and salvaged them from being forever lost to the world (Lundin:248).

To return specifically to Dickinson's later years and to identify traces of the bipolar temperament, the following poem written in 1870 is worth examining:

He is alive, this morning -
 He is alive - and awake -
 Birds are resuming for Him -
 Blossoms - dress for His Sake.
 Bees - to their Loaves of Honey
 Add an Amber Crumb
 Him - to regale - Me - Only -
 Motion, and am dumb. (1160, 1870)

This is a celebration of God's presence which manifests itself through the birth of a new day. The words "alive" (repeated) and "awake" set the tone for the rest of the poem as the birds, flowers and bees testify to God's greatness. The poem graphically depicts the natural landscape, vibrant and pulsating with energy and activity. In the penultimate line, the speaker announces that she is "Only - Motion" which implies that she is alive and alert to the world around her - that her faculties are open and able to take in all that is perceived. The poem ends problematically, however, as the speaker states that she is "dumb". At the first reading, this word appears to be anti-climactic and the impression gleaned is that the speaker distinctly sets herself apart from the world around her. A second reading, however, reveals that Dickinson has used the word ambiguously. This dumbness seems to be an indication of her inability to enter into the spirit of the morning and to share in its glory despite the receptive powers of her perception. Is this muted response related to her inability to articulate the joy of the scene she witnesses because she lacks the language and powers of expression to do so, or, is she

so overwhelmed by God's powerful presence that words, in the proverbial sense, fail her?

Alternatively, is she simply indifferent because she happens to be in the midst of a depressive mood swing? It is unlikely that the speaker, and through her Dickinson, lacks power of language and poetical expression. Equally unlikely, and based on the evidence in the earlier poems, is the possibility that the speaker is overwhelmed and hence, dumbfounded. What is blatantly obvious in this poem is the absence of the manic emotion we have become accustomed to in earlier poems: the "exultation" and "divine intoxication" of Poem 76 for example or, for that matter, the highs of the "liquor never brewed" in Poem 214. This then leaves us with the third and most likely option: that she is indifferent as a result of a depressive episode, and that even the most captivating of scenes fails to arouse her into singing a song of praise in the poetic tradition. This possibility seems congruent with Johnson's observation that Dickinson, in her later years, no longer exhibited her earlier sense of urgency for poetic creation and supports my own claim that symptoms of manic-depression are still to be found in the poetry of later years.

In her later years, Dickinson is at peace with herself although there are those frequent recollections of her painful past, tinged at times with the pleasant memories of events revisited. Since this chapter is devoted almost exclusively to the art of containment, I focus on the poems which deal specifically with Dickinson's concern with memory. Sigmund Freud referred to "the paradox of traumatic temporality" in which he questioned whether the record of a traumatic event was "lodged in the unconscious, waiting for recall, or was the very product of that recall." Freud suggested that it is "*both* these things, impossibly, at the same time"(in Luckhurst:501). With regard to "There is a pain - so utter -" (599), I discussed how memory, even whilst experienced in an altered state of consciousness, translates perception and rewrites it into poetic experience. In the poems which follow, memory returns to consciousness years later, minus the "traumatic temporality" which Freud describes. In these poems,

Dickinson looks back to the past with hindsight and a new sense of knowing and maturity. This is not to suggest that the scars of her traumatic experiences have been totally obliterated. The poems speak, instead, of memory's capacity to store images of events and, long after they have occurred, to call up and re-enact them in the living present - without any exhibition of the symptoms of former agonies. Unfortunately, these poems appear to have been neglected by scholars as I have not been able to locate them in the critical texts on Dickinson, or in the various anthologies of American Poetry. The tendency has been, by and large, to focus on the 1862-1865 period - and not surprisingly, as this is her most creative period. It is to these more obscure poems which I now turn.

There is no escape from memory's eye and Dickinson is well aware of this.

What I see not, I better see -
Through Faith - my Hazel Eye
Has periods of shutting -
But, No lid has Memory - (from: 939, 1864)

She draws attention to the scriptural distinction between seeing by faith and seeing by physical sight. Her imaginative powers enable her to see "better" through "Faith" than through physical sight. The crucial point is that Memory has no (eye)lid and that it can never be shut down. This makes it irrepressible. Thirteen years later she was to reinforce this sentiment in the following poem:

No Passenger was known to flee -
That lodged a night in memory -
That wily - subterranean Inn
Contrives that none go out again - (1406, 1877)

If memory is irrepressible, then those who come under its powerful influence have no escape.

Dickinson's use of the metaphor in "subterranean Inn" to describe memory shows her understanding of the dark and hidden realms of consciousness and anticipates her use of similar images of house, closet and apartment in poems to be discussed later. As an indication of Dickinson's versatility in her use of metaphor, which brings her close to the conceits employed by the metaphysical poets, I turn

to Poem 1508. Written as she neared the end of her life, the poem shows that her abiding concern with memory has not diminished.

You cannot make Remembrance grow
 When it has lost its Root -
 The tightening the Soil around
 And setting it upright
 Deceives perhaps the Universe
 But not retrieves the Plant -
 Real Memory, like Cedar Feet
 Is shod with Adamant -
 Nor can you cut Remembrance down
 When it shall once have grown -
 Its Iron Buds will sprout anew
 However overthrown - (1508, 1880)

Memory which has not taken hold of the psyche is described in the image of a plant which has “lost its Root”. It has no substance and eventually fades away, despite any attempt to tighten the soil around it and set it upright. “Real Memory”, by contrast, endures, as it is anchored firmly in the individual’s consciousness. It is associated with the hardened raw materials of the earth, “shod with Adamant -” and sprouting “Iron Buds”. It cannot be “overthrown”.

In this context of “Real” memory, Dickinson, a decade earlier, looks back to the past, turns to the present and contemplates the future. Her theme, not surprising, is agony.

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

Weeds triumphant ranged
 Strangers strolled and spelled
 At the lone Orthography
 Of the Elder Dead

Winds of Summer Fields
 Recollect the way -
 Instinct picking up the Key
 Dropped by memory - (1147, 1869)

Only the individual who has endured the ravages of agony is able to relive the ordeal through repeated

enactment of the drama in the theatre of the mind. Nobody else “knows the Place”. Dickinson deliberately employs hyperbole (“After a hundred years”) to underline the powerful capacity of the mind to store, recall and re-live agonizing memories across all temporal boundaries. Even after such a prolonged period of time, memory can never be expunged; it lies hidden in the depths of the unconscious (“Motionless as Peace”), awaiting the first sign which would reactivate it into consciousness. To outsiders, the experiences of the speaker are as remote and as alien as an unknown grave or tombstone is, visited by “Strangers” who “strolled and spelled/At the lone Orthography/Of the Elder Dead”. All they see is the outward form of the letters spelt out on the tombstone of the person they never knew. The intricate details of the inner dramas and agonies will never be known to these strangers. Gerd Sommerhoff, writing from a bio-psychological point of view, explains that

[t]he distinctive properties of subjective experience are its *intrinsicness, privacy and uniqueness*. By *intrinsicness* is here meant the fact that this subjective “feel” of an experience is an inherent part of each and every conscious experience. The *privacy* is obvious, for there is no way in which anyone can look into my feelings; nor is there a way in which my feelings, the hurt of my pain, for example, can be conveyed to a third party to produce a true copy. We cannot truly share experiences. My words or demeanour can at best enable others to identify my feelings with something they experienced themselves, or could imagine experiencing. But that is as far as as it goes. (15)

In stanza two Dickinson continues to exercise her gift at clever word play. Both the words “Weeds” and “Orthography” have double meanings. “Weeds” may refer to traditional mourning garments, which is linked to the image of the “Elder Dead”, or, literally, to the grass which grows and spreads unchecked around the grave. On a much deeper level, extending into the realm of the psyche, and in the context of the speaker’s past agony, “Weeds” may well allude to those negative and destructive forces associated with a painful episode. These “Weeds”, notorious for their propensity to strangle and choke flowers in the garden are “triumphant”, metaphorically, as they threaten to disorientate the speaker’s state by impeding and retarding her growth. “Orthography” refers to the original or conventional spelling of words but more significantly, in the context of the poem, its alternative

meaning appears to be more imperative. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary the word also refers to the “perspective projection used in maps and elevations in which the observer is supposed infinitely distant so that the projected lines are parallel.” Dickinson uses this word in its cartographical sense to suggest the infinite distance between those who perceive her from the outside and the actual inner reality of her agony. The poem thus examines memory in the context of space and time. In the final stanza, “Winds of Summer Fields/ “Recollect the way -”, the speaker is revisited by reminiscences of the past but she is now wiser through experience. Her instincts are aroused and she has learned, through memory, how to handle painful situations (“Instinct picking up the Key-/Dropped by memory -”). It is this “key” which allows her to lock herself away from the terrors of the past. The image of the “key” is therefore crucial to this poem. It not only locks out the demons of past agonies, but opens new doors to perception and understanding as well. The end result is a calmer, more sedate speaker in perfect control of her senses.

The fascinating relationship between memory and the art of containment is taken up in the next poem in which the image of the “key”, introduced in Poem 1147, is developed and sustained even further. Memory is presented in the striking metaphor of a large “House” consisting of numerous chambers and recesses. Instinct has given the speaker the “key” which enables her to dwell in this “House”. Here, she is fortified against the painful memories of the past. There are any number of places within (“a Rear”, a “Front”, a “Garret”, the “deepest Cellar”) where the speaker may seek refuge.

Remembrance has a Rear and Front -
 'Tis something like a House -
 It has a Garret also
 For Refuse and the Mouse.

Besides the deepest Cellar
 That ever Mason laid -
 Look to it by its Fathoms
 Ourselves be not pursued - (1182, 1871)

In “Papa above!” (61, 1859) Dickinson’s speaker appeals to God to protect the terrified and vulnerable mouse from the menacing cat. Twelve years later, this mouse image recurs. By this time the timid mouse, no longer living under the shadow of fear and trepidation, enjoys the freedom of the “House”. It would seem that the speaker’s prayers, so earnestly supplicated in Poem 61, have been answered. The poet ends on a note of supreme confidence. The “deepest Cellar/That ever Mason laid” is a place beyond the reaches of dark and dangerous (“Look to it by its Fathoms/Ourselves be not pursued -”). Her use of the “House” metaphor to describe the architecture of the brain is an indication of her perceptive insight into areas regarded exclusively in her time as the sole domain of men. In Dickinson’s time, a considerable body of knowledge existed on the brain and its functioning (phrenology) and there is no doubt that she would have been aware of this as she was an avid reader who took more than a passing interest in the natural sciences. In her description of the dynamic and complex nature of the brain in her poems, Dickinson is surely ahead of her time.

Experience has been Dickinson’s greatest teacher.

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch -
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience.

(875, 1864)

After the turbulent episodes of the early 1860's, so explicitly described in the poems of this period, the later years, by contrast, reflect a far more mature and perceptive mind. Dickinson understands that a concerted and conscious effort is needed to let dark memories “lie” - containment is an art that has to be practised and worked upon with diligence. In other words, Dickinson touches on the questions of selective memory and, to an extent, free will which have been the subjects of extensive psychological

and philosophical discourses for a long time and continue to attract vigorous scholarly interest.

That sacred Closet when you sweep -
Entitled "Memory" -
Select a reverential Broom -
And do it silently.

'Twill be a Labour of surprise -
Besides Identity
Of other Interlocutors
A probability -

August the Dust of that Domain -
Unchallenged - let it lie -
You cannot supersede itself
But it can silence you - (1273, 1873)

Dickinson's ability to manipulate her metaphors to achieve poetic effectiveness is a hallmark of her artistry. The "House" metaphor, which she uses to describe memory in 1182, reappears in the above poem albeit in a different shape; here, memory is likened to "a sacred Closet". In the process of cleaning out this "Closet" and getting rid ("sweep -") of that which is unwanted, the speaker warns that one needs to be selective as well as cautious. In stanza two she anticipates the fearful prospect of unwittingly arousing unwanted memories ("Besides Identity/Of other Interlocutors/A probability"). The third stanza follows with advice to leave and let lie those memories("Unchallenged") which are potentially dangerous. She calls these memories - "August the Dust of that Domain" - in a line that is rhythmically enhanced through both assonance and alliteration. They cannot be overcome ("You cannot supersede itself") and the last line of the poem ends portentously ("But it can silence you -").

Sommerhoff explains that

in everyday life we also take our behaviour to be governed by our mind; and we generally tend to think of this entity as a *free* agent. We feel that our intentional activities are the result of freely made choices, that we can act as we please. (83)

Freedom of choice is related, clearly, to the art of containment and Dickinson demonstrates her understanding of the mind's ability to choose. It is for this reason that she is so successful at the art of

containment, more so, in these later years for she has learnt the value of prudence.

Through those old Grounds of memory,
The sauntering alone
Is a divine intemperance
A prudent man would shun. (*from: 1753, ?*)

Sommerhoff in his 2000 study coined the two phrases “Integrated Global Representation” and “Running World Model” to explain, from a twenty-first century perspective, the complex workings of the brain. The former refers to the internal processes by which the brain functions, what Sommerhoff describes as the “extensive internal representation of the current state of the organism which includes representations of the total situation facing the organism in the outer and the inner world” (12). The latter describes the brain’s relationship to the external world and its ability to “infer from its current sensory inputs on the basis of past experiences and other prior knowledge, the properties and current constitution of the surrounding world”(13). Dickinson’s poetry, in its nineteenth-century context, reveals her insight into the workings of the brain long before these ideas were to be expressed in scientific terms. It is a testament to her poetic imagination that she is able to create and fuse metaphors from the natural and biological sciences into her poetry with such poignancy. Consider for example, the following poem, written during 1862 when Dickinson experienced, as we have already seen, several emotional upheavals:

The Brain - is wider than the Sky -
For - put them side by side -
The one the other will contain
With ease - and You - beside -

The Brain is deeper than the sea -
For - hold them - Blue to Blue -
The one the other will absorb -
As Sponges - Buckets - do -

The Brain is just the weight of God -
For - Heft them - Pound for Pound -
And they will differ - if they do -
As Syllable from Sound - (632, 1862)

The sheer expanse of the brain is suggested by its capacity to transcend both the width of the sky and depths of the sea, thereby opening up the infinite possibilities which the poetic mind encompasses. It is Dickinson's awareness of the brain's potential and her understanding of her own poetic power which enable her to confront adversity with resolute confidence. This she demonstrates most explicitly in the following poem:

One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -
 One need not be a House -
 The Brain has corridors - surpassing
 Material Place -

Far Safer, of a Midnight Meeting
 External Ghost
 Than its interior Confronting -
 That Cooler Host.

Far Safer, through an Abbey gallop,
 The Stones a'chase -
 Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter -
 In lonesome Place -

Ourself behind ourself, concealed -
 Should startle most -
 Assassin hid in our Apartment
 Be Horror's least.

The Body - borrows a Revolver -
 He bolts the Door -
 O'erlooking a superior spectre -
 Or More - (670, 1863)

Strictly speaking, this poem should have been discussed in chapter two but I have chosen to deviate, somewhat, from my original chapter outline because of the poignant way in which the poem links with the thematic strand that is unfolding. The speaker describes two kinds of enemies, presented as dichotomies, that one has to confront: the first is external and appears in the form of literal and physical terrors, whilst the second is interior and lurks within consciousness ("interior Confronting"). This dichotomy between the exterior ("Chamber" and "House") and interior ("The Brain") is introduced in the first stanza. The speaker maintains that one is susceptible to attacks from both outside

the self and from within. The brain, which comprises many “corridors”, is just as susceptible to attacks by ghosts in the same way that a chamber or a house is. These internal attacks appear to the bipolar demons which the previous poems have described so vividly. The speaker suggests that she would rather confront the external terrors than face the enemy from within. In stanza two the external threat is described as an “External Ghost” in a “Midnight Meeting”. In stanza three there is an echo of a Gothic horror attack: “through an Abbey gallop, / The Stones a’chase -”. The descriptions of the exterior enemy culminate in stanza three with the “Assassin hid in our Apartment”. In each of these situations the speaker feels “Far Safer”. This is in contrast to the inner, mental struggles which she has to endure (“Than Unarmed, one’s a’self encounter - / In lonesome Place -”). These struggles are far more horrific, “Ourself behind ourself, concealed -”, and they resemble in many respects, the essential principles of Sigmund Freud’s revolutionary and celebrated theory of the unconscious which was to make its first appearance towards the close of the nineteenth century. According to Freud, the unconscious is the battleground for supremacy between instinctual forces, to which he gave different names at different times - such as the ego and the id, or the life and death drives. (Lapley:67). In this poem, Dickinson’s speaker recognises the inner threat that she has to deal with and acknowledges how formidable a foe it is. It is this knowledge of self which enables her to contain the ghosts which haunt the “corridors” of her brain.

As this chapter nears its end, it is necessary to reiterate that I have not been able to discern in the poems of Dickinson’s later period any evidence of mental or emotional turmoil. What is to be found, on the contrary, is a rational mind reflecting on its past experiences with insight and a new-found confidence. In an 1863 poem, Dickinson shows quite clearly that she had learnt to weather the storms of her turbulent 1861 -1862 period and this capacity for containment turns out to be decisive in signposting the way towards peace and tranquillity in the years that followed.

The Props assist the House
 Until the House is built
 And then the Props withdraw
 And adequate, erect,
 The House support itself
 And cease to recollect
 The Auger and the Carpenter -
 Just such a retrospect
 Hath the perfected Life -
 A past of Plank and Nail
 And slowness - then the Scaffolds drop
 Affirming it a Soul. (1142, 1863)

Dickinson's poem affirms her strong spirit of independence and enlightenment through her attainment of self-knowledge. She has come to terms with her soul after enduring so much of personal suffering ("A past of Plank and Nail"). This is a far cry from 1861, only two years before, when the "Plank" image at the end of "I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain" appears in a totally different context..

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
 And I dropped down, and down -
 And hit a World, at every plunge,
 And Finished knowing - then - (280, 1861)

By contrast, the dropping of the "Scaffolds" in Poem 1142 signifies the opening up of a new dimension to the speaker's consciousness, suggested in the final climactic line, "Affirming it a Soul". And finally, by 1876 and at forty-six years of age, Emily Dickinson shows that she has learnt, through experience, to understand the relationship between heart and mind in relation to emotion and reason. This is indicative of how far she has come in being able to exhibit such a mature understanding of these crucial issues which govern perceptions and shape the development of her self-image. In her, by now trademark, use of geographical images she expresses the relationship between the heart and the mind as follows:

The Heart is the Capital of the Mind -
 The Mind is a single State -
 The Heart and the Mind together make
 A single Continent -
 One - is the Population -
 Numerous enough -

This ecstatic Nation
 Seek - it is Yourself. (1354, 1876)

In a reciprocal relationship, heart and mind are contained within each other and together they constitute a larger entity ("A single Continent -") representing the wholeness of being. Alternatively, from another perspective, she presents the same relationship through a totally different image:

The Mind lives on the Heart
 Like any Parasite -
 If that is full of Meat
 The Mind is fat.

But if the Heart omit
 Emaciate the Wit -
 The Aliment of it
 So absolute. (1355, 1876)

The powers of reason and rationality associated with the mind are fed by the heart, from where all emotion emanates. The mind then transforms and rewrites emotional experiences through the power of the imagination and the end result is the creation of the poems we have been examining. In other words, according to Dickinson, the mind suffers if there is an absence of emotion and this is conveyed explicitly in the second stanza where the mind ("wit") is emaciated from lack of nutriment from the heart ("Aliment"). This dualistic and reciprocal relationship between the heart (emotion) and the mind (thought) is crucial to Dickinson's work. All the emotions, traumas, the pendulum-like mood swings and the near psychotic states, which we have discerned in the poems, spanning almost a quarter of a century, became the food which fed and nourished her appetite for poetic creation. This entire thesis has been conceived, constructed and written bearing this in mind.

Conclusion

Emily Dickinson has been the subject of many studies since the early part of the twentieth century and these continue to proliferate well into the twenty-first century. What we have seen, as a result, is the emergence of many theories which have attempted to shed light on the mysteries surrounding the poet's life. Dickinson has been variously described as being neurotic, psychotic, homoerotic, anorexic, shamanistic, a sufferer of brain damage and, according to one study, the victim of incest. Whether all of these are to rank alongside the work of established scholars such as Thomas H. Johnson, Richard Sewall, or more recently, Roger Lundin remain to be seen. Nevertheless, a brief overview of these theories is necessary in order to glean some sense of contemporary trends in Dickinson biographical studies. My aim, in alluding to these theories, is to trace, broadly, some of the directions that Dickinson biographical studies have taken and not to undertake reductive criticism of any scholastic work; suffice it to say that these studies tend to rely heavily on Dickinson's correspondence with her small circle of family and friends, at the expense of her poetry. I hope that in presenting a thumbnail sketch of some of these approaches, I may be able to offer the reader a broader vantage point from which to assess my own assumption which constitutes the lifeblood of this thesis.

In her 1951 study, *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson*, Rebecca Patterson (in Sewall:605) postulates the theory that Dickinson recognised her "own homosexuality" when, around 1864, she fell in love with one Kate Scott Anthon, a brilliant young woman who was a guest of Susan Gilbert, wife of Dickinson's brother Austin. Patterson argues that Dickinson's rejection by Anthon precipitated an emotional collapse which was to have serious repercussions for the rest of her life. In a more recent study (2004), H. Jordan Landry uses Patterson as a starting point to further his claim that Dickinson's emotional problems had their roots in suppressed homoerotic desire. Landry discusses at length what

he calls “embryonic lesbian triangles” (884) in Dickinson’s letters and suggests that “lesbian desire and female masculinity” (891) were the influential factors which shaped Dickinson’s poetry. Heather Kirk Thomas takes an entirely different view in her attempt to explain the emotional imbalances in Dickinson’s poetry. She argues strongly that the poet suffered from a serious eating disorder, clinically referred to as anorexia nervosa.

Yet in spite of our attempts to dismiss or explain the peculiarities of Dickinson’s renunciative life, her puzzle remains unresolved. Although it is not my intent to finally resolve the enigma of her behaviour or of her art, I suggest that not only does Dickinson’s poetry display the obsessive patterns of starvation and renunciation typical of female victims of anorexia nervosa but that her life and extant letters present nearly conclusive evidence that Dickinson herself suffered from this symptom.(206)

Karin Perriman, in her 2003 doctoral thesis, locates her study within the framework of trauma theory and suggests that Dickinson became a recluse as a result of incest, perpetrated, possibly, by her father Edward Dickinson. Earlier, psychiatrist John F. McDermott in an article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* (in Marianne Szegedy - Maszak:144) concluded that Dickinson suffered from what would be today diagnosed as brain disorders and agoraphobia. Maryanne Garbowsky in her book *The House Without the Door: A Study of Emily Dickinson* (in Hirschhorn and Longworth: 299) postulates that Emily Dickinson suffered from agoraphobia caused by a “visual perception disorder”, perhaps strabismus, resulting from “organic brain dysfunction”. In another of these studies (2000), Clifford Snider attempts to show that Dickinson’s poetry has strong parallels with the ancient practice of Shamanism which is thought to have originated in Siberia and Central Asia.

Had she lived in another era and been associated with a religion or belief system that included shamans, no doubt Dickinson would have been a shaman in the traditional sense, for she is concerned about the same mysteries that concern shamans and investigates these mysteries using the imagery of shamanism. These mysteries include death and the afterlife, as well as suffering, loss, and healing. ...

What has this to do with my reading of Dickinson as a neo-shaman? I see it as an aspect of her poetic need to cross the gender boundaries of her time; it places her into the shamanistic frame of the “berdache.” The berdache is a cross-gender figure in many American Indian tribes; that is, a man-woman or a woman-man who took on roles of the opposite gender and often had sex with and even married the same gender the berdache was originally born to ... (online)

Perhaps the most well-known of all the psychoanalytical theories on Dickinson is the work of John Cody in his 1971 study, *After Great Pain -The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson*. Cody takes a strong Freudian line in his assertion that Emily Dickinson, as a result of oedipal complexities, experienced a serious sexual identity crisis which was damaging to both her personality and her emotional outlook. He argues emphatically that this crisis induced a series of psychotic attacks from which the poet never recovered. Cody's extensive study is constructed solidly on the premise that Dickinson's emotional and personality disorders were precipitated by her problematic relationship with her mother. He concludes as follows:

Psychological calamities, decades of frustration, isolation, and loneliness all created a void that Emily Dickinson's talent rushed in to fill. Without this void there might well have been no poet. Her afflictions all had their point of origin in the circumstances and personality of Edward Dickinson's young wife in the early days of her motherhood. To this extent it may be said that Emily Dickinson was able to become a great poet because - not in spite of - her unobtrusive, ungifted, and unstimulating mother - the ultimate progenitress, therefore, of the verse. (499)

Discussion of "My Life had stood - A Loaded Gun -" (754) which is one of Dickinson's most frequently discussed and well-known poems - as complex as its meaning is elusive and speculative - will illustrate the application of some of the theories I have mentioned above. Cody devotes almost an entire chapter to this poem as he sets out to justify his theory of Dickinson's tortured struggle to come to terms with her apparent sexual identity crisis (275). Sharon Cameron points out that "the problem with the poem, then, is not that it is devoid of meaning but rather that it is overwhelmed by it" (68) whilst Robert Weisbuch, in a poignant description, calls the poem "a transparent gown for dynamic speculation"(39). It would seem that nobody has, as yet, been able to state exactly what Dickinson refers to in this poem. Others, like Vivian Pollak in *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender*, postulate similar readings of the poem by seeing the "Loaded Gun" in terms of phallic imagery and associating it with repressed sexuality (152). The question of Dickinson's sexual orientation and her so-called gender

anxieties is an issue which does not concern me. I see “My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -” as announcing the new Emily Dickinson in 1863 after the traumatic events of the preceding year, for it is in this poem that she really finds herself and endorses, with an unshakeable confidence, her ability to face the world and all its adversities. There are no indications whatsoever of the traumas and uncertainties which we witness in the poems of 1862. We see here a boldness, hitherto undetected. The poem is not only a dramatization of the speaker’s new sense of self - it is the very personification of Dickinson’s art of containment and is, therefore, a fitting conclusion to this thesis.

My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
 In Corners - till a Day
 The Owner passed - identified -
 And carried Me away -

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods -
 And now We hunt the Doe -
 And every time I speak for Him -
 The Mountains straight reply -

And do I smile, such cordial light
 Upon the Valley glow -
 It is as a Vesuvian face
 Had let its pleasure through -

And when at Night - Our good Day done -
 I guard My Master’s Head -
 ‘Tis better than the Eider-Duck’s
 Deep Pillow - to have shared -

To foe of His - I’m deadly foe -
 None stir the second time -
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -
 Or an emphatic Thumb -

Though I than He - may longer live
 He longer must - than I -
 For I have but the power to kill,
 Without - the power to die - (754, 1863)

The first important observation which the reader makes is the question of temporality. The poem opens with a description of the perfect past (“had stood”) and shifts to the present continuous (“And now”)

which, thereafter, dominates the poem. The repetition of these words in stanza two is therefore very effective. The speaker clearly wishes to convey her experiences in the context of two distinctive time spans. Ruth Parkin-Gounelas's exploration of "how gaps or silences in texts may be seen to represent the unconscious, and ... the different configurations of psychoanalytical theory provide structures through which texts are to be read" (xii), is recalled, being particularly appropriate to this poem. A "Loaded Gun" usually connotes a potentially violent and destructive scenario. If the poem were to be read in isolation, without any reference to the others which precede this, for example, then this connotation becomes very relevant indeed. This, however, is not the case as I am following, here, a particular thematic strand which I have traced back to 1862, namely, bipolar attacks and creativity. In this context, then, the "Loaded Gun" is associated with energy and creativity rather than violence and destruction. Ultimately, it is about the art of containment. To the critic who asks for explicit evidence of creative energy in the poem I offer Parkin-Gounelas's explication of "gaps and silences" in the texts:

Between the 'I' and the 'me', the subject of self-conscious reflexivity and the object of reflection or representation, lies a 'founding silence' which is the mark of the unconscious sources of signification. (ibid)

The speaker's life is described, metaphorically, as a "Loaded Gun" which stood dormant in some remote corner inactive, isolated and forgotten, until her owner "identified" and "carried" her away. Since then, her life has been transformed dramatically. A loaded gun is potentially explosive only when it comes into the hands of its owner. Otherwise it remains dormant and useless. The speaker, in the image of this "Loaded Gun" and her owner, who galvanizes her into action, are the two dimensions of the same entity as they constitute the total sum of her consciousness which interact in a mutually reciprocal way. In terms of this reciprocity, the owner is helpless without the gun whilst the gun is impotent when it is not in the hands of its owner. This "Loaded Gun" represents the potential poetic

energy which has been suppressed for a long time and, when this is identified by the other half of her consciousness (her owner), her full potential is realized. The implication in the last two lines of stanza one, suggested strongly by the word “identified”, is that the owner has been consciously searching for the “Loaded Gun” which is his other half. Helen McNeil notes that Dickinson is “all writerly power and nothing else ... the poem is a definition of self as purely artistic agency, recognised by her preceptor and carried away” (175).

The result of this union is that both speaker and owner experience a new lease of life, described in stanza two. This mutual relationship between gun and owner is underlined by the powerful presence of the personal pronoun “We” which is repeated in the first two lines of stanza two. The inactivity of stanza one, suggested by the verb “stood”, is replaced by “roam” in stanza two which aptly conveys her new sense of freedom. Dickinson has used the word “Sovereign” with great care as the word resonates loudly with her sense of the special status she affords to poets in those preceding poems which I have examined earlier. Seen this way, the words “I speak for him” are not only central but crucial to unfolding the meaning of this poem. Dickinson is, once again, extolling the power of her poetic voice; albeit in more powerful and provocative imagery. In speaking for “Him” she speaks for herself, as both he and her are two parts of the same entity. This poetic speech is alive and vibrant; it resounds throughout the countryside and its echoes reverberate instantly as “The Mountains straight reply - ”.

In the context of her bipolar disorder, this poetic energy (the ammunition in the “Loaded Gun”) serves a dualistic purpose: it becomes a weapon which protects her from those stormy episodes, discussed earlier, which assault and torment her mental and emotional faculties and it gives her a deep sense of contentment. Equally important, it is also the weapon of those episodes, liable to fire at any stage without warning. But why would the owner and the “Loaded Gun” want to “hunt the Doe” in

particular? This female animal is considered to be one of the most docile, timid and vulnerable of creatures and I concur with those feminist readings which suggest strongly that Dickinson comes to see the doe as symbol of that part of her personality which feels dwarfed and intimidated in the patriarchal and male-dominated world she inhabits. Barbara Mossberg, for instance, sees a direct link between Dickinson's apparent feelings of feminine inferiority and her poetic aspirations in her mid-nineteenth century context.

These poems, which thematically vacillate between the persona's dread of self-revelation and her chafing to have her identity revealed, betray a particular ambivalence with regard to her self-image as a poet. Indeed, Dickinson seems to define poetic identity in terms of a woman's role in her culture, a function of a man's notice. (19)

I believe that Dickinson's "dread of self-revelation and her chafing to have her identity revealed" is the main reason for the stylistic and linguistic devices she employs in the poem which, as Robert Weisbuch has reminded us, is open to any number of interpretations. This ambiguous and non-committal stance is deliberately adopted by Dickinson largely through her use of the speaking gun as persona - as one facet of her consciousness presented in a mutually rewarding relationship with the other which is represented by the owner of the gun. This strategy is given further currency through her skilful shifts in her use of pronouns: "My", "Me", "We", "I", "Him", which has invited a wide range of speculation, already alluded to, as regards gender and identity. That Dickinson succeeds in veiling the identity of her speaking persona (there is no evidence in the poem to suggest gender), coupled with the fact that her "Owner" can be positively identified as male, opens the door to even more speculation, paradoxes and ambiguities. It is ultimately this *modus operandi* (leaving her poems open-ended and inconclusive) that protected Dickinson from the agonies inflicted on her by her culture and social context which Mossberg and Showalter have alluded to. As there is no scope for a more explicit discussion of feminist explorations of Dickinson's work in this thesis, I must hasten to return to her containment of what the poems show to be bipolar disorder; suffice it to say that she implicitly affirms her poetic

power through the “gaps and silences” in her texts without running the risk of subverting the status quo. The hunting of the doe, then, is not a pursuit that is driven by a desire to kill, as result of any violent instinct or inclination. Instead of a senseless gratification of a violent disposition, the speaker wishes metaphorically, to hunt and kill the doe (and what it symbolizes) within her. This death of the symbolic doe, in turn, gives her a new sense of self and rewrites her identity - she overcomes her old self which “stood” in “Corners” bursting with creative but repressed energy.

Stanzas three and four are therefore a logical follow-on as they convey the speaker’s deep sense of contentment (“And do I smile, such cordial light/Upon the Valley glow”) at realising her new-found identity and freedom as a result of killing the doe. Dickinson’s use of the volcano image as a powerful motif in her poems, and which I have used to structure this thesis, recurs in stanza three (“It is as [if] a Vesuvian face/Had let its pleasure through”). What is interesting is that the volcano image is drawn from nature and, as we all know, according to the laws which govern its conception and existence, it is destined to eventually erupt with catastrophic results. In bringing together these two dichotomous ideas (volcanic eruption and pleasure) Dickinson demonstrates her remarkable ability to transform that which is potentially destructive into something that is both positive and pleasurable. In all of the poems which I have examined thus far, evidence is to be discerned of her yearning towards the attainment of her poetic voice. This poem, to me, represents the culmination of her poetic desire. Lord Byron, in his most celebrated description, quoted by Bernard Beattie in Donald Beale (7), speaks of poetry as being the “lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake”. The Vesuvian face which “had let its pleasure through” conjures up the image of energy (potentially destructive), hitherto suppressed and dormant, but now transformed into creative power.

Stanza three therefore flows almost seamlessly into stanza four as the pleasure principle becomes

directly linked with sleep and rest. As a result, the speaker no longer relives the restless and anxious nights which troubled her (“And when at Night - Our good Day done - / I guard My Master’s Head”). Dickinson successfully integrates the two facets of consciousness as the dualistic and reciprocal relationship between the “Loaded Gun” and her “Owner” (who is now called “Master”) is sustained even further. The stanza describes blissful sleep which connotes peace of mind and comforting rest. Dickinson, in these lines, enters into what Freud was to later call the realm of the unconscious and the “operations of dream- work” (Suprenant: 208). Whilst one facet of consciousness enjoys a sleep that is “better than the Eider - Duck’s/Deep Pillow - ” the other is ever alert to the possibilities of danger. What we have, then, is the paradoxical situation of the speaker experiencing conscious and unconscious moments of contentment simultaneously. It is interesting to note that Dickinson ends the stanza with the word “shared”. Her use of verbs by this stage takes on an added significance in the context of the poem as a whole: “stood”, “roam”, “hunt”, “speak”, “smile”, “guard” and “shared” suggest, collectively, the unfolding of a pervading autobiographical element to the poem. I shall discuss the other verbs (“live”, “kill”, and “die”) shortly. Before that I wish to return to Harold Bloom’s explication of the “sublime” in his reading of Freud’s work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where Freud argues that “the psyche strives to master trauma after the event” (174). From an autobiographical point of view, this principle is worth pursuing when we consider that Dickinson wrote this poem in 1863 - at a time when the memories of her 1862 traumas were still vivid in her mind. Bloom, who locates his study within the Freudian paradigm, explains the connection between trauma, poetry and psychoanalysis.

The poetry of the sublime represents a manic triumph over loss: a terror uneasily allied with pleasurable sensations of augmented power, even of narcissistic freedom, freedom in the shape of that wildness that Freud dubbed “The omnipotence of thought”, the greatest of all narcissistic illusions. (27)

This “manic triumph” and the “sensations of augmented power” are to be seen in the opening lines of

stanza five as Dickinson's speaker is emphatic about her ability to overcome adversity ("To foe of His - I'm deadly foe - / None stir the second time"). It does not need overstating here, but the "foe" is likely to refer to the bipolar demons which have plagued her and this is the reason for the tonal tongue-in-cheek arrogance which rings through these lines. The critics I have mentioned earlier associate the "Yellow Eye" and the "emphatic Thumb -" with marksmanship and the literal pulling of the trigger. I see these purely in terms of the poet's eye and its capacity for golden vision together with the thumb that holds the pen to write. Dickinson, in affirming her present potency, banishes, seemingly, the anxieties of the past.

Much has been written about the concluding stanza of "My life had stood - a Loaded Gun -" and the ambiguities and paradoxes and this has led to even more speculation. John Robinson has called the concluding stanza a "riddle".

Obfuscation is a deliberate part of riddling. The same sound may have different senses; a form of words will be juggled to juggle the mind of the reader, and this happens in the last stanza of Emily Dickinson's poem. 'I than He' becomes 'He ... than I'; 'may longer' becomes 'longer must'; and 'power to' in the third line is 'power to' in the next. The explanatory connection 'for' is very loose since, if we try to read it strictly, we are left with a non sequitur (he must live longer than I do because I do not have the power to die). So the major problem is with the opening two lines of the riddle with each of the poem's two protagonists appearing, impossibly, to outlive the other (159).

Robinson's reading of this stanza appears to support the view I postulated earlier; that Dickinson is cautious about explicitly revealing certain aspects of her inner world and therefore strategically employs these riddling and enigmatic linguistic devices. What is significant about this last stanza, however, is that the time sequences shift to the future tense in the first two lines and thereafter revert to the present in the final two. The poem as a whole, then, spans the past, present and future. In the final scheme of things, Dickinson says in this poem that a poet's creativity doesn't die - it lives on through the poems she leaves behind ("For I have but the power to kill, / Without - the power to die -"). Whilst the poet's faculties, like the rest of her mortal body, perish away through the inexorable laws of time,

her creativity lives on to perpetuate the imaginative energy which was once an integral part of consciousness. This is made up of the 'I' and the 'He ' and ultimately embodies the infinite "I AM". Shakespeare, in his sonnets, repeatedly expresses the immortality of his works whilst Yeats, much later in "Sailing to Byzantium" echoes similar sentiments. Dickinson too, in these concluding lines, is claiming immortality through her poetry. In the final analysis, "My life had stood - A Loaded Gun -" is the decisive poem which celebrates Emily Dickinson's triumph over her dreaded "foe".

I have endeavoured, throughout this thesis, to illustrate how Emily Dickinson's poetry suggests her complete control over her emotional and mental faculties. Even in the most trying circumstances, discernable in the 1862 period, she demonstrates her fortitude, resilience and strength of character. I have also attempted to show the reader the link I have established between, what appears to be her bipolar condition and her creative powers by suggesting that her manic-depressive temperament fed her creative impulses resulting in poetic creation. Dickinson herself describes her indomitable urge to create poetry at the height of crisis. In this way, as we have seen, Dickinson is able to contain those forces which threatened to overwhelm her. Jamison notes that

[c]reative work can act not only as a means of escape from pain, but also as a way of structuring chaotic emotions and thoughts, numbing pain through abstraction and the rigors of disciplined thought, and creating a distance from the source of despair. (123)

I have shown the reader, in Chapter Two, several poems which support everything that Jamison identifies in the above observation. The poems examined in Chapter Three indicate, clearly, the poet's state of mind and her ability to reflect with maturity and understanding on her troubled past. Central to this is her acquisition of self-knowledge and her understanding of memory and consciousness - long before these were to be incorporated into psychology and its related disciplines.

This thesis has dealt specifically with those poems which are indicative of Emily Dickinson's struggles

to come to terms with her emotional and mental battles and, more significantly, her victory over adversity. When one undertakes a more comprehensive study of Dickinson's poetry, one will indeed encounter the "thousand unapprehended combinations" of the mind which Shelley speaks about in his "A Defence of Poetry":

Poetry acts in another and divine manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends over all thoughts and actions with which it co-exists . (535)

Such is the expanse and scope of Dickinson's mind which was able to traverse the universe from the confines of her bedroom. Her themes, by way of example, range in their diversity from "the faces of the Atoms" (954) to a spider that "sewed at Night/Without a Light/Upon an Arc of White" (1138) to "Bulletins all Day/From Immortality" (827). She explores with insatiable curiosity: life, death, immortality and probes into the interconnectedness of all living things, in what Judith Farr describes as her "daring investigations into the possibility of eternity" (vii) and Roger Lundin, as her mapping of "the uncharted paths of consciousness" (74). She may be called a Romantic, a Metaphysical or both. Her influence is to be seen in the works of the succeeding generation of poets such as Ezra Pound and others when the Imagist and Vorticist movements evolved in the early part of the twentieth century. Postgraduates and biographers continue to pursue her with fascination but it seems unlikely that the truth about Emily Dickinson will ever be known - unless of course, new evidence is forthcoming. Perhaps some fortunate individual may happen to stumble upon letters, journals or memoirs in an old attic. Future generations will thereafter be the richer for it.

Joyce Carol Oates in a speech to the Cosmos Club, Washington, DC in 1991, is on record as rightly pointing out that:

Emily Dickinson was not an alcoholic, she was not abusive, she was not neurotic, she did not commit suicide. Neurotic people or alcoholics who go through life make better copy, and people talk about them, tell anecdotes about them. The quiet people just do their work. (in Jamison: 49)

What remains is for the reader to take time to ruminate on the concerns that have been raised here. Of all the themes which characterize Emily Dickinson's work, one particular strand of her consciousness unifies her work: and that is her abiding passion for poetic creation and her deep understanding of what it meant to her to be a poet.

One Blessing had I than the rest
So larger to my Eyes
That I stopped gauging - satisfied -
For this enchanted size -

It was the limit of my Dream -
The focus of my Prayer -
A perfect - paralyzing Bliss -
Contented as Despair -

I knew no more of Want - or Cold -
Phantasms both became
For this new Value in the Soul -
Supremest Earthly Sum -

The Heaven below the Heaven above -
Obscured with ruddier Blue -
Life's Latitudes leant over - full -
The Judgement perished - too -

She perceives her poetic gift to be the "One Blessing" she values above all others. Although Dickinson experienced serious problems with her eyesight in the mid-1860s when this poem was written and had to receive specialized ophthalmic treatment, her deeper, poetic vision was unaffected; it became, in fact, more focused and acute, much to her deep sense of contentment ("So larger to my Eyes /That I stopped gauging - satisfied - / For this enchanted size -"). Stanza three sums up, aptly, what poetic creation means to her: it enables her to banish the "Phantasms" which tormented her. Ultimately, she comes to realize the "new Value" in her soul. This has been an enriching experience and it is not surprising that she grants the art of poetic creation a fitting accolade: it represents the

“Supremest Earthly Sum - ” and provides her with the pedestal from which she is able to probe into the mysteries of life, death and beyond. I mentioned, at the outset, that “speculation” was to be the watchword. It is therefore fitting that the concluding words of this thesis be those of Emily Dickinson herself:

Why Bliss so scantily disburse -
Why Paradise defer -
Why Floods be served to Us - in Bowls -
I speculate no more - (756, 1863)

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