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Feminism, Selfhood & Emily Dickinson

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York,
Regina
1991

FEMINISM, SELFHOOD, AND EMILY DICKINSON

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the English Department

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Regina York

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FEMINISM, SELFHOOD, AND EMILY DICKINSON

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FEMINISM, SELFHOOD, AND EMILY DICKINSON

Why yet another paper on gender identity? From Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex in 1953 to Kate Millett's Sexual Politics in 1970 to Paula Bennett's Emily Dickinson : Woman Poet to be published early in 1991, gender identity has stoked the fires of feminist criticism. Few, if any, American feminist literary critics and critics of American feminist criticism managed to negotiate a course that avoided identity. Even so, much remains to be said, for feminist criticism has only recently passed from its reactionary beginnings and is now poised to become a proactive, fully-developed critical discipline. Only with a strongly defined sense of gender identity and a balanced look at principles of gender can feminist criticism hone a philosophical base and moral view in a manner that redefines natural law so that feminine values are accepted as human values appropriate for both sexes.

Questions relative to identity--Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe?--are the basic questions of all thinking people from before the beginning of recorded history, as our mythological heritage indicates, to the present, as scanning current philosophical, psychological, sociological, and theological writing attests; our literature testifies to this ongoing quest. From Socrates onward, our

heritage is one of relentless, critical self-examination. Concepts of self-identity, along with valid principles of thought and action, engage each new generation of scholars and thinkers. Feminist scholars are simply advancing a tradition inherent in the Western cultural experience.

The quest for identity has engaged philosophers from Socrates to Sartre; writers and poets from Sappho to Sartre, from Homer to Heller give voice to this perpetual search for meaning and value. But for the most of our recorded literary history, male voices define the human condition. Women's voices and their life experiences have been ignored, silenced, or viewed as illegitimate. In explaining and defending (yes, feminists still find it necessary to defend their position) her feminist perspective, theologian Carol Christ restates a basic plank from the feminist platform that reiterates the centrality of identity:

Women live in a world where women's stories rarely have been told from their own perspectives. The stories celebrated in culture are told by men. Thus men have actively shaped their experiences of self and world, and their most profound stories orient them to what they perceive as the great powers of the universe. But since women have not told their own stories, they have not actively shaped their experiences of self and world nor named the

great powers from their own perspectives. Of course women appear in the stories of men, but only in roles defined by men--usually mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, nurses, assistants, or whores.

Christ's simple, straightforward, and nonthreatening assertion functions as a fundamental tenet of feminist thought; but such a position, even today, encounters resistance, subtle perhaps, but resistance nevertheless. The stories of women's lives, in the words of the women who lived them, have barely begun to infiltrate the sacrosanct literary canon. The poets who write honestly of women's realities are actively and consistently creating a new standard, one that will rank equally with the literature we are familiar with today. But the task is closer to its inception than to its conclusion. Perhaps because of the widespread resistance to and lack of understanding of feminist thought, prominent feminist critics seem willing to concede that early dreams of a feminist ideological revolution must be abandoned in favor of a merger or reconciliation with traditional mainstream criticism.

The cover of Judith Spector's Gender Studies: New Directions in Feminist Criticism dramatically illustrates the current status of feminist criticism--on a stark white background bold arrows point up, down, right, and left; or north,

south, east, and west, depending upon your perspective. Or, it could be argued, feminist criticism has no clear direction. In spite of the illustrative cover, in Gender Studies Spector sadly concludes that feminist criticism must change its focus to proceed toward the twenty-first century as a legitimate critical discipline:

One of the most effective means of fostering the feminist critical approach is to include works by women within traditional curricula, where that is possible, certainly, but also to point out attitudes toward gender within traditional works of literature. That tactic brings us back to the original dialogue with the male-dominated tradition. This time around, though, the feminist critic can, in addition to critiquing an obviously masculine sexist perspective, also teach literature by women writers in a positive manner. We are not back where we started as mere detractors on the sidelines; we are in danger of remaining on the sidelines only if we insist on teaching and studying literature only by women. (4)

Spector cautions those who promote women's studies and feminist criticism as separate disciplines that "keeping women professionals occupied with 'women's literature' is one way of keeping them out of the establishment" (4) and also

that such marginal, isolated departments quite likely would be among the first to suffer in times of financial difficulties and budget cutbacks.

Spector wisely identifies two very real pitfalls that feminist critics can ill afford to ignore, but even with these serious issues, the time is not yet right for curriculum integration. Even though feminist critical theory dominates many literary conferences and scholarly journals, even though colleges and universities continue to establish women's studies programs to promote feminist criticism in all disciplines, feminist critical theory in literature continues to be an evolving academic discipline with fundamental weaknesses hindering its acceptance as a recognized, legitimate critical method. Far too many critics stand firm in their unwavering belief in the traditional standards of excellence that have shaped the curriculum and the current body of knowledge as representative of the best "man" has thought, created, and accomplished. Only when a female aesthetic standard is as strong and as deeply entrenched in our cultural heritage can feminist critics relax and peacefully co-exist with the traditionalists. Only when female experience is accorded the same recognition now given to the male experience can the curriculum be integrated.

After three decades of political activism, the feminist movement has slowed its pace and its rhetoric and has backed

off from its earlier militant stance. Feminist critical theory, like its parent, also has reached the stage in its development where a reevaluation of its methods, principles, and aims is called for. As the twentieth century ends, feminist critical theory is impaled on the horns of a dilemma. Feminist critics themselves disagree on the future of gender difference. One group considers gender irrelevant; the other celebrates a female culture. Despite this difference in opinion, women remain in agreement on their distrust of traditional critics. Cheri Register's case against what she called "Phallic Criticism" in 1976 continues to unite women today:

Feminist critics claim to have good cause for questioning scholarly objectivity and critical absolutism. Their dispute with established, reputedly non-ideological critics, most of whom are male, focuses on three allegations: (1) they fail to discuss female writers as writers, without regard for their sex; (2) they ignore many female writers altogether; and (3) they have a myopic tendency to make universal statements on the basis of male experience. (8)

Register's reasoning is not as circular as it seems. Feminist critics continue to address gender as a primary concern because the disparities Register mentions still

flourish. After thirty years, feminist criticism must continue to focus on gender identity because one generation is not nearly enough time to correct 2,500 years of male-defined history. The traditional view of female selfhood continues to be rooted in changeable social practices and materialistic outward trappings. This narrow view permeates our academic institutions as well as our popular culture. Part of this current intense attention to matters of identity can be viewed as a product of the time, as no critical theory can completely divorce itself from its time and place. The past two decades, the coming-of-age period for feminist criticism, have been devoted to the selfish needs and materialistic wants of the individual. As the decades of the individual give way to an era rooted in community, feminist critical theory, too, must, out of necessity, adopt a broader view; but a strong philosophical base has been put in place, and that underpinning must not be compromised.

Feminist criticism risks becoming a closed system dominated by a few well-recognized names who continually cite each other's work, perpetuating an endless circle of minor variations on the same issues. A critical school with such a blatant disregard for traditions and alternative interpretations will fail to flourish. For many feminist critics, any work which does not pass the feminist litmus test based on political assumptions regarding the social status of women is

automatically rejected as lacking in merit. Feminist criticism, left in the hands of fanatics, risks being as systematically single-minded as the systems it seeks to replace.

In spite of its shortcomings, feminist critical theory has revitalized and enhanced literary criticism. It is right and good to question fundamental assumptions about class, culture, and gender. Ethical stances must be subjected to constant scrutiny in light of new knowledge and new understanding. However, it serves no reasonable purpose to replace one biased view of the world with another one-sided system. As Josephine Donovan noted in the ground breaking work, Feminist Literary Criticism, "a feminine aesthetic will provide for the integration into the critical process of the experiences denoted as feminine in our culture" (79). As Donovan and other critics have pointed out, no critic can justifiably contend that the male experience alone fully defines what it means to be alive and human. Human experience must be defined in terms of both male and female experience. But this is where feminist critical theory, like traditional critical theory, breaks down. Rather than focus on both male and female experience or common human experiences, feminist critics, all too often, center their studies on masculinity and femininity -- changeable constructs delineated by culture.

How, you might wonder, does Emily Dickinson fit into this scheme? Why yet another paper on Emily Dickinson? The poetry of Emily Dickinson, with her strong identity as a female poet, exemplifies both the fundamental fallacies in and the philosophical justification for feminist critical theory. Dickinson is especially important because her life, but not her mind, was severely constricted and limited by the prevailing theological and philosophical ideologies of her time. Even so, Dickinson achieved wholeness in her life and work, albeit with great pain. Dickinson exhibited a full dimension of experience and authority of mind, body, and reason. Alicia Ostriker, who "places Dickinson among the great writers of the English language" (38) explains why Dickinson commands the attention of critics:

Dickinson's artistry exceeds others' because, although she may have feared much, she did not fear her own mind. She never retreats from an insight, never withdraws or retracts, but bears it out to the edge of doom, in language and rhythms formed to reflect precisely the swiftness, compactness, and drama of that single subject, her mind. (42)

Quite simply, Dickinson's accomplishments inspire excellence.

This paper will draw on the work of leading feminist critics and the works of Dickinson, her biographers, and her critics. No effort is being made to trace the history of

feminist criticism; that has been done numerous times by critic after critic. Nor does this paper attempt to provide a concordance to critical thought on Dickinson. That, too, is unnecessary. Rather, this paper looks at the relationship between self-identity in Dickinson's poetry and the fundamental need for such a pronounced sense of identity to serve as the cornerstone of feminist criticism. Dickinson's courage to be female and the implications of that courage on her world view are at the core of neofeminist or post-feminist criticism. Dickinson exhibited an independence of mind that broke out of the boxes of cultural constraints developing a strong sense of identity as a woman and as a poet. She expressed a strong moral view of the world solidly grounded in, but often critical of, the Christian tradition. With her strong sense of self, her overarching moral vision, and her disregard for the "oughts" and "shoulds" of her culture, Dickinson held her work to a high standard of significance. Feminist criticism is only now reaching such a standard of significance. As Dickinson achieved personal wholeness and creative integrity through the integration of (not the obliteration or repression of) opposing qualities, feminist criticism, too, must have that same courage to stand firm in the face of powerful opposition and defy social and political pressures to conform. Conforming to a mediocre, and consequently powerless but socially acceptable, integrated posi-

tion within mainstream criticism places feminist criticism once again on the sidelines waiting for the next popular trend to relegate it even further from the intellectual center.

Chapter 1: Dimensions of Possibility

Our own possessions-though our own-

'Tis will to hoard anew-

Remembering the Dimensions

Of Possibility.¹

#1208

For writers there are no "new truths." There is only one very old truth, as old as Sappho, as old as Homer, as old as the Song of Deborah, as old as the Songs of David--that the imagination is free, that the gift of making literature is accessible to every kind and condition of human being, that when we write we are not women or men but blessed beings in possession of a Promethean art, an art encumbered by peril and hope and fire and, above all, freedom. What we ought to do as writers, is not wait for freedom, meanwhile idling in self-analysis; the freedom one waits for, or builds strategies toward, will never come. What we ought to do, as writers, is seize freedom now, immediately, by recognizing that we already have it.

Cynthia Ozick

¹ All Quotations of Emily Dickinson's poetry are taken from The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson edited by Thomas H. Johnson.

All ideas require gestation periods. Sociologists know that each social push forward is accompanied by groups organized to hold back the hands of time. Anthropologists know that cultural changes span decades, even centuries. Biologists confirm that evolutionary changes occur gradually over time. Geologists know that in the process of metamorphosis a stage is reached when the rock is neither what it was nor what it will be. Psychologists note that resistance to change is a normal human reaction. Yet, in every field the point of critical mass is eventually reached, change inevitably occurs, a slow process of acceptance and further refinement follows, and eventually the existing body of knowledge incorporates the new idea or scientific principle. So it is with feminist criticism.

Feminist criticism has reached a crucial stage in its development, and not surprisingly, opinions vary widely as to its future direction. Along with "New York Intellectuals, Existential Critics, hermeneuticists, Reader-Response Critics, semioticians, deconstructors, Black Aestheticians, Marxist-Leninists, and Neo-Marxists," feminist critical theory falls into what Vincent B. Leitch refers to in a new work on American literary criticism as "leftist criticism" (407). Therefore, it should come as no surprise to any literary scholar with little more than a passing knowledge of contemporary socio-political issues that any theory closely

aligned with leftist concerns is, in 1991, out of favor as the social and political scale tips farther and farther to the right. As feminist criticism has, from its inception in the 60s, been a theory in the service of politics, it understandably has lost ground as a surge of conservative traditionalism has swept through our social, political, and academic institutions. With its emphasis on cultural criticism and gender identity and its so-called radical intellectual position, feminist critical theory faces the distinct possibility of remaining a reactionary critical method for a small group of adherents whose influence does not extend far beyond the walls of their respective universities.

Just as the modern feminist movement has failed to convince the majority of modern American women of a need for radical societal change, feminist literary criticism, likewise, has failed to coalesce into a viable, unified critical method with an influential following, remaining instead an adjunct theory outside the mainstream. The problem is not that the feminist movement failed; on the contrary, it succeeded admirably in addressing women's issues, making American life more equitable for men as well as women. Feminist criticism arose out of a sociological context with strong political overtones as chronicled in the publication of Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, Kate Millet's Sexual Politics, and Germaine Greer's The Female Eunuch.

Following the surge of feminism in the 60s, feminist scholars, teachers, and students examined the "images of woman" as put forth by mostly male writers and critics. The 70s saw a search for and promotion of works by female writers and poets, often with little regard for the work's literary merit. The last decade saw an attempt to redefine the canon of literature to include those "found" geniuses of the 70's. Yet, this rise in popularity and the number of works on feminist criticism or women's issues published is not indicative of excellence in scholarship but a lowering of standards in general.

In a sense, contemporary feminism has completely reversed itself, and feminist literary critics go along as just another cog in the wheel. Initially, the modern feminist movement rejected the "anatomy is destiny" arguments and attempted to break down the barriers that segregated women because of their unique female nature. In Cynthia Ozick's words, "classical feminism...saw itself as justice and aspiration made universal, as mankind widened to humankind..." (80). But after years of demanding equality, some women are once again setting themselves apart; Ozick says that "more and more, apartness is perceived as the dominant aim, even the chief quality, of feminism" (80). Feminist literary critics follow the same line of thought as they insist on isolating and separating women's issues and concerns. Such

separatism and isolation rests on a precarious set of dangerous assumptions--assumptions which reinforce the outdated notions that "intellect and imagination" divide neatly along gender lines (Ozick 80). Ozick, a writer and critic whose work exerts international influence, has been virtually ignored by the most recent crop of feminist critics because she boldly criticizes when criticism is rightfully due:

Now we are enduring a feminism so far advanced into "new truths" that it has arrived at last at a set of notions indistinguishable from the most age-encrusted, unenlightened, and imprisoning antifeminist views. (81)

On both sides of the Atlantic, feminist critics simply follow trendy political and sociological research trends, ignoring the wisdom of voices like Ozick's: "Outside its political uses, 'woman writer' has no meaning--not intellectually, not morally, not historically. A writer is a writer" (56).

Feminist critical theory has failed to break out of the narrow category of fringe movements and rise above its second rate classification because its most respected and most prolific advocates have only recently advanced a moral, philosophical view of the world that builds on rather than tears down the Western cultural tradition. This is not, by any means, to suggest that feminist critics should blindly accept all that has been handed down. Much of our Western cultural

heritage, most assuredly, contains blatantly misogynistic traditions, and many of our greatest thinkers and writers have considered man, the male of the species, the sum of all that is good. Nevertheless, this heritage cannot be denied; the past cannot be changed. As noted historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. explained when he called Ethnic Studies Un-American:

...we inherit an American experience, as America inherits a European experience. To deny the essential European origins of American culture is to falsify history....Let us by all means teach women's history, black history, Hispanic history. But let us teach them as history, not as a means of promoting group self-esteem....If we repudiate the quite marvelous inheritance that history has bestowed on us, we invite the fragmentation of our own culture into a quarrelsome spatter of enclaves, ghettos, and tribes. The bonds of cohesion in our society are sufficiently fragile...that it makes no sense to strain them by encouraging and exalting cultural and linguistic apartheid.

A "spatter of enclaves" aptly defines the current state of feminist criticism. The primary division is between French and American critics, but within the American camp major factions vie for legitimacy and recognition. Here is how

Betsy Draine assesses the situation:

The biblical story of the "wisdom of Solomon" bears reading as a parable of the recent state of feminist literary theory. 1 Kings 3:16-22 tells the tale of two harlots who bore sons while dwelling in the same house. One of the infants died in the night, and as the tale begins, both mothers stand before King Solomon, each claiming that the live child belongs to her. The disputed baby may be seen as symbolizing the future of feminist theory. The dead one can stand for whatever in past feminist theory may be judged lifeless and useless.... various feminist theorists, still somewhat marginal to literary theory, contend before the bar of the academic profession for the unofficial title of 'mother of the new feminism'...."

(144)

While such recognition will acknowledge the seriousness and the validity of feminist theory, it still will keep women scholars in the margin and on the outside. Draine calls for conscientious scholars "to cut through partisan antagonisms to critical issues that can be debated, clarified, and negotiated on their merits" (148). The past can and should be reconsidered with a view toward the future, what Adrienne Rich refers to as "Re-vision--the act of looking back, of

seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction..." ("Dead Awaken" 18). This "re-visioning" can be accomplished without the "fragmentation of our culture." Schlesinger is certainly right to maintain that in recent years our academic institutions have taught "literature not as an intellectual challenge but as psychological therapy." And few self-respecting feminist teachers, writers, or critics can deny that assaults on the established canon have, far too often, been little more than cathartic, therapeutic attempts to bolster "group self-esteem."

Any new idea, however well-intentioned, which operates without regard for the past faces certain doom. While this idea may not be amenable to feminist thought, it remains a fact--the American political, economic, social and academic systems discourage rapid, radical change.

Astute feminist critics know that their discipline has survived the throes of development. From a violent birth to a rebellious adolescence to a frequently-erring young adulthood, feminist criticism now stands ready for the final rite of passage--the entry into the mature wisdom of adulthood. As we near the start of a new century, a new generation of feminist critics stands ready to extinguish the myth of women so that real women, women with intellectual dignity, can assert themselves with the same freedom previously available

almost exclusively for males and a few exceptional women.

The traditional view that good criticism, like good literature, is sexless has failed to convincingly acknowledge that prior to the 60s, both literature and criticism were indisputably male-oriented. That good literature and good criticism rise above gender-specific issues is a self-indulgent fiction; when only one version of reality claims to speak for all humankind, that version of reality is inherently limited and distorted. Certainly much female experience parallels that of the male. Much, though, is uniquely female. That half of the human experience has never been given a full representation in our literary history. Despite the occasional presence of an influential woman such as Dickinson, "American literature is male:"

To read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is perforce to identify as male. It insists on universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms. (Fetterley xii)

Feminist critics deserve credit for asking the embarrassing and uncomfortable questions about the literary canon and the relation of gender. Likewise, mainstream critics deserve credit for urging caution, for pointing out the weaknesses in new critical methods, and for reining in the fanatics. Consequently, constructing a new method with feminine prin-

principles alone in no way remedies the situation. To move forward as a separate field of study or to significantly influence other critical methods, which is infinitely more practical, feminist criticism must, as Josephine Donovan has pointed out, integrate male and female aesthetics. Ultimately, Donovan's ideal probably will prevail, but now the scale remains skewed toward the masculine because, for generations, "women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values" (Fetterley xx). One of the major obstacles to overcome in bringing this much-needed balance to the field of literature, one that continues to generate heated controversy across the academic disciplines as well as outside the university, is that of gender identity. Only when feminist critics take a balanced, reasonable look at identity and its role in the creative process and tolerate a fair amount of diversity and conflict, as did Emily Dickinson, can feminist literary critics expect to exert significant influence both inside and outside the English Departments of their institutions. By the same token, the same level of integrity is required of males as readers, teachers, scholars, critics, writers, and poets.

Gender identity was and is one of the key issues to which feminist critics address their talent and energy because gender is of primary significance in any social or

cultural analysis. From the earliest feminist writing to the most recent, the issue of identity as a woman has been a focal point for women writing about women. This ongoing process of individuation should come as no surprise; it comes as the result of centuries of measuring self-hood against white, upper-class male standards. But, that "socially, politically, and economically powerful subgroup of the human race" is not now nor has it ever been "the generic type for the normal human condition" with all other people "important only as obstacles, aids, or rewards" (Pearson and Pope 4) to the heroic male. Women throughout our recorded history intuitively know that the male representations of identity perpetuated in our cultural, religious, and literary heritage deny the existence of an independent, autonomous female identity. Traditional criticism "perpetuates the ideology that all people are male" (Ostriker 53). This does not mean, of course, that the masculine perspective should be ignored. Quite the contrary, as most reasonable feminist critics agree; focusing on experiences from a male point of view is also legitimate, but the fact needs to be made clear that the view is male and not a claim of universality.

Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, who document heroism in the lives of women in The Female Hero in American and British Literature, point with exquisite precision to the reason why women, historically, fail to "develop their in-

dividual identities":

In general, female independent selfhood was and still is defined by the traditional patriarchy as theologically evil, biologically psychologically unhealthy, and socially in bad taste. Literature, therefore, tends to portray the woman who demonstrates initiative, strength, wisdom, and independent action--the ingredients of the heroic life--not as a hero but as a villain. (6)

Yes, by all means, notable exceptions can be found in each century, but, by and large, Pearson and Pope's claim holds true, extending to women writers as well as women subjects. Pearson and Pope argue a strong case, but the inherent worth of their argument is unquestionably weakened by their accusing, strident tone and their choice of words such as "traditional patriarchy."

Dickinson is only one of a long line of women who exhibited strength, courage, intelligence from the viewpoint of a woman only to be considered "an exception, a deviant, and doomed to destruction" (Pearson and Pope 7). Such a view of female identity is a powerful destructive force in the lives of women, men, and the families they create; just as importantly, it denies "the repeated instances of bravery, strength, and wisdom by women in their roles as wives, mothers, protectors, and breadwinners" (6).

But why, after three decades of the women's revolution, do the same questions continue to surface: Why is female identity considered as "other" while male identity is considered "self?" Why do women so willingly sacrifice self as they so willingly accept the constraints and limitations of their culture? Why does self image continue to loom as a major issue in the lives of women? How do women as writers project their self identity in their work? Regardless of what we, both women and men, say, we still regard the male perspective as the norm, which means, of course, that we still must continue to justify all deviations from that norm. Until our institutions fully accept and incorporate the feminine (not necessarily feminist) ethic to complement the male ethic, these questions remain crucial to an understanding of female identity and the necessity of its affirmation.

"Humanity is male," wrote Simone de Beauvoir in 1949, "and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being ... He is the Subject, he is the Absolute--she is the Other" (89). Sadly enough, the changes in this attitude have been minuscule, despite solid economic, social, and political gains for many of the world's women. Feminist theory currently functions as the intellectual system that inculcates into all our institutions the still radical idea that the feminine is a crucial element of the human. Feminism is unique in that it inte-

grates theory into practice and merges thought with action. As such, feminism possesses a dynamic, life-changing potential. That process, though, has proven to be frustratingly slow as Kate Millett notes in the introduction to the new edition of Sexual Politics:

And the history of the emancipation of women is--like other stories that describe the long, difficult winding down of oppressive systems--circular; a little forward, almost as much backward, then standstill, reaction, repression, then another surge. (1)

Contemporary feminism has lost, in its effort to become more socially acceptable, the raw, explosive energy and the bold defiance that marked its early years. Feminist literary critics such as Judith Spector would have feminist criticism undergo the same weathering process to smooth the rough edges and sharp corners, to supplant the blind rage with tolerant plurality within the mainstream. Blind rage, such as that of early feminist critics, certainly serves no constructive purpose. But, a degree of rage is necessary to withstand the onslaught of numbing indifference. Feminist theologian Mary Daly calls rage "a convertible energy form" (370) to be cultivated:

Rage is not a stage. It is not something to be gotten over. It is transformative, focusing Force.

Like a horse who streaks across fields on a moonlit night, her mane flying, Rage gallops on pounding hooves of unleashed Passion. Rage...makes senses come alive again, thrive again. (371)

Controlled rage directed toward the institutions which enforce and promote unnatural, unreasonable gender differences breaks through the mind-numbing effects of a popular culture that enslaves both males and females. True identity can then develop unfettered by oppressive conditions.

The "me" decade of the 70s and the materialistic, self-centered acquisitiveness of the 80s have given self-identity a bad name. Make no mistake about it--this paper does not address those frivolous, trivial personal identity issues that fill the pages of pop psychology how-to books cranked out by the thousands by the social scientists eager to exploit the public's gullibility and desire for easy, absolute answers to its every shortcoming. This paper concerns the self and its subsequent affirmation as the fundamental unit of philosophical discourse. In The Courage to Be, Paul Tillich offers a basic, workable definition of self-identity which often serves as the starting point for discussions on identity for both male and female critics:

The courage to be is the ethical act in which man [sic] affirms his own being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his es-

stantial self-affirmation. (3)

Tillich further refines this definition by adding that "the courage to be is the courage to affirm one's own reasonable nature over what is accidental in us" (13). The portrayal of women in literature and the critical treatment of them has, for the better part of two thousand years, celebrated and held up for emulation what is unnatural or accidental in these women's lives and denied their true "reasonable nature." Many critics would protest vociferously, but feminist critics are restoring the natural law subverted by centuries of misguided "truths." Tillich addresses internal forces; however, his reasoning clearly applies to "accidental" external forces such as culture as well. The combination of external and internal forces which demands self-denial explains why identity eludes so many non-white, non-male persons living in a white male dominated world. Consequently, those who must constantly engage in a struggle to overcome both internal and external constraints on selfhood are denied the true rewards of self-affirmation:

The affirmation of one's essential being in spite of desires and anxieties creates joy....Joy is the emotional expression of the courageous Yes to one's own true being. (14)

Emily Dickinson knew that joy of which Tillich spoke:

In many and reportless places

We feel a Joy--
 Reportless, also, but sincere as Nature
 Or Deity--

It comes, without a consternation--
 Dissolves--the same--
 But leaves a sumptuous Destitution--
 Without a Name--

Profane it by a search--we cannot
 It has no home--
 Nor we who having once inhaled it--
 Thereafter roam.

#1382

Is it any wonder that female writers and critics write of rage? Can there be any doubt that that rage is fully justified? Women have long known and written of the despair that results when the natural process of self-affirmation is denied them. Theirs is not a petty, selfish wish for personal fulfillment but an elemental yearning common to all people. Tillich says the full expression of the self precedes all other acts:

...self-affirmation is the essential nature of every being and as such its highest good. Perfect self-affirmation is not an isolated act which

originates in the individual being but is participation in the universal or divine act of self-affirmation, which is the originating power in every individual act. (23)

"Participation in the universal" represents a critical component of true identity. In this sense, identity encompasses far more than the concept of individual identity so common throughout much of the twentieth century. The individual search for meaning and identity has been a major concern in this century as writers and poets chronicle the processes aimed at cutting through societal influences to find authenticity. But, as Wayne Booth has noted, that rather fruitless inward search of selfish individuals has only deepened the void:

In that search one tends to peel off the inauthentic, insincere, alien influences that might deflect the self from its unique, individual destiny. For many decades the last heirs of romantic individualism have been peeling off elements assumed to be the not-self: first the church, then the family, then political and economic forces....Sooner or later one hopes to locate and remove all alien stuff and discover bedrock--but what one discovers is emptiness....(237)

The search itself becomes meaningless if affirmation of the

individual self operates without regard for concerns beyond the self. Selfish considerations aimed at the poet's personal gain or the critic's political gain have no moral significance. The true artist has the courage to confront chaos, to look straight in the eye of the void. Dickinson did just that. In doing so, she overcame "what was accidental" in her, achieving full "participation in the universal."

Erik Erikson, a psychotherapist who studied the teachings of Freud and developed new theories based on Freud's work, augments Tillich's definition of personal identity. Erikson approaches identity as the culmination of conflict resolution in the life cycle, resulting in, assuming the conflicts are resolved, a "healthy personality:"

[To achieve identity] the vital personality weathers conflicts, inner and outer, re-emerging from each crisis with an increased sense of inner unity, with an increase of good judgment, and an increase in the capacity to do well according to his [sic] own standards and to the standards of those significant to his. ...a healthy personality actively masters his environment, shows a certain unity of personality, and is able to perceive the world and himself correctly. (91)

Would that these lofty, high-minded definitions had been applied to all of humanity and not just a select few. When

the natural processes of identity formation and the inherent need for self-affirmation are blocked, the result, of course, is the condition in which women have found and continue, even in the last decade of the twentieth century, to find themselves. But this is no reason for despair: " Our own possessions--though our own-- / 'Tis well to hoard anew-- / Remembering the Dimensions / Of Possibility" (#1208). Whatever women own as their past expands the "Dimensions of Possibility."

Gender was, is, and most likely will continue to be the primary distinction in human societal groups. Gender, more than any other factor, determines role and function. The qualities associated with masculine and feminine, however, are not natural laws even though they have been assigned that status in numerous cultures. Such notions--that women cannot exhibit courage and valor, that men cannot nurture children, that women lack intellectual ability, or that all men crave power and control (just as a few examples)--limit the "dimensions of possibility" for both men and women and focus undue energy on secondary issues. Those traits so often associated with the female gender do not represent innate differences between the sexes. They are, as British historian Alexandra Owen has explained, cultural notions that have, over time, come to be regarded as inherent, endemic female qualities (4). Our literature shows us repeatedly that the most

oppressive conditions cannot subdue the human spirit and will, which have no gender. The real artist taps into that deep well; she operates with cultural restraints, but she enjoys freedom as she captures the magnitude of unfettered human possibility. Dickinson, who operated in the realms of possibility, knew the source of her creative genius:

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

No culture yet has produced people free of associations based on gender--male and female principles. While there are qualities which are valued in both genders, culturally ascribed male qualities and female qualities delineate and pro-

scribe most human endeavors. It is a biological fact, not a state of cultural conditioning, that only the female of the species can carry, give birth to, and nurse a child. Conversely, only the male can impregnate a female. These however, are the only activities strictly limited to one sex. To read much of the feminist propoganda of the past thirty years, though, would lead one to believe that the male is no longer necessary for the continuation of life. While debate among the experts continues on the extent to which biology and culture determine role and function, both male and female critics and writers outside the feminist fold continue to define female selfhood as secondary, always relative to the male.

But to superimpose a feminine aesthetic or feminine principle over the dominant male pattern is as woefully inadequate as the traditional assumption that male is synonomous with humankind. We have yet to construct ideologies which fully incorporate female existence. Visionary poets such as Dickinson--whose poetry had its genesis in her everyday life, offered a world view arising from experiences unique to a woman, and was written using a woman's language--fared extremely poorly prior to the re-emergence of feminist thought. Male critics and male-trained female critics complained that women pursued the small, the personal, and the domestic while avoiding the public, the political, and the

intellectual aspects of life. In many cases, the criticism is justified. Faced with social, moral, political, personal, educational, religious, and economic constraints from birth to death, most women, needless to say, failed to develop a sense of themselves as an autonomous, independent whole person. Transitory roles determined their identity. Those exceptional women who transcended cultural conditioning to assert their identity as women faced censure, rejection, and derogatory labeling. Emily Dickinson serves as only one example. It took over one hundred years for her genius to be appreciated, but she still is regarded as an eccentric recluse. Even now, her personal life is of greater interest to many readers and critics than her work. The critical assessment of Dickinson and other women writers, poets, and artists, all too often, centers on personal life: whether she had a sex life, what sort of sex life it was, whether she was married, why she did not marry, whether she was a good wife and mother.

Chapter 2: Infinities of Nought, Many Leagues of Nowhere

Classical feminism, while not denying the body, while not precluding self-image and self-knowledge, never dreamed of engaging these as single-minded objectives. Feminism means, has always meant, access to possibilities beyond self-consciousness. Art, freed of restrictions, grows in any space, even the most confined. But polemical self-knowledge is only partial discovery. Each human being is a particle of a generation, a mote among the revealing permutations of Society. Self-consciousness (narcissism, solipsism) is small nourishment for a writer. Literature is hungrier than that: a writer with an ambitious imagination needs an appetite beyond the self.

Cynthia Ozick

Each Life Converges to some Centre-
Expressed-or still-
Exists in every Human Nature
A Goal

.....

(#680 1-4)

Most of the preeminent feminist critics have acknowledged the importance of self identity to women writers. In her often-quoted text, The Resisting Reader, Judith Fetterley, citing Emily Dickinson as a prime example, says that women experience consciousness as a sense of loss: "Forced in every way to identify with men, yet incessantly reminded of being a woman, she undergoes a transformation into an 'it,' the dominion of personhood lost indeed" (1x). Dickinson's words can indeed support such a conclusion:

A loss of something ever felt I--
 The first that I could recollect
 Bereft I was--of what I knew not
 Too young that any should suspect

A Mourner walked among the children
 I notwithstanding went about
 As one bemoaning a Dominion
 Itself the only Prince cast out--

Elder, Today, a session wiser
 And fainter, too, as Wiseness is--
 I find myself still softly searching
 For my Delinquent Palaces--

...

(#959 1-12)

That is, of course, one reading of the poem, but there is another. This poem need not be viewed as a funereal dirge since this loss of childhood innocence (and the loss here is childhood loss) occurs as a normal event in the maturation process. One of the "careers" open to Victorian-era women was perpetual childhood, and Dickinson stubbornly clung to childhood long after her peers accepted their adult status. She did not, however, attempt to stifle her intellectual development; instead, she welcomed the increasing complexity of her mental ability:

...

I find my feet have further Goals-

I smile upon the Aims

That felt so ample-Yesterday-

Today's-have vaster claims-

I do not doubt the self I was

Was competent to me-

But something awkward in the fit-

Proves that-outgrown-I see-

(#563 5-12)

Seeing, thinking, and knowing as an adult places heavy demands on the soul, as Dickinson well knew; she was, however, willing to pay the price to attain knowledge and wisdom. This poem brings to mind Paul's words to the Corinthians,

which Dickinson would also have known well: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (II Cor. 13:11). Nor is it unusual for an adult to sometimes look back at childhood with regret and longing. Since Dickinson rejected so much of what was considered normal for a woman in her time, inevitably she would eventually experience a sense of loss. Actually, she willfully rejected the conventions of nineteenth century womanhood so as to preserve what she valued most--her sense of self. Furthermore, nothing in her work suggests that she mourns the loss of a bit of flesh as the Freudian critics insist.

That she be "cast out" was her own choice, a decision consciously made so that she could pursue her vocation as a poet. Calling Dickinson a "genius" and "a practical woman exercising her gift as she had to," Adrienne Rich argues strongly against seeing the poet as a victim:

I have a notion that genius knows itself; that Dickinson chose her seclusion, knowing she was exceptional and knowing what she needed. It was, moreover, no hermetic retreat, but a seclusion which included a wide range of people, of reading and correspondence. But she carefully selected her society and controlled the disposal of her time. Given her vocation, she was neither eccentric nor

quaint; she was determined to survive, to use her powers, to practice necessary economies. (Vesuvius 102)

Dickinson's trademark "searching" overshadows the sense of loss, confinement and isolation when viewed in context with her desire to know exactly what will endure: "Best gains--must have the Losses' Test-- / To constitute them--Gains--" (#684 1-2). Even Sewall, her most traditional and conservative biographer, saw her "withdrawal into her father's house not a retreat from life" but as an "adventure into life, a penetration of life she elected to discover and explore" (155). Her isolation and confinement, which were nowhere near as total as many critics make it out to be, gave her the freedom she needed:

...

And then-the size of this "small" life-
The Sages-call it small-
Swelled-like Horizons-in my vest-
And I sneered-softly-"small"!

(#271 13-16)

In Women Writers and Poetic Identity Margaret Homans contends that "women writers cannot see their minds as androgynous, or as sexless," (3) because the "literary tradition" in which they live and write identifies human qualities as male. Consequently, women writers "must take part in a

self-definition by contraries." (3). Homans is half right. Why must a poet strive for a "sexless" or "androgynous" mind; why should any poet attempt to "break out of the terms of gender altogether" (209) as Homans says of Dickinson? By failing to search for new ideas, Homans reports what has been. The real truth here is the myth of universality. Theoretically, great literature transcends gender; it speaks for all people for all time. Nonsense! First of all, such an idealistic notion is probably impossible. Secondly, great literature speaks for and interprets the truth as seen by the poets relative to their culture and their time and their sex. As Bennett notes, "People, not angels, create art, though we long to attribute art to angels. And people, whether male or female, can write only what their lives enable them to say" (10). Bennett and Alicia Ostriker use such reasoning to argue for the existence of "women's poetry" with a long tradition of its own. Ostriker represents the views of other feminist critics in her attack on universality:

The belief that true poetry is genderless--which is a disguised form of believing that true poetry is masculine--means that we have not learned to see women poets generically, to recognize the tradition they belong to, or to discuss either the limitations or the strengths of that tradition. For writers necessarily articulate gendered experience just

as they necessarily articulate the spirit of a nationality, an age, a language. (9)

As a poet Dickinson shattered the myths by presenting herself as an authoratative, powerful figure. Criticism is just now catching up. Feminist critics such as Bennett and Ostriker do not intend to dismantle or splinter the accepted canon; their aim is to open literature to new possibilities because "the critical insistence that poetry should be universal often presupposes a far too narrow notion of what is universal" (Ostriker 13). That literature represents universal truth is a fiction, a pretense; it always contains personal subjectivity. What for centuries has been regarded as universal truth is one view of reality, and that one very important fact justifies the existence of feminist criticism whose purpose it is "to give voice to a different reality and different vision, to bring a different subjectivity to bear on the old universality" (Fetterley xi).

In the massive work, The Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify the female urge to redefine the self in the nineteenth century as a response to the male-defined and "male dominated society" (xi) that made them "prisoners of their own gender" (85). These two influential critics who grace the most prestigious "women's conferences" expand the categorization of male qualities and female qualities set forth by Mary Ellmann in Thinking About Women

in 1968. Gilbert and Gubar attempt a Herculean task: to "dissect" and then "murder" the imprisoning images of woman so prevalent in our literature and then to reconstruct a truer image based on the way actual women writers and poets saw themselves; in other words, to extend the range of female experience beyond the virgin/whore, angel/monster dichotomies. Their statement of the fundamental problem facing the female artist echoes a refrain through subsequent feminist criticism which has followed the publication of their work: "For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion. The creative 'I Am' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is" (17).

Fortunately, Dickinson recognized the diverse elements of her being. Consequently, Gilbert's and Gubar's theory breaks apart when they read Dickinson as a fragmented, self-seeking, powerless woman. Drawing on the poet's extensive catalog of possibilities for herself as a woman, they claim that "Emily Dickinson herself became a madwoman--became...both ironically a madwoman (a deliberate impersonation of a madwoman) and truly a madwoman (a helpless agoraphobic, trapped in her father's house)" (583). Apparently, Gilbert and Gubar who, like John Cody, see diversity as psychosis, lack "the discerning eye" to see that "much madness is divinest sense." Such readings defy common sense,

but they are quite common as Bennett explains:

Many critics have, understandably, seen in the emotional diversity and contradictions of Dickinson's poetry evidence of psychic fragmentation. But the various psychological states which Dickinson describes in her poetry are all ones that, in one way or another, most people experience in their lives. It is not her experience of them but the precision and vividness with which she records them that sets Dickinson apart. (148)

Unlike so many women of her century, Dickinson refused to write only of cloying, romantic love and the joys of domesticity. She freely expressed the dark, hidden side of her soul. As Bennett argues, her willingness to face the inner and outer demons kept her from insanity: "Her energy was not bound up in repression. She knew clearly who and what she was....Dickinson's sense of self was utterly firm" (148).

Poem #1142 best illustrates her self-sufficiency:

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 a perfected Life--
 A past of Plank and Nail
 And slowness--then the Scaffolds drop
 Affirming it a Soul.

In Literary Women, Ellen Moers states "that 'the self' is one of the great themes in all literature, by men and women both," but she contradicts that idea by saying that "nothing separates female experience from male experience more sharply, and more early in life, than the compulsion to visualize the self" (244). Moers and her Literary Women both have reached virtual reverential status in the feminist camp, but in all fairness, the current crop of critics needs to recognize the fallacies in her claims. Moers mistakenly associates "self-disgust, self-hatred, and the impetus to self-destruction" (107) with the female, and she errs even further by using Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti to illustrate her point. Identity formation, in all its complexity, is a human characteristic, not one peculiar to only the female sex, and matters of identity thoroughly inform the existing canon.

Once again, it is Paula Bennett who sees the crucial difference between the male and the female tradition:

Lacking the male poet's long-established tradition of self-exploration and self-validation, women

poets in our culture have been torn between restrictive definitions of what a woman is and their own fears of being or seeming unwomanly. As a result, they have been unable to allow the full truth of their experience to empower their speaking voice. (4)

Again, here is one more reason that Dickinson and her self-concept remain crucial to the development of a feminist aesthetic--Dickinson used the "full truth" of her "experience to empower" her "speaking voice." Paradoxically, by expressing the full truth, Dickinson and her poetry often violate and contradict the political aims of feminist criticism. The "Empress of Calvary" is, quite often, "caught Without her Diadem." Poetry accounts for the totality of experience, and in Dickinson's case, the full range of her mental experience covers tremendous ground. When the poet said "The mind is meant for mighty freight" she meant it sincerely. Dickinson spoke fiercely and fearlessly on her condition and status, and never was she hindered by fears of seeming unwomanly. She is aggressive and assertive; her vocation demands that she be.

Pearson and Pope expand and further explain Bennett's "restrictive definitions," calling them "societal myths" which hinder the development of self-identity in women. These societal myths--"the myth of sex differences, the myth

of virginity, the myth of romantic love, and the myth of maternal self-sacrifice"--cripple and destroy women leaving them capable only as "a secondary, supporting character in a man's story who is unworthy and unable to do anything other than self-destruct for the sake of others" (18). Those myths precisely define the early critical view of Dickinson--the fragile spinster, the quasi-nun, the rejected lover secluded in her father's house. Dickinson does escape the "myth of maternal self-sacrifice" only to be consigned to a life of perpetual childhood.

The critical work of Homans, Moers, Fetterley, Gilbert, and Gubar--recognized leaders in American feminist criticism--forms the backbone of the feminist canon, and newer critics build their cases on the ideas laid down by these women. Certainly, some validity can be found in these claims; each critic added to the useful knowledge concerning the poet. They failed, however, to meet Rich's challenge to "re-vision the past." They simply do not go far enough, perhaps because they know their claims will collapse if their arguments are carried to their logical conclusions. Their theories do not hold up under careful scrutiny. For example, Fetterley contends that women such as Dickinson define themselves in terms of what they do not have. Ironically, just as Ozick noted, such a position reverses early feminist claims that Freud's similar assumptions about psychosexual

development were a key component in the "patriarchial" domination of women.

As late as 1979 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar recognized the embryonic state of feminist criticism. In their introduction to Shakespeare's Sisters, Gilbert and Gubar insist:

most criticism of poetry by women has failed to transcend the misogyny...just as it has failed to explore in any but the most superficial ways the crucial relationship between sexual identity and art....That the themes, structures, and images of their art may have been at least in part necessitated either by the special constrictions of the sexual role or by their uncertain relationship to an overwhelmingly masculinist [sic] literary tradition is a matter that feminist critics have just begun to explore. (xxiii)

In the intervening eleven years that relationship still perplexes critics as they continue to sift through social and cultural issues of dubious value to literary criticism. As Gilbert and Gubar implied in 1979, only after that preliminary groundwork has been laid can "true feminist criticism" (xxvi) develop. Now is the time. In another ironic turn, just as feminist criticism emerges from its developmental years some critics are eager to merge with main-

stream criticism. For instance, in Women Reading Women's Writing, a recent collection of critical essays, as the title implies, by women about women's writing, the editor Sue Roe begins her introduction with a disclaimer: "Women Reading Women's Writing is not a book about feminism, nor does it offer feminist theories of reading" (1). Roe admits to having a "discreet dissatisfaction with the whole notion of feminist theory" (2). She wisely sees that feminist criticism cannot be packaged and marketed as one unified theory with all its advocates falling in step to support an agreed-upon agenda, for "feminist criticism is not...a system, a methodology, but widely diverse positions, socially, politically, and in terms of aesthetic judgment" (3).

Contrast this conciliatory view with that of early feminist critics such as Dorin Schumacher who urged women to reject Western cultural traditions, or Lillian Robinson who called for revolutionary criticism. That early raving brings to mind Wayne Booth's astute observation that "every critical revolution tends to speak more clearly about what it opposes than what it embraces" and that "revolutionaries depend on their oppressors far more than they know" (386).

In spite of this incendiary rhetoric, these and other like-minded, bold critics formulated a few worthwhile principles that continue to engage the minds of female critics. As Ellen Messer-Davidow summarizes, "when we adopt tradi-

tional perspectives, the consequences to us are the marginalization, negation, objectification, and alienation of our female selves in the service of a critical self" (75). Messer-Davidow's claims are well documented and supported with compelling evidence, but she fails to mention that the critic faces consequences of equal weight if all tradition is abandoned as Robinson and Schumacher advocated. Much of the criticism they would dismantle contains sound reasoning; for example, Tate said:

[when] the intellectual and religious background of an age no longer contains the whole spirit, the poet proceeds to examine that background in terms of immediate experience. But the background is necessary; otherwise all the arts (not only poetry) would have to rise in a vacuum. Poetry does not dispense with tradition; it probes the deficiencies of a tradition. But it must have a tradition to probe. (89)

Poetry is neither ahistorical nor is it acultural; rather it contains the history of a people as they have lived their lives and thought beyond the immediate concerns of day-to-day living. As early women poets and contemporary poet and writer Cynthia Ozick insist, with the written word the human mind has the power to claim freedom, regardless of what limits tradition places on lives.

However, it is time to move beyond this passive, negative, reactionary blame-placing engaged in by so many contemporary feminist critics; further documentation of the obvious benefits the critics opposed to a feminine ethic. Thus far, most feminist criticism resembles random blasts fired from poorly-placed shotguns when the situation calls for a single shot from a strategically placed rifle in the hands of an expert. Paula Bennett is one new critic who hits the target. Bennett does not shy away from the truth even when being honest will cost her the support of many of her feminist colleagues:

The woman writer's principal antagonists are not the strong male or female who may have preceded her within the tradition, but the inhibiting voices that live within herself. (10)

Dickinson faced the same dilemma in her relationships with women who possessed "dimity convictions." She recognized early in life that her individual destiny veered sharply from the path these "gentlewomen" trod. Granted, admitting the power of those inner voices is a bitter pill to swallow, but swallow it we must to make a meaningful and enduring contribution to literary scholarship. Reactionary diatribes explode with a bright flash only to fade rapidly to oblivion.

Chapter 3: Bind me- I still can sing-

Bind me-I still can sing-

Banish-my mandolin

Strikes true within-

Slay-and my Soul shall rise

Chanting to Paradise-

Still thine.

#1005

A close look at the work of Emily Dickinson-- a poet who developed a strong sense of self-identity, built confidence in her ability as a poet, felt secure in her identity as a female, and appreciated the power of her intellect-- shows just how difficult it is for a woman to develop herself as an intellectual power to be reckoned with. As early as 1860 Dickinson said, "My business is to find!" Two years later her introspection grows more precise:

I felt my life with both my hands
 To see if it was there--
 I held my spirit to the Glass,
 To prove it possibler--
 I turned my Being round and round
 And paused at every pound
 To ask the Owner's name--
 For doubt, that I should know the Sound--

.... (#351 1-8)

Throughout her writing life she turned her "Being round and round." Early letters, especially those to female friends, also indicate her intense curiosity concerning her innermost being. That search for the ultimate answer to the reason for her being reaches its climax in what is perhaps Dickinson's most perplexing poem: "My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun-- / In Corners--till a Day The Owner

passed--identified-- / And carried Me away--" (#754 1-4). She did, indeed, "know the Sound." Here the self, the artistic, creative self is pure dynamic force. While the poem is frequently anthologized for its phallic imagery, it is also notable for its forceful imagery not often associated with the female. In this poem, the female is to be hunted and killed. Once the self is realized and named, once the speaker has been empowered as an "I," she becomes "fully identified with the life of pure destructive power; she is what she does, and the mountains echo back their correspondent rifle-crack" (McNeil 176). The "I" of the poem is all inclusive: male, female, object. This poem is also central to Rich's analysis of Dickinson and gender; Rich says that Dickinson goes "so far beyond the ideology of the feminine and the conventions of womanly feeling" that she cannot be categorized by "anything so simple as masculine and feminine identity" (Vesuvius 112).

Reaching this point, though, required unrelenting self-examination to get beyond the facade of nineteenth century femininity: "Ourself behind ourself, concealed-- / Should startle most-- / Assassin hid in our Apartment / Be Horror's least" (#670 13-16). That "concealed self," that powerful, dangerous, autonomous self, she knew was not supposed to exist. Dickinson rejected, though, all the other options open to her to nourish this independent self. Her

quest for knowledge focused on the concealed elements hidden to the world, but nevertheless the driving forces in the human experience. In poem after poem she reiterates the need to look within: "'The "Tune is in the Tree-' / The Skeptic-showeth me- / 'No Sir! In Thee!'" and "The Table is not laid without / Till it is laid within." Much like her Puritan ancestors, Dickinson felt a moral imperative to achieve inner growth toward spiritual ideals:

Growth of Man-like Growth of Nature-

Gravitates within-

Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it-

But it stir-alone-

Each-its difficult Ideal

Must achieve-Itself-

Through the solitary prowess

Of a Silent Life-

... (#750 1-8)

Dickinson made use of the material at hand, her own consciousness, that "Undiscovered Continent," the "Indestructible Estate," and her diligent exploration of that mysterious realm yielded profound psychological insights that her religious community failed to supply. Her quest, as she realized, was an ongoing one to be pursued day after day because "Your thoughts don't have words every day / They come a

single time / Like signal esoteric sips / Of the communion Wine" (#1452 1-4). Her openness to experience led her to know that "Contained in this short Life / Are magical extents" that justify the pain and the loneliness she felt as a result of her chosen lifestyle. Like Virginia Woolf years later, she sought and recorded those brief individual moments of vision, the fleeting glimpses of true perspective. To experience those "magical extents" though, Dickinson knew that she must never abandon one basic truth: "Finding is the first Act." She approached her search for knowledge with the same fervor her close companions and relatives devoted to their religious experiences, as Joanne Feit Diehl noted: "...when Dickinson writes of her experience, she characteristically sees it as an adventure, a journey through rugged, hostile terrain toward an end both untested and potentially fatal" (168). However dangerous that journey might be, Dickinson's Puritan heritage compelled her to act.

Dickinson's firm stance regarding the duties of the soul reflects her Puritan background, another key idea in her work which feminist critics portray negatively. The Puritan influence was on the wane in her lifetime, but it profoundly affected her sense of identity with its emphasis on the individual need to study the self, the world, and the Bible and to conduct a "spiritual examination of personal experience" (Gilbert and Gubar, Anthology 46). In The Mind of the Poet

Albert Gelpi sees Dickinson's Puritan heritage as the supporting structure in her relentless study of personal identity. Dickinson flourished because, to the Puritan mind, "universal religious truth and individual human experience were working not at cross purposes but toward concentricity" (56). Rooted in this tradition, Dickinson could explore the inner recesses of herself to form an identity unique and separate from the conventions of time and place. She fits into a long line of philosophers and poets who doubted and questioned blind acceptance of authority, whether it be the Bible or the philosophy of the early Greeks, preferring instead the truth of individual experience. Gelpi links Dickinson's perception of identity to that of Thoreau and Whitman (99). As with Thoreau and Whitman, no matter how intensely Dickinson felt an experience, no matter how tightly the self was bound to the universal, a part of her "stood aside as witness and recorder of action and response" (101).

To meet those obligations of her soul, Dickinson illuminated the psychological states which most people repress or deny and fearlessly catalogued those states with detached objectivity: In "The first Day's Night had come-" she says:

...

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 off-within-
 That person that I was-
 And this One-do not feel the same-
 Could it be Madness-this?

(#410 13-20)

When a poet writes 109 poems beginning with "I" and 104 with "I" in the first line, it would seem to be an easy task to define that poet's concept of self. In fact, "I" is the most frequently occurring word in Dickinson's work (Sewall 715); one-fifth of her poems begin with "I". Nevertheless, Dickinson's concept of self remains difficult to precisely name and describe, when viewed within the context of feminist criticism, because she adroitly maintains multiple personae; she ranges from child, to wife, to lover, to man, to queen, to nobody, to object, to the equal of Christ. Critics remain divided in their assessment of the many voices of the poet. Had Dickinson spoken only from the perspective of an unmarried, New England woman, how narrow her range would have been. That she could speak authoritatively on so many subjects from multiple points of view and maintain her credibility attests to her skill as a poet, to the power of her intellect, and to her creative genius rather than to the fragmentation of her identity. As Wolff explains, Dickinson

knew exactly what she was doing:

...each different Voice is a calculated tactic, an attempt to touch her readers and engage them intimately with the poetry. Each voice has its unique advantages; each its limitations. A poet self-conscious in her craft, she calculated this element as carefully as every other. (178)

When critics with an axe to grind put aside political considerations, Dickinson's concept of identity emerges fully formed and infinitely complex. Cynthia Griffin Wolff says:

To be a great artist in any age requires an exceptional self-consciousness about the terms of one's existence; thus in mid-nineteenth-century New England, any woman who wished to be a major poet was forced to think with brutal honesty about the implications of gender. (172)

Dickinson mastered "brutal honesty"; as Poem 1453 shows, her psychological and moral makeup allowed her no choice:

A Counterfeit-a Plated Person-
 I would not be-
 Whatever strata of Iniquity
 My Nature underlie-
 Truth is good Health-and Safety, and the Sky.
 How meagre, what an Exile-is a Lie,
 And Vocal-when we die-

Oddly enough, Dickinson's sense of self-identity differs greatly from that of most feminist critics. While most feminist critics center their studies on the search for or development of identity, Dickinson, on the other hand, "assumes the presence of a feeling self, instead of depicting a struggle towards self-knowledge" (McNeil 9). Perhaps more importantly, Dickinson assumes a knowing self. While she persistently questions and distrusts the basic ideas and concepts underlying her Christian heritage, she consistently trusts her own ability to know; she exhibits supreme confidence in the validity of her judgment, her conclusions, and her observations. Neither does she doubt her ability to express her new-found knowledge and understanding in concrete words. In #1309 she considers herself a constant party to the divine: "The Infinite a sudden Guest / Has been assumed to be-- / But how can that stupendous come / Which never went away?" In #1072 she calls herself "Empress of Calvary." She may be small, a speck upon a ball, but she remains close to her God. Her God is often a close companion with whom she can banter as in "Papa above! / Regard a Mouse" and whose word can be parodied as in "In the name of the Bee - / And of the Butterfly- / And of the Breeze- Amen!"

Had Dickinson set forth her self concept solely in terms of self-centered concerns, she would never have been included

in the canon of American literature. Dickinson could have written of narrow, private concerns. But she did not. She could have confined her theme to a search for identity in the constrained and restricted life of Amherst. But she did not. Dickinson could have defined herself in terms of traditional roles--those of daughter, sister, aunt, wife, or spinster. But she did not. Instead she wrestled in Jacobean fashion with the integrity of the self in relation to cosmic and universal elements, those "accidental elements" of which Tillich spoke. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff has noted, "The poetry is not offered as a record of individual introspection, however intelligent and sensitive that might be: Dickinson does not intend to speak for herself, uniquely fashioned; she intends to speak of the general condition...."(142). Her constant probing yielded profound insights into the inner struggles of the human soul.

Dickinson engaged in a never-ending investigation of individual identity; Sewall, perhaps her most famous biographer, said Dickinson dealt with "two opposing subjects: herself and God" (157). Johnson also ranks "identity and integrity" as being of "permanent importance" (246) to the poet. In tracing the sense of identity through the body of her poetry, a definite trend takes shape: Dickinson's sense of identity as a female poet signals a new philosophical ideal which recognizes, with no apologies and no qualifica-

tions, the inherent worth of the female perspective and its equal contribution to human kind. Wolff argues that the poet was not preoccupied with gender, but "she was a woman, and although she did not necessarily want to exploit that fact, neither did she intend systematically to deny it" (177). That attitude is conspicuously absent from early feminist criticism.

That Dickinson did, in fact, consider her sex important to her poetic ability and that she wrote with pleasure as a woman quite likely raises doubts and prompts questions. McNeil, who centers her carefully-reasoned biography on Dickinson's search for knowledge, supports such a view: "Her work is to find out all that she can, using her unsublimated female self as agency for this knowledge" (149). Evidence from the letters and poems strongly suggest that Dickinson did desire to be a strong woman poet, that being a woman gave her a perspective that was lacking in the literature that she read. She placed herself squarely within a female tradition of women writers and poets. In a letter to Higginson she wrote, "Mrs. Hunt's Poems are stronger than any written by Women since Mrs. Browning, with the exception of Mrs. Lewes" (L 368), strongly suggesting that she considered womanhood as a means of literary classification. She knew the work of her female literary counterparts, especially the Brontes, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot, and referred

to many of them in her letters and poems as "strong Madonnas." Her letters also show that strong friendships with female friends and relatives sustained and nurtured her all her life. And her poetic imagery is overwhelmingly female, not only the clitoral and vaginal imagery, but also the use of domestic imagery common to a woman's life marks much of her work. In Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet Paula Bennett devotes a full length study to this idea.

A recent biographer of Dickinson, McNeil, contends that "Dickinson's poetry changes literary theory;" reading her unconventional, direct, powerful, and often startling lyrics forces the reader to "experience gaps and silences in the existing models" of critical theory. "Reading her," McNeil says, "means redefining those models" (4). Dickinson remains difficult to categorize. Some critics liken her to Donne, others see her as a precursor to modernist poets. Regardless of where she is placed, not only are the models of literary criticism redefined, but also our body of knowledge dealing with the full range of human experience. McNeil is correct in her assertion; indeed, Dickinson's early critics attributed her innovative style to lack of ability. Until relatively recently, biographies and criticism accentuated the strangeness--Dickinson was considered an oddity, an eccentric, the reclusive spinster of Amherst. Without the critical evaluation of feminist critics with their equally

innovative methods of viewing literature, Dickinson, "one of the very greatest English poets" (McNeil 1) may well have languished as an interesting aberration in the literary history of the nineteenth century.

Suzanne Juhasz consolidates the viewpoint of other influential feminist critics in her introduction to Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson (what she calls "the first collection of critical essays on Dickinson from a feminist perspective") as she explains the key idea behind feminist criticism and the importance of Dickinson's self-concept to that line of thought:

The central assumption of feminist criticism is that gender informs the nature of art, the nature of biography, and the relation between them. Dickinson is a woman poet, and this fact is integral to her identity. The contribution of feminist criticism to Dickinson studies is twofold. Its first function is revisionary. Traditional criticism has presented Dickinson not only partially but falsely. By splitting her identity into two mutually exclusive elements, "woman" and "poet," traditional criticism has represented two persons, not one. Feminist criticism begins by putting the pieces together: woman and poet, woman poet and her poetry. Next feminist criticism moves

from re-interpretation to new kinds of interpretation, because it observes from a perspective that not only takes into account the significance of gender in life and art but sees female gender, in particular, as a positive instead of a negative factor. (1)

In Emily Dickinson woman and poet come together as never before in literary history.

Male critics did ensure Dickinson's place in American literary history, but with their attitudes which sound condescending to modern women, Tate, Crowe, and Ransom consigned Dickinson to secondary status. It is not entirely their fault, however. Dickinson simply does not fit neatly into their critical schemes, just as she does not quite fit contemporary feminist criticism; no period adequately contains the full range of her genius. In a recent article that illustrates the continuing importance of feminist criticism, Margaret Dickie wrote:

One of the most obdurate institutional restraints in literary criticism is the periodization of literature for purposes of teaching, of analysis, and of specialization. These periods, created by a male-dominated literary establishment for a predominately male literary tradition and sanctioned by a chronological inevitability, may be fictions,

but they have the tenacity of convenience and convention. (397)

Dickie employs a feminist perspective and Dickinson to argue against periodization; she selects Dickinson because "her writing life spanned literary periods" and because she is "generally considered so far outside the main currents of the period that she is not always included in major studies of the time" (397).

Assuming that feminist criticism needs even more justification for its existence, the Tate and company assessment of Dickinson as a poet offers compelling evidence. Without the insight of feminist critics, Dickinson could have remained a diminished person, a "Nobody," a bird-like, fragile creature in white, suitable for little more than speculation as to the identity of her lover and/or "Master." Instead, we have a richly-textured, multi-faceted portrait of a woman poet who, as Paula Bennett says in Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet "wanted to stretch the boundaries of what it meant to be a woman and to write in a womanly way" (18) and who continues to perplex critics and attract readers of both sexes.

Although Dickinson projected a strong self-identity, she experienced the restrictive cultural binds explained in excruciating detail in feminist writing across the academic disciplines during the past three decades. Her inner conflict with the oughts and shoulds of her day fueled her most

memorable poetry. She addressed her isolation in "I saw no Way," saying "I alone-- / A Speck upon a Ball-- / Went out upon Circumference--" (#378 5-7). In "It would have starved a Gnat--" she depicts the smallness of her life and her inability to end or change that state:

It would have starved a Gnat--
 To live so small as I--
 And yet I was a living Child--
 With Food's necessity

 Upon me--like a claw--
 I could no more remove
 Than I could coax a Leech away--
 Or make a Dragon--move--

 Nor like the Gnat--had I--
 The privilege to fly
 And seek a Dinner for myself--
 How mightier He--than I--

 Nor like Himself--the Art
 Upon the Window Pane
 To gad my little Being out--
 And not begin--again--

#612

Dickinson understood the searing pain brought about by lacking the power to act on her own behalf. Like the gnat and

the leech, both bloodsuckers, her "small" life tried to suck the vitality, the life-blood from her.

Consider Dickinson's life which "would have starved a gnat" with the boundless freedom of Whitman to see the difference in the female tradition and the male tradition. Dickinson wrote of herself as Nobody at roughly the same time Whitman was claiming to be everybody (Ostriker 39). Song of Myself begins "I Celebrate myself, and sing myself." From "Assurances" in Leaves of Grass comes "I do not doubt I am limitless" (562). And from Song of the Open Road:

From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and
 imaginary lines,
 Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,
 Listening to others, considering well what they say,
 Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
 Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of
 the holds that would hold me. (299)

In A Song of Joys Whitman celebrates his "manly self-hood" which is "servile to none" and "defers to none" (328). In contrast, Dickinson laments "What Liberty! So Captives deem / Who tight in Dungeons are" and "I never hear the word "escape" / Without a quicker blood...But I tug childish at my bars / Only to fail again!" At times, yes, the poet feels "Vesuvian" power, but at many other times she exhibits the same powerlessness that informs the women's tradition:

To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness-not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male-to be universal, to be American-is to be not female.

(Fetterley xiii)

In Dickinson, with her frequent use of a male persona and her many poems containing bodies fragmented and divided into parts, feminist critics rightly see the revolting powerlessness women feel when denied the right to name and explain their life experience. If Whitman is the poet of openness and freedom, then Dickinson is the voice of his opposite--enclosed spaces and confinement. Whitman's open road contrasts sharply with Dickinson's rooms, houses, and haunted chambers. While Whitman joyously sings his "Song of Myself," Dickinson says, "I am afraid to own a Body-- / I am afraid to own a Soul--."

As divergent as their paths may have been, Whitman and Dickinson share common ground in their belief in the importance of the self. In "Small the Theme of My Chant" from the

1869 edition of Leaves of Grass Whitman writes, "Small, the theme of My Chant, yet the greatest--namely, / One's Self--a simple, separate person" (627). And in "Quicksand Years" Whitman parallels Dickinson's line of thought:

One's-self must never give away--that is the final
substance--that out of all is sure,
Out of politics, triumphs, battles, life, what at last
finally remains?

When shows break up what but One's-Self is sure? (563)

The lines from Whitman exemplify individual freedom--one of the great themes of American literature. Man escapes the tyranny of stifling conventions to define himself by pitting individual strength against hostile elements--man against society. "Lighting out for the territory" remains an American mystique. Late in the nineteenth century young men could set out to seek experience; young women were kept at home by the restrictions of sex and class. While the men explored and conquered, women saw their very lives threatened by clothing which bound their bodies so tightly they could neither breathe properly nor exercise freely and by social conventions that kept them close to the confines of home. This great theme of freedom in American literature is only one more manifestation of the male stranglehold on both American literature and criticism. "Lighting out for the territory," until quite recently, was a male prerogative. Once again,

the male standard is accepted as the condition for all Americans, to the almost utter exclusion of the vast ethnic, racial, geographic, and sexual diversity of this nation. Such uncompromising attitudes persisted far into the twentieth century. Mickey Pearlman, in her introduction to American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space elaborates:

American literature, we are taught, is about escape, escape from perceived or real evil (Hawthorne), from intellectual anguish (Bellow), from the debilitating effects of social, political, and religious forces (Dreiser, Mailer, Malamud), from the castrating parental figure (Washington Irving, Roth), or from psychological disorder (Melville), from materialism and the masses (Whitman), from the drudgery of the commonplace (Hemingway), from time that either entraps you (Faulkner) or that is amorphous and free-flowing (Twain). (1)

Not a single woman among the group of our most respected writers. These writers do write about women, but most of them conceive of their women as objects, as property to be owned, always defined in relation to a man, always responsible for the emotional environment upon which identity formation rests, but, at the same time, denied the opportunity

for independent identity development (Pearlman 3). Ultimate authority rests with the male voice. Not surprisingly, many American women write of confinement and small spaces, what Pearlman calls "the usually imprisoning psychological and actual spaces..., of being trapped, submerged, and overwhelmed" (5). Ostriker carries this a step further in saying that "the history of women's poetry in America is a tale of confinements" (15). Dickinson exemplifies such entrapment with her imagery of being submerged, drowned in a sea, or trapped in her father's house, but that entrapment is only one aspect of a complex individual, a point many critics hesitate to acknowledge.

Pearlman's comment contains much truth, and even a cursory look at the body of Dickinson's work justifies her claim. But, here lies another pitfall in feminist critical theory. It must be remembered that always, in all cultures, in all times, for the vast majority of the population, outside elements stifle the development of independent identity. Women and men have always made complicated choices within the limits imposed by culture. The underlying and unanswered question, one with far-reaching implications for critics, is how to endow the female quest for identity with the importance now given to the heroic quest of the male and subsequently integrate the two. That is the mission of contemporary feminist critics.

Chapter 4: To be alive is power

To be alive is power
Existence-in itself-
Without a further function-
Omnipotence-Enough-

To be alive-and Will!
'Tis able as a God-
The Maker-of Ourselves-be what-
Such being Finitude!

(#677)

The Bone that has no Marrow,
What Ultimate for that?
It is not fit for Table
For Beggar or for Cat.

A Bone has obligations-
A Being has the same-
A Marrowless Assembly
Is culpabler than shame.

But how shall finished Creatures
A function fresh obtain?
Old Nicodemus' Phantom
Confronting us again! (#1274)

Students and critics alike sometimes encounter difficulty when identifying what Dickinson's poems are "about." A clue to the difficulty in understanding her work lies in poem #1222: "The Riddle we can guess / We speedily despise-- / Not anything is stale so long / As Yesterday's surprise--." She obviously made complexity her art as she consistently wrote in an uncommon manner of themes common to all great literature--faith, belief, mortality, immortality, God, death, love, identity, and nature. The individual poems with their enigmatic metaphors rarely lend themselves to neat and tidy explications. One guiding principle, however, does underlie the entire body of Dickinson's poetry. Whatever her topic, whatever the voice, the common, unifying thread is the search for knowledge. Even though she said, "I cautious, scanned my little life," she knew that contained within that "little life" was the source of infinite wisdom: "Behind Me--dips Eternity-- / Before Me--Immortality--/ Myself--the Term between--(#721 1-3). With intense, scrupulous honesty, Dickinson studied "the Term between."

Implicit in her body of work is the knowledge that there is no set of ever-constant rules: "In her poetry as in her thought, Dickinson became an original, a being who was self-conceived and therefore always capable of change" (Bennett Woman Poet 41). As she observes the natural laws

that govern the universe, she searches for the same "truths" in human affairs. What she discovers is conflict, the result of which is apparent contradiction in her work. Yet, this apparent contradiction shows just how willing Dickinson was to search for the truth wherever her mind led. When her work is viewed in all its depth and breadth, the contradictions are reconciled, or at least logically and reasonably explained. Quite simply, this poet studied and wrote of the full range of human possibilities--a full life marked by exuberant joy as well as numbing despair and all the possibilities in between, all the while cognizant of the futility of seeking only "bliss" while avoiding "woe"--"From neither of them tho' he try / Can Human nature hide." Because of her intense desire to know and to understand, to blend reason with emotion, she treats even the most traumatic event with calm precision and accuracy as evident in "I felt a funeral in my brain" and "Pain has an element of blank."

While many critics have noted her intellect and her questioning mind, few have realized the tremendous impact of Dickinson's wisdom. Helen McNeil, calling Dickinson "a heuristic poet, a poet of investigation, of knowledge as value," (9) is among the first, if not the first feminist critic, to write of Dickinson as an important, influential force as a philosophical poet. McNeil asserts that Dickinson denies the mind/body dualism implicit in Western philosophy (10). Using

"The Soul has bandaged moments--" as her primary evidence, McNeil contends that Dickinson refuses to separate mind and body, rather she fuses intellect and education with emotion and feeling. What sets Dickinson apart from other poets is her ability to intellectually observe (but not deny) emotion with great objectivity because "the drive for knowledge dominates, and the affairs of the heart are seen as part of that knowledge, not separate" (14). Of prime importance and significance is that in her most introspective poems she does not "soften those emotions into acceptability or use poetry as an escape" (14). Her stark revelations, her harsh and often painful admissions, startle the reader. The early tendency to anthologize her cheerful, non-threatening verse led to serious misrepresentations of her range as a poet.

Much to the chagrin of the feminist critics who treat idle, feeble-minded women as helpless, wounded victims of patriarchal society, Dickinson berated such women because they lacked substance. She demanded that her personal relationships engage and stimulate her mind, to offer substance:

Experiment to me
 Is every one I meet
 If it contain a Kernel?
 The Figure of a Nut

Presents upon a Tree

Equally plausibly,
 But Meat within, is requisite
 To Squirrels, and to Me.

#1073

Just as she carefully selected her friends, Dickinson "utterly refused to write down for an audience of lesser gifts than her own" (Woolf 258).

The poem which begins "This Consciousness that is aware" summarizes Dickinson's concept of identity. In this philosophical statement she fuses detached intellectual observation with equally perceptive and vigilant introspection. Battles may have raged between the inner and the outer, the seen and the unseen, but those intense conflicts within allowed Dickinson to clearly articulate a firm sense of her own identity, an identity which was never in question. Part of her genius lies in her unique ability to precisely identify the various states which comprise the self. Although she explored with exquisite precision the many spiritual, psychological, and emotional phenomena which could splinter the soul, she maintained basic integrity; she could split mind and body for the sake of analysis and recombine them into a seamless whole. In fact, the self which she constantly refines and hones can stand defiant after monumental wrestling with God:

He strained my faith-

Did he find it supple?
 Shook my strong trust-
 Did it then-yield?

Hurled my belief-
 But-did he shatter-it?
 Racked-with-suspense-
 Not a nerve failed!

Wrung me-with Anguish-
 But I never doubted him-
 'Tho' for what wrong
 He did never say-

Stabbed-while I sued
 His sweet forgiveness-
 Jesus-it's your little "John"!
 Don't you know-me?

(#497)

In Dickinson: Anxiety of Gender, Vivian Pollack asserts that "most of Emily Dickinson's poetry, and all of it that matters, originates in frustration." She further argues that "Dickinson's identity crisis was, broadly speaking, a crisis of sexual identity..." (9). I deny such assertions. First of all, sexual identity is only one component of full identity and to accord it primary status in Dickinson's case is

to overestimate its importance. Whether Emily Dickinson enjoyed sex on her father's sofa or whether she went to her grave as a virgin, while providing grist for the gossip mill, represents irrelevant speculation that pulls Dickinson down to the common level. At the same time, such speculation ignores the totality of her experience with life. Regardless of the constraints she faced, Dickinson engaged life to the hilt; in fact, her life is a testament to the idea that life can be fully lived under a variety of cultural conditions; joy and wonder co-exist with pain and despair, and personal disappointments and petty problems in no way diminish the sheer excitement of being alive. That she secluded herself in her room to write in no way diminishes her life because as Wolff explains:

She was preternaturally gifted-sensitive and immensely intelligent. The world is not organized to meet the demands and capacities of a few such extraordinary people, and it is scarcely surprising that highly creative men and women often do not lead lives that are successful when measured by normal standards. (167)

While Dickinson's themes have been analyzed again and again (and rightly so) over the years, the negative elements have overshadowed the positive. Without a doubt, pain, suffering, loss, and death account for a large portion of the

poetry, but underneath the surface lies an irreducible core of well-developed and tested identity with the will and power to endure. Even Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who tend to see little but gloom, subjugation, and psychological distress in nineteenth century women's poetry, do finally admit that Dickinson places her emphasis "not upon her pain but upon her triumph" (612). Dickinson never shrinks from her surgically precise examination of the many causes of torment to the human soul. Whatever the cause of pain and torment, Dickinson examined it as a specimen under a microscope. In "I measure every Grief I meet" she lists in great detail the criteria by which she evaluates human suffering--"the fashions--of the Cross--" which form the core of many poems. As this poem indicates and as Paula Bennett has noted in her latest work, the goal of Dickinson's poems on self-examination "was to celebrate the survival of the soul under adverse conditions which God had appointed for it" (122). Dickinson took a pragmatic approach to creating an environment in which she could benefit from the many "adverse conditions" since she believed "Life-is what we make it-" and refused to accept the terms and conditions life handed to her. As she measured her grief "With narrow, probing, Eyes," she exemplified the endurance of the human spirit and "its enormous power to endure, indeed to transcend, the pounding that life--or God--gave it" (Bennett 122).

Those critics whose goal is to find examples of victimization, suffering, psychosis, and renunciation, most assuredly, find no paucity of material with which to work. The critic who looks for eroticism finds it; the critic who looks for confinement finds that, and the critic looking for smallness can find that. This apparent contradiction, however, is not indicative of a tortured poet with a "fragmented self," a term feminist critics seem quite fond of. Rather than using a few illustrative poems to prove a position, the critic with scholarly integrity will openly examine the poet's body of work in its entirety. Only then can the poet's philosophical stand be ascertained.

Dickinson's poetry has moral importance. The soul which overcomes adversity with dignity attains spiritual significance. Unfortunately, morality is out of fashion, so many contemporary critics, those who suffer from terminal trendiness, ignore moral issues. The early cultural critics, Gilbert and Gubar especially, sought only to prove their main premise: that Dickinson was a victim of cultural restraints, that cultural conditioning led to self-denial, that social conventions fragmented her sense of self. The twentieth-century reader or critic who arbitrarily imposes current standards on Dickinson severely undercuts the very real moral implications in her work. As Jane Donahue Eberwein has pointed out, "We take it for granted that she

needed to break out of the limitations her culture placed around her and that she, and we, would have benefitted from greater freedom" (206). The truth is, Dickinson did not rebel. In both letters and poems she expresses her satisfaction with living as she did. She knows freedom, the realistic freedom of which Harvard-educated critic and novelist Marilyn French writes:

Freedom is the sense that we are choosing our own bonds. It is not a lack or absence, but the presence of harmonious relations between us and our condition, our acts, our relationships. Freedom also includes duty, responsibility, and bonds as well as our relatively independent states and acts; it is the sense that we are using well those parts of the self we want to use, enjoy using, in acts and states we wish to be immersed in. (542)

While she recognized and wrote of the "smallness" of her life, Dickinson refrained from criticizing the cultural conditions bounding her life; those conditions were simply part of her life, and she dealt with those which threatened her creativity in a positive manner. She settled into domestic life, and many poems point to her enjoyment of life among women engaged in the numerous tasks necessary to promote the nineteenth century lifestyle of Amherst. The way she arranged and lived her life remains problematic to

feminist critics looking for a standards-bearer: "Instead of smashing through limitations, she drew them in upon herself--deliberately narrowing her life beyond the cultural norms she assimilated" (Eberwein 215). The poet did see the limitations and restrictions as deprivations, but she also saw them as values which molded her work and her identity:

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

...

#675

Nowhere is Dickinson's belief in the necessity of a trial by fire more evident than in poem which begins "Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?"

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
 Sounds 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)

Even though he called her "unable to reason at all,"
 Tate also stressed the moral implications in Dickinson's
 work:

With the exception of Poe there is no other
 American poet whose work so steadily emerges from
 the framework of moral character...her poetry con-
 stantly moves within an absolute order of truths
 (84).

Tate credited Dickinson with the unique ability to capture
 the "clash of powerful opposites" (86) from an abstract per-
 spective without losing the sensuous. Dickinson does not
 separate thinking and feeling; each complements the other:

The Spirit lasts-but in what mode-
 Below, the Body speaks,
 But as the Spirit furnishes-
 Apart, it never talks-
 The Music in the Violin
 Does not emerge alone

But Arm in Arm with Touch, yet Touch
 Alone-is not a Tune-
 The Spirit lurks within the Flesh
 Like Tides within the Sea
 That make the Water live, estranged
 What would the Either be?

...

(#1576)

For this reason, because of this mutuality, she can examine
 opposing forces without bias. Thinking and feeling, mind and
 body can not be separated:

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)

Historically, the woman poet who chose to write from a per-
 spective that included her body, her emotions, and her feel-
 ings has been denied consideration as a serious poet. With
 Dickinson, the tide begins to turn.

Chapter 5: Between the form of Life and Life

Because the nature of poetry is to illuminate our darkness,
we should discover not only more of what it means to be a
woman but more of what it means to be human.

Alicia Suskin Ostriker

Between the form of Life and Life

The difference is as big

As Liquor at the Lip between

And Liquor in the Jug

The latter-excellent to keep-

But for ecstatic need

The corkless is superior-

I know for I have tried

(#1101)

Eventually, feminist criticism as a separate discipline will cease to be necessary because women and men are, after all, similar members of a single species. Biological fact dictates that each sex complements the other; each is part of a larger whole, and this concept is the harmony of the natural world. Male and female, mind and body, spirit and flesh, and self and other need not be diametrically opposed.

Feminist theory as an intellectual system affirms that the feminine is a crucial element of the human; heretofore, such has not been the case. That feminist sensibility informs and sometimes influences mainstream intellectual systems, but a full appreciation for that sensibility has not yet penetrated the deep recesses of the academic consciousness. As history repeatedly shows, one value system does not easily supplant another. Indeed, wars have been waged for less. The trend today is to tolerate feminist critics until they come to their senses, renounce their errant ways, and rejoin the fold. Because of this lack of seriousness toward feminist ideals, it is far too early to concede the struggle for the recognition of a feminist ethic which contains fundamental wisdom with the power to rehumanize all that we as a people think, say, do, and write, and integrate feminist criticism with mainstream criticism. It is time, though, to

relegate to the past the shrill, cathartic, confessional, and therapeutic aspects of feminist criticism that were, perhaps, necessary components of the developmental process. Much of the feminist terminology, too, deserves banishment--feminist, masculinist (let's face it, who can say masculinist and keep a straight face), womanist, phallic criticism, gynocentric criticism. Such language that separates and categorizes with hostility is divisive and only encourages antagonism. The wild claims--that all people are the same regardless of class, sex, or race, or that women are more fully human than men, for example--must be replaced by balanced, reasonable scholarship which recognizes that males and females are enmeshed in an interdependent web. As Jung and Emily Dickinson knew, there is a hidden man in every woman and a hidden woman in every man.

Just as Dickinson's views challenged the traditional assumptions regarding propriety in her native New England, feminist theory challenges the most basic relationships in our culture. It undermines accepted values and offers radical new ways of ordering experience. The resulting anxiety brought about by the conflict of the old which tries to justify and maintain itself, and the new which deprives the old value system of its powers, not surprisingly, engenders strong resistance. Paul Tillich has noted that such anxiety comes at the end of an era when "the accustomed

structures of meaning, power, belief, and order disintegrate" (62). Feminist theory, contrary to popular opinion, is not the sole cause of the current widespread breakdown of traditional values; indeed, feminist theory is the intellectual system that can supplement traditional values. Roe envisions feminist criticism as an intermediary in the current conflict among the various hostile factions: "At its best, feminist criticism can offer a kind of meeting ground, a possibility for confrontation, for reappraisal, for quiet rethinking and reassessment" (4). While such a position will not appeal to the radical elements on both sides of the issue, it is a sensible position.

Erik Erikson said that "it is only in periods of marked transitions that the innovators appear" (32). Feminist critics are the innovators in this time of transition. Shakespeare produced his remarkable body of work in a society caught between the medieval world and the emerging modern world; Augustine and his Christian colleagues had to master the techniques of pagan learning to advance and defend their early Christian faith. Dickinson, too, wrote in a period marked by the overlap and straining of divergent views as her country emerged from the Puritan Era, fought a bloody civil war, and moved into the Industrial Age. Even though she was influenced by the romantic idealism of the previous age, Dickinson spoke with a new voice, and she confronted head on

new subject matter. Dickinson's analytical, precise observations of her life as a woman in a small New England town challenged the conception of what was appropriate subject matter for poetry.

Significantly, there now exists a similar overlap between men and women, traditionalists and innovators. Eventually, synthesis will come as the divergent views meld, bringing an essential balance to the fields of literature and criticism. The fully realized human moves through a wide range of roles in the course of a lifetime, each role requiring a different set of skills and personal qualities; good literature, by its very nature, captures the essence of those human responses (sometimes male, sometimes female) which change little with the passing of time. Good criticism should do no less. So far, American feminism has neither escaped nor transcended the constraints of gender; it has reversed and reproduced them. As such, it represents a gross failure of imagination, for there is no unchanging essence that makes a woman a woman or a man a man. The gender dichotomy does, though, color all human experience. That women bear children is due to sex; that women nurture children is due to gender, a cultural construct. Men too have submitted and adapted to biological necessity. But, there remains a limited number of proven biological differences between the sexes. Those proven biological differences demand close scru-

tiny before they are accepted as givens because as Messer-Daividow points out:

Much that has passed for scientifically established 'fact' about sex traits, feminists contend, is invalidated by the androcentric perspectives and misogynistic values that have warped the choice of subjects, problems, methods, and designs in research. (78).

Unfortunately, these limited differences have been vastly exaggerated by cultural interpretations, and these same exaggerations over time have become sacred relics, cherished generation after generation as divine or natural law.

In the field of literature, and perhaps in other fields of study as well, feminist critics stand on the verge of a breakthrough as women tear down barrier after barrier. Yet, Betty Schmitz, who conducted an extensive study on "integrating women's studies into the curriculum" for the U.S. Department of Education, insists that it will still require decades to "involve more faculty in teaching from a feminist perspective and to expose more students to the new scholarship on women" (8). Based on extensive analysis of women's studies in programs, Schmitz advocates "curriculum integration" as opposed to a separate women's studies curriculum because isolated departments will further distance women from the mainstream of literary study. To concede defeat now is

unthinkable, but courage is required to forge ahead—courage to stand firm against deeply ingrained traditions and courage to risk occasional failure and frequent setbacks. Only with courage, the courage to be female, can feminist critics claim intellectual arrogance and assert the right to reorder literary theory.

Early feminist criticism offered little intellectual satisfaction and challenge as it probed representations of women or images in literature. The mission to expose oppressive, dominating structures that obscured alternative modes of being stopped short of its goal by failing to offer a new view with a strong moral and philosophical base.

In the sciences, a theory must take into account and explain all data, not just pieces of data selectively chosen by the scientist. Literary theory should be no different. Helen McNeil says this of Dickinson's poetry: "Her fierce power sets a standard for which no one need apologize" (146). Feminist critics must strive for the same standard of excellence. But, feminist criticism, heretofore, has often exhibited shabby scholarship as its most vocal proponents pounced on details that were often trivial and insignificant and built their house on that shaky foundation. Nowhere is that more apparent than with the feminist assessment of Emily Dickinson. Their handling of Dickinson clearly shows that the intellectual level of this relatively new critical theory

fails when it goes up against a poet with Dickinson's intellectual integrity. As Schmitz noted, "women's studies must transform itself before it can represent for the rest of the academy the truth about human experience" (7).

Feminist criticism, nevertheless, fills a void in literary theory, a void that Allen Tate described forty years ago, a decade before the rise of feminist criticism. Tate said that for poetry of fundamental ideas such as Dickinson's "we lack a tradition of criticism:"

There were no points of critical reference passed on to us from a preceding generation. I am not upholding here the so-called dead hand of tradition, but rather a rational insight into the meaning of the present in terms of some imaginable past implicit in our own lives; we need a body of ideas that can bear upon the course of the spirit and yet remain coherent as a rational instrument. We ignore the present, which is momentarily translated into the past, and derive our standards from imaginative constructions of the future. The hard contingency of fact invariably breaks down, leaving us the intellectual chaos which is the sore distress of American criticism. (82)

In all probability, Tate would have blasted feminist criticism as "heresy" and "shallow nonsense" just as he did

Marxist criticism, but the emerging feminist criticisms meet his challenge.

A fundamental problem remains in reviewing work by and about women: an inadequacy of acceptable terms for describing the female experience coupled with a still vague understanding of both real and perceived differences in male and female consciousness. This means that much work in this field remains to be done. To fully accept handed-down tradition serves to reinforce flawed patterns of thinking that created the current state of affairs. To create a new feminist tradition errs in the opposite direction. The alternative is to change (more than some would prefer, but less than others would prefer) so that the full truth of human existence is carried forward in literature and criticism.

The critical interpretation of literary history, at present, is only a partial record at best. While women are and have been central, not marginal, to the creation of our literary heritage, the rich, full reality of what women have done and experienced has been left unrecorded, neglected, and ignored in interpretation. And even that partial record is distorted because, for the most part, it comes from the viewpoint of the male half of humanity. Messer-Davidow calls the needed new ideal "perspectivism" and defines it as

a feminist philosophy that counters objectivism, which privileges objects, and subjectivism, which

privileges subjects. Perspectivism would bring together, in processes of knowing, the personal and cultural, subjective and objective-replacing dichotomies with a systemic understanding of how and what we see. It would explain how we affiliate culturally, acquire a self-centered perspective, experience the perspectives of others, and deploy multiple perspectives in inquiry. (89)

What Messer-Davidow outlines is exactly what Emily Dickinson did. Stuck between life and the form of life, women writers, poets, and critics must pick up that loaded gun.

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