

EMILY DICKINSON:  
THE LANGUAGE OF A SPIRITUALLY PERIPHERAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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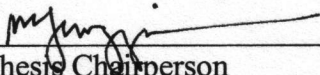
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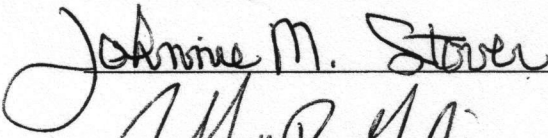
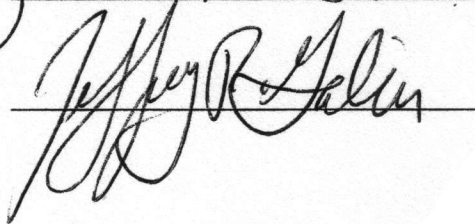
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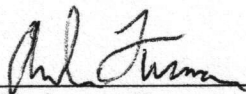
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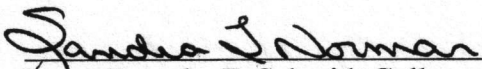
This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Mark Scroggins, Department of English and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

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Emily Dickinson was a poet who existed at the center of her nineteenth-century United States culture and yet wrote from a periphery located at the edge of her being. Integral to understanding her poetry is a contextual awareness of her spiritual struggle. The experience of cultural marginalization and the way it informs art through a peripheral perspective has been the focus of examination in much of modern and post-modern literary studies where attention is given as much to an author's cultural station as to his or her artistic creation. A close study of Emily Dickinson's poetry reveals a spiritually marginalized perspective which closely resembles the structural framework of cultural marginalization. While there are areas of Dickinson's poetic perspective where these two experiences merge, my examination of Dickinson concentrates on her personal spiritual liminality in her relationship with God as expressed in the context of her poetry and letters.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Self-consciousness has before it another self-consciousness; it has come outside itself. This has a double significance. First it has lost its own self, since it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, it has thereby sublated that other, for it does not regard the other as essentially real, but sees its own self in the other” (562).

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 1807

As Emily Dickinson contemplates and transcribes the ageless dichotomy of life and death, her poetic voice becomes mortality’s delegate of, not only her world, but also ours. Although Dickinson’s poetic insights are influenced by the physical world in which she lived, they are also a product of an independent self whom the poet refers to as “Sovereign” (Fr579B). In this poem from 1863 Dickinson describes her consciousness as she contemplates the spiritual awareness of her soul. She writes:

The Soul unto itself  
Is an imperial friend—  
Or the most agonizing Spy  
An Enemy—could send—  
Secure against it’s own—  
No treason it can fear—  
Itself—it’s Sovereign—Of itself  
The Soul should stand in awe— (Fr579B)



It is this sense of sovereignty, revealed throughout the corpus of Dickinson's work, which impels her to inquire what it means to reach toward a world that is separate from the physical one.

My focus will be on tracing Dickinson's spiritual struggle as she contemplates her separation from God. In my examination of Dickinson's perspective, I will show how she poetically represents her spiritual marginalization through the dichotomic tensions between physicality and spirituality; mortality and immortality; intellect and intuition; and language and inference. Each of these dualities represents Dickinson's expressed relationship with God, which in another poem from 1863, Dickinson refers to as a "Vicarious Courtship—" (Fr615).

## CHAPTER 1

### A PERIPHERAL VOICE

One way of understanding Emily Dickinson's perspective is to examine her use of language to articulate her sense of spiritual marginalization. If we look back to the thirteenth century and the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, we may find some assistance in understanding Dickinson's work. Aquinas is concerned with the philosophical union of reason and faith. Dickinson's keen intellect paired with a spiritual sensitivity grappled with the same dilemma. Aquinas seeks to interpret the allegorical nature of the world as a representation of God. Dickinson's older contemporaries, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edward Hitchcock also echo this idea. Aquinas argues that God uses the language of the world to transmit his message of truth whereas mankind is relegated to the use of words, which Aquinas calls the "literal sense" (151). Aquinas explains that God's language uses the "things signified by words [and] have themselves also a signification." This he terms the "spiritual sense" (151). Through the unwieldy instrument of words, the subtlest medium at hand for this artist's expression, Dickinson seeks to merge these two senses into one. It is as if a sculptor of profound insight spent her life sculpting her works out of limestone instead of bronze because it was the only medium to which she had access.

In the seventeenth century, John Locke diminishes the use of words as a medium for the translation of thought in his description of "the imperfections of language"

(294). His ideas of self-evident truths whose meanings are not reliant on words for conveyance, but are instead revealed through God, inspired Thomas Jefferson in his writing of the “Declaration of Independence” fifty-four years before Dickinson was born. Locke acknowledges that “the will of God, when clothed in words [is] liable to doubt and uncertainty” (294), and Dickinson struggles with this dilemma as well. In a poem acknowledging her struggle with the translation of God’s language, Dickinson writes, “In Him Existence serve or set / A Force illegible” (Fr1113B). The illegibility of this spiritual force is the impetus for the poet’s lifelong pursuit of articulation. While all language, a mediator between thought and self, is intrinsically a product of the physical environment, it is only a representative apparatus for the translation of thought. While there is no doubt the poet, like language itself, is a product of her physical environment, she is also a product of what she senses as the spiritual realm of God. My examination of Dickinson’s spiritual dilemma concentrates on the disproportionate power dynamic between the poet and God as represented in her poetic language. Through my examination of Dickinson’s expressed context, I hope to understand her spiritually marginalized perspective.

It is possible to gain a clearer understanding of Dickinson’s dilemma if we borrow from our contemporary notions of cultural marginalization. In using the framework of cultural marginalization as a model for spiritual marginalization, I knowingly take a conceptual risk. Although post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha is currently not part of the ongoing scholarly conversation about Emily Dickinson’s poetry, I was drawn to his ideas in my investigation of her life and work. Thinking about the marginalized perspectives Bhabha studies, I applied his framework of understanding to Emily

Dickinson. The dimension to Dickinson's perspective I am interested in is her spiritual marginalization where the dynamics of difference in perceived power relations is similar to the dynamics of difference experienced in the culturally marginalized perspective. Bhabha speaks of cultural impact on an individual's perspective and the same spatial, though spiritual, dynamic is evident in Dickinson's perspective. In Jennifer Leader's examination of some recent Dickinson criticism, she appears to support a non-conventional look at the poet's perspective. Leader writes, "Finally, Dickinson's status as a major writer and thinker in her own right is earning her a place at the table in still wider-ranging studies that attempt comparative examinations of spatial conception, cognition, and interiority in the works of the so-called 'great' writers" (84). While Leader may not have been thinking of Bhabha's post-colonial cultural studies with this statement, her remarks do open up a wider dialogue of discussion concerning Dickinson. Leader's comments indicate that Dickinson's spatial conceptions concerning her relationship with God support a type of "comparative examination" with the kind of identity dynamics of which Bhabha writes. The relational aspects of his insights inform this work.

As expressed in the title of his book, Bhabha seeks the "location of culture." In Bhabha's identification of this location, he speaks of "[t]hese 'in-between' spaces [which] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood" (2). As Bhabha acknowledges the interplay between self and "other" in the context of twentieth-century post-colonialism, he presents a dynamic which functions as a model for interaction between two opposing realms of experience. Dickinson's poetry at times reveals a similar interplay of experience as she contemplates her spiritual dilemma.

Bhabha speaks of the marginalized “location of culture” as providing not only one’s positional status, but also one’s positional perspective, both of which are derived from one’s station either in the “center” or on the “periphery” (xi) of a culture. In examining the marginal perspective as integrally linked to social liminality, Bhabha ponders the questions of human autonomy within the environment of culture. There are certain conceptual similarities between Bhabha’s descriptions of cultural marginalization and Dickinson’s poetic articulations of spiritual marginalization. Both peripheral aspects experience the tension of disproportionate relations with power. In Bhabha’s context, that power is the dominant culture. In the context of Dickinson’s spiritual marginalization, that power is an omnipotent God. My reading of Bhabha allows for a structural link between the two. The central focus of my study is on Dickinson’s articulated poetic consciousness devoted to her cosmic understanding of existence.

In Bhabha’s discussion of migrant workers and their alienated existences, he writes of “the foreignness of language” (236) and its influence on their perspectives. Bhabha describes the struggle of the socially marginalized voice as it attempts to decipher the “encrypted discourse” (236) of a world from which the speaker is separated. In reading Bhabha’s discussion, I am drawn to Dickinson’s poem from 1865 where she acknowledges the struggle she perceives in deciphering the language of immortality. The poet reveals a perspective of alienation from the language of God to which she is not fully privy. Dickinson writes:

Could mortal lip divine  
The undeveloped Freight

Of a delivered syllable

‘Twould crumble with the weight (Fr1456B).

Through her acknowledgment of a spiritual world from which she senses division, this short poem represents a key element of Dickinson’s dilemma. The poet cannot quite decipher this “undeveloped Freight,” yet it is crucial to her understanding, and like Bhabha’s description of the culturally alienated, Dickinson cannot participate in a world to which she senses proximity as well as separation.

Dickinson exhibits her frustration in the poem above as she encounters the extra-physical realm of existence and realizes the struggle of translation. The “foreignness of language” Bhabha speaks of in a cultural context is associated with a realm of power from which the marginalized voice is separated. The urge to participate in a dialogue separated from her understanding is key to Dickinson’s sense of spiritual marginalization. Bhabha writes of a “canonical ‘center,’” that is “most interesting for its elusiveness” and is even an “illusion of the powerless” (xi). For Bhabha this elusive and illusive center is cultural, thus tied to the physical world. In some of Dickinson’s poetry, however, this equally elusive and illusive center is God, thus bound to the spiritual realm. This component of Dickinson’s unique peripheral perspective, caught in the tension of a relationship between her human intellect and an omnipotent God, seems similar in manifestation, if not origin, to Bhabha’s descriptions of a culturally peripheral perspective. Bridging this separation through a mission of poetic articulation impels Dickinson to strive toward an elusive spiritual center. Indeed, the poet herself refers to this elusive center in a letter from 1884. She writes, “The Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference” (L950), as she

articulates her struggle to understand. The powerlessness Dickinson senses as she contemplates this elusive spiritual center suggests a peripheral perspective exemplary of her spiritual marginalization.

The complex mind of Emily Dickinson wrestles with the idea of unity of mind and spirit (or God). Despite what may be a hopeful dimension to her poetry, the space between her inferences and her access to a larger immaterial realm is always present.

In the following poem, not even death can bridge this gap:

Departed—to the Judgment—  
A Mighty—Afternoon—  
Great Clouds—like Ushers—leaning—  
Creation—looking on—  
  
The Flesh—Surrendered—Cancelled—  
The Bodiless—begun—  
Two Worlds—like Audiences—disperse—  
And leave the Soul—alone— (Fr399)

In this poem, not only does Dickinson express a perspective of separation from life (as the “flesh—surrendered—Cancelled—”), but she also projects this separation onto the soul after death. In Barton Levi St. Armand’s discussion of the genesis of the poet’s perspective, he writes: “Dickinson’s fascination with death was an authentic response to a popular cultural genre that had its own unique strength and purpose” (41). Although in some ways Dickinson’s sense of separation may indeed be a reaction to her cultural environment, there is also a portion of her that expresses what

she sees as a “sovereign” self as she encounters her perceptions. While Dickinson is “relegated to the use of words” (151) as Aquinas reminds us, in the poem above, she strives to communicate a perspective that exists as separate from the physical. Helen Vendler describes Dickinson’s poems as “temporal structures that mimic the structure of life as she at any moment conceives it” (64). Dickinson employs this temporal medium of language to gain an understanding she interprets as foreign. In the above poem Dickinson is aware of a spiritual realm foreign to the world she inhabits, and so she must describe it in the terms to which she has access. A metaphorical language is the best available tool of transcription to a mind that perceives an extra-physical relationship. Mimicking the language of her own physical environment as she confronts the spiritual environment of God exemplifies Dickinson’s spiritually marginalized perspective.

Dickinson represents her perspective as “Sovereign” in various ways throughout her poetry to establish her voice as a consciousness untied to either the spiritual or the physical worlds. For the moment, let us take the poet at her word in order to understand her perspective. In the previously transcribed poem above beginning “Departed – to the Judgment—,” the poet emphasizes equally her physical and spiritual surroundings. The poem culminates with the soul as “alone,” disconnected from even the spiritual realm. As the body and “Creation” both leave the soul after death in the poem, they are described as “Audiences—[who] disperse,” suggesting a disconnectedness, an uninvolvedness, a separation. While it is true that the poet’s contemporary social environment is included in the word “Creation,” along with the rest of the material world, also present in the poem is a sense of separation



from the extra-physical element of her consciousness.

Reading this poem, I am reminded of Bhabha's understanding of the liminal voice. In the context of cultural marginality, Bhabha describes a "Third Space of enunciation" (54). An expression in this "Third Space," Bhabha writes, "reveals the structure of its positionality" (53) in the articulated tension between two cultural forces. The level of consciousness described in Dickinson's poem is also expressed through a "Third Space of enunciation," though in a spiritual context. Dickinson's articulative stance is located on a periphery between "The Flesh" and "The Bodiless," on which the poet is stranded, suggesting Bhabha's "'in-between' spaces [which] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood" (2). Although Bhabha is speaking in the context of the politics of culture, there is also a politics of spirit, I think, which may be what Dickinson strives to articulate in her poem. She represents her existence as a negotiative experience, between "Two Worlds" which "like Audiences—disperse— / And leave the Soul – alone—." The speaker in Dickinson's poem exists, both in life and in death, as a marginal entity, on the periphery of mortality and immortality. The poem mimetically represents Dickinson's identity, at the time of its writing, both physically and spiritually alienated from God or "Judgment."

Through a lifetime of poetic inquiry, the poet seeks to understand a spiritual center from which she senses separation. Dickinson's perspective is on the periphery between two influential aspects of her consciousness: the physical and the spiritual. In Josef Raab's discussion of Dickinson's articulation of her spiritual struggle, he writes: "As it is impossible for her to reach the center, the poet needs to circle around this

center, to examine it indirectly from various perspectives and with various alternatives in mind” (274). In many ways, this spiritual center mirrors the unreachable “canonical ‘center’” that Bhabha describes. Through her poetry, Dickinson reaches toward this center from a stance located on what I call the periphery of perception between her physical and spiritual perspectives. In an 1862 letter to her friend Samuel Bowles, the poet identifies “a sea” (L272) as she describes the peripheral space from which she grasps at meaning. She writes: “I tell you Mr. Bowles, it is a Suffering, to have a sea—no care how Blue—between your Soul and you” (L272). This metaphor of separation, expressed in so many ways throughout Dickinson’s work, is the hallmark of her perspective.

In an 1862 poem, Dickinson writes: “I plucked at our Partition / As One should pry the Walls—” (Fr570), suggesting some metaphorical periphery. Jed Depman sees Dickinson’s “partition” as a reference to “the line between life and death” (98), which in the context of the poet’s work appears accurate. It is this periphery that I want to explore further. In his discussion of cultural identity, Bhabha observes: “the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting” (63). He speaks of “the disturbing distance in-between” that the colonized subject experiences as he contemplates his “otherness” (64). Dickinson, in the cosmic context, senses this “otherness” as well as she contemplates her position between the physical and spiritual worlds. Like Bhabha’s “space of splitting,” Dickinson’s “partition,” as with the poet’s other metaphors of separation, suggests a “splitting” of consciousness between her physical mortality and her spiritual immortality. Key to my use of Bhabha’s framework in understanding Dickinson’s marginalized

perspective is the subjectivity to power experienced by an alienated consciousness. Dickinson's perceived subjectivity to an omnipotent God echoes Bhabha's dynamic. The poet represents her spiritual peripherality through a marginalized perspective as she confronts the distance between herself and God. Through my examination of Dickinson's peripheral perspective, I hope to clarify the spiritually marginalized voice behind many of her poems.

## CHAPTER 2

### A SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

Emily Dickinson's social status was in the cultural center of nineteenth-century New England with a family who could trace its roots to the first English settlers in the New World (Wolff 13). Her father held prominent positions as treasurer of Amherst College and was elected to the United States Congress (Martin xiv) and Massachusetts House of Representatives (Wolff 499). Not surprisingly, Dickinson had all the advantages of private boarding schools in her youth where she studied "Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin and Botany" (L6), among other subjects. All of this helped shape her perspective. Likewise, Dickinson's perspective was influenced by her status as a woman in nineteenth-century America as well as her experiences with organized religion. While Dickinson's influences were multiple, integral to her voice is her sense of a personal separation from God. The perceptions of nature, self, death, being, thought, eternity and other contemplations, experienced from this peripheral perspective, allowed Dickinson to communicate a perspective that was uniquely astute in clarifying her responses to spiritual struggle.

Before delving too deeply into Dickinson's poetry and correspondence for insights into her peripheral aspect, it would be useful to briefly explore the poet's biographical background in regard to her religious experiences. In speaking about her

family in an 1862 letter to Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an abolitionist activist and magazine columnist whom she trusted for poetical advice, Dickinson states: “They are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their ‘Father’” (L261). Although her family and community were deeply engaged in their own personal pursuits of Christian salvation, Dickinson resisted opportunities to accept Christ as her personal savior. Indeed, Dickinson’s father did not consent to being saved until 1850 (Habegger 240) and her brother did not publicly consent to salvation until 1856 (Bingham 97). In 1846, when the poet was sixteen years old, Dickinson wrote to a friend that “[t]he few short moments in which I loved my Saviour I would not now exchange for a thousand worlds like this” (L11). The poet’s short-lived salvation seems to have been a treasured memory. Dickinson, as Alfred Habegger informs us, “does seem to have remained unbaptized” (87). Her refusal to assent to a public declaration of Christianity seems, at least in part, due to an independent intellect in a quest for utter comprehension before she would submit. While the cultural pressures of this aspect of the poet’s struggle cannot be denied, Dickinson’s poetry and letters never deride or negate her family’s and community’s religious choices. Instead, they express the uncertainty of the poet’s own spiritual investigation. Rather than diminishment or belittlement, Dickinson’s term “eclipse,” in her statement to Higginson about her family’s religious addresses, seems to acknowledge the obscured understanding she experiences in her spiritual pursuits. In a poem from 1861, Dickinson writes: “God keep His Oath to sparrows-- / Who of little Love—know how to starve—” (Fr195). If only her intellectual appetite did not demand answers, she seems to be thinking, then she could be secure in the knowledge

of salvation. Dickinson's tone in this poem seems almost envious of the sparrows' indifference to God. Earlier she conveys this tone of envy more overtly as Dickinson informs Jane Humphrey in 1850 that her sister, Vinnie, as well as her friends have been "saved." The poet writes: "I really think I envy them" (L35). Like the sparrows, her sister and companions will be kept in God's love, but Dickinson required more than a recitation of belief as she considers salvation. In a poem from 1865, Dickinson writes: "I cannot be ashamed / Because I cannot see" (Fr977). Whether this statement is a declaration or an admission (perhaps both), it seems to be at the crux of Dickinson's spiritual dilemma.

As Habegger writes, "resistance was not a sign of unbelief, since she was intellectually convinced she ought to 'give up'" (203). Dickinson resisted a declaration of salvation, Habegger thinks, because of "something she didn't or couldn't *articulate*" (203) (emphasis added). Habegger's observation of the poet's struggle to articulate prompts further examination when contemplating the decisions of a woman whose life is dedicated to the meanings of words, as Dickinson's was. Dickinson sought to find spiritual meaning through the construction of her own syntactical choices. In a letter to her close friend, Joseph Lyman, she writes, "We used to think, Joseph, when I was an unsifted girl and you so scholarly that words were cheap & weak. Now I don't know of anything so mighty" (qtd. in Sewall, *The Lyman Letters* 78).<sup>1</sup> It is in this facet of Dickinson's spiritual struggle where the marginality of her perspective is significant. For Dickinson, to consent to salvation meant to be finished with her spiritual inquiries, and although it would be easy to confess the words required, it appears she would not articulate them unless she meant

them. This serious poet would find her own metaphorical language to communicate her limited understanding of God. If Dickinson strove to quench her curious mind with different answers, as she clearly did, then her poetry was the well in which she sought them. Although Dickinson sought poetic criticism from Higginson, in further testament to her “sovereign” mind, she never did accommodate her style to his suggestions. Nevertheless, in another 1862 letter to Higginson, Dickinson encloses four poems for “surgical” attention to their “faults.” In this letter, she famously states, “[m]y business is Circumference” (L268), suggesting, among other possibilities, the image of a circle where no gaps (in understanding) exist. Dickinson’s lifelong circumnavigation of her consciousness, through her poetry, was how she chose to find this “Circumference.” Interestingly, employing another bird reference in a letter to her friends the Hollands, the poet describes a little bird she encountered who informed her “My business is to sing” (L269). In contemplating the poet’s statement to Higginson (“My business is Circumference”), I wonder if, like the bird who knows it is her job to sing, Dickinson is communicating that she is clear as to what her purpose is as well. The syntactical construction of these two sentences, where the word following “business” is an action, illustrates Dickinson’s use of “circumference” as a process.

Although the dictionary definition of the word circumference defines it as a “boundary of a circle or other closed curve” (OED), Dickinson’s circumference appears to be a state of consciousness. In 1863, however, while in her early thirties, Dickinson seems to state the concept of circumference as a positional point of reference. She writes: “and I alone – / A speck opon<sup>2</sup> a Ball – / Went out opon

Circumference – / Beyond the Dip of Bell – (Fr633). Here we sense the speaker as perceiving her positional perspective (“alone”) on some peripheral vantage point as she scans the horizon of consciousness. By 1865 Dickinson seems to modify her conception of circumference. She writes:

The Poets light but Lamps—

Themselves—go out—

The Wicks they stimulate

If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns –

Each Age a Lens

Disseminating their

Circumference— (Fr930)

In this poem we see Dickinson contemplating her own role as a poet. Her vocation involves the passing on of her comprehension to future generations after her death. Every life provides a unique “Lens” from which to gain perspective, and she defines this “disseminat[ion]” of understanding as “Circumference.”

By 1884 at the end of her life, it seems Dickinson further communicates her conception of circumference in the first line of a poem which states, “Circumference thou Bride of Awe” (Fr1636). Awe, being a state of mind, is paired with another state of mind, namely “circumference” or full comprehension where the “closed curve” of understanding is sought. Dickinson seems to have fully realized her conception of circumference in this late observation. The poet settles on defining circumference not



as a position as she did in 1863, but as a process, which indeed is tied to her peripheral aspect. Her ambition to bridge the space between the spiritual realm of God and the physical realm of her self, through poetic articulation, seems apparent.

In a poem from 1866, Dickinson defines this duality of existence as a “Double Estate—entailed at pleasure / Opon an unsuspecting Heir—” (Fr1050). In describing a part of herself as “an unsuspecting Heir,” Dickinson suggests some sense of “otherness,” from the spiritual realm. Bhabha’s cultural “otherness [is] marginalized in [a] theoretical text committed to the articulation of ‘difference,’ or ‘contradiction’” (97), and Dickinson’s sense seems similar as she differentiates between the implications of the two worlds that compel her attention: the physical and the spiritual. The full poem reads:

I am afraid to own a Body—  
I am afraid to own a Soul—  
Profound—precarious Property—  
Possession, not optional—

Double Estate—entailed at pleasure  
Opon an unsuspecting Heir—  
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness  
And God, for a Frontier. (Fr1050)

Although she states she is “afraid to own” them, Dickinson is consigned to her body as well as to her soul; it is not “optional,” as she acknowledges, and these two separate sides of her self create what Bhabha would call, in a culturally marginalized

sense, a “contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation” (55). The poet is not articulating being caught in a tension between two cultures, as Bhabha describes; although Dickinson does seem to perceive a disproportionate power dynamic. Dickinson is “precariously” negotiating the tension between the physical world and the spiritual world. The poet enunciates this perception of ambivalence throughout her poetry as she struggles for balance between the two worlds in which she simultaneously senses belonging and separation. The sense of separation that Dickinson perceives between her physical and spiritual environments prompts the poet to continue her intellectual mission through the poetic articulation of her struggle. The poem seems to comply with what Bhabha describes as the struggle for a “unified image of the self” (69) encompassed by what Dickinson calls in the poem above, this “Profound—precarious Property” of her body as well as her soul. In the context of the socially marginalized individual, Bhabha discusses the need to reunify a fragmented identity. Through the contemplation of her spiritual struggle, Dickinson articulates the fragmentation of her identity as well. In the above poem, the poet contemplates the two realms of existence that she perceives: her “Body” and her “Soul.” Dickinson’s struggle to unify her own perspective as a “Double Estate” of consciousness is evident as she exemplifies a feeling of self-alienation so common to the marginalized perspective. It is in striving to unify the competing images of herself (comprised not only of the corporeal and spiritual, but also of the intellectual and intuitive) where so many of Emily Dickinson’s poems are born.

Some critics, in seeing Dickinson’s poetic motivation from a feminist perspective, perceive her poetry, in part, as a response to the overtly patriarchal

culture in which she lived. In Shira Wolosky's discussion of "I am afraid to own a Body—" (Fr1050), in reference to the line "Duke in a moment of Deathlessness," Wolosky states: "To inherit as duke is not to inherit as woman" (139). Later in her essay, Wolosky identifies this construction as "a kind of cultural slippage in which a female gender complicates or contradicts assertion of an American or Romantic selfhood" (139). As I acknowledge the societal inequalities which Dickinson experienced, I also must ask: When is a "Duke" just a duke? In my interpretation of this poem, it appears that it is the supremacy of "Deathlessness" or immortality that carries the weight of meaning in this line, and is at the core of the poem's query. The poet's sense of "Deathlessness" is only momentarily perceived in a fragment of time as rare and elevated (in the physical world) as the word duke conveys. "Duke", with its implied royalty and status, acts as a poetically chosen description of the quality of Dickinson's transient perception of "Deathlessness." The word functions metaphorically and rhythmically, as well as alliteratively, and communicatively. The male quality embedded in the word seems only superfluous to the real meaning of spiritual inheritance that Dickinson strives to convey. In Wolosky's reading, she is contemplating the poet's decision to choose the masculine word "duke" over other feminine options. If "Deathlessness" or immortality is the central query of the poem, as I argue, then the moderated power of a "duke", in comparison to a "duchess", as subject to an omnipotent God, presents a more appreciable contrast. In this poem Dickinson's "Duke" is merely subordinate to the spiritual realm of God. The meaning, which Dickinson struggles to articulate, is "Deathlessness" or immortality, in this poem and others, and it is this elusive center that Dickinson pursues. Indeed,

Wolosky seems to have shifted her perspective somewhat, although not in the context of this poem, in an essay published two years later in 2004. Here she comments on the significance of gender issues in interpreting Dickinson's work. Wolosky asserts this gender-based view "is in many ways an imposition on [Dickinson] of this gendered paradigm rather than evidence for it" (104). As Wolosky seems to now suggest, it may be overreaching to impose a gender-based element on a nineteenth century poem about immortality. The gender implications of the word duke, although apparent, may cloud the dominant meaning Dickinson seeks to communicate. Like the biblical Jacob, it seems, Dickinson is primarily wrestling with her infinite God as she articulates her spiritual struggle through her poetry.

Cristanne Miller discusses Dickinson's diction and syntax as a "sign of her general colloquialism that Dickinson speaks in the voice of her everyday life, therefore in the voice of a woman" (112). Miller's use of the phrase, "general colloquialism" suggests to me that Dickinson's language choices do not necessarily reflect societal opposition, although Dickinson may reflect her societal position with her language choices. As Miller asserts, "there may be different reasons for women in various contexts to choose the language patterns they do" (111). These reasons may be conscious or unconscious, and Dickinson's identifications of herself as a "Sovereign" (Fr579B) or "Hermetic Mind" (Fr770) seem to play a role in her language choices. My focus is to argue for the conscious motives behind Dickinson's work through a close study of her spiritual struggle as represented in her poetic choices.

Susan Howe also projects a feminist cultural underpinning to Dickinson's

work. She writes: “She built a new poetic form from her fractured sense of being eternally on intellectual borders, where confident masculine voices buzzed an alluring and inaccessible discourse” (21). Howe is referring to a Dickinson poem in which the poet uses metaphors of hearing to articulate communion with a realm beyond the physical:

The Spirit is the Conscious Ear—  
We actually Hear  
When We inspect—that’s audible—  
That is admitted—Here—  
  
For other Services—as Sound—  
There hangs a smaller Ear  
Outside the Castle—that Contain—  
The other—only—Hear— (Fr718)

In Howe’s acknowledgement of Dickinson’s place in a male dominated society, we see the cultural difficulties the poet was dealing with. The “alluring and inaccessible discourse” to which Howe refers, that Dickinson was not welcome to participate in as a woman, is evident when one realizes the patriarchal circumstances in which the poet lived. Also evident, however, is Dickinson’s allusion to the separation between body and spirit, of which she is acutely aware. The play of words between “Hear” and “Here” is interesting. “Here” seems to represent the physical world and “Hear” is suggestive of the spiritual. If only we allow ourselves to “Hear,” the poet advises, we might find some connection to the spiritual world. Dickinson admits we do indeed

hear the physical world “Here,” but there is also “a smaller Ear / Outside the Castle,” or outside of our corporeal residence which will enable us to “Hear” another kind of information, equally reasonable or “Sound.” Dickinson’s use of the word “Sound” to mean reasonable is extraordinary as she plays with auditory references to convey what she senses. One perceives her effort in convincing her reader (herself?) that there are more than just the physical senses from which to derive clarity. The poem attempts to locate the intuitive perceptions she experiences, which she cannot trace to her physical body or environment. These perceptions, profound in their origin, can only be communicated with the language at hand, and it is this tension with which the poet continually struggles.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE POETIC INFERENCE

Dickinson's peripheral stance on the boundaries between physicality and spirituality enabled her to experience another kind of peripheral perspective between the intellect and intuition. The poet's urge to articulate is sometimes frustrated by the limited capacity of language to communicate exactly what she infers. Dickinson seems to have acknowledged this frustration in a poem that she includes in a letter meant to comfort her cousins Louise and Frances Norcross at a difficult time in their lives. She writes: "Our inference is premature / our premises to blame" (Fr1192). The poet seems to be saying full understanding is not available to us in the physical world or "our premises" (Fr1192), as she calls it. Doubly alluded to in the meaning of her words is the "premise" of an argument based on the physical perspective, which Dickinson perceives as insufficient. However, as Dickinson alludes in her poem, there does exist a keen, if "premature" (Fr1192) and vague, awareness of an extra-physical realm of understanding. In spite of the difficulty in comprehending this realm, Dickinson strives to encapsulate her inferences through the language of her poetry.

In his book *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, cognitive neuroscientist Steven Pinker speaks of an environment of the mind at a level separate from language, which he calls "[o]ur inference-making device" (79) from which all language is transcribed. In Pinker's use of the word "inference," he is

describing a pre-linguistic perception, which enters the consciousness as raw data. Through cognition, we make sense of the inference with language or we discard it. Emily Dickinson's reserves of inferences, located in this space of consciousness that Pinker describes, appear to have been immense and her capacity for their transcription seems to have been acutely developed. In the first stanza of an 1862 poem she writes:

I found the words to every thought

I ever had—but One—

And that—defies Me—

As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun (Fr436)

Dickinson refers to an inability to transcribe a thought as she reaches across the periphery between inference and language as she confronts the spiritual realm of her existence. In Bhabha's discussion of the culturally marginalized voice, he speaks of "the opacity of language [which] fails to translate or break through [the] silence" (238). In the context of colonialism, Bhabha's description concerns the frustration of being unable to translate one's experiences into language; and this inability produces equal resonance in both the culturally and the spiritually marginalized voice. Although inference may be a direct link to some intuitive immortal center, as Dickinson seems to communicate, written language is this side of mortality's best claim to permanence (or immortality). For Dickinson, language functions as a mediator between both the physical and spiritual worlds. In acknowledging a failure to transcribe beauty in a later poem, she writes: "To tell the Beauty would decrease" (Fr1689), suggesting that in the case of beauty, one's inference is superior to



language. Later in the poem, she continues: “My will endeavors for its word / And fails, but entertains” (Fr1689), where Dickinson’s endeavor is further revealed. In this poem a self-chiding attitude in which the speaker is comfortable with the entertainment value of the search for the right word is evoked. In the previous poem, however, where a word “defies” her, she shows a tinge of annoyance at the inference, in not allowing itself to be expressed through language. It almost seems as if Dickinson has a love/hate relationship with language; it is her obsession as well as her burden. Dickinson expresses her alienation from language, born on the periphery of perception, in the articulation of her inferences. In his discussion of Charles Darwin’s insights, Pinker seems to echo Dickinson’s thought process as Pinker finds his first thread of support for his own theory of the instinct for language in humans. Darwin sees the human’s tendency for language as an instinct “to acquire an art” (qtd. 20), Pinker explains, much like the tendency for “song-learning birds” (20), to acquire the skill for singing. Interestingly, in Dickinson’s identical analogy in her previously mentioned letter to the Hollands, she reminds us that her drive to create poetry, independent of audience, is instinctive like the little bird she observes:

I found a bird, this morning, down – down – on a little bush at the foot of the garden, and wherefore sing, since nobody *hears*? / One sob in the throat, one flutter of bosom – “*My business is to sing*” – and away she rose! How do I know but cherubim, once, themselves, as patient, listened, and applauded her unnoticed hymn? (L269).

Like the bird, as the poet sings her own song, Dickinson’s audience, may be only the “cherubim” (L269, Fr1243), as acknowledged in the following poem.

In this often-cited poem, Dickinson's relationship with words is further revealed. In this poem, Dickinson suggests that she is not the one in control of her own transcription:

Shall I take thee, the Poet said  
To the propounded word?  
Be stationed with the Candidates  
Till I have finer tried—  
The Poet searched Philology  
And when about to ring  
For the suspended Candidate  
There came unsummoned in —  
That portion of the Vision  
The Word applied to fill  
Not unto nomination  
The Cherubim reveal— (Fr1243)

Dickinson seems to have discovered that it is not up to her to nominate candidates of words from which to choose the appropriate one to transcribe her thought. There is a level of understanding beyond language that defies words, which Pinker calls “inference.” Dickinson, it seems, has access to the realm of the mind that Pinker describes, which exists before language, this “portion of the Vision” (Fr1243), and it seems Dickinson is saying that it is not fully under her own command. Expressed in many of the poems regarding the divide between inference and language, there is a subjugation of power that the “Cherubim reveal[s]” (Fr1243). The divided agency of

mind suggested in this poem seems to clarify a self-marginalization from Dickinson's own consciousness. This realm of inference seems to be connected to some intuitive center toward which the poet strives. In Raab's discussion of this poem, he alludes to this idea of inference: "Philological reflection is necessary but cannot replace inspiration" (281). While the poet may be "inspired" to transcribe her inference, more compelling for her seems to be the search for a language adequate for her inspiration's description. This is at the core of Dickinson's dilemma. It is Pinker's "inference-making device" (79), which may or may not inspire Dickinson to write a particular poem. Raab continues: "It is this borderline between actual experience and the expression of experience that especially concerns Dickinson" (281). As evidenced by the volume of poems she left behind, it seems the poet is compelled to transcribe her inferences at a frenetic pace. Inspiration seems secondary to the transcriptive will of a consciousness pursuing the permanence of the written word as she contemplates the borderline of mortality and immortality. Once again, Dickinson's experiences on the periphery of perception are paramount as she strives to find a bridge between the intellectual part of herself in the physical sphere and the intuitive part of herself in the spiritual realm.

Miller speaks of Dickinson's use of negation in her poetry to "reveal a center by what they do not claim" (102). Dickinson's poem "Shall I take thee, the Poet said" (cited above) seems to exemplify Miller's assertion. In Dickinson's acknowledgment that her word choices are "Not unto nomination," it seems the poet clarifies her perspective on the periphery of perception by negating her own role as a poet. Dickinson reveals her poetic position in much the same way that Bhabha describes

the “positionality” of a socially liminal voice, except in this case the poet’s position is between her intellectual and intuitive experiences, linked respectively with the physical and spiritual contexts. In describing Dickinson’s use of negation, Miller states: “By defining her margins, Dickinson reveals what she does not have, that is, the unnamed meaning she will illuminate” (102). In Dickinson’s negation of the autonomy of word choice, she exemplifies Miller’s assertion, and this “unnamed meaning” (Miller 102), it seems, in the context of Pinker’s examination of language, resides in the realm of inference. In Dickinson’s marginalized perspective, she seems to be reaching from a peripheral position that almost, but does not quite, find the “Circumference” (L268) about which she wrote to Higginson.

Seen from another perspective, if Dickinson’s word choices are not subject to “nomination,” then where indeed do they come from? The poem also seems to clarify that Dickinson’s consciousness, which transcribes thought into language is, in fact, in unity with the realm of inference, which seems to be closer to the spiritual realm. In this understanding, the poet’s acquiescence to the realm of inference is not admonished submission to what “The Cherubim reveal[s],” but communion. The dual interpretation that this poem makes possible is an example of what Wolosky discusses as “texts as somehow at odds or at cross-purposes in their internal structures and their mutual relationships, with which every Dickinson commentator ultimately must grapple” (132). The dual meanings in many of Dickinson’s poems represent a divided consciousness struggling for a balance between the physical and spiritual realms on the boundaries of comprehension. One may look to Hegel for support of this alternate interpretation of what Dickinson might be saying in her poem. Hegel states that the

“mind place[s] itself at the standpoint of opposition between itself and its Other” (33). He further posits: “If soul and body are absolutely opposed to one another as is maintained by the abstractive intellectual consciousness, then there is no possibility of any community between them” (33). But this view, as Hegel points out, is not a correct one because he maintains that “Thought” (34) is not independent of “the nature of spirit” (33). We must “transcend the dualism” and recognize that all is “One” (34). It seems that despite her struggle, by 1865 Dickinson did “transcend the dualism,” at least temporarily, as she writes these lines: “Banish Air from Air – / Divide Light if you dare – They’ll meet” (Fr963). In Hegel’s view, it seems, there is no separation between the intellect and the intuitive self, and it seems that Dickinson is struggling to accept this concept. If we think of the mind as the intellect and the spirit as the intuitive self, there may seem to be a distinct separation between the two. Hegel is saying that there really is no separation at all between them. They are one. Although this might seem an over-simplification of Hegel’s thoughts on this subject, it clarifies Dickinson’s poetical motivations as a consciousness precariously poised on the periphery between mind and spirit. In an 1863 poem, the poet expresses her inability to be one with the spiritual realm as she states: “It takes me all the while to poise— / And then – it doesn’t stay—” (Fr546). Perhaps Dickinson, poised on the periphery of perception, is referring to the “Partition” (Fr570) mentioned earlier, which she strives to tear down through her poetry.

David Porter discusses “the harsh artistic freedom [of Dickinson’s] that opens up when reality and language undergo a separation” (115). It seems Dickinson’s allegiance to the articulation of her consciousness, however separated from reality it

may be, allows her to describe a thought process not necessitated by the physical world. This “artistic freedom” actually exists in the space between reality and language, or on the peripheries of both. In an undated poem Dickinson refers to the area between the two as a “solitude of space” (Fr 1696), which she describes as: “That polar privacy / A soul admitted to itself—” (Fr1696). There is a certain “undecidability” that Bhabha refers to “in the signification of part and whole, past and present, self and Other” (77), which seems present in this “solitude of space” that Dickinson describes. The longing for “A soul admitted to itself—” exemplifies Dickinson’s spiritually marginalized perspective as she seeks to merge her dual existences. In striving to blend her peripheries of perception into one space of clarity, Dickinson confronts the cold poetic intersection of her physical self with her spiritual self (perhaps where her mind meets her soul, or where her inferences meet language). This tension Dickinson articulates may be what Porter describes as “self-conscious, private, and momentary in its grasp” (115). Dickinson’s true struggle is with understanding her spiritual consciousness as she strives for the ultimate “relief” she once described to Higginson, through the writing of her poetry. Through poetic articulation, the poet longs for the relief of her “soul admitted to itself—” (Fr1696), where bridging the gaps between her intellectual and intuitive experiences, linked with the physical and spiritual realms of consciousness, are paramount.

CHAPTER 4  
A SOVEREIGN MIND

Central to Dickinson's sense of a peripheral perspective as a sovereign consciousness is her aversion to publication; "How public—like a Frog—" (Fr260), she once wrote in a poem about public recognition. In this statement we see clear evidence of a mind not altogether comfortable with acknowledging her person as the conduit of her poetry's public communication. She writes to Higginson: "When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me, but a supposed person" (L268). This statement seems to show that Dickinson perceived her poems as distinctly apart from her physical being, seeming "to dissolve any linkage between them and herself" (455), as Habegger affirms. Dickinson's statement appears to be a response to her spiritually peripheral perspective and parallels Bhabha's culturally marginalized perspective. Bhabha writes:

Each time the encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as site of identity and autonomy and—most important—leaves a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance. (71)

In this description Bhabha is describing an immediate reaction to the confrontation of the self with an opposing realm of prospective existence. As a consciousness confronts its "other," there is, as Bhabha describes, a "moment of interrogation, a

moment in which the demand for identification becomes, primarily, a response to other questions of signification and desire” (71). Dickinson is confronting a higher realm of recognition that does not include the physical world in which she participates. Dickinson’s statement to Higginson may represent what Bhabha describes as a “sign of resistance” (71). In Dickinson’s statement to Higginson, she is resisting the earthbound temporal status of the role of an author. In representing herself as a “supposed person” in regard to her work, she is responding from a spiritually marginalized stance. Corresponding with Bhabha’s description of marginalized behavior, Dickinson seeks to “evacuate the self as site of identity” in her desire to attain the spiritual realm of experience. A poem from 1863 seems to support this view. Its first stanza reads:

Publication—is the Auction  
Of the Mind of Man—  
Poverty—be justifying  
For so Foul a thing (Fr788)

The last two lines of the poem read: “But reduce no Human Spirit / To Disgrace of Price—” (Fr788), which may shed more light on her description of herself as “a supposed person” in regard to her “representative” status as the author of her work. Her thoughts may be immortal like her “Human Spirit” (Fr788), as she notes in contemplating publication, but she is well aware that her person is not. As Dickinson puts distance between her spiritual self and the temporal physical identity of authorship, she is exercising her limited power in what Bhabha would call this “moment of interrogation” (71). Through language, she is pushing against the



boundary between her physical self and the non-material realm of the spirit where her true consciousness resides, “resisting” it, as Bhabha would say, or “pluck[ing] at [the] partition” (Fr570), as Dickinson would say, on the periphery of perception.

In her biography, Cynthia Griffin Wolff sees Dickinson’s statement of herself as “representative of the verse” (L268) as indicative of a familiarity with Emerson’s essays of “Representative Men,” and this seems likely. However, I also think that due to her peripheral perspective, Dickinson’s statement about her representative status - “it does not mean me, but a supposed person” (L268) - also indicates a drive to distance her poems from herself in an effort to allow them to be interpreted in their own right, apart from her mortal authorial identity. Dickinson’s questions in her first letter to Higginson ask him “if my verse is alive?” and if “it breathed” (L260). This seems to indicate a notion on Dickinson’s part that she wanted her poetry to have a life of its own, outside the boundaries of her authorship, and in a way outside the boundaries of her own mortality. In a later letter to Higginson, the poet writes: “I smile when you suggest that I delay ‘to publish’—that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin—” (L265). If one dismisses false modesty on Dickinson’s part, it seems that she would want her verse once written, to exist apart from her physicality, which her name identifies. This seems to be the primary motivation behind Dickinson’s statement to Higginson concerning herself as “a supposed person” (L268). Dickinson employs the ancient poetic desire for one’s work to outlive oneself.

Yet Emily Dickinson, not some supposed person, did write...and write...and write. But for whom? Although only eleven of her poems were published in her own

lifetime (Fr 1531-2), Dickinson wrote a total of 1789 poems (Fr), most of which were not discovered until after her death. According to her sister Lavinia, 900 of them were “tied together with twine” (qtd. in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Edited by Thomas H. Johnson, ix) into little packets. Dickinson’s choice to organize her poetry into packets, which we now refer to as her “fascicles,” shows some sense of divided ownership. In her cognitive struggle between her physical self and her spiritual self, her poems only partially belonged to her. Her writing, one can assume, was a spiritual necessity, as well as an intellectual relief. She once wrote to Higginson, “the Verses just relieve—” (L265), and judging from the large number of poems Dickinson left behind, her need for relief was intense.

Dickinson’s divided sense of self is apparent in the following poem, written in 1865, which shows a wish to experience the independence of air, the independence that one who lives inside a body could never have:

Air has no Residence, no Neighbor,  
No Ear, no Door,  
No Apprehension of Another  
Oh, Happy Air!

Ethereal Guest at e’en an Outcast’s Pillow—  
Essential Host, in Life’s faint, wailing Inn,  
Later than Light thy Consciousness accost me  
Till it depart, persuading Mine— (Fr989)

Air, the universal enabler of life, to whom Dickinson assigns a consciousness, is not

confined to a body. It has no “Residence,” which foreshadows her confession a year later in: “I am afraid to own a Body—” (Fr1050). The consciousness of air, Dickinson imagines, is one that she seems envious of for its aloofness, if that is possible. Yet she understands that what it takes for her to apprehend it is its departure, its absence from the physical world, which would clearly mean death. Absence is palpable to Dickinson. She is not afraid of it, as evidenced by her unabashed use of dashes to indicate silence or the termination of expressed thought. Her true consciousness exists only when she strives to “pry the Walls—” (Fr570) and reach beyond the periphery of her perception to translate a feeling anchored in separateness. In the above poem, Dickinson refers to herself as an “Outcast,” but it is hard to judge in the context of the poem why she is outcast. Does Dickinson feel she is “Ethereal[ly]” (spiritually) outcast for her religious ambivalence, or just because she has not yet died? Or maybe it is for both reasons, which are themselves integrally related.

The other side of life seems to claim Dickinson’s attention even in her youth. In a late 1850 letter to her girlhood school-friend, she writes: “I seem to be quite submissive to the thought of growing old” (L39). Contrastingly, in a letter to her brother Austin two years later she writes: “I wish we were always children, how to grow up I don’t know” (L115). These two statements present an interesting dichotomy of Dickinson’s psyche. She seems drawn like a magnet to two peripheral extremes, birth and death, each at the edge of mortality. Dickinson’s envious tone in regard to “Air” (Fr989) seems as though it is her state of physical aliveness, as opposed to spiritual “Deathlessness” (Fr 1050), as shown in the poem mentioned earlier, that keeps her separate from a camaraderie with “Air.” Dickinson’s seeming

envy of Air's having "no Residence, no Neighbor, / No Ear, no Door, / No Apprehension of Another" (Fr989) seems to suggest a self-willed alienation from her own society as well as her own body. Her use of the word "Residence," metaphorically similar to her use of the word "Castle" (Fr718) in "The Spirit is the Conscious Ear," refers to the physical body, which she perceives as a hindrance to her spiritual quest. In this poem it is apparent that the poet senses a feeling of separateness. The speaker is either "othered" from our world or the next, and in striving to reach beyond the periphery of her perception, she is "relieve[d]" (L265) as she expressed to Colonel Higginson. This relief of articulation may restore some sense of control to a consciousness that seeks "Circumference" (L268).

Dickinson realizes that the perception of separation between the physical body, tied to its natural surroundings and cultural environment, and the spiritual self, which exists apart from the physical, is not limited to her alone. The following poem from early 1864, written at the height of the Civil War, may be one of her only poems that directly acknowledges race. Apparent in this poem is the poet's cultural awareness of her contemporary society:

Color—Caste—Denomination—

These—are Time's Affair—

Death's diviner Classifying

Does not know they are—

As in Sleep—all Hue forgotten—

Tenets—put behind—

Death's large—Democratic fingers

Rub away the Brand—

If Circassian—He is careless—

If He put away

Chrysalis of Blonde—or Umber—

Equal Butterfly—

They emerge from His Obscuring—

What Death—knows so well—

Our minuter intuitions—

Deem unplausable— (Fr836)

In Dickinson's reference to "Color—Caste—Denomination—," she makes clear that race, economic status, and religion are "Time's Affair—" (Fr836). In this poem, Dickinson clarifies an acute awareness of cultural struggles in her own world, yet in reaching toward a spiritual center from which she is separated, she realizes that only "Death's large—Democratic fingers / Rub away the Brand—" (Fr836). The struggles of other physical beings like herself will be attended to in the spiritual realm if not in the physical realm. The ultimate power to effect change is not in Dickinson's contemporary physical world, as this poem makes clear; only through time and death are "Tenets—put behind—" (Fr836). In this realm beyond the physical, every self is an "Equal Butterfly—" (Fr836), and whatever earthly cultural conclusions, or "minuter intuitions" (Fr836) we may arrive at, they are, in truth, "unplausable"

because only “Death—knows so well—” the true value of the soul. On first glance, the cultural implications of this poem may seem anomalous; however, once again revealed is Dickinson’s primary perceptive struggle with a realm of spirit outside of her physical world, and it is in transcribing this realm where her perception dwells.

While it is clear that Dickinson’s wartime perspective, when this poem was written, was subjected to cultural, political and societal shifts which were inescapable, the reality of war and its repercussions of loss and death seem to have also intensified the poet’s struggle for spiritual deliverance. Like American writer Stephen Crane’s question “Where is God?” in his 1899 collection of poems *War is Kind and Other Lines*, Dickinson senses a separation from her spiritual center as she confronts war. In her recent discussion of Dickinson’s war poetry, Wolosky writes that “War is proposed not only as a historical-metaphysical problem—where metaphysics and history intersect—but also as a problem of selfhood” (118). Each self is subject to its own spiritual selfhood; Dickinson seems to understand, as she contemplates the selves in her midst in the writing of “Color—Caste—Denomination” (Fr836). As the poet identifies herself elsewhere as a “Sovereign” self, separate from her physical identity, she reaches toward a realm outside of the physical where “Death’s Diviner classifying” (Fr836) is more important. Intensified in the throes of war, Dickinson’s intellect was consumed with the question of immortality. War, it seems, while a cultural inevitability, is also a reminder of personal mortality. As Jane Donahue Eberwein writes in her discussion of Dickinson’s struggle with the concept of immortality, “Even while questioning, Emily Dickinson continued to hope for immortality, especially as death’s depredations struck closer and closer” (96). The

cultural implications of Dickinson's poetry cannot be denied; however, in acquiescing to the poet's perspective as a "Sovereign" self, we can also acknowledge another poetic meaning in the separation she places between the physical and the spiritual worlds. As the poet reaches across the periphery of perception, she is aware of the unknown spiritual realm just along the margin of comprehension.

CHAPTER 5  
AN INTELLECTUAL APPETITE

For Dickinson, full comprehension of existence encompassed both the physical and spiritual realms. In a discussion of Dickinson's understanding of the biblical story of Jacob, Wolff offers insight into Dickinson's struggles with spiritual alienation. The Old Testament story of Jacob and his wrestle with God seems to have struck a nerve with Dickinson. God's visible presence left the earth for good after his wrestle with Jacob, and mankind was left alone. In Dickinson's earlier mentioned poem, as the "Soul" is left alone, the poet's spiritual separateness is evident. Wolff writes:

In Emily's Dickinson's judgment, this primal scene [of Jacob confronting God] was the turning point for all subsequent history, and she reckoned all human life as scarred by the God Who had withdrawn from us to prowls behind the veil of the visible world. [. . .] [S]earch as she might, she could never know His nature save by indirection. (147)

Dickinson's understanding of the story of Jacob contributed to her skepticism concerning a benevolent God. Even as a young woman, the poet struggles with a consciousness reaching toward comprehension on the periphery of perception. In a letter to a friend in 1846, Dickinson, writes:



I feel that I am sailing upon the brink of an awful precipice, from which I cannot escape & over which I fear my tiny boat will soon glide if I do not receive help from above. There is now a revival in College & many hearts have given way to the claims of God. What if it should extend to the village church & your friends A. & E. feel its influence. Would that it might be so.

(L11)

Still searching in 1864 for the “help from above,” about which she wrote her friend in 1846, the poet longs for “The luxury to apprehend” (Fr819) as she expresses her need for comprehension of God in a poem. Here, as in other poems, Dickinson points to “a single Crumb” (Fr819) on which she, like the sparrow in an earlier mentioned poem, is to feed her appetite for comprehension. This unsatisfied appetite is again imagined in another poem using bird imagery where the poet refers to “an insufficient Loaf—” (Fr872) to fortify her hunger for clarity. Christopher E.G. Benfey writes that Dickinson “tends to accept the ‘truth’ of skepticism—that we cannot know, with certainty, the existence of God” (16). This skepticism, increasingly prevalent in mid-nineteenth century New England, which fostered a transcendental perspective that views nature as the divine force, seems present in Dickinson.

Looking for answers in nature, the poet strives to find clarity as she discovers God’s presence in the physical world. In this light, Dickinson’s poetry seems to suggest a view closer to New England transcendentalism than Christianity, although Dickinson’s philosophical underpinnings were born of a unique psyche, which would insist on discovering her own truths. Roger Lundin is forthright when he states: “That is not to say that in her maturity Dickinson definitively renounced the Christian faith;

there is too much evidence of her continuing spiritual passion and intense religious devotion to prove any such assertion” (60).

While Dickinson did not reject Christianity outright, she seems to have had a need for more answers than it alone could offer. Dickinson’s mind required a variety of intellectual and intuitive stimuli to satisfy her appetite for clarity. Part of this quest included seeking out the thoughts of other great minds. Dickinson acknowledges her love of engagement with other minds in a poem from 1863:

Strong Draughts of Their Refreshing Minds

To drink – enables Mine

Through Desert or the Wilderness

As bore it sealed Wine –

To go elastic – Or as One

The Camel’s trait –attained –

How powerful the stimulus

Of an Hermetic Mind – (Fr770)

The last line of the poem suggests the poet’s respect for other “Sovereign” (Fr250) minds like her own, and the invigoration she experiences in her engagement with them as they arouse her intellect to widen or “go elastic.” Dickinson’s engagement with other minds prods her aptitude for conceptual memory as she suggests a capacity for indefinite storage of insight like the “Camel’s trait” for the preservation of water. As the daughter of Amherst College’s treasurer, Dickinson had access to many of the leading thinkers of her day. In Lundin’s discussion of the poet’s family life, he writes

Dickinson was part of a family who “subscribed to fifteen magazines and newspapers, far more than most families in Amherst received” (128). Although she was far from a social butterfly, Dickinson was known to have attended several lectures and sermons by popular speakers. Their influence provided the poet with intellectual stimuli engaging her with other contemporary thinkers and their metaphorical creations.

As readers of Emily Dickinson know, the variety of complex and beautiful metaphors presented in her poetry can sometimes take one’s breath away. It seems the poet had a natural aptitude for the creation of metaphor. It is evident that poetry was not the only art form in which Dickinson sought and discovered her own unique metaphors. Dickinson alludes to her late night piano improvisations in a letter to her cousin John Long Graves who had visited overnight and may have been disturbed by it. In her letter to him afterwards, the poet writes: “I play the old, odd tunes yet, which used to flit about your head after honest hours—and wake dear Sue, and madden me, with their grief and fun” (L184). Habegger mentions an interview with Graves’ niece given to the *Boston Sunday Globe* years later, who recalls her uncle’s description of Dickinson’s comment that “she could ‘improvise better at night.’” (qtd. 296). In the same style of solitude she preferred during the creation of her poems, Dickinson sought the quiet nocturnal privacy of her own mind in which to improvise musical metaphors of meaning. It seems Dickinson had a naturally metaphorical mind.

Although it is probable that Dickinson’s brain was hard-wired for this type of thought process, some literary influences seem to have fortified her natural poetic gifts. Chief among them are Edward Hitchcock and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Both men lived and

published during her lifetime and were influential in contemporary mid-nineteenth-century American thought.

Hitchcock, the self-identified adherent of “natural religion” and president of Amherst College during the years the poet attended, enhanced Dickinson’s “basic orientation to nature and immortality” (Habegger 143). Hitchcock’s *Reminiscences of Amherst College*, published in 1863, provides a glimpse of the academic environment in which Dickinson and her family were immersed. This book, out of print since its publication, gives brief biographical homage to a number of key figures, including Samuel Dickinson (the poet’s grandfather and one of the college’s founders), and Edward Dickinson (the poet’s father and the college’s treasurer for a time). Hitchcock would never know the literary significance he may have had on Emily Dickinson, and the lasting imprint she would make on American literature beyond Amherst. Because Hitchcock was a geologist first, he perceives the vastness of time more acutely than even the historian, and it is this sensitivity that seems to have resonated with Emily Dickinson. In this book, while comparing the “enthusiasm” (404) of the archeologist’s study of human history to the geologist’s study of the earth, Hitchcock writes: “But I have found in geology a still higher source of gratification and one not expected. It has deepened my convictions of the truth not only of natural but of revealed religion” (405). Dickinson’s search for a “revealed” truth seems to have aligned in some ways with Hitchcock’s pursuit. Though Dickinson’s association with nineteenth-century American intellectual and spiritual thought, through her academically and politically active father, undoubtedly fed her perspective, she remained skeptical of conclusions not of her own making. Choosing to remain

unsaved until she discovered her own answers, Dickinson was still searching when she died. It is this skepticism, generated from her spiritually peripheral perspective, which drives the questions Dickinson seeks to answer through her poetry.

Edward Hitchcock seems to have been searching for some of the same answers that Dickinson was. Before the publication of *Reminiscences of Amherst College*, Hitchcock collected four lectures he had given to Amherst's academic community during part of Emily Dickinson's tutelage at the college. As one reads Hitchcock's *Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons*, published in 1851 in Amherst, it becomes apparent his insights were significant in the evolving philosophical inquiries of Dickinson. Hitchcock's search was fulfilled; it seems, with the metaphors provided by the physical world, which he illustrates through a religious and scientific perspective. Millicent Todd Bingham, part of the poet's close circle of family and friends, one generation removed, writes of Hitchcock: "During that period no account of Amherst is complete which fails to give weight to his influence" (104). Hitchcock, a professor, theologian, and geologist with a poetic way of writing, sought to build "bridges between the Christian faith and science" (Lundin 32). He saw no conflict between the two; in fact they proved each other in Hitchcock's view. Through an examination of the seasons, Hitchcock hypothesizes all matter is renewed in another form after its demise. Hitchcock's ideas are extremely suggestive of Einstein's work in the next century that states energy cannot be created or destroyed, but only converted. Dickinson seems to be grappling with the idea of the soul or consciousness as an entity that exists distinct from, but similar, to matter. Hitchcock repeatedly uses words like "modification" (22),

“change,” “transformation,” and “translated” (23) to describe what he acknowledges is a miraculous process. Immortality is characterized as a series of temporary conditions and death represents a transition rather than an end. Hitchcock writes, “the change of death may pass upon man with no other effect upon his interior nature [(his spirit)], than to fit it to unfold in higher perfection in eternity” (38). In a late poem from 1883, seeming to affirm Hitchcock’s assertion, Dickinson writes:

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? (Fr1627B) (lines 1-12)

“The Spirit lasts –,” Dickinson writes in the first line of the poem, seeming to acknowledge Hitchcock’s view of eternal life. But wait, not so fast, the poet seems to think, as she follows that statement with a dash to indicate her hesitancy: “– but in what mode – / Below, the Body speaks,” the speaker is quick to add. While the poet seems to express a philosophical kinship with Hitchcock in another poem: “No Friend

have I that so persists / As this Eternity” (Fr1690), she also is unsatisfied in not knowing completely what Hitchcock is so certain of, namely how she will “unfold in higher perfection in eternity” (Hitchcock 38). “[I]n what mode” (Fr1627B) will she be transformed after death, she inquires; the not knowing is what bothers her even as Hitchcock’s words comfort her. Dickinson refers to Hitchcock in a letter to Higginson in 1877: “I used to read Dr. Hitchcock’s Book on the Flowers of North America. This comforted their Absence—assuring me they lived” (L488).<sup>3</sup> Although there seems some certainty of spiritual continuity in the assertion “The Spirit lasts —,” the immediately following question, “— but in what mode —” expresses what Bhabha describes as an “ambivalent space of enunciation” (55). She seems equally curious, as she is hesitant, to experience a realm of existence from which she is excluded. The ambivalence, which Bhabha associates with cultural liminality, is also apparent in the spiritual liminality of Dickinson. The tension between two sides of a cognitive conversation, exemplifying a relationship of unequal power between a human consciousness and an omnipotent God, is exhibited in the poet’s words. It is this perception of an unequal power dynamic in Dickinson’s relationship with God that provides the basis of my comparison to Bhabha’s conception of the marginalized perspective. The ambiguous margin between certainty and doubt, manifested in Dickinson’s consciousness, represents a voice on the periphery of perception.

It would not be surprising for Dickinson to find Hitchcock’s prose inspiring; as Sewall states in his discussion of Hitchcock, “there was a touch of the poet in everything he did” (343). The professor scientifically, yet with a poetically imbued tone, explains the properties of matter and decay as well as the eventual regeneration

of all things in nature, including flowers, for which Dickinson held a special love,<sup>4</sup> and uses his explanations to confirm spiritual immortality. Hitchcock writes:

The spiritual body will be incorruptible and immortal. [. . .] [W]e see no organic being able to resist all tendency to decay, and all mechanical violence; and hence we may be unable to understand, how a material organization can remain unaffected by all chemical and mechanical agencies. But it is only a narrow mind, that supposes it understands all the possible modifications of matter. (22)

Certainly Emily Dickinson did not have “a narrow mind.” Dickinson’s unachievable search for complete comprehension confirms Hitchcock’s acknowledgment that not all things can be understood by the human mind. Indeed, key to understanding Dickinson’s refusal to be “saved” is her unwillingness to “narrow,” as Hitchcock describes it, her mind to only one area of doctrinal insight offered through Christianity. Instead, Dickinson is willing to examine all possible areas of insight available to her, as Hiroko Uno writes, “using her learning from textbooks or lectures, especially from Hitchcock’s, in order to find her own solution” (107). Like Hitchcock, she seems to have had an insatiable appetite for clarity, and for Dickinson that meant seeking answers through her poetic quest. Hitchcock, like Emerson, acknowledges the art of poetry as a means to understanding as he cites a poem, which speaks of angels. Hitchcock comments, “the poet hardly exceeds the literal truth” (20), as he intersperses poetry throughout his thesis to reinforce his points. Hitchcock’s poetic language, along with his intellectuality and spiritual insights seem to have had some influence on Dickinson.



Integral in Hitchcock's appeal to Dickinson's poetic sense must have been his use of metaphor to aid in a deeper comprehension of what he called "heaven."

Hitchcock writes:

The employments and enjoyments of heaven are also represented as wholly spiritual, although sometimes described, from the poverty of human language, by a reference to material objects and processes" (14).

In this statement, Hitchcock's observation acknowledges the use of metaphor, the language of the poet, to convey greater truths.

In recognizing "the analogy of nature" (Hitchcock 46), the professor is able to make sense of existence as he documents the metaphorical value of the seasons in his collection of lectures. As Lundin observes, Hitchcock, through his richly conveyed prose, "reinforced [Dickinson's] inclination to read nature as a text possessing an abundance of spiritual meanings" (33). Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose *Nature* was published nine years before Hitchcock's lecture "The Resurrections of Spring" was presented, writes: "It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (34). Both men, older contemporaries of Dickinson, seem to have a similar perspective in regard to the physical world's capacity as a tool for understanding the spiritual world. Dickinson seems to have come to this realization as well as she seems to distill Hitchcock's prose concerning heaven and the "poverty of language" (Hitchcock 14) into a poem from 1862:

"Heaven" has different Signs—to me—  
Sometimes, I think that Noon

Is but a symbol of the Place—

And when again, at Dawn,

A mighty look runs round the World

And settles in the Hills –

An Awe if it should be like that

Opon the Ignorance steals –

The Orchard, when the Sun is on –

The Triumph of the Birds

When they together Victory make –

Some Carnivals of Clouds

The Rapture of a finished Day

Returning to the West –

All these – remind us of the place

That Men call “Paradise” –

Itself be fairer – we suppose –

But how Ourselves, shall be

Adorned, for a Superior Grace –

Not yet, our eyes can see – (Fr544).

Dickinson’s reference to “Ignorance” in the second stanza acknowledges the

unknowability of God while recognizing that the divide between the physical and the spiritual is an uncrossable periphery. The poet's focus on "Heaven" in this poem, once again reveals her persistent preoccupation with eternal life. The "Signs" that Dickinson sees everywhere in the "Dawn," in the "Hills," and in the "Orchard" (Fr544) echo Hitchcock's assertion in his statement above acknowledging the "poverty of human language" (14), and the symbolism of nature. In Nina Baym's discussion of Dickinson's understanding of science, she acknowledges the poet's recognition that science is insufficient to represent experience. Baym writes: "This is not to attack science but simply to separate the representational work of science from the creative work of nature" (150). Dickinson and Hitchcock, it seems, understand that language, like science, is only a representational framework and cannot fully explain existence.

Hitchcock writes: "Nature, indeed, with a thousand tongues, tells us that it is a world of probation and discipline; a mere preparatory state for a final and far more exalted condition" (70-1). The symbolic value of nature told to humanity "with a thousand tongues" further authorizes the value of metaphor for Dickinson.

Hitchcock's description of the physical life as a "mere preparatory state," is refigured in Dickinson's confident, perhaps impatient, phrase in the above poem about the as yet unknown heaven - "Not yet, our eyes can see—" (Fr544), - she writes. Although the poet is separated from the realm of "Spirit," her use of the word "yet" shows that her faith is not quite dissolved. I think it is possible that Hitchcock's assurances to Dickinson that her flowers indeed "lived" (L488), may have served to help temper what could have developed into spiritual despair. Contrary to Baym's view of

Dickinson's "affiliation with science against theology," (151), I think Dickinson used Hitchcock's scientific, yet theologically inspired, insights to understand theology on her own terms.

As Eric Wilson observes, "Dickinson both participates in and critiques the Hitchcockian scientific optimism of her age" (28). In a declaration of seeming certainty, she writes in 1864 "Love is Immortality" (Fr951). Although scattered throughout her work are statements of certainty like her assertion on "Love," more often we see expressed the poet's struggle as she strives to bridge another periphery between clarity and uncertainty. Hitchcockian optimism, however, is moderated by both Hitchcock's and Dickinson's realization that science, like God, is not fully knowable by human minds. Dickinson acknowledges this when she writes: "Nature and God – I neither knew / Yet both, so well knew me" (Fr803). She would spend her life attempting to know them through her poetry.

In his discussion of Hitchcock's influence on Dickinson, Uno writes: "Emily Dickinson had a special interest in 'Eternity' or the life after death, partly because in her time many religious scientists including Hitchcock, tried to prove 'Eternity' through scientific evidence" (99). Uno looks at Dickinson's references to chemistry and scientific processes in her poetry to link her insights to Hitchcock, and his observations reveal Dickinson's keen scientific understanding of matter. Hitchcock's scientific language seems to have provided Dickinson with supplementary metaphoric inventory. In a direct commentary on the use of metaphor, Dickinson writes in a poem from 1865: "The Object absolute – is nought— / Perception sets it fair" (Fr1103). Dickinson seems to be saying one must look deeper into an object's

symbolic or metaphorical meaning for the truest perceptive value. Recognizing the spiritual implications in the physical world that surrounds us is integral to a mind that seeks the fullest contextual understanding of existence. Emerson, Hitchcock, and Dickinson, among others in the nineteenth century, seem to have been on the same path of discovery.

CHAPTER 6  
A PRIVATE PERSPECTIVE

Many of Dickinson's poems express a divided consciousness, which places equal weight on two areas of insight that the poet perceives *because* of her peripheral aspect. At times it seems that Dickinson actually guards this peripheral aspect like a secret owner of something of which only she is aware. This is her private perspective, and she is proud of it:

A Wind that rose though not a Leaf  
In any Forest stirred—  
But with itself did cold engage  
Beyond the realm of Bird.

A wind that woke a lone Delight  
Like Separation's Swell—  
Restored in Arctic confidence  
To the invisible—(Fr1216B)

This poem seems in some ways to bridge Dickinson's alienated consciousness with herself using metaphors of nature. Bhabha observes, "[the] splitting of the subject is enacted in the *writing*" (75), as he describes the existence of dual consciousness in his examination of several twentieth-century poems. While Bhabha's cited poems are

representative of a cultural splitting, Dickinson's poem represents a spiritual splitting, through her word "Separation," exemplifying a marginal perspective. "Separation's Swell" (Fr1216B) is something to be desired, suggesting in the word "Swell" the proud feathered breast of a winter bird, employing another example of Dickinson's bird imagery. Also evident in Dickinson's use of the word "Separation," is the suggestion of not only the separation of feathers from skin to promote desirable warmth, but also the sovereignty of self as separate from both the physical and spiritual realms. The speaker, while acknowledging in the poem an alienated position through her word "Separation," also experiences "confidence." In Dickinson's recognition of "a lone Delight / [ . . . ] / Restored in Arctic confidence / To the invisible—" (Fr1216B), I am reminded of what Bhabha describes as a certain "presence through absence" (75), in his discussion of cultural "otherness." Not even a leaf will stir in recognition of the poet's presence as she experiences the periphery of perception in the writing of her poem. The splitting or "doubleness" (75) Bhabha writes about is evident in Dickinson's line "But with itself did cold engage" as the speaker affirms the two sides of her split consciousness as she contemplates her spiritual separation.

In paraphrasing Roland Barthes, Bhabha describes this process as "the superstructure overwhelmed by the infrastructure" (75), and Dickinson's poem seems to exemplify this. Her superstructure is the spiritual world and her infrastructure is her physical self. The constant tension the poet articulates between the two is representative of a marginalized perspective. The suggestion of an invisible self of which only the poet is aware is evident in the poem. Dickinson communicates a kind

of “presence through absence” in her poem where not even a leaf will stir (as the poem suggests). The speaker seems to linger her observation over the cognitive landscape unnoticed by either world or “Beyond the realm of Bird.” Although the poem might seem that it is about nature, it is really about the poet’s own consciousness. Dickinson is engaging with herself in what Sally Bushell, in referring to other Dickinson poems, sees as a “deep dialogue of understanding” (57). The coldness to which Dickinson refers with words like “Wind,” “cold,” and “Arctic” seems to indicate a self-imposed distance, in what she calls “Separation’s Swell,” between one part of her consciousness and another. It is this cognitive separation, however, which actually provides the peripheral vantage required for Dickinson’s insights to be born. In an odd way, only by dividing her consciousness is Dickinson able to see the “invisible.”

Dickinson’s private perspective exhibited as a divided consciousness is also apparent in the following poem. Here she speaks of a second mind separate from her own, which exists behind her own consciousness. In this poem, Dickinson compares her mind to a haunted house, “—surpassing / Material Place /” (Fr407B). She writes:

Far safer, of a midnight meeting  
External Ghost  
Than its interior confronting—  
That cooler Host— (Fr407B, lines 5-8).

When one plane of her mind meets the other, it is startling for her. Here again, as in “A Wind that rose” (Fr1216), an image of coldness permeates the interior thought process where sense is made. This haunted chamber of her consciousness is also a



dark place as evidenced by her reference to “a midnight meeting” (Fr407B). She continues:

Ourself behind ourself, concealed—

Should startle most—

Assassin hid in our Apartment

Be Horror’s least—

The Body—borrows a Revolver—

He bolts the Door—

O’erlooking a superior spectre—

Or More—(Fr407B, lines 13-20)

Once again the body is placed at odds with the spirit or the soul. It seems that in these poems, Dickinson is thinking of her divided consciousness as being comprised of her body’s mind and her soul’s mind, one linked to the physical world and one linked to the spiritual world. The space between them is what she endeavors to cross. In Dickinson’s view, the soul’s mind is one to be more feared than an “Assassin,” yet it is “superior” and it may even be “More” than what she suspects. Awe and fear, both integrally related, as in her traditional understanding of God or “circumference” as the poet describes it, are expressed in this poem. It seems that in describing an interior self, “a superior spectre” that exists in the silent realm of cognitive inferences independent of language, Dickinson is referring to Pinker’s “inference making device” (79). This silent realm Dickinson describes, however, as separate from herself, seems to be connected to God in its obscurity as well as its superiority and its

unknowable “More.” The space underneath language, which she is describing in this poem, is scary, yet astounding, and transcribing her awareness of it into language may be the required “relief” Dickinson described to Higginson as the reason for her writing.

Dickinson’s awareness of some unbridgeable periphery demarcating the boundary between her physical and spiritual selves seems in many ways to have fostered a perception of spiritual marginalization. Dickinson’s position as a naturally reclusive and economically protected woman may have actually provided the freedom she required to pursue her poetic expressions of spiritual separation. The poet continues to resist metaphors not of her making; as she creates and speaks her own language in her attempts to comprehend immortality. “Faith – is the Pierless Bridge” (Fr978), Dickinson writes. The poet understands that belief alone is not sufficient in providing a firm footing for her search; she requires understanding as well. In seeking to claim the sovereignty of her spirit through her own poetic metaphors, she sometimes does appear to find the comfort of unifying both her physical and spiritual worlds. Dickinson seems to wrestle as much with her own consciousness as with her God. In an 1861 poem she writes: “The Drop that wrestles in the Sea— / Forgets her own locality— / As I—toward Thee— ” (Fr255). The speaker is at once oppositional in her wrestling and acquiescent in her forgetting as she blurs the peripheries of her perspective. This early poem represents the poet’s lifelong spiritual struggle as she negotiates the two realms of her perceptions.

In the following poem, Dickinson expresses a liminal identity, torn between the mortal world where she is confined and the spiritual world in which she wishes to “wade.”

What if I say I shall not wait!

What if I burst the fleshly Gate –

And pass escaped – to thee!

What if I file this Mortal – off –

See where it hurt me – That’s enough –

And wade in Liberty! (Fr305, lines 1-6)

This poem clearly describes the poet’s frustration as she confronts the boundary that separates her from the spiritual world of God. The speaker is acutely aware of the confines of physicality as she longs for its opposite. Bhabha describes this sense of difference in a cultural context as a “liminal space, in between the designation of identity, [which] becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference” (5) between two opposite identifications. While the differences Bhabha is describing exist between different classes, ethnicities, or cultures of people, the difference that Dickinson experiences is between the mortal world she is a part of and the immortal world she is not. It is this tension between two opposing forces that provides the similarity between Bhabha’s and Dickinson’s descriptions of a marginal voice. In her discussion of Dickinson’s perceptive struggle concerning immortality, Eberwein writes: Dickinson “subjected Transcendental promises to the same tests she applied to church ones, [. . .] often encountering an

unbridgeable divide between it and her consciousness” (88). The divide between the physical and spiritual worlds confounds Dickinson throughout her life. In the poem above, Dickinson is defiant in her frustration with the inability to transcend the confines of physicality. These lines seem to represent what Bhabha describes as “the negotiation of incommensurable differences creat[ing] a tension peculiar to borderline existences” (312). Dickinson’s poetic struggle defines her as an identity on the periphery of perception equally subjected to Bhabha’s cultural marginalization as to a subtler spiritual marginalization.

Emily Dickinson’s perspective, however, was certainly not a wholly alienated aspect upon the world in which she existed. Many of her poems expressed an awe and a symbiotic partnership with her natural surroundings. Dickinson confides to Higginson: “You ask me of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog large as myself [. . .]. They are better than beings because they know, but do not tell” (L261). Nor do they, like the poet’s bird “of little Love—” (Fr195), have a need to tell, or transcribe what they “know” as Dickinson seeks to do through her poetry.

In Dickinson’s seeming alienation from her inherited conception of God, as expressed in some of her poems, it is understandable why an intelligent inquisitive mind like hers would seek answers through all areas of insight, including those outside of organized religion. Language, as the mediating representative framework of her dilemma, is her interface between the physical and spiritual realms of existence. Struggling for clarity, Dickinson’s perspective on the periphery of perception is evident as she attempts to describe the space she temporarily inhabits. The following short poem suggests Bhabha’s “‘in-between’ spaces” (2) where the

marginalized voice seeks identity. In 1863 Dickinson writes:

Behind Me – dips Eternity –

Before Me – Immortality –

Myself – the Term between— (Fr743A, lines 1-3).

The poet's consciousness, existing on the threshold between "Two Worlds" (Fr399), one that claims her (the physical world) and one that she strives to reach (the spiritual world), continually beckons her to articulate her perceptions. In Dickinson's description of God's "Vicarious Courtship" (Fr615) she confirms her separation from the spiritual realm of existence. Jed Depman describes Dickinson's writing urge as a means of coping with "painful conditions" (94) where she would "survive it through thought" (94). Perhaps it was the painful condition of doubt that was always present, which Dickinson may have wished did not intrude on her consciousness and which she strived to transcend above through her poetry. The activity of transcribing her inferences would direct Dickinson's feelings of spiritual marginalization into a productive and cerebral endeavor that might have helped her to complete the "Circumference" she so ardently wished for.

While Dickinson may have felt a sense of doubt as an intrusion on her psyche, she also seems to sense that sometimes comprehension happens through intrusion as well. Understanding is not always attained through her own efforts. In a poem about mortality, Dickinson writes:

By his intrusion, God is known –

It is the same with Life – (Fr1481, lines 7-8).

Here Dickinson acknowledges a sense of confrontation (conveyed with her word

“intrusion”) equally experienced between the physical and spiritual worlds. Dickinson seems to acknowledge the “intrusion” of her physical environment in her reference to “Life” (Fr1481) as she compares it with the “intrusion [of] God.” Her words suggest the same comparison I have made between the spiritual and cultural influences on Dickinson’s perspective. In a letter to her friend Joseph Lyman, written most likely in the 1860s, Dickinson writes, “ I conclude that space & time are things of the body & have little or nothing to do with our selves” (qtd. in Sewall, *The Lyman Letters* 71).<sup>5</sup> In this statement, Dickinson expresses the central philosophical motivation of her poetic quest. The spiritual understanding she seeks can only come when she separates her consciousness from the physical world. Dickinson’s dilemma is that she knows she cannot gain the understanding she seeks on this side of mortality, yet she continues to try because some part of her believes she can access the spiritual realm she senses. Reading her words to Lyman helps us to understand her self-identification as a “Sovereign” consciousness. Dickinson seems to respond equally to both realms of sensitivity, the physical and the spiritual, and her poetry is the legacy of that struggle.

I hope my examination of Emily Dickinson’s poetry has helped to add further insight into the spiritual component of Dickinson’s peripheral perspective. It seems Dickinson likes to swim in the cool dark pool between the physical environment of intellect and the spiritual environment of inference, and after each daring dip, she returns to shore, the periphery of her consciousness, perhaps shaken, but exhilarated...and relieved. As she wrote to Colonel Higginson “the Verses just relieve—” (L265), and through the large number of poems she left behind, it is clear

the poet's need for relief was great. In reaching toward some elusive center from a peripheral perspective, Dickinson is able to transcribe thoughts that are just in reach of her consciousness. As I contemplate Dickinson's poetical aspect, I am reminded of a line of her verse mentioned earlier: "I plucked at our Partition / As One should pry the Walls—" (Fr 570). Lucky for us, in poem after poem Emily Dickinson continued to peer out from this partition, her own unique "periphery of perception," where her art was created.

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## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The original letter from Emily Dickinson to Joseph Lyman (from which this excerpt was taken) no longer exists. In Richard B. Sewall's 1965 study of Lyman's papers, he writes: "Although what was certainly a long and rich correspondence between Lyman and Emily Dickinson seems lost beyond recovery, he had the good sense to copy down and preserve seven "snatches" (as he called them) from her letters" (v).

<sup>2</sup> Emily Dickinson used this spelling (opon) for the word "upon" throughout her life. (In similar respect for the poet's original manuscript writing, Franklin also retained Dickinson's spelling of "it's" for "its" in "The Soul unto itself" (Fr579B)).

<sup>3</sup> I disagree with Habegger's conclusion in his footnote (158) regarding Dickinson's statement: "I used to read Dr. Hitchcock's Book on the Flowers of North America. This comforted their Absence— assuring me they lived" (L488). While there is no disagreement that Dickinson was referring to flowers in her statement, there seems to be some disagreement as to what book Dickinson meant to refer. Habegger writes: "Because Hitchcock wrote nothing by this title, Thomas H. Johnson proposed the poet had in mind his *Catalogue of Plants Growing without Cultivation in the Vicinity of Amherst College*." Habegger continues, "A more plausible explanation is that she mistook the author rather than the title and was thinking of Eaton's *Manual of Botany, for North America*" (158). I disagree. Since integral to the statement is the sentiment of immortality or rebirth, I think Dickinson actually did mean to refer to Dr. Hitchcock. I think she merely got one word wrong in her memory, that being the word "Flowers" in referring to the subject of Hitchcock's book. What Dickinson probably meant to say was the word "Seasons," as in the actual title of Hitchcock's book *Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons*.

<sup>4</sup> See Habegger's discussion of Emily Dickinson's herbarium. "Dickinson assembled two collections in her lifetime. [ . . . ] The herbarium is a collection of dried plants kept in a large leather volume manufactured for the purpose" (154).

<sup>5</sup> See note 1.