WORDSWORTH AS A TRANSUMPTIVE PRESENCE IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

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Abstract

This thesis looks at and speculates about the transumptive influence of William Wordsworth on the *oeuvre* of Emily Dickinson. It posits the theory that Dickinson could not possibly have escaped Wordsworth's influence in view of her own reading of Wordsworth, and her extensive reading of poets and authors whose work is not just permeated by Wordsworth's influence, but which is also comprehensively informed by the poetic tenets that he espoused. It identifies and discusses common themes, images and preoccupations as they manifest in the poetry of both poets.

The Preface speculates about the difficulties entailed in 'pinning down' the influence of preceding artists on their successors, whilst taking cognizance of the inescapability of that influence. It looks at the palimpsest, intertextuality and allusion as literary tropes for the manifestation of influence and touches briefly on the agonistic denial by strong poets of their poetic indebtedness.

Chapter 1 contains a fairly detailed look at the enormously pervasive and seminal influence that the intensely controversial Wordsworth exerted in not only what has become known as 'the age of Wordsworth', but also on succeeding generations. It pinpoints poets, writers and artists who were influenced by him, and also identifies the large number amongst these who in turn influenced Dickinson, thus serving as conduits for Wordsworth's influence to have entered her work.

In Chapter 2 Dickinson and Wordsworth's views of poetry and poets are explored. It foregrounds the remarkably similar elevated status that both poets ascribe to the poet and to poetry. It asks the question whether Dickinson's emphatic rejection of the traditional female role of her age meant that she saw herself as the 'poetic son' of her male poetic predecessors.

Chapter 3 identifies common themes that occur in the poetry of both Dickinson and Wordsworth. Amongst these it specifically discusses their engagement with solitude and the Solitary, looks at how they encapsulate the inner life of heart,

mind and soul in their poetry, explores their preoccupation with states of consciousness, being and the imagination, speculates about the intriguing and pervading consciousness of loss that manifests in their poetry, deals with the preoccupation that both exhibit with the various states of perception, explores their mutual engagement with the 'unknowable' as well as the idea of immortality, and highlights some of the marvellous celebrations of morning in their 'light' poetry.

Chapter 4 contains an exploration of the deeply significant, albeit often ambiguous relationship that these two devotees of Nature had with it. It also looks and how this complex, indeed haunted and ambivalent relationship, informs some of their greatest poetry.

Chapter 5 deals with the mind, its power and its incredible capacities as featured in the poetry of Dickinson and Wordsworth. Both poets were not only in awe of the mind's power, but were also deeply aware that the mind's supremacy and dominance could be frightening, particularly in conjunction with the usurping power of the imagination.

Chapter 6 takes an in-depth look at the extremely complex and deeply ambivalent relationship that Dickinson and Wordsworth had with language as they acknowledge not only its power, but also its limitations – even as they laud its power, they are aware of its frightening, destructive potential and the dangerous dominion that it exerts over thoughts. It also deals with the demands that their meta-lingual, often contradictory poetry, make on their readers.

And finally, the Conclusion attempts to identify Dickinson definitively as a poetic heir of Wordsworth.

Opsomming

Hierdie proefskrif ondersoek en bespiegel oor die transumptiewe invloed van William Wordsworth op die oeuvre van Emily Dickinson. Daar word geteoretiseer dat dit onmoontlik vir Dickinson sou gewees het om nie Wordsworth se invloed te ervaar het nie in die lig daarvan dat sy nie net self Wordsworth se werk gelees het nie, maar ook dié van baie ander digters en skrywers wie se werk nie slegs van Wordsworth se invloed deurspek is nie, maar ook van die poëtiese beginsels wat hy aangehang het. Die proefskrif identifiseer en bespreek gemeenskaplike temas, beelde en preokkupasies soos wat hulle in die werk van beide digters manifesteer.

In die Voorwoord word bespiegel oor hoe moeilik dit is om die invloed van voorgangers op hulle digterlike nakomelinge vas te pen terwyl mens terselfdertyd in ag neem hoe onontkombaar dié invloed inderdaad is. Daar word gekyk na palimpsest, intertekstualiteit en sinspeling as letterkundige stylfigure waardeur hierdie invloed kan manifesteer en raak ook skrylings aan die strydlustige ontkenning van sterk digters van hulle "literêre skuldlas".

Hoofstuk 1 kyk na die deurdringende en bevrugtende invloed wat die omstrede Wordsworth nie net op sy eie tydperk, die sogenaamde 'age of Wordsworth', uitgeoefen het nie, maar ook op daaropvolgende geslagte. Dit identifiseer digters, skrywers en kunstenaars wat deur Wordsworth beïnvloed is en bepaal die vele van hulle wat op hulle beurt weer vir Dickinson beïnvloed het sodat hulle as leikanale gedien het vir Wordsworth se invloed op haar werk.

Hoofstuk 2 bevat 'n ontleding van die rol van die digter en van poësie soos gesien deur Dickinson en Wordsworth. Dit beklemtoon die verstommende enersheid van hulle siening oor die verhewe status wat beide digters aan die digter en die digkuns toeskryf, en die vraag duik op of Dickinson se nadruklike verwerping van die tradisionele vroulike rol van haar tyd nie beteken het dat sy

haarself gesien het as die 'poëtiese seun' van haar manlike poëtiese voorgangers nie.

Hoofstuk 3 identifiseer gemeenskaplike temas wat in die poësie van beide Dickinson en Wordsworth voorkom. Hiervan word die volgende spesifiek bespreek: hulle betrokkenheid by afsondering en die Kluisenaar; hoe hulle werk die innerlike lewe van die hart, verstand en die gees weerspieël; hulle preokkupasie met die verskillende bewussynsvlakke, wese en die verbeelding; die prikkelende en omvattende bewussyn van verlies wat in hulle poësie manifesteer; die belang wat beide heg aan die verskillende vlakke van waarneming; hulle gemeenskaplike betrokkenheid by die 'onkenbare' asook die konsep van onsterflikheid, en laastens word sommige van die wonderlike verheerlikings van die oggend in hulle 'lig'- poësie uitgelig.

In Hoofstuk 4 word gekyk na die baie betekenisvolle hoewel soms dubbelsinnige verhouding wat dié twee natuur-aanbidders met die natuur gehad het. Daar is ook 'n naspeuring na hoe hierdie ingewikkelde, inderdaad obsessiewe en tweeslagtige verhouding in van hulle grootste poësie tot uiting kom.

Hoofstuk 5 handel oor hoe die menslike verstand, sy krag en ongelooflike vermoëns in die digkuns van Dickinson en Wordsworth na vore kom. Beide digters het nie net ontsag vir verstand gekoester nie, maar was ook bewus van sy beperkinge. Terwyl hulle die verstand se vermoëns besing, is hulle ook deeglik bewus van die vreesaanjaende, vernietigende potensiaal van die verstand en die gevaarlik beheer wat dit uitoefen oor die gedagtewêreld. Hoofstuk 5 verwys ook na die eise wat hulle metalinguale en dikwels teenstrydige poësie aan hulle lesers stel.

Hoofstuk 6 ondersoek in diepte die komplekse en tweeledige verhouding, waarbinne hulle beide die mag en die beperkings van taal in ag neem, wat Dickinson en Wordsworth met taal gehad het – selfs wanneer hulle die mag van taal aanprys, is hulle steeds bewus van die vreesaanjaende en vernietigende

potensiaal wat daarin opgesluit is, asook die gevaarlike houvas wat dit op die mens se denke uitoefen. Daar word ook in die hoofstuk gekyk na die eise wat hulle meta-linguale en dikwels teenstrydige poësie aan hulle lesers stel.

En laastens poog die Slothoofstuk om Dickinson sonder twyfel as 'n poëtiese erfgenaam van Wordsworth te identifiseer.

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"Asserting his immortality most vigorously": Wordsworth as a transumptive presence in the poetry of Emily Dickinson

Preface

This thesis posits and explores the question whether Emily Dickinson can be regarded as one of William Wordsworth's 'literary inheritors'. I intuit that she is, and that Wordsworth's influence is strongly perceptible in her *oeuvre.* Indeed, as I have worked on this thesis, I have come across significant numbers of critics whose work seems to lend support to this premise. As I explore the allusive (and elusive!) echoes and glimpses of Wordsworth in Dickinson's work, I will draw on the concepts of transumption, intertextuality (most notably allusion), and the palimpsest as theoretical tools of investigation in an attempt to establish whether Dickinson was indeed influenced by Wordsworth, or whether she escaped his enormously pervasive influence. As regards the latter, this thesis also asks the question whether it would, in fact, have been at all possible for her to have escaped his influence, considering which poets and authors she read and professed admiration for. I feel that she could not have done. I believe she absorbed Wordsworth's influence not only from her own reading of Wordsworth, but because so many of the poets and authors that she read were steeped in Wordsworth and his philosophy. Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and Emerson immediately spring to mind here, as do George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to mention only a few. I contend that this extensive indirect exposure to Wordsworth's influence inevitably coloured Dickinson's *oeuvre* and resulted in transumptive Wordsworthian echoes in her poetry and letters. In whichever way it was that Dickinson absorbed Wordsworth's influence, I am convinced that his influence, sometimes overt, but more often covert and transmuted, is strongly detectable in her work. As a result of this I believe that **glimpses** of Wordsworth's work surface in her text in the sense of an imperfectly erased palimpsest that manifests in a possibly subversive fashion. I agree with Joanne Feit Diehl that transumptive influences are more likely to be uncovered, firstly, by the identification of common themes and preoccupations, secondly by the literary strategies (e.g. the use of repetition

and oxymorons), and, finally and possibly more covertly, by the use of language. I explore these matters in Chapters 3, 4 and 6.

In his discussion of poetic influence Bloom identifies a surprisingly small number of what he refers to as the Great Originals – poets who have influenced their successors significantly and inescapably. Wordsworth is included among these – in fact Bloom refers to the nineteenth century as a "Wordsworth-haunted" century as the eighteenth century had been haunted by Milton. He also refers to those two poets as the most notable influences on Keats, whom Dickinson actually acknowledges, albeit somewhat cagily, as an influence (Bloom, 1988:85).

More and more critics are acknowledging the enormously wide-ranging influence that Wordsworth had not only on his contemporaries, but also on the generations after him. Stephen Gill's book *Wordsworth and the Victorians* explores the pervasiveness of Wordsworth's influence and his 'fecundating' of later works of literature as Christopher Ricks puts it in his 1996 *Essays in Appreciation* (Gill, 1998:5). Richard Gravil also touches on this in his very interesting *Romantic Dialogues*, intriguingly subtitled 'Anglo-American Continuities, 1776-1862'.

To illustrate Wordsworth's often extraordinary impact, I would like to refer here at some length to William Hale White (better known as Mark Rutherford, writer of *Diary on the Quantocks*), only one of the many who attest to significant influence by Wordsworth in their lives. Hale White makes a profoundly telling comment about Wordsworth that echoes my own feelings exactly, namely that "Wordsworth has a singular power of expressing articulately that which would be mere mist without him, but is of vital importance" (quoted in full below). As an 18-year-old theology student, Hale White had discovered in Wordsworth's advocacy of the salvation to be found in a wise and nurturing Nature, an alternative to the arid Calvinist teachings of New College where he was studying. (Did Dickinson possibly have a somewhat similar experience when, according to Albert Gelpi, she came into contact with the "warm, swelling, swirling notions of the Romantic poet-prophets" [Bloom, 1985:40]? I will pursue this further in Chapter 4.) Encountering these lines in *Lyrical Ballads* –

"Knowing that Nature never did betray/The heart that loved her" ('Tintern Abbey, *ll* 123-24) – constituted a life-changing event for Hale White that he claimed was on a par with Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. On reading the quoted lines

> ... Rutherford [Hale White] was possessed by Wordsworth's God, 'the God of the hills, the abstraction Nature:
>
> Instead of an object of worship which was altogether artificial, remote, never coming into genuine contact with me, I had now one which I thought to be real, one in which literally I could live and move and have my being, an actual fact present before my eyes. God was brought from that heaven of the books and dwelt on the downs in the far-away distances, and in every cloud-shadow which wandered across the valley. Wordsworth unconsciously did for me what every religious reformer has done, – he recreated my Supreme Divinity; substituting a new and living spirit for the old deity, once alive, but gradually hardened into an idol (Gill, 1998:52).

Hale White was, in fact, subsequently expelled from New College for expressing Wordsworthian sentiments along these lines. They were regarded as 'incompatible' with training for the Christian ministry (Gill, 1998:51). And later, he became just as obsessed as Wordsworth

> ... with the search for continuity and the wholeness of life, so that it is appropriate that the last entry in the *Diary on the Quantocks* should connect directly with the feelings of the 18-year-old who was possessed by *Lyrical Ballads*: 'Wordsworth has a singular power of expressing articulately that which would be mere mist without him, but is of vital importance' (Gill, 1998:55).

And indeed, so say I – emphatically. Richard Gravil quotes Greenwood (*North American Review*, 18 (1824):366-67) along similar lines in an excerpt that goes some way towards revealing the extraordinary stature of Wordsworth, even after the benighted Jeffrey of *The Edinburgh Review* had done his utmost to destroy Wordsworth's credibility:

> To cite Greenwood again, "the great distinction and glory of Mr Wordsworth's poetry is the *intimate converse* which it holds with Nature. He sees her face to face" and his work unravels "those secret influences which we had always felt but hardly understood." Not merely describing objects, "he causes them to live, breathe, feel" so that through his work "our intercourse with Nature becomes permanent ...

> We are convinced that *there is more mind, more soul about us, wherever we look.*" (2000:43).

Attempting to 'pin down' the influence of one poet or artist on another is, of course, not an easy task, if it be possible at all. Is one really detecting an influence? Is one truly encountering an element of intertextuality? Does the earlier writing of the palimpsest glimmer through, so to speak? Is there in truth an allusive echo from an earlier work? And if there is one, is this a primary echo or a secondary or even a tertiary one?

G Kim Blank acknowledges the inherent difficulties in determining influence:

> Some might argue that it is an impossible task simply because of the complexity involved, that studying influence not only means working on a number of levels where complicated information is available, but also that *one* influence can never be singled out as *the* influence. Influence, they might argue, works by combinations and accumulation: one effect comes about not just as a point in an infinite chain of causes, but as the result of a number of causes working at once (1988:ix).

In her seminal book *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*, Joanne Feit Diehl also points out the difficulties in attempting to establish influence:

> When moments of explicit allusiveness do appear, readers may seize upon these rhetorical surfaces, pointing to verbal echoes and narrative borrowings which may actually reveal little of the underlying relation between the text and its generative sources (1981:8).

The idea of transumption, or the force (or even fear?) of anteriority, is a difficult though fascinating one. It goes beyond overt derivation from a literary ancestor, in that it can be extremely subtle: both allusive and elusive. I understand it to refer to the inescapable influence that precursor poets, in this instance, exert over their successors. It may manifest in clear influences or echoes from the precursor, or in the merest hints or traces or nuances from the precursor's *oeuvre*. Shakespeare, the Bible and Milton's transumptive influences are strongly perceptible in Wordsworth's poetry. Wordsworth's transumptive influence permeates virtually all the poetry and much of the prose that follows him. One hears him very strongly in Shelley, Tennyson and George Eliot, also in Jane Austen, Matthew Arnold and the Brownings, in the work of the Brontës, in Emerson (though Emerson, rather surprisingly, does

not acknowledge this debt), Thoreau, Whitman and Dickinson, in Yeats and Stevens. And yes, even in Byron. What it essentially amounts to is that no poet (or author) writes in a literary vacuum. Bloom states categorically that there "can be no strong, canonical writing without the process of literary influence, a process vexing to undergo and difficult to understand" (1995:8). The *milieu* in which any literary artist has her or his literary being fairly hums and seethes with voices and presences of the past - with consideration of Harold Bloom's intriguing concept of the Oedipal agon, Judith Still makes exactly this point, namely that poetry consists of words that refer to the words of precursor poets, whose words in their turn refer to yet more previously used words in the congested *milieu* of literary language (2004:115-6). In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" from *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism,* TS Eliot claims that "not only the best, but the most individual parts" of the poet's work are more than likely those "in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (Weinberg, 1990:787). Therefore no poet or author can deny her or his literary forebears, no matter how agonistic the attempts of strong poets to do so. What they are able to do, if they are truly strong and individualistic, is to make their precursors "return from the dead" but dressed in their "own colours" (Bloom, 1982:88). So when Dickinson assured Higginson in her August 1862 letter (L 271) that she "never consciously touched a paint mixed by another person, but her claim is deeply suspect; her allusiveness is becoming well-documented, as will become clear during the course of this thesis. I believe her denial should be seen in the context of Bloom's theories about the anxiety of influence, which adds a fascinating dimension here. In truth, she is almost certainly exhibiting the agonistic denial of a strong poet of her poetic indebtedness. Bloom makes the point that the readings of precursor works are inescapably "defensive" and that strong literature is "agonistic whether it wants to be or not ... and that the dark truths of competition and contamination continue to grow stronger as canonical history lengthens in time. A poem, play, or novel is necessarily ***compelled*** [my emphasis] to come into being by way of precursor works" (Bloom, 1995:11). And among the Dickinson texts were many books that reflected the influence of the Romantics, for example Joseph and Laura Lyman's *Philosophy of Housekeeping* that reflects the philosophy of an era

"influenced by Wordsworth and Emerson" (Farr, 1992:53-4), as well as numerous collections of poetry that contained a great deal of Romantic poetry (Donnelly, 1998:120n5).

Regarding the complexities of transumptive influence, I want to quote in full an insightful passage from Blank that very clearly reflects the dilemma that poets face in relation to their precursors. Though Blank is discussing Shelley and Wordsworth, I feel that many of the points he raises are apposite to Dickinson and Wordsworth as well especially considering the extent of Shelley's influence on Dickinson:

> The question is: to what extent, and in what ways, are Shelley's heroes (and his poems) determined and prefigured by Wordsworth (and Wordsworthian problems)? And by 'Wordsworth' I mean Shelley's Wordsworth, that complicated entity who is a man and poet, contemporary yet predecessor, who is to be praised, pitied and scorned; I mean the complicated entity always to be ***emulated*** and ***subverted*** [my emphasis]; a figure of Oedipal complexity. Might it then be suggested that Shelley 'killed' Wordsworth, his father figure, in order to marry the same Muse to which Wordsworth was wed? Could it be said that Shelley sought to engage the source of Wordsworth's own inspiration? The answer is yes. Shelley's poetry about Wordsworth portrays the older poet as if he were dead. This figurative death allows Shelley to hold on to the early Wordsworth (eulogising him), to punish him for his poetic and personal failings, and to inherit the place of the dead leader. Because the hostile component of the Oedipal complex dictates that the son has wishful thoughts of killing the father whom he imitates, there are (repressed) manifestations of this in Shelley's poetry: Shelley figuratively killing Wordsworth in a Wordsworthian mode. In other words, those poems of Shelley where this poetic parricide takes place are some of his most Wordsworthian poems. But for Shelley "Wordsworth' is not now a man and now a poet, now a good poet and now a bad poet, now to be followed and now to be avoided: ***he is at all times all these figures, all these situations***; [my emphasis] and Shelley is never certain of how to distinguish them. His poetry tries to work this out. Further, besides being a historical individual, 'Wordsworth' for Shelley is also a force representing the burden of the past, the given of the poetic tradition and its language: 'Wordsworth' as a style of expression that Shelley must contend with and surpass (1988:6).

I therefore believe that the idea of Wordsworth's writing forming a partially erased palimpsest that exists below the surface of Dickinson's writing is one that can be fruitfully explored. The concept of the palimpsest as a literary

trope derives from Thomas De Quincey's essay entitled 'The Palimpsest', published in 1845. Sarah Dillon claims that De Quincey inaugurated the concept of the palimpsest in this way, giving it a "strange, new figurative entity, invested with the stature of the substantive" so that since 1845 it has been diversely used in various fields most notably in "creative, critical and theoretical texts across the expansive fields of literature, philosophy and cultural studies" (Dillon, 2005:243). The French Structuralist critic Gérard Genette also interestingly notes the palimpsest as a figure of literary discourse in *Discourse du Récit* (1972), published i.a. by Columbia University Press as *Figures of Literary Discourse* (1982).

In his *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Martin Gray refers to De Quincey's usage in his definition of 'palimpsest':

> **Palimpsest.** (Gk. 'rubbed smooth again') A piece of material, like parchment, which has been used more than once for writing on, previous inscriptions having been rubbed out. This practice was common in the Middle Ages when writing materials were expensive. ... In his *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) De Quincey turns it into an image of the human mind:
>
> What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? Such a palimpsest is my brain; such a palimpsest, O reader! is yours. Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain as softly as light.

In *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* two of the meanings of palimpsest are given as follows:

> **1** Paper, parchment, etc., prepared for writing on and wiping out again, like a slate – 1706. **2** A parchment, etc., which has been written on twice, the original writing having been rubbed out -1805.

What none of the definitions above refers to is that one of the intriguing aspects of the palimpsest is that the original, erased writing often reappears or resurfaces through the 'new' writing, or that it can be recovered by various means. And it is this imaginative and multi-layered aspect of the palimpsest that makes it such a striking trope to illustrate transumption and intertextuality. If one accepts as a given that no poet writes in a literary vacuum, it is an interesting literary conceit to posit that, because Wordsworth influenced

Dickinson, his writing reappears in and through hers in the guise of the original and subsequently erased writing on a parchment becoming visible and resurfacing through the 'new' text – Wordsworthian traces that one glimpses in her work.

The term intertextuality is derived from the Latin term *intertexto* "meaning to intermingle while weaving" (Panteleo, 2006:164). The French structuralist writer and critic, Julia Kristeva, coined the phrase 'intertextuality' in 1966 to describe the numerous and different kinds of relationships that literary texts have to each other. According to Kristeva all texts are constructed of a mosaic of quotations, and contain many texts that have been absorbed and imaginatively transformed (Pantaleo, 2006:164). The different kinds of relationships texts have to each other include concepts like imitation, adaptation, and parody, to mention just a few. In the context of this thesis I mainly will look at allusion (derived from a Latin phrase that means to play with or to touch on lightly), as a possible way in which Wordsworthian influence entered Dickinson's work. In this regard I am particularly indebted to Richard Gravil for making me aware of some notable instances of allusion that I had previously been unaware of.

In 1886, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote that Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' displayed Wordsworth's "insight ... at its very deepest" and that it had shocked human nature, and that the tremble of the resultant shock wave was still spreading (McSweeney, 1998:69). Thoreau and Coleridge were both aware of this 'tremble' – could Dickinson, who read so widely, and who succeeded in creating a Wordsworthian narrative (Farr, 1992:78), possibly not have felt it and been influenced by it as well? I believe not. Joanne Feit Diehl argues along similar lines:

> Among major nineteenth-century poets, Dickinson remains the most elusive. Placed outside the development of post-Enlightenment poetry, her work is still regarded as eccentric and somehow apart, as arresting and important, but only tenuously related to the Romantic tradition. Can there be such a poet; can a major poet survive and grow, isolated from the central literary voices of her age? (1981:3-4).

Indeed, since the appearance of Feit Diehl's book, Dickinson's link to the Romantics has been acknowledged by many more critics as will become clear during the course of this thesis. And, as is also being acknowledged more and more, there was no stronger, no more insistent and influential voice than Wordsworth's in Romanticism and its still continuing aftermath. I will look at the truly astonishing scope of Wordsworth's influence more fully in Chapter 1.

What I have not done in this thesis is to speculate in any depth about Dickinson along feminist lines, or about the supposed love tragedy that some regard as being at the centre of her 'withdrawal' from the world, or who this love-object was (Susan Dickinson, Susan Anthon, Samuel Bowles, Charles Wadsworth or somebody yet to be identified?), though I have taken cognisance of work done in these fields. Nor have I explored the very intriguing topic of the 'Master letters', tempting though it was! I have regarded these topics, though undoubtedly very interesting and valid, as outside the scope of my field of enquiry. Nor did I explore the very interesting subject of whether Dickinson was bipolar and whether this impacted on her creativity as discussed by Christopher Ramey and Robert Weisberg in a recent article - though it made for fascinating reading. Space also militated against a pursuance of these matters in my thesis. I also preferred to continue using Johnson's version of Dickinson's poems rather than R W Franklin's newer 1998 compilation.

As regards the structure of the thesis, I have in the main moved from the general to the specific. I started with the scope of Wordsworth's influence in general and then progressed to a more in-depth engagement with his transumptive presence in Dickinson's poetry specifically. I have to stress that this latter part is often subjective and speculative – as previously discussed, 'pinning down' influence is not an exact science! I found it an engrossing and rewarding exploration, however – one which seemed in the anticipation and the run-up the study to be worthwhile, and has in the aftermath been confirmed to my mind as a contribution to the expanding body of critical comment on the work of both Wordsworth and Dickinson, and can pave the way towards more work on their relationship.

Chapter 1

Dickinson – and some other literary 'inheritors' of Wordsworth

Wordsworth has always been controversial. He has had many passionate critics, as he has had many more and even more passionate adherents if not acolytes. He not only preached the doctrine of a radical new poetics, but he wrote his poetry, conceived in a mind of startling and indeed radical originality, in a new language, and elevated to poetic status the subject matter of the everyday. And he wrote, with passionate, dedicated intensity, about the personal – feelings, emotions, the mind – and was much criticized for his egotism and arrogance in doing so. As Hazlitt perceptively put it in his 1823 essay *Spirit of the Age*, Wordsworth "started anew on a *tabula rasa* of poetry" (Smith, 1969:24), and then proceeded to fill that blank slate with the deeply personal – the fluxes and refluxes of the mind, emotions and perceptions; in short, the self. Indeed, Harold Bloom writes persuasively that Wordsworth "can be said to have invented modern poetry, which has been a continuum for two full centuries now". The revolutionary subject of this modern poetry "is the subject herself or himself, whether manifested as a presence or absence" (1994:239).

In his article *Emily Dickinson and the Romantic Tradition*, Michael Yetman writes along similar lines when he points out that "the landscape of poetic action" is now, under the influence of the Romantics, "the mind of the poet" (1973:129). Intriguingly, Bloom also voices a suspicion that 'Tintern Abbey'

> ... *is* the modern poem proper, and that most good poems written in English since *Tintern Abbey* inescapably repeat, rewrite, or revise it.
>
> Of all Milton's descendants, including even Blake, Wordsworth was the strongest, so strong indeed that we must face a dark truth. Wordsworth's greatest poem *The Prelude,* was finished, in its essentials, a hundred and seventy years ago, [now, of course, more than two hundred years ago, and Bloom's statement is just as accurate now as it was in 1985] and no subsequent poetry written in English can sustain a close comparison with it, no matter what fashionable criticism tries to tell us to the contrary.

> Nietzsche and Emerson, more than any other theorists, understood that other artists must pay the price for too overwhelming an artist. Wordsworth, like Milton, both enriches and destroys his sons and daughters (1985:118-19).

J P Ward also stresses Wordsworth's markedly influential role. He writes that it "is common knowledge that Wordsworth wrote a new kind of poetry, with revolutionary and far-reaching results" and claims that Wordsworth 'saved' language for poetry. He points out perceptively that " ... Wordsworth was able to write a vast poetic *oeuvre* of such influence that poetry was secured for subsequent centuries" (1984:3,7).

Geoffrey Hartman similarly acknowledges Wordsworth's seminal influence. With specific reference to the influence of *Lyrical Ballads*, he states that what Wordsworth "did is clear: he transformed the inscription into an independent nature poem, and in doing so created a principal form of the Romantic and modern lyric" (1987:39). Even more significant, one could argue, is that Wordsworth not only 'reads' Nature and the landscape almost as if it were the writing of an inscription, but he then also succeeds in writing his inscription, his lyric, in the very language of Nature herself so that Nature, alongside the self, becomes one of the strongest protagonists in his poetry.

Like so many of Wordsworth's readers, Hartman experienced Wordsworth's influence and poetry in an extremely personal way:

> I have never been able to get away from Wordsworth for any length of time. The moment I was obliged to read him during high school in England, he reflected back my own sense of nature: rural nature, but more generally a world that felt as ancient and immemorial as "rocks, and stones, and trees," that encompassed, inanimate yet animating, the mind in its earth-walks. ... No one before him had so naturally brought perception and consciousness together, had charted the growth of the mind without over-objectifying it; and so not only anticipated developmental psychology but made us inherit unforgettably ... a sense of [the] "unknown modes of being" (1987:xxv).

As will be discussed more fully later in this chapter, Wordsworth was well-known in America. He influenced both Emerson and Thoreau, though they both underplay the extent of their debt to him. Emerson does, however, acknowledge the greatness of 'The Immortality Ode' as the "high-water which

the intellect has reached in this age" (Atkinson, 1950:682). In discussing American Romanticism, Richard Gravil points out rather amusingly that Emerson, significantly, shows "apparent lapses of memory, when it comes to acknowledging his sources" though many readers "recognized the centrality of Wordsworth" in Emerson's text, most notably in *Nature* which gives evidence of "a long immersion in the lyrical Wordsworth" (2000:xv,93,95). Emerson's 'The American Scholar' likewise shows a most striking and inexplicably unacknowledged appropriation of Wordsworth, though Wordsworth had at that point been lauded by many influential American scholars like Channing, Bryant, Elizabeth Peabody[1] and her sisters, i.a., as the father of modern poetry and indeed the founder of an era for more than ten years (Gravil, 2000:60-63). One is no doubt dealing here, in the light of the Bloom quote on the previous page, with instances of agonistic denial of overwhelming indebtedness. Thoreau's work similarly shows "a prolonged engagement with Wordsworth" starting with what was "little short of hero-worship" (Gravil, 2000:103), though he recanted rather agonistically on this score later. Richard Gravil discusses this astonishing denial by American writers (most notably Emerson and Thoreau) of their indebtedness to English literature and Wordsworth in particular at length in his very interesting (and entertaining!) book, *Romantic Dialogues*. He makes the very convincing claim (borne out by other authors like Stephen Gill) that it was under the explicitly Wordsworthian guidance of Greenwood, Bryant, Channing and Emerson[2] that a coherent American Romanticism developed, and that it was founded on Wordsworth who had "discovered how poetry could go beyond a mere depiction of landscape and celebrate the transcendent interaction of the mind with nature" (2000:43). Regarding the astonishing scope of Wordsworth's influence on American letters in Dickinson's time, Gravil writes convincingly:

> Emerson's *Nature* would not have been *Nature*, nor Emerson

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1 Elizabeth Peabody was extremely prominent in Boston as an educator, translator, bookseller, writer and editor. She was a passionately committed Wordsworthian and corresponded with him from December 1825 onwards, and was very influential in promoting his poetry, making his work central to her teaching activities. The character 'Miss Birdseye' in Henry James's *The Bostonians* is reputed to be based on her.

2 Extraordinarily, apart from his familiarity with a great deal of Wordsworth's poetry, Emerson was reputed to have known *The Excursion* and *The Prelude* almost by heart (Gravil, 2000:94)!

> Emerson, without "Tintern Abbey" and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." "The Boy of Winander" originates the call with which Thoreau endeavours to awaken America and return the nation to its early self, while "The Thorn" provides the grit around which Hawthorne's characteristic style forms itself. In Hawthorne and Thoreau Wordsworth found his most creative American readers. The Lucy poems and "Intimations" are, however, almost equally formative in the various arts of Poe, Whitman and Dickinson. In the Ode and the Lucy poems, Poe encountered his characteristic topoi. Imitating "We are Seven," Whitman took his first manuscript steps in poetry, and his "Song of Myself" answers *The Prelude*. *Moby-Dick* defines one pole of its "high argument" with the aid of "Intimations" and *The Excursion*. Even the aging Wordsworth's premature burnout, becomes for Thoreau a symbol of the American compromise and its gathering deafness to the still sad music of humanity [the latter phrase comes from 'Tintern Abbey', / 91] (2000:67).

In a very interesting work that deserves much more in-depth discussion than can be engaged in here, and which is obviously much more multifaceted and complex than this short synopsis can indicate, James C McKusick makes exactly the same point, albeit in a slightly different context. In his absorbing *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*, that describes the emergence of ecological understanding among the English Romantic poets and how "this new holistic paradigm offered a conceptual and ideological basis for American environmentalism" (2000:11), McKusick speculates about the way in which many American writers deny their debt to the English Romantics. He points out that Thoreau's *Walking* is deeply indebted to Wordsworth's 'Expostulation and Reply', 'The Tables Turned' and 'Stepping Westward', yet Thoreau[3] does not acknowledge these sources. In some puzzlement he wonders about the reasons that could possibly have motivated Thoreau and others to deny the influence of the Lake Poets, while repeatedly citing Wordsworth and Coleridge in their work. He argues persuasively and with a fine dash of irony that this denial of its rich Romantic legacy has impoverished America's intellectual and cultural heritage:

> The Romantic tradition offers a far more rich and varied set of responses to the natural world than is dreamed of in the conventional

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[3] Richard Gravil also points out that Thoreau's *Walden* was comprehensively influenced by Wordsworth and "manifests an astonishing openness to the living Wordsworth" (2000:103).

> history of ideas. If the American environmental movement seems to be perpetually in a state of crisis, lurching from one dam disaster to the next, perhaps one reason is an intellectual impoverishment that arises from the world view of the "true believer." Contemporary American nature writers do not need to know their own intellectual history, because everything they need to know is written in the Good Books of Emerson, Thoreau and Muir. Amid this pantheon of Green Saints, what need to investigate the Romantic origins of American environmentalism (2000:11)?

So Dickinson, who read so very widely, including Emerson and Thoreau and the other authors mentioned above, certainly had a vast number of contact points with Wordsworth, and many, many conduits through which she unavoidably had to have been exposed to his influence – this is apart from reading his poetry herself of course. Daria Donnelly points out that Dickinson read the Romantic poets "avidly" in the household collections of poetry (1998:120).

We also know that Dickinson read Wordsworth because two of her letters specifically quote 'Elegiac Stanzas' and she refers to 'We are Seven' in letter number 96 (Johnson, p 215 – hereafter all letters will be referred to by number only). Her work also displays familiarity with the 'Lucy' poems, *The Prelude*, *The Excursion*, 'Tintern Abbey' and 'The Immortality Ode', as well as other Wordsworth poems as will become clear during the course of this thesis.

Another of these many contact points with Wordsworth, and an extremely influential one, was Thomas Cole the painter and poet who had been strongly influenced by Wordsworth. This emerges clearly from a journal entry that Cole wrote as he was finishing his well-known painting *The Tower*:

> I am now engaged in painting a picture representing a ruined and solitary tower, standing on a craggy promontory, laved by the unruffled ocean. Rocky islets rise from the sea at various distances: the line of the horizon is unbroken but by the tower. The spectator is supposed to be looking east just after sunset: the moon is ascending from the ocean like a silvery vapor; around her are lofty clouds still lighted by the sun; and all are reflected in the tranquil waters. On the summit of the cliff round the ruin ... is a lonely shepherd. He appears to be gazing intently at a distant vessel that lies becalmed on the deep .... I think [this picture] will be poetic ... and will produce in a mind capable of feeling, a pleasing, poetic effect, a sentiment of tranquillity and solitude (Farr, 1992:252).

Judith Farr argues persuasively that Cole's painting was inspired by Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas' (I refer to this poem in greater detail on pp 31, 60n18, 101,140 and 187). I regard this as thought-provoking, as many elements depicted by Cole in *The Tower* recur time and time again in Dickinson's poetry – images like ruins, sunsets, the sea, the rising moon, a ship seen in the distance, and the solitary, dreaming viewer (the poet?), to mention but a few. What makes this even more significant is that 'Elegiac Stanzas' is one of the two Wordsworth poems that Dickinson specifically refers to.

As stated, Cole was extremely influential in Dickinson's artistic life, in particular his series of landscapes entitled *The Voyage of Life* that depicts a Christian's journey through this life to the next. Farr feels that Cole's work forms a subtext for some of Dickinson's work – Dickinson even signed one of her letters as "Cole" (1992:69). Apart from his paintings, Cole also wrote a long poetic version of *The Voyage of Life* in which abundant traces, phrases and imagery echo *The Prelude* (1992:77) as discussed below.

Cole went to England in 1829 and remained there until 1832. It is quite possible that he met Wordsworth. Cole was taken up socially and fêted by the London literary circles. He was befriended by both Thomas De Quincey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The latter often read to people from Wordsworth's works-in-progress. Though *The Prelude* was only published in 1850, after Wordsworth's death, it had been completed by 1805, though Wordsworth still revised it for many years[4]. It seems certain that Cole was familiar with at least parts of it to account for its marked influence on his work. These Wordsworthian echoes in Cole's work include, i.a. the boat-stealing incident in Book 1 of *The Prelude* and the feeling that an interior angel or blessed spirit is influential in guiding his life, as described in Book 4. Similarly Wordsworth's Simplon Pass episode (Book 6 of *The Prelude*, *ll* 556-570) seems to have

[4] I have always assumed that the reason *The Prelude* had not been published in Wordsworth's life-time was to be found in its highly personal nature. Sharon Cameron raises another very interesting option, namely that it was published posthumously at least in part to ensure that his widow would have the benefit of copyright law, as had it been published in his life-time, its copyright protection would have expired at his death (1992:51).

materially affected the imagery in Cole's *Manhood.* It is also significant that Cole later painted his 'Tintern Abbey' in homage to Wordsworth whom he "regarded as his chief teacher" (Farr, 1992:76).

Judith Farr suggests (1992:58) that it was through reading descriptions by others, like Wordsworth, that Dickinson could visualize the Alps that she had never actually seen, and write about them. In Poem 124 she acknowledges this herself and writes about them with charming whimsy:

> In lands I never saw – they say
> Immortal Alps look down –
> Whose Bonnets touch the firmament –
> Whose Sandals touch the town – .

Wordsworth also refers to a mountain's 'head' and 'feet' – in 'On the Power of Sound', *ll* 185-6, he refers to "The towering Headlands, crowned with mist,/Their feet among the billows".

Many of Wordsworth's references to the Alps occur in *Descriptive Sketches taken during a Pedestrian Tour among the Alps.* Many of these descriptions are very evocative – "To where the Alps ascending white in air/Toy with the sun, and glitter from afar." Just for interest sake I would like to quote a few more telling descriptions of the Alps by Wordsworth. The first is of a sombre, brooding night over the Alps:

> Heavy, and dull, and cloudy is the night;
> No star supplies the comfort of its light,
> Glimmer the dim-lit Alps, dilated round,
> And one sole light shifts in the vale profound;
> While opposite, the waning moon hangs still
> And red, above the melancholy hill.

Further on, this powerful description of a storm over the Alps occurs:

> 'Tis storm; and hid in mist from hour to hour
> All day the floods a deepening murmur pour;
> The sky is veiled, and every cheerful sight;
> But what a sudden burst of overpowering light!
> Triumphant on the bosom of the storm
> Glances the fire-clad eagle's wheeling form;
> Eastward, in long perspective glittering shine

The wood-crowned cliffs that o'er the lake recline;
Wide o'er the Alps a hundred streams unfold,
At once to pillars turned that flame with gold;
Behind his sail the peasant strives to shun
The west that burns like one dilated sun,
Where in a mighty crucible expire
The mountains, glowing-hot, like coals of fire.

The following description is in a quieter, more pastoral vein:

The pastoral Swiss begins the cliffs to scale,
To silence leaving the deserted vale;
Mounts, where the verdure leads, from
stage to stage,
and pastures on as in the Patriarch's age
O'er lofty heights serene and still they go,
And hear the rattling thunder far below;

Dickinson's writes in a somewhat similar vein:

Our lives are Swiss –
So still – so Cool –
Till some odd afternoon
The Alps neglect their Curtains
And we look farther on!

Italy stands the other side!
While like a guard between –
The solemn Alps –
The siren Alps
Forever intervene! (P 80)

Wordsworth also describes the Alps as a barrier standing between Switzerland and Italy – "Caught the far-winding barrier Alps along" ('After leaving Italy', *l* 11).

It is interesting to note that at the end of *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth writes about the conclusion of his journey and describes the progress of the river as an image of the growth of his mind, he deals with what is surely one of Dickinson's most absorbing issues, namely infinity:

This faculty (imagination[5]) hath been the moving soul

[5] It may be interesting to note how Wordsworth describes the faculty of imagination in prose. In his Note to 'The Thorn in *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800, he describes it as "the faculty which produces impressive effects out of simple elements" (Brett & Jones, 1991:288).

Of our long labour: we have traced the stream
From darkness, and the very place of birth
In its blind cavern, whence is faintly heard
The sound of waters; followed it to light
And open day, accompanied its course
Among the ways of Nature, afterwards
Lost sight of it bewildered and engulphed,
Then given it greeting as it rose once more
With strength, reflecting in its solemn breast
The works of man, and face of human life;
And lastly, from its progress have we drawn
The feeling of life endless, the one thought
By which we live, infinity and God (*Prelude*, 1805, 13, *ll* 171-84).

These lines strongly echo the final lines of the Simplon Pass episode referred to above:

The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,
Were all like the workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great apocalypse,
The types and symbols of eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end (*Prelude*, 1805, 6, *ll* 565-72).

As has already been said, it is known that Dickinson read Wordsworth. She also read and was influenced by many poets and authors like Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Emerson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning. All of these poets and writers had, to a greater or lesser extent, been influenced by Wordsworth, read his work and often quoted him.

Dickinson expressed great admiration for the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in particular *Aurora Leigh*.[6] This manifested most notably after Browning's death when Dickinson wrote laudatory memorial poems about her, namely Poems 312, 631 and 593. Cristanne Miller points out that these are in

[6] John Evangelist Walsh even accused Dickinson of plagiarism in this regard in his book *The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson* (1971); he also suggested that she had plagiarized Emily and Charlotte Brontë. I prefer to accept Ellen Moers's more imaginatively balanced view that Dickinson deliberately and elaborated on the emotional content of incidents in *Aurora Leigh* in her own poetry, as she transmuted other influences as well. In similar vein Richard Gravil argues persuasively that her poems often constitute 'meditations' on precursor texts (2000:188). Joanne Feit Diehl also warns against taking superficial echoes at face value as they could indicate deeper and more ambivalent literary relationships (1981:8, n7).

fact the only overt verse tributes that Dickinson made to any contemporary writer (1987:163). A significant further number of poems (possibly in the region of about 80) can be traced back to *Aurora Leigh*. Barrett Browning's influence on Dickinson's can mainly be seen in the shaping of many of the aims and motives that manifest in her work. These are, however, more often than not I believe often the aims, themes, preoccupations and motives of Romanticism itself. Michael Yetman not only points out three important areas of convergence between Dickinson and the Romantics, namely the relationship between the mind and the world, poetic perception and religious scepticism, but also believes that much of her thinking, as is that of Emerson, is coloured by her assimilation of the Romantics' views and attitudes (1973:130).

In her turn, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was an ardent admirer of Wordsworth. In 1841, she sent John Kenyon, a mutual friend of hers and Wordsworth's, to get her something from "the king-poet of our time". She was subsequently delighted to receive "a slip of green" from the Wordsworth garden at Rydal Mount (Gill, 1998:10). In 1842 she publicly expressed her reverence for Wordsworth in a review in the *Athenaeum*, issue 774.

Shelley's influence on Dickinson's work was particularly strong. Feit Diehl refers to their "shared vocabulary" (1981:130). Shelley's work was so permeated by Wordsworth's influence that many of the influences that Dickinson absorbed was Wordsworth's, through the conduit of Shelley's poetry. As said earlier, Wordsworth's marked influence on Shelley is explored by G. Kim Blank in an absorbing book entitled *Wordsworth's Influence on Shelley: A Study in Poetic Authority.* In its preface Blank writes as follows:

> In this book I want to consider three interrelated things: first, that Percy Bysshe Shelley was very concerned with being influenced, ...second, that Shelley's work is often involved with the production of poetry and the figure of the poet coming-into-being; and, that Shelley was troubled by and knowledgeable about Wordsworth, the issues and problems Wordsworth and his poetry raised, to the extent that throughout his career as a poet he was continually compelled to poetically address his older contemporary. I want to prove what many critics[7] have intuited:

[7] These critics include i.a, Edward Dowden, Harold Bloom, Donald Reiman, Paul

> that Wordsworth is the single most important influence on Shelley's poetic development (1988:x).

Blank then proceeds to demonstrate convincingly that Shelley not only read Wordsworth intensively and quoted his work extensively – he even succeeded in persuading Byron of Wordsworth's merits! Byron reported that Shelley used to "dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea" when he was in Switzerland and then concedes somewhat grudgingly that he remembered then reading some of Wordsworth's work "with pleasure" (Blank, 1988:42). Blank points out that there are literally "hundreds of phrases and lines in Shelley that unmistakably bear the mark of Wordsworth's influence" (1988:x). Shelley not only wrote many poems in which Wordsworth's influence can be detected clearly, but he also wrote poems in response to Wordsworth's poetry, and about Wordsworth (in which he either praised him, agreed/disagreed with him, or censured him). The latter include most notably 'To Wordsworth', but also 'Verses Written on Receiving a Celandine in a Letter from England', the satirical 'Peter Bell the Third', and 'Oh! There are Spirits of the Air'. The former include 'A Tale of Society as it Is' which draws on poems like 'The Female Vagrant' and other poems about death, loss and suffering in *Lyrical Ballads*, 'To Harriet' and 'A Treatise on Morals' which draw on 'Tintern Abbey'. Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' also influenced numerous poems by Shelley like 'Retrospect', 'To Jane: The Recollection', 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', 'Mont Blanc', 'Prometheus Unbound" and 'To a Skylark" to mention but a few. Blank argues persuasively that Shelley models his very conception of the role of the poet, and solitude (both key subjects for Dickinson) on Wordsworth himself and on his conceptions thereof, as can be seen in 'Alastor'. In the Preface to 'Alastor' Shelley misquotes "Oh, Sir! The good die first/And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust/Burn to the socket" (*The Excursion*, Book 2, *ll* 500- 502) as "The good die first,/And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust/Burn to the socket". 'Alastor', that also contains quotations from 'The Immortality Ode', carries strong echoes from 'The Thorn' – the descriptions of the graves in both poems contain striking

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Mueske, Earl Griggs, J.C. Echeruo and Marilyn Butler to mention but a few.

similarities. Blank maintains convincingly that Wordsworth's in *The Excursion* informs not just the figure of Alastor, but also that of the Maniac (the figure of a failed poet) in 'Julian and Maddalo' (1988:24, 46, 49, 50-54, 63, 68, 69,73-74, 83, 84, 90, 91,109, 124,132, 134,167-170,176, 188,192, 207, 219, 231).

Joanne Feit Diehl in turn points out how influential Shelley was in Dickinson's poetry as regards the power of words, the role of the poet and solitude. As Blank clearly shows, these are areas in Shelley's poetry that were shaped and informed by Wordsworth, thus surely and inescapably exposing Dickinson to Wordsworth's influence. In this regard it is extremely interesting to note that one of the two passages believed to have been marked by Dickinson in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth* that is included in the Dickinson Collection at Harvard is a passage in Book 2: The Solitary of *The Excursion.* So when Feit Diehl points out that Shelley's 'Epipsychidion' "appears to have served as an imagistic mine" for Dickinson's poetry, I cannot avoid thinking of Wordsworth's 'The White Doe of Rylstone', though Blank does not identify this poem as a source of Wordsworthian influence on Shelley. Feit Diehl writes as follows:

> The opening of Shelley's poem, a paean to Emily, describes her as a "radiant form" [*l* 22], a star and moon, her light causes the poet's words to "Flash, lightning-like, with unaccustomed glow"[*l* 34]. She is lamp, flame, immovable star. When Emily appears as a deer, it is "the brightness/Of her divinest presence which trembles through her limbs." [*ll* 77-79] (1981:145).

Shelley's poem abounds with images that seem to echo 'The White Doe of Rylstone'. Wordsworth's poem refers to a white deer that is a "radiant creature" "beauteous as the silver moon" and "spotless, and holy, and gentle, and bright ... like an angel of light" (Canto 1, stanzas 4, 8 and 11). It also features a sister called Emily who is an inspiring force. The Emily in Shelley's poem is likewise a "lovely soul" who is gentle and a "Mortal shape indued/With love and light and deity" that he refers to as "Spouse! Sister! Angel!". Shelley often refers to his Emily as 'sister' while Wordsworth's Emily is the sister of the Norton brothers. Both poems abound with images of the moon, stars, moonlight, caves, caverns, flowers, ivy, light, solitude and tranquillity, to mention only a very few of the many common images that occur in both poems. Feit Diehl also *inter alia* identifies 'To a Skylark', 'Ode to the West

Wind', 'Mutability', 'Mont Blanc" and 'Prometheus Unbound' as poems that influenced Dickinson – these are all poems identified by Blank as poems in which Wordsworth's influence is clearly discernible. I will refer to this again.

Gill similarly maintains that Wordsworth was not only instrumental in shaping the poetry of both Shelley and Keats, but also in shaping their very conception of the poetic life. In fact, Keats's well-known sonnet 'Great spirits now on earth are sojourning' acknowledges Wordsworth as the first of these 'great spirits' – "He of the cloud, the cataract, the lake,/Who on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake,/Catches his freshness from Archangel's wing" (*ll* 1-3). And Stephen Gill confirms my long-held belief that Byron's mocking criticism of Wordsworth was in fact an agonistic denial of Wordsworth's influence and an admission that Wordsworth "in some malign way, counted" (1998:17)! Richard Gravil touches on this subject as well when he refers quite scathingly (and maybe not *quite* fairly!) to "Byron's translation of Wordsworth's poetry of nature into the borrowed thoughts and rhythmic clichés of *Childe Harold*" (2000:37).

Harold Bloom shares Blank and Gill's views and refers to Wordsworth as Shelley's "poetic father" (1994:246) – indeed, Shelley acknowledges this himself in the Invocation/Preface to *Alastor*:

> I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain
> May modulate with murmurs of the air,
> And motions of the forests and the sea,
> And voice of living beings, and woven hymns
> Of night and day, and the deep heart of man (*ll* 45-9).

The tone of the early Wordsworth is unmistakable here. I quote from 'The Immortality Ode' to illustrate:

> The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
> Is lovely yet:
> The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
> Do take a sober colouring from an eye
> That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
> Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
> Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
> Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
> To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears (*ll* 197-206).

In 'Tintern Abbey" Wordsworth writes about the restorative power that lies in the memories that he retains of the beautiful natural places of his childhood:

> But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
> Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
> In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
> .... tranquil restoration: ....
> .... that blessed mood,
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world
> Is lightened: – that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on,
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things (*ll* 27-49).

As previously mentioned, Shelley also refers to Wordsworth in 'Mont Blanc' and "Ode to the West Wind'. And very significantly (regarding the role of the poet and poetry), one also hears Wordsworth very strongly in *The Defence of Poetry* and in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound.* And in 'To Wordsworth', Shelley lauds the early Wordsworth as follows:

> Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
> On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
> Thou hast like a rock-built refuge stood
> Above the blind and battling multitude:
> In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
> Songs consecrate to truth and liberty.

In *Emily Dickinson's Reading*, Jack Capps regards her as "well qualified as a potential disciple of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Romantic Movement" (1966:76). This view has subsequently almost become a common-place. In her perceptive and thought-provoking study *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*, Joanne Feit Diehl places Dickinson firmly in the Romantic tradition. She regards it as essential that Dickinson's poetry be appraised with an awareness "of what Dickinson shares with and how she departs from the Anglo-American Romantic tradition" (1981:3-4). With reference to Feit Diehl's

book, Richard Gravil believes that her analyses of Dickinson's link to the Romantics illustrates "perhaps the most extraordinary instance of a mind in persistent dialogue with a broad range of other poets in the history of Anglo-American lyricism" (2000:191) – the poets most notably referred to here are the Romantics. Daria Donnelly also refers to this aspect of Dickinson's poetry when she claims that Dickinson's intensive use of the comparative "constitutes a conversation with Romantic ideas of mutability and progress" (also see pp 5, 86, 89 and 90). Donnelly believes that Dickinson shares the interest of the Romantics "in the volatility of nature and the human mind" and consistently uses the so-called "Romantic comparative" (as employed for instance by Wordsworth in his great 'Immortality Ode' and in 'Tintern Abbey') to explore those topics (1998:125). Indeed, Dickinson regarded herself as "as the heir of romantic tradition, composing in order to cope with emotional pain and inspired by the benign and tutelary powers of nature" – the Wordsworthian tone is unmistakable here. Richard Sewall states unambiguously that Dickinson

> can no longer be regarded, for all her withdrawn ways, as working in grand isolation, all uniqueness and originality. She saw herself as a poet in the company of Poets – and, functioning as she did mostly on her own, read them (among other reasons) for company (1974,1980:660-70).

Sewall further maintains, with reference to the sources that she tapped in producing her highly original poetry, that Dickinson should be seen in an "ever-widening perspective, and her stature grows. She comes to us increasingly as the summation of a culture, not (as she was long regarded) a minor and freakish offshoot" (1980:671, n3). I maintain that the root-culture that nurtured her was Romanticism, a culture that is so permeated with Wordsworth's influence that this influence could not then, and still, cannot be avoided and certainly cannot be discounted. I also wonder whether Dickinson was not, perhaps only subliminally, aware that Wordsworth was the ultimate 'controlling/overbearing/influential poetic master/stranger/father' and made an agonistic, albeit fearful, attempt to deny this influence. Why else did she not want to 'chagrin' the Stranger? (See pp. 30, 31, 100 and 186.) Richard Gravil points out a further complicating element in determining influence – whereas

Dickinson "sometimes takes her Wordsworth, her Keats, her Tennyson, singly, more often their essential oils are indescribably blent" (2000:193), thus making it harder to establish to whom she is alluding, or whose writing is surfacing through the palimpsest.

During the last twenty-five years of his life Wordsworth's influence expanded greatly and his fame grew enormously – Gill details the astonishing scope of this in the first chapter (pp 11-39) of *Wordsworth and the Victorians*. Wordsworth's admirers and readers included not only Charles Darwin, John Ruskin (whom Dickinson acknowledges as an influence), Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Gaskell, John Stuart Mill, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Brönte, Tennyson and a myriad others, but even Queen Victoria herself on whose insistence Wordsworth eventually accepted the position of Poet Laureate in 1843. Rydal Mount became a veritable shrine. In the public's mind, the Lake District and Grasmere became synonymous with Wordsworth. Wordsworth was not only acknowledged as a great spiritual power, but also as a life-changing one. Gill refers to him as a "cultural icon" – he was not only listened to with increasing respect, but was "visited, written about and, by disciples, revered" (1998:3). When Thomas Wakley, MP for Finbury, denigrated Wordsworth in Parliament in 1842, he unleashed a "storm of chastisement" and he was treated "as if he had been caught defacing a national monument" (Gill: 1998: 21)!

Wordsworth's readership stretched not just the length and breadth of England itself, but also from "North America to India" (1998:82). Although Gill feels that Wordsworth's influence in America still needs to be fully explored, he makes the extremely relevant point that Wordsworth was no unknown quantity in America:

> Wordsworth's poetry was being freshly set by American printers as early as 1802; his first editor, during his [Wordsworth's] lifetime, was an American, Henry Reed; *The Prelude* and Christopher Wordsworth's *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* were better received in America than in Great Britain; American admirers contributed substantially to the Wordsworth memorial in Ambleside Church; the greatest private collectors of Wordsworth books and manuscripts were (and still are) Americans. But apart from the line through Emerson and Thoreau,

> Wordsworth's presence in American literature and art has not been fully explored (1998:9).

George Eliot was another writer who was an ardent admirer of Wordsworth. She cherished some rose leaves from his garden that her brother Isaac Evans had brought her after a visit to the Lake District. She said in a letter to Charlotte Carmichael that she was delighted to find that they were "agreed in loving our incomparable Wordsworth" (Gill, 1998:145). She read Wordsworth exhaustively throughout her life and referred to his work consistently in her essays, letters and reviews. Much of the tenor of her work is unashamedly Wordsworthian. *Adam Bede* starts with a quotation from Book 6 of *The Excursion* (*ll* 651-59), thus placing Eliot firmly within Wordsworth's ambit. Gill concludes his chapter on George Eliot with the statement that Eliot is "... the most eloquent meditator of the humanist vision inherent in all of Wordsworth" (1998:145-67).

Dickinson in turn admired Eliot greatly. She read both her poetry and novels, thus inescapably exposing herself to Wordsworth's influence. Capps maintains that Dickinson felt "an intimate kinship with such writers as George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the Brontë sisters and had an active interest in the principal figures of the Romantic Movement" – in common with the Romantics, her writing shows "a love of natural beauty, a belief in man's innate goodness, and a faith in human intuition" (1966:77-8), though he then also makes the somewhat strange claim her work does not show much influence by the Romantics. Though Capps's statements are undoubtedly simplistic[8], they do go some way towards reflecting my own opinion that Dickinson was influenced to such an extent by the Romantics that she shared many of the themes and preoccupations that informed the poetry of the Romantics. Capps does, however, acknowledge somewhat contradictorily that Dickinson found the poetry and prose of American authors less attractive than that of British writers of the Romantic and Victorian periods (1966:121).

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[8] Richard Gravil points out that Capps significantly underestimated the influence of the Romantics on Dickinson and notes that Joanne Feit Diehl, in pointing out that Dickinson is virtually in "persistent dialogue" with the Romantics, gives a much truer picture in this regard (2000:191). Michael Yetman also believes that Capps does not acknowledge the influence of the Romantics on Dickinson sufficiently (1973:130).

I would like to conclude this chapter on Wordsworth's influence by quoting Greenwood in *The North American* Review, 18 (1824), again. The alert reader, Greenwood writes, in one of America's first significant appreciations of Wordsworth, knows that

> … "however this poet may have been disregarded, he has borne a most important part in giving its character to the poetry of the age; he knows that many of the poets, with whose writings this country is so familiar, have borrowed some of their sweetest minstrelsy from strains which have reached us but rarely and faintly from the mountains of Westmoreland; and he is continually detecting plagiarism, both in spirit and in letter, made from the volumes of Wordsworth, by those who have joined to depress him." (Gravil:2000:37).

Greenwood is right. Fortunately, however, Wordsworth outlived all of those who 'joined to depress' him. He lived long enough to have created the taste by which he was to be appreciated and to savour honour and fame and some financial reward, even as his creative powers declined. And his influence is everywhere – in the works of almost every poet and many authors who followed him, in 'green' attitudes and policies, in conservation practices. And I believe his poetry is deeply interwoven, if not imbricated, in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. I will explore this in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 2

"The fantasy within": Wordsworth and Dickinson on poetry and poets

Dickinson and Wordsworth both regarded poetry and the role of the poet as vital to the very well-being of humanity. Gelpi draws a parallel between Dickinson's assumption of the poetic mission and Wordsworth's consecration to the same mission in *The Prelude* (1985:44). Her adoption of the signature 'Emilie' has indeed been seen by some critics as an adoption of "the mask of the child-poet ... in the Blake-Wordsworth-Emerson tradition ..." (Gelpi, 1985:45).

Much has been written about the difficulties that the woman poet of the nineteenth century faced in establishing her identity as a poet in the light of the fact that virtually all her influential precursor poets were male. I discuss this further on in this chapter, but wish to make a tentative point here. Both Margaret Homans and Joanne Feit Diehl believe that the successful establishment of Dickinson's poetic identity is significantly complicated, possibly even compromised, by the fact that she is a woman. I am in agreement with this, but somewhat uneasily. I wonder if Dickinson did not, first and foremost, see herself as a poet, who only secondly happened to be a woman as well. I keep thinking of Adrienne Rich's view that Dickinson knew her own genius and, as a strong and practical woman, took steps to ensure that she could practise it (1976:51-55) by eschewing the traditional female role. Nancy Mayer does point out that Dickinson practises her poetry in a "deeply interior landscape that is potentially shared by many or all human subjects" (2005:3). I cannot help wondering whether Dickinson wasn't less worried about being a woman poet than she was about simply being a poet who had to compete in an agonistic confrontation with her predominantly male precursors.[9].

[9] And hopefully this issue will become clearer as I work through this thesis

Dickinson and Wordsworth both felt that the poet's role in society was a laudable and indeed crucial one. Dickinson's choice of the "unholy and unwomanly" task of becoming a poet (Leder with Abbot, 1987:23) reminds one of Wordsworth's dedication and commitment to the vocation of the poet. Judith Farr notes that central to Fascicle 22,

> ... and to "I dwell in Possibility," is the idea of the poet's nature, role, and development according to an aesthetic held by Emerson and conveyed to him by Wordsworth. In other lyrics, such as "I was the slightest in the House" (486), "Myself was formed – a Carpenter" (488), and "A Solemn thing within the Soul" (483), Dickinson confides the thoughts and characteristics of a "supposed person" (L 2.412) whose vital self-discovery as a poet invites her identification with the author. These poems describe Dickinson's understanding of the relation between life and art as well as the working patterns by which the speaker of this fascicle learns the secrets of the former to serve the latter. As Emerson enjoins poets in Nature, as Wordsworth describes his poet in *The Prelude*, Dickinson's speaker offers herself in solitude to nature's influence and predicates the sacramental connection between landscape and humanity, between landscape and the divine, which was the hypothesis of the [R]omantics ... (1992:51).

How strongly reminiscent is this not of Wordsworth musing "in solitude" on "Man, on Nature, and on Human Life" preparatory to speaking "in numerous verse" of "Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope" in the opening lines of his Prospectus to the 1814 edition of *The Excursion*. Further on in the same Prospectus he refers to the "great consummation" of humanity and Nature and proclaims, in "spousal verse"

> How exquisitely the individual Mind
> ... to the external World"
> Is fitted: – and how exquisitely, too –
> ....
> The external World is fitted to the Mind (*ll* 63-68).

In Poem 657, Dickinson not only gives expression to her vocation as a poet of Nature and landscape, but makes it clear that this landscape, as is the case with Wordsworth, also encompasses the landscape of humanity's heart, mind and soul:

> I dwell in Possibility –
> A fairer house than Prose –

More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

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

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –

Dickinson was fully aware that domestic duties interfered with her intellectual life, and complained about the pressure on women to live within the confines of their traditional role and follow the path of duty that she did not find appealing at all. She hungered to follow creative paths that 'Satan adorns' with flowers of the imagination that she couldn't resist:

> I reach out to pick them. The path of duty looks very ugly indeed – and the place where *I* want to go more amiable – a great deal – it is so much easier to do wrong than right – so much pleasanter to be evil than good.

With characteristic wicked humour she then adds, "I don't wonder that good angels weep – and bad ones sing songs" (*L* 1:82)[10]. It is intriguing to speculate here about the fact that Dickinson regarded the path of poetic creation as 'wrong'. Is this because all her powerful precursor poets were male and poetic creation was therefore a masculine preserve that she, as a woman, was trespassing on? Was she, in writing poetry, and in deliberately creating for herself the favourable circumstances for doing so, shirking her true role as a woman? I believe that there are many elements of truth in this hypothesis. Wendy Barker argues along similar lines, as does Margaret Homans (1980:166-1770). Barker claims that Dickinson "could only see her poetic power as "bad," since it needed to assert itself away from the sunny world of culturally condoned, even expected, dress fittings and calling cards" ie, the accepted and traditional female role of her time (2002:80). There is possibly even some significance in this regard to Cristanne Miller's comment

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[10] Facetiously, one could ask whether this would fall into be rubric of good girls making good wives and bad girls making good cocktails?

that, judging "by a contemporary writer's characterization of typical feminine and masculine styles, Dickinson's style shares more with the latter than with the former ... Dickinson writes with what might in her age be called a "masculine" "terseness of diction" and "concentrativeness" free from the floweriness and airiness that was felt to have characterised typical women's writing of the time (1987:158-59). Some feminist critics have indeed regarded Dickinson's conspicuously individualistic and modernist style as a form of rebellion against the "patriarchal literary tradition" that preceded her (Stonum, 1990:32). I suspect that there is also a much subtler element of subversion here. In employing her provocative and obscuring strategies, Dickinson succeeds in challenging and possibly even frustrating what Chomsky refers to as linguistic competence. Could this not be interpreted as a sly and veiled attack on the androcentric language of the Stranger/Father/Master? There is a teasingly elusive element here if one considers Dickinson's preoccupation with the themes of power and mastery. In an unnumbered note to Susan Gilbert sometime in 1878 (Stonum, 1990:53), she advises her to "Cherish Power – dear". This raises the question of whether she wishes to wield power or whether she wishes to submit to it. She often refers to 'dominion' which would seem to support the latter premise, except that she claims that

> Dominion lasts until obtained –
> Possession just as long –
> But these – endowing as the flit
> Eternally belong.
>
> How everlasting are the Lips
> Known only to the Dew –
> These are the Brides of permanence
> Supplanting me and you (P 1257).

This poem deals with one of Dickinson's most prominent themes, namely that it is better to strive than to attain. This echoes the Romantic quest motif – Stonum words it well when he refers to "the Romantic commonplace which Dickinson clearly endorses, namely that the boundless intensity of longing dwarfs the finitude of any actual satisfaction of the desire" (1990:55). Does this mean that she regards power as illusory? Is she saying that the power of the Master is likewise illusory? Is she saying, in Poem 415, that the Master is

in fact fallible?

Sunset at Night – is natural –
But Sunset on the Dawn
Reverses Nature – Master –
So Midnight's – due – at Noon.

Eclipses be – predicted –
And Science bows them in –
But do one face us suddenly –
Jehovah's Watch – is wrong.

In the deeply enigmatic Poem 754, with its tantalisingly pervasive sense of menace, is she saying that she is stronger than the Master? Though she is the possession of the Master and her association with him confers glory on her, she is his powerful, indeed lethal protector who vanquishes his enemies and is immortal. In typical ambiguous Dickinson manner, however, she then seems to suggest that this immortality could be a weakness rather than a strength:

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

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

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

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

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
None stir the second time –

On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
Or an emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He – may longer live
He longer must – than I –
For I have but the power to kill,
Without – the power to die –

So what is Dickinson doing in this poem? Is she reducing herself, though a powerful poet, to a tool of her male precursor poets, or is she saying that she is in fact stronger than her precursors and will outlive them? Is she perhaps indicating that *she*, the poet, is the possession of her tool, namely language? I believe that she is all these things, and that the poem is an extended oxymoron that highlights the poet's ongoing dilemma regarding her or his precursors. And it moves her no closer to resolving that dilemma. I also believe that it highlights the quandary of all poets' regarding that lethal tool, language, that they all employ in their craft. Wordsworth was overwhelmingly conscious of the dangers inherent in language. He says very clearly in his third *Essay upon Epitaphs* that words "are too awful an instrument for good or evil to be trifled with" particularly since they hold "above all other external powers a ***dominion*** [my emphasis] over thoughts" (*PrW*, 1974, 2:84-5). And dominion is, of course, an extremely loaded word for Dickinson. It is her key word for the kind of power that a Master exerts over an ephebe or apprentice, with its intriguing aspects of discipline and domination.

In view of the complexities of transumptive influence (as discussed in the Preface) I find it intriguing that Dickinson was so emphatic in her rejection of the traditional female role of her age. Did she unconsciously view herself as a 'poetic son' of her male precursor poets? The protagonists of her poems are certainly frequently male, and she indubitably resented the demands of domestic life on her time and energy. She certainly was less than enamoured of household chores! In Letter 36, written as early as May 1850 during an illness of her mother's, she writes at length about being the queen of dust and dirt with three loyal subjects, her mother, father and brother Austin who "still clamor for food, and I, like a martyr am feeding them ... God keep me from what they call *households ...*!" In Letter 333, written to Susan Gilbert in the autumn of 1869, she complains that she is "so hurried with Parents that I run all Day with my tongue abroad, like a Summer Dog".

In view of the foregoing one therefore has to ask the question whether she did not in fact symbolically sacrifice her gender (and its concomitant privileges/burdens/rewards – marriage, children, domesticity) to stand among the ranks of her poetic fathers? In this regard it is extraordinarily interesting to speculate about the affinities that Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out between Emily Dickinson and the patriarch Jacob in her excellent 1986 biography *Emily Dickinson,* as John Wargacki points out in a recent thought-provoking article (2007:154-157). One has to ask whether Dickinson identifies with wrestling, proactive Jacob because he 'took on' the ultimate Father/Stranger and "worsted" Him as she so memorably describes in another intensely subversive poem, Poem 59[11]

> A little East of Jordan,
> Evangelists record,
> A Gymnast and an Angel
> Did wrestle long and hard –
>
> Till morning touching mountain –
> And Jacob, waxing strong,
> The Angel begged permission
> To Breakfast – to return –
>
> Not so, said cunning Jacob!
> "I will not let thee go
> Except though bless me" – Stranger!
> The which acceded to –
>
> Light swung the silver fleeces
> "Peniel" Hills beyond,
> And the bewildered Gymnast
> Found he had worsted God!

I agree with Wolff (1986:146) that the field of battle of the epic encounter between God and Jacob is in fact poetry itself, and I am then further irresistibly tempted to read this in the light of Feit Diehl's theories about Dickinson's struggle against her powerful precursor poets. I believe that in this poem at least audacious and cunning Dickinson, as the aspiring and ambitious poet, wins her agonistic battle to establish her own poetic persona

[11] Wargacki (2007:155) appositely describes this poem as an artful and insightful 'midrash' which is an ancient Jewish homiletic commentary on some portion of the Hebrew Scriptures (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary).

against her precursor poets. Feit Diehl also points out that Dickinson identifies herself with Jacob, and in this context sees poetic creation as a struggle with "the combined power of her muse and male Precursor" who fills her with what Dickinson herself describes as ""awe" ... an awareness and fear of the sublimity of her confrontations" with this Other during which she is frequently "abashed by the power of the Precursor, the lover, God" (1981:24). Consequently, because Dickinson is a strong, truly original poet, she subversively employs

> obscuring strategies, rhetorical disguises that mask as they simultaneously disclose, poetic relationships too ambivalent to be acknowledged openly. How often has the oblique qualities of these [Dickinson's] hermetic poems led us away from a search for origins; how often their self-reflexive form invited us to restrict our analyses of patterns of reference to the isolate text?

I was fascinated to note that Feit Diehl also reads the above Dickinson poem against Wordsworth's 'Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendor and Beauty' in which Wordsworth's imaginatively visualizes a Jacob's ladder stretching from earth to heaven in the "hazy ridges" of the hills – I had long wondered if Dickinson's "silver fleeces" did not hark back to Wordsworth's "gilded flocks"! As Feit Diehl appositely points out, both poems do indeed deal with the poet's acquisition of poetic power.

Regarding the role of the Bible, identified by many as the pre-eminent poetic source for Dickinson, Feit Diehl continues as follows:

> Although the Bible contributes its vision of the Divinity of the Word, its images and language to her poetry, Dickinson turns this prepotent source toward her own concerns, which are, I will argue, the major concerns of Romanticism. Like her contemporaries Tennyson and Browning, Dickinson finds her voice in response to the controlling issues of her most powerful predecessors ... – the self's relation to nature, the power of the imagination as if confronts death, a heroic questing that leads to a trial of the limits of poetic power ... (1981:7).

And to this one could add a profound awe/distrust of and ambiguity about the power of language and its deficiencies, as well as concepts of a dual consciousness, and the dangerous powers of the mind. All these points place Dickinson squarely within Wordsworth's ambit.

As referred to above, the situation of Dickinson *vis-à-vis* her poetical forebears is made more intriguing by the question of gender. Feit Diehl makes the valid point that Dickinson had to find her own voice as a powerful Post-Enlightenment woman poet. She had to create a space in which her own poetic voice could be heard amid the 'echoes' (indeed, dare one not say 'noise' or 'tumult'?), of the powerful voices of her male precursors. And none of these voices was stronger, more insistent, possibly even more insidious, than Wordsworth's in that "Wordsworth-haunted" century that Bloom refers to. What provides a second and even more fascinating dimension to this situation is the way that Dickinson deals with this inescapable literary inheritance or these 'presences'. As stated above, Feit Diehl presents a very convincing argument that Dickinson's powerful male precursors manifest in her poetry in the intriguing, indeed tantalising, guise of the Master or Sire or the Stranger, a 'visitor' she both welcomes and loves, but also fears and consequently attempts to reject, albeit with both trepidation, reluctance and yet with a measure of defiance as well. It therefore has to be stressed that this rejection is ambivalent, as is her attitude to her predominantly male precursors. Poem 49 shows this duality clearly:

> I never lost as much but twice
> And that was in the sod.
> Twice have I stood the beggar
> Before the door of God!
>
> Angels – twice descending
> Reimbursed my store –
> Burglar! Banker – Father!
> I am poor once more! (P 49).

Any study of Dickinson is enormously complicated by the fact that she "neglects much of the cuing" that one expects to encounter in the body of work of a poet as Gary Lee Stonum puts it (1990:7, 9). Stonum also refers to the "the astonishing gap" which in fact exists between the "certainty that she is a major poet and the uncertainty about what her business as a poet might be" (1990:3)! Judith Farr notes this aspect of Dickinson's work as well when she says that the poetry is difficult to read because it is "coded". This was necessary, Farr speculates, because much of Dickinson's "riddle-some"

poetry was written for a married woman and a married man, i.e. Susan Dickinson, her brother Austin's wife, and Samuel Bowles (1992:5). This is no doubt accurate, but there is more to it than that. The very essence of Dickinson's poetics lies in its subversive character, its slantwise, enigmatic engagement with its subject matter. This does make her poetry 'difficult' and ambiguous, creating what Bloom i.a. refers to as the "cognitive difficulties" that her work presents us with (1986:1).

With the advent of Romanticism (which firmly established the poet's subjectivity as a one of the central themes of poetry) the poet's role expanded to encompass the element of artistic risk and affirmed the poet "as hero of his or her own [dangerous] spiritual quest" (Stonum, 1990:9). As will also be discussed in Chapter 6, Dickinson and Wordsworth share a strong awareness of the danger that lurks in poetry and the powerful tools of their trade – language and the word. This contributes to the consciousness in both of them that, in writing poetry, they are engaged not only in a laudable, indeed essential activity, but also in a hazardous enterprise. The poet not only uses a tool, language, that carries its own inherent dangers (indeed, according to Wordsworth, darkness 'inheres' in it as will be discussed), but s/he is further engaged in the risky business of interpreting the universe for the reader. In doing this, the poet is enormously influential. In Dickinson, who often assumes the persona of the reader, the poet (predominantly male) is frequently depicted as the heroic creator who overawes his reader with his intellectual wealth, power and mastery. Indeed, so overwhelming is the effect of his poetry that the reader is not only intimidated by the power and riches on display, but feels impoverished and diminished by it:

> Of Pictures, the Discloser –
> The Poet – it is He –
> Entitles Us – by Contrast –
> To ceaseless Poverty –
>
> Of Portion – so unconscious –
> The Robbing – could not harm –
> Himself – to Him – a Fortune –
> Exterior – to Time – (P. 448).

In Dickinson's poetry, this heroic and masterly poet features frequently. The

role of this poet is ambiguous, however, as is Dickinson's reaction to him. As already stated, she stands in awe of him, but also seeks her independence from him. It is also interesting to note that the Stranger (the male precursor poet?) often seems to carry a threat. In *l* 6 of Poem 1202, for instance, the murderous, destructive frost first manifests itself as "A Stranger hovering round".

Whereas Dickinson seems to feel that she is part of a female literary tradition (that contains Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Brontës and George Eliot), intriguingly, her true precursor is always male. I believe that she felt herself to be part of the community of poets that Wordsworth describes in the following lines (he is addressing Coleridge) and that she shares his desire to create poetry that is *alive* and that will be *remembered*:

> Dearest friend
> Forgive me if I say that I, who long
> Had harboured reverentially a thought
> That poets, even as prophets, each with each
> Connected in a mighty scheme of truth,
> Have each for his peculiar dower a sense
> By which he is enabled to perceive
> Something unseen before – forgive me, friend,
> If I, the meanest[12] of this band, had hope
> That unto me had also been vouchsafed
> An influx, that in some sort I possessed
> A privilege, and that a work of mine,
> Proceeding from the depth of untaught things,
> Enduring and creative, might become
> A power like one of Nature's (*Prelude*, 1805, 13, *ll* 298-312).

I believe that Joanne Feit Diehl confirms this when she writes about Dickinson's link to her male precursors as follows:

> Active women authors provided her with encouraging examples; she was especially interested in their work and seems to have identified them as members of a kind of literary sisterhood in whose triumphs she shared and from whom she gained strength. But the dominating "lover," the desired yet threatening master who retains the power to destroy or to give life to the poet is, throughout Dickinson's poems and letters, male (1981:16n).

[12] Wordsworth consistently uses 'meanest' to mean 'insignificant'.

Feit Diehl further states that this Master Poet or Stranger or Visitor in Dickinson's poetry is an inspiring force, a symbolic, composite male figure who functions as her muse, and who

> subsumes the individual poets that comprise his identity, and the Composite Precursor, who represents the collective force of the major influences on her writing. Yet her sense of her muse differs fundamentally from that of the male Romantics, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley. For them the traditional vision of the feminine goddess, the image of the fecund if idealized or distant muse, lingers. The male poets retain the ability to separate their poetic fathers – mythic progenitors – from the muse. The relation between the male poet and his muse is a private courtship upon which the presence of the father impinges but in which the younger poet, depending on his strength, may win his muse from the father to invoke the aura of inspiration he desires .... But not so for Dickinson. Her dilemma of influence is at once complicated and radically simplified by her perception that the ***Composite Precursor and her muse are the same*** [my emphasis] (1981:18).

She therefore fears and needs his power simultaneously. She wards him off even as she tries to propitiate him in order to gain access to his power. She cannot reject her male precursor poets without risking a possibly fatal injury to her muse and therefore her creative poetic ability. Dickinson fears that as a poetic apprentice, she might lose her poetic power if she submits to her male muse and yet she needs him to fuel her creativity. Consequently she both craves and fears creative self-sufficiency. This accounts for her highly ambivalent responses to the figure of the Master/Visitor/Stranger in her poetry. In this context it is extraordinarily intriguing that she actually refers to Wordsworth as the Stranger who is not to be 'chagrined' (see reference below). If one accepts Feit Diehl's premise that this male presence in Dickinson's poetry, the Master or Stranger or Sire, is indeed her male precursor poets in the guise of her male muse (and I do), it opens the way to an interesting extrapolation. If, as Feit Diehl suggests, she both welcomed her muse and felt that she had to reject him, then it is surely significant that she specifically refers to Wordsworth as "the Stranger" and twice seemingly rejects what he says. In a letter to Mrs J. G. Holland she writes, "February passed like a Skate and I know March. Here is the 'light' the Stranger said 'was not on land or sea.' Myself could arrest it but we'll not chagrin Him" (L

315). She is referring to a line from Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas' here that Wordsworth composed in the deeply sad aftermath of his brother John's death. The poem was inspired by a painting done by Sir George Beaumont that depicts Peele Castle during a storm. I quote stanzas one, three and four:

> I was thy Neighbour once, thou rugged Pile!
> Four summer weeks I dwelt in sight of thee:
> I saw thee every day; and all the while
> Thy Form was sleeping on a glassy sea.
>
> How perfect was the calm! it seemed no sleep;
> No mood, which season takes away, or brings:
> I could have fancied that the mighty Deep
> Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things.
>
> Ah! THEN, if mine had been the Painter's hand,
> To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,
> The light that never was, on sea or land,
> The consecration, and the Poet's dream.

In her letter to Mrs Holland, Dickinson had placed a '1' over "sea" and a '2' over "land". Dickinson also quotes the same line in Letter 394 to her Norcross cousins: "... 'The light that never was on sea or land' might just as well be had for the knocking". One can't help wondering why she was so preoccupied with this line or issue. Though these references have been interpreted as "a charming condescension" (Bloom, 1994: 301), to her illustrious precursor Wordsworth, I am not convinced that there is not an agonistic quality here – I suspect that Dickinson is deliberately resisting Wordsworth's inescapable influence by disagreeing with him in a slightly superior tone. The irony is, of course, that Wordsworth did not mean that this light could not or did not exist – he simply meant that it had been created by the power of the poet's mind and imagination. Bloom does indeed refer to Dickinson's agonistic stance regarding the Romantics – he claims that her "agon was waged with the whole of tradition, but particularly with the Bible and with [R]omanticism" (1985:1).

I believe that it is this almost confrontational stance regarding her precursors that informs the fact that the act of creation in Dickinson's poetry is often seen as a physical struggle as discussed above regarding Poem 59 (quoted on p

25) that depicts Jacob wrestling with and overcoming God. Dickinson also identifies with Jacob in a letter that she wrote to Thomas Higginson (L 1042) in which she enigmatically changes the wording of Genesis and of her own poem around so that Jacob (the poet) is the figure of authority: "Audacity of Bliss, said Jacob to the Angel 'I will not let thee go except I bless thee' – Pugilist and Poet, Jacob was correct – ". It bears repeating that I strongly agree with Feit Diehl that this relates to "Dickinson's sense of struggle when confronting the combined power of muse and male Precursor" (1981:24), and is also an indication that at times Dickinson feels herself in full possession of the precursor's power – the triumphant and autonomous poet. It is as if with every poem that she successfully creates, like Poem 59 referred to above, she temporarily overcomes her male precursor, even as she draws on his power. Even more important, however, than drawing on and controlling the power of her muse/precursor, is the need for the poet to assert control over her own poetic powers of creation. In asserting her own poetic creativity, she affirms her ambitious poetic identity. This phase of fulfilment only lasts for a short time, however, until she has to go through the same process again, rather like Coleridge's wedding guest driven by the compulsion to tell his story. Feit Diehl (1981:32) refers to the "taut balance" that she struggles to, first, establish and then maintain between her poetic independence and the inescapable powerful presence of the Stranger/Master/Father. What further adds to the complexity of this process is that she feels that she is continuously being assessed and judged by him:

> Tried always and Condemned by thee
> Permit me this reprieve
> That dying I may earn the look
> For which I cease to live – (P 1559).

Dickinson's powerful poetic persona makes it impossible to ever resolve this dilemma – she cannot ever completely subject herself to her male precursor/muse, nor can she escape or renounce his influence. Indeed, she needs his influence to fuel her creativity in an agonistic confrontation that is ongoing:

> He was my host – he was my guest,

I never to this day
If I invited him could tell,
Or he invited me.

So infinite our intercourse
So intimate, indeed,
Analysis as capsule seemed
To keeper of the seed (P 1721).

Consequently she needs to lower her poetic defences in order to access the fructifying power of her precursor, but simultaneously cannot escape the fear that in doing so her own creative power may be fatally usurped; that the precursor's pigments may contaminate her *palette*. Whereas she wants to stand alone creatively and only paint with her own colours, she is afraid that in doing so she may be impoverished, so, whilst passionately desiring it, she remains fearful of creative independence:

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
Upon an unsuspecting Heir –
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
And God, for a Frontier (P 1090).

Feit Diehl writes intriguingly that the body and soul that Dickinson is reluctant to possess is the masculine self that she frequently assumes in both her poetry and her letters. I am tempted to agree here and see this as a further indication that it is possible for Dickinson to transcend her gender and stand among her poetic fathers as an equal, sometimes possibly even as a superior, when she is able to assert herself as an autonomous poet and give expression to her belief that "Jehovah's Watch – is wrong" (P 415).

Along very similar lines to those Feit Diehl would pursue later (and as discussed above), Adrienne Rich points out that Poems 315 and 273 are both about "the poet's relationship to her own power" which, particularly in Poem 315, is "exteriorized in masculine form" (1976:56-59) in much the same format, I believe, of Feit Diehl's combined muse/male Precursor. The poems are likewise about inevitability, finality and possession. They depict not only

Dickinson's acknowledgement of being possessed by poetry, with the concomitant compelling need to write poetry and the enormity of that undertaking, but also her acceptance of the vocation of being a poet and the finality of that choice – "He put the Belt around my life – /I heard the buckle snap –" (P 273). Poem 488 almost puts the seal on this acknowledgement as Dickinson makes a clear and unapologetic statement as to her craft: "Myself was formed – a Carpenter – " whose business is defined very concisely: "We – Temples Build – I said – ".

Poem 315 depicts Dickinson's relationship to her dangerous poetic vocation in erotic imagery that carries overtones of seduction, possibly even rape:

> He fumbles at your Soul
> As Players at the Keys
> Before they drop full Music on –
> He stuns you by degrees –
> Prepares your brittle Nature
> For the Ethereal Blow
> By fainter Hammers – further heard –
> Then nearer – Then to show
> Your Breath has time to straighten –
> Your Brain – to bubble Cool –
> Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt –
> That scalps your naked Soul –
>
> When winds take Forests in their Paws –
> The Universe – is still –

Inder Nath Kher puts a slightly different interpretation on this poem. She believes that it portrays the effect that the poet has on the reader in the sense of "one who willingly submits to the poet's spell" (1974:132). Though I can see why Kher arrives at this interpretation, I believe Rich's interpretation to be the more valid one. David Porter believes the poem deals with the "terror of assault" (1981:285). This is an intriguing though limited reading – if one interprets the poem as the poet's bondage to her poetic vocation (reinforced by Poem 273), the element of assault does enter into it. The poet is indeed subjected to the psychically and physically frightening onslaught of poetry in conjunction with her muse/male precursor, along with being exposed to the dangerous powers inherent in language. In this context it is intriguing to look

at the final couplet of Dickinson's poem ("When winds take Forests in their Paws – /The Universe – is still –") in the light of Wordsworth's contention that "the motions of the winds" are embodied in the mystery of words in which darkness also "makes abode" (*Prelude*, 1805, Book 5, *ll* 620-24 – quoted below on p 37, and also referred to on pp 70, 157-158 and 178), giving a clear warning of the awesome powers of language that one feels might well reduce the universe to awed stillness. I am also irresistibly reminded of those marvellously chilling description from Book 10 (*ll* 80-83) of *The Prelude* which describes Paris after the September massacres of 1792 as "a place of fear/Unfit for the repose of night,*/Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam"* [my italics]. Whether Dickinson had this line from Wordsworth in mind when she wrote her penultimate line is probably highly debatable, but the image of a vulnerable and defenceless forest being shaken in the paws of the dangerous winds of language, and the image of tigers roaming on no doubt silent paws through a defenceless forest do make one wonder! The vivid images employed by both poets not only serve as tantalising evocations of the mysterious and transforming power of language as it manages to suggest what lies beyond the verifiable, but also succeed in implying the dangers inherent in language as it stalks the corridors of the mind in stealthy and subversive fashion.

In her later poetry, Dickinson claims her independence of any influential precursor/master, yet in truth she remains haunted by the possibility that in achieving this independence, she may have lost his 'potency and power':

> ... Dickinson wavers between feeling that she must wait to receive her Master/muse and radical rejection of his presence. Threat of dependence foments rebellion; by casting off her Precursor, she fears that she may be relinquishing her muse as well. In the process of exorcising her Precursor, she may banish the source of her art (Diehl, 1981:21).

So her poems veer obsessively between these two poles, as the struggle plays itself out in poem after poem. This can be very clearly seen in Poem 750:

> Growth of Man – like Growth of Nature –

Gravitates within –
Atmosphere and Sun endorse it –
But it stir – alone –

Each – its difficult Ideal
Must achieve – Itself –
Through the solitary prowess
Of a Silent Life –

Effort – is the sole condition –
Patience of Itself –
Patience of opposing forces –
And intact Belief –

Looking on – is the Department
Of its Audience –
But Transaction – is assisted
By no Countenance – (P 750).

This is such a traumatic struggle that Dickinson is sometimes tempted to relinquish her poetic powers:

I would not paint – a picture –
I'd rather be the One
Its bright impossibility
To dwell – delicious – on –
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare – celestial – stir –
Evokes so sweet a Torment–
Such sumptuous – Despair –

Nor would I be a Poet –
It's finer – own the Ear –
Enamored – impotent – content –
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,

Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts of Melody! (P 505).

Adrienne Rich persuasively points out that even as Dickinson seemingly rejects her poetic vocation, she cannot help wondering how it would feel to evoke "so sweet a Torment" with godlike fingers, or what the reward would be of wielding those stunning "Bolts of Melody" (1976:60). It is also highly revealing to look at the adjectives that Dickinson employs in describing the non-poet: "Enamored" no doubt indicating emotional dependency; "impotent"

which I interpret as powerless; and worst of all "content" to be so!

Poem 1580 also portrays this dilemma:

> We shun it ere it comes,
> Afraid of Joy,
> Then sue it to delay
> And lest it fly,
> Beguile it more and more –
> May not this be
> Old Suitor Heaven,
> Like our dismay at thee?

For both Dickinson and Wordsworth poetry is a magical, powerful and disturbing force. It carries nuances of darkness, enchantment and insanity, as much as it does of beauty and inspiration. In *The Prelude* of 1805, Book 5, Wordsworth voices his concern about and fascination with language when he claims that it is in the "mystery of words" that "darkness makes abode" and where a "host/Of shadowy things" effect transforming and obscuring changes. It is intriguing to note that Wordsworth believes that this 'darkness' almost magically circumfuses "forms and substances ... with light divine" and imbues them with "a glory scarce their own". Here is that truly extraordinary passage:

> Visionary power
> Attends upon the motions of the winds
> Embodied in the mystery of words:
> There darkness makes abode, and all the host
> Of shadowy things do work their changes there
> As in a mansion like their proper home.
> Even forms and substances are circumfused
> By that transparent veil with light divine,
> And through the turnings intricate of verse
> Present themselves as objects recognised
> In flashes, and with a glory scarce their own (*ll* 620-29).

In Poem 593, Dickinson also deals evocatively with the magical transformation wrought by the discovery of poetry as she describes her response to first reading the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I find it intriguing that Dickinson should also associate poetry/words/language with 'darkness' and the almost divine power of bewitching and magical transformation. She refers to the transforming power of poetry in which "The

Bees – became as Butterflies – /The Butterflies – as Swans – " and that makes the "dark" feel beautiful:

> I think I was enchanted
> When first a somber Girl –
> I read that Foreign Lady –
> The Dark – felt beautiful –
>
> And whether it was noon or night –
> Or only Heaven – at Noon –
> For very Lunacy of Light
> I had not power to tell –
>
> The Days – to Mighty Metres stept –
> The Homeliest – adorned
> As if unto a Jubilee
> 'Twere suddenly confirmed
>
> I could not have defined the change –
> Conversion of the Mind
> Like Sanctifying in the Soul –
> Is witnessed – not explained –
>
> 'Twas a Divine Insanity –
> The Danger to be Sane
> Should I again experience –
> 'Tis Antidote to turn –
>
> To Tomes of solid Witchcraft –
> Magicians be asleep –
> But Magic – hath an Element
> Like Deity – to keep –

Wordsworth similarly refers to the bewitching power of poetry when he remembers Coleridge reciting *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* and 'Christabel':

> Thou in bewitching words, with happy heart,
> Didst chaunt the vision of that Ancient Man,
> The bright-eyed Mariner, and rueful woes
> Didst utter the Lady Christabel; (*Prelude*, 1805, 14, *ll* 400-03).

The power of poetry to transform the ordinary is the same thought that Wordsworth expresses in the following quotation from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads:*

> ... to chuse incidents and situations from common life ... [and] to throw over them a certain colouring of the imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting (1991:244).

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth describes how he became aware of the "charm/Of words in tuneful order" when he was only thirteen years old. As young men he and John Fleming recited poetry during early morning walks as they revelled in the wonder of poetry:

> What wonder then if sounds
> Of exultation echoed through the groves –
> For images, and sentiments, and words,
> And every thing with which we had to do
> In that delicious world of poesy,
> Kept holiday, a never-ending show,
> With music, incense, festival, and flowers! (*The Prelude*, 1805, 5, *ll* 601-07).

Similar sentiments are expressed in Book 14. Here Wordsworth is addressing Coleridge and refers to the days when "with buoyant spirits" they "Together wantoned in wild Poesy" (1850, *ll* 418-20).

For both Wordsworth and Dickinson poetry is a vigorous, absorbing and transporting activity, possibly even with overtones of the erotic, with nothing passive about it. As Dickinson puts it:

> There is no Frigate like a Book
> To take us Lands away
> Nor any Coursers like a Page
> Of prancing Poetry – (P 1263, *ll* 1-4)

Wordsworth in particular often refers to the physically taxing nature of composing poetry. In Book 4 of *The Prelude* of 1805 he describes composition as a compulsive activity that has a physical effect on him:

> ... , and when first
> The boyish spirit flagged, and day by day
> Along my veins I kindled with the stir,
> The fermentation and the vernal heat
> Of poesy, affecting private shades
> Like a sick lover,

A hundred time when in these wanderings
I have been busy with a toil of verse –
Great pains and little progress – ... (*ll* 89-103).

In Letter 408 Dickinson also refers to the taxing compulsion to write poetry as a "palsy" that the "Verses just relieve". Wordsworth returns to this thought in the following poem:

There is a pleasure in poetic pains
Which only poets know[13] – 'twas rightly said;
Whom could the muses else allure to tread
Their smoothest paths, to wear their lightest chains?
When happiest fancy has inspired the strains,
How oft the malice of one luckless word
Pursues the enthusiast to the social board,
Haunts him belated on the silent plains!
Yet he repines not, if his thought stand clear
At last of hindrance and obscurity,
Fresh as the star that crowns the brow of morn;
Bright, speckles as a softly-moulded tear
The moment it has left the virgin's eye,
Or rain-drop lingering on the pointed thorn.

Dickinson likewise attests to the physical effect that poetry has on her. In her well-known comment to Thomas Higginson (recounted by him in a letter to his wife that same evening) during his visit in August 1870, she describes the effect of poetry as follows:

> If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way (L 342a).

I suspect that Inder Nath Kher is correct when she suggests that Poem 937 deals with the difficulties of poetic composition:

I felt A Cleaving in my Mind –
As if my Brain had split –
I tried to match it – Seam by Seam –
But could not make them fit.

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before –
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound

[13] Wordsworth is quoting from William Cowper's *Task*, Book 2, *l* 285.

Like Balls – upon the Floor.

Poem 992 carries a very similar message and again employs the very effective homely image of thoughts tangled like balls of wool unravelling on the floor:

> The Dust behind I strove to join
> Unto the Disk before –
> But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
> Like Balls upon the Floor –

It is obvious therefore that both Dickinson and Wordsworth share the thought that there is pain and suffering in writing poetry, though it holds wonderful rewards too. It is a well-documented fact that composition often made Wordsworth physically ill. Dickinson alludes to the awful "privilege" of the poet to "stun myself/With bolts of Melody!" (P 505, *ll* 21-4). She sees her vocation of being a poet as choosing her "Preappointed Pain" (P 910) and describes poets as martyrs who are destined to write "their Pang in syllable" (P 544). Do these not hold allusions to Wordsworth's reference to poetic composition in 'There is a pleasure in poetic pains', quoted above? In Poem 167 Dickinson claims that poets learn their craft by "the Transport" of "the Pain". And Poem 675 suggests that creating poetry from the experience of life is like distilling perfume from rose-petals – it is "the gift of Screws" – a laborious and painful process.

Both poets also believe that the power of poetry not only lies in the poetry itself, but also in the response it evokes in its reader as can be seen from Dickinson's Poem 593 (quoted above) in which poetry casts a magical aura over everyday things. Wordsworth holds a similar belief and says that it is in "the turnings intricate of verse" (see the passage quoted on p 37) that objects are changed and imbued "with a glory scarce their own" (*Prelude*, 1805, 5, *ll* 628-30).

Sharon Leder and Andrea Abbot refer to Conrad Aiken's very significant point made as early as 1935 that Dickinson made a deliberate choice to remain single (1987:16), and that she had little "affinity" (p 38) with what was regarded as women's traditional role in the nineteenth-century. Dickinson also

had no interest in 'serving' – either as "a missionary, teacher, mother, or wife". She was interested in acquiring knowledge ... (p 47). I believe that one would not be reaching too much to claim that, within the constraints of her time and circumstances, she deliberately created for herself an autonomous space, indeed a 'masculine' space, in which to pursue her quest and vocation as a poet. Adrienne Rich confirms this – she describes Dickinson as a strong and indeed a practical woman who knew that she was exceptional and what she needed, and took "an immense decision" to ensure that she got it. Her withdrawal from society was a necessary economy to ensure her a life that she had deliberately organized on her terms (1976:51-55). I believe that by withdrawing from the world and, by choice, not adopting the traditional female role, she in effect freed herself to follow her true vocation, namely that of being a poet. I perceive a similarity here to Wordsworth much criticized withdrawal to his Cumbrian mountains in order to pursue *his* vocation as poet.

I quote and paraphrase at some length from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (Brett & Jones, 1991:241-72) to illustrate in what high regard Wordsworth held poetry and the vocation of the poet:

> ...I ask what is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind: a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him" and has "a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels"(pp 255-56).

He further claims that the poet is possessed of "a divine spirit" (p 260) and a "more than usual organic sensibility." The poet is someone who has "also thought long and deeply" in order to "discover what is really important to men" so that the poet's reader will be "in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated" by reading poetry and being exposed to the poet's vision. The poet's function includes illustrating how "our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement" and how the mind is moved "by the great and simple affections of our nature" (pp 246-47). It is part of the poet's vocation to combat the forces that are attempting to "blunt the

discriminating powers of the mind" (p 249). All "good poetry" should contain "good sense" and be free of "falsehood of description" (p 251). The poet's art is "an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe" and the "native and naked dignity of man" and is capable of producing "an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure". The poet makes us aware of "our natural and inalienable inheritance". In short, the poet "is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love." The "object of poetry is truth" that is "carried alive into the heart by passion" (p 257). Poetry should deal with the "incidents and situations of common life" and illuminate them for his reader by colouring them with the imagination, as said before. In spite of "things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" (p 259).

Wordsworth believes that the object of poetry is "truth" and that it carries "the image of man and nature" (p 257). Poetry should deal with the "primary laws of our nature" and "the essential passions of the heart" as we "associate ideas in a state of excitement" (p 245). All "good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and "originates in emotion recollected in tranquillity" (pp 246, 266). Poetry is "the breath and finer spirit" of what we know, and "the first and last of all knowledge – it is as immortal as the heart of man." (p 259). Poetry should deal with "storm and sun-shine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow" and "the great and universal passions" (pp 261-62) that motivate humanity. It should, in short, keep its reader "in the company of flesh and blood" (p 250).

The language of poetry should be "a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation" (p 244), it should avoid "gaudy and inane phraseology" (p 244) and should reflect a "more naked and simple style" (p 263). The language of a poem should carry the "passions" that the subject of the poem evoked in the poet, and should be "dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures" (p 255). It should avoid "falsehood of

description" and hackneyed expressions (p 251).

Dickinson saw the poet and poetry in a similarly elevated vein and I am confident that her concept of the poet is strongly underpinned by Wordsworth's premises. Cynthia Wolff points out that, though Dickinson never explicitly mentions having read Wordsworth's influential Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

> ... there is every reason to suppose that she did. Certainly she knew the English Romantic credo: "I think of your little parlor as the poets once thought of Windermere," she wrote the Norcross cousins, "peace, sunshine, and books" (1986:283).

I agree with Gary Stonum's claim that poets and poetry "constitute the only topic Dickinson persistently idealizes, and she regularly attributes to the figure of the poet a typically high romantic majesty" (Stonum, 1990:10). Like Wordsworth, she saw the poet as a seer and an interpreter who discloses the marvels and mysteries of the world to others:

> This was a Poet – It is That
> Distills amazing sense
> From ordinary Meanings –
> And Attar so immense
>
> From the familiar species
> That perished by the Door –
> We wonder it was not Ourselves
> Arrested it – before –
>
> Of Pictures, the Discloser –
> The Poet – it is He –
> Entitles Us – by Contrast –
> To ceaseless Poverty –
>
> Of Portion – so unconscious –
> The Robbing – could not harm –
> Himself – to Him – a Fortune –
> Exterior – to Time – (P. 448).

Dickinson's poem depicts the poet as a person of great sensory and perceptual acuity who distils the 'attar', the very essence, of Nature and the world and reveals it to the rest of us. This is strongly reminiscent of Wordsworth's statement that the poet is possessed of a divine spirit and more

than usual organic sensibility, who shows us ordinary things (Dickinson's 'familiar species') in a defamiliarised light, enlivened and imbued with the energy of the poetic imagination. It also voices the thought that the poet is immune to the passing of time, as his poetry will survive "Exterior – to Time". This is the same thought that Wordsworth pursues in the passage from *The Prelude*, 1805, Book 12, *ll* 300-12 quoted below – he hopes that by using his ability to see more deeply and fulfilling his function as discloser and interpreter of things "unseen before", he will create something that will endure.

Wordsworth writes in similarly elevated terms as Dickinson of the poet's role – he depicts the poet as no less than an almost godlike explorer and interpreter of the dangerous and intriguing mysteries of the universe:

> For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
> Deep – and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
> To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil (Preface to *The Excursion*, *ll* 28-30).

Along with Wordsworth, I believe that Dickinson also harboured

> ... reverentially a thought
> That poets, even as prophets, each with each
> Connected in a mighty scheme of truth,
> Have each for his peculiar dower a sense,
> By which he is enabled to perceive
> Something unseen before – forgive me, friend,
> If I, the meanest of this band, had hope
> That unto me had also been vouchsafed
> An influx that in some sort I possessed
> A privilege, and that a work of mine,
> Proceeding from the depth of untaught things,
> Enduring and creative, might become
> A power like one of Nature's (*Prelude*, 1805, Book 12, *ll* 300-12).

This idea, that poets create enduring, influential and inspiring, indeed indestructible monuments that live on after their deaths, is eloquently voiced by Dickinson in Poem 883:

> 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[14] –

Likewise Dickinson believes that the poet moves far beyond the familiar verities when engaged in the poetic quest to plumb the mysteries of the universe, as described in Poem 378, when a mere "Speck upon a Ball – ", s/he goes to the outermost limits of "Circumference/Beyond the Dip of Bell –"

Wordsworth voices similar thoughts in 'A Poet's Epitaph':

The outward shews of sky and earth,
Of hill and valley he has viewed;
And impulses of deeper birth
Have come to him in solitude
In common things that round us lie
Some random truths he can impart
The harvest of a quiet eye
That broods and sleeps on his own heart (*ll* 46-52).

Dickinson is overwhelmingly aware of the magic of poetry, but possibly even more of its dangerous, incendiary potential. Joyce Carol Oates most tellingly refers to Dickinson's perception of poetry as subversive and "private, allusive, teasing, sly, idiosyncratic as the spider's web, a kind of witchcraft ..." (1988:4). Dickinson in fact claims that poetic truth, in conjunction with the frightening power of language, can be so powerful and disturbing, that it needs to be toned down and edited to soften the impact it has:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind (P 1129).

In a very similar vein, Wordsworth has the deceitful and unscrupulous Oswald

[14] I agree with Joanne Feit Diehl's interpretation of the word, namely that it is the furthest limit that the imagination can reach, a "kind of demarcation of imaginative limits and possibilities" (1981:56).

('Rivers' in the Early Version of 1797-99) in *The Borderers*[15] call on "a few swelling phrases, and a flash/Of truth, enough to dazzle and to blind" (*ll* 563-65) in order to ensnare Marmaduke ('Mortimer' in the Early Version). And in *The Excursion* the Wanderer clothes "the nakedness of austere truth" (Book 1, *l* 269) to similarly soften its impact.

In short, both Dickinson and Wordsworth believe that, in being a poet, one's calling rivals that of God – simply put, a poet encompasses the universe as Dickinson so authoritatively puts it:

> I reckon – when I count at all –
> First – Poets – Then the Sun –
> Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –
> And then – the list is done –
> But, looking back – the First so seems
> To comprehend the Whole –
> The Others look a needless Show –
> So I write – Poets – All – [569, *ll* 1-8].

Wordsworth says very much the same when he claims that poetry is "the first and last of all knowledge – it is as immortal as the heart of man." (*LB*, 1991:259). He also makes the sweeping claim that the poet is the custodian, as it were, of the very soul and the creative impulse of humanity which are lodged in "the hearts/Of mighty Poets":

> Come, thou prophetic Spirit, Soul of Man,
> Thou human Soul of the wide earth that hast
> Thy metropolitan Temple in the hearts
> Of mighty Poets: (*Home at Grasmere* [*The Recluse*[16]], *ll* 126-29).

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15 *The Borderers,* a tragedy in five acts, was composed in 1796/7, but only published in 1841 in *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years*. The edition that I used was published in 1982 in the series *The Cornell Wordsworth* and contains the 1842 version as well. In the Preface the editor Robert Osborn refers to it as "one of the neglected masterpieces of the English Romantic Movement".

16 *Home at Grasmere*, never published by Wordsworth, forms part of what was supposed to have been Wordsworth great philosophical poem and *magnum opus The Recluse*. Lines 959-1048 were published in the Preface to *The Excursion* as a 'prospectus' to *The Recluse*. Apart from *The Excursion*, published in 1814 and having the subtitle 'Being a Portion of *The Recluse,* 'The Ruined Cottage', 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', 'A Night Piece' and the description of the discharged veteran at the end of Book 4 of *The Prelude* arguably also form part of the projected great poem. *The Prelude* itself was probably intended to be part of *The Recluse* as well. So if *The Recluse* is to be regarded as a 'failure', it is indeed a "noble failure" as Kenneth Johnston points out persuasively (1987:138-43).

The adjective 'mighty' in relation to poets recurs often in Wordsworth's work. Indeed, 'mighty' is a loaded word for both Dickinson and Wordsworth and both often use it with great originality. In 'Resolution and Independence' (line 123) Wordsworth refers to "mighty Poets in their misery dead". The 'misery' that Wordsworth refers to here is that of non-recognition and poverty. In line 43 of the same poem Wordsworth refers to Thomas Chatterton, author of the supposedly fifteenth-century poems of Thomas Rowley, who, in despair at non-recognition and poverty, committed suicide. Chatterton became a symbol of the poet whose creative abilities become destructive if not allowed to flourish as they should.

Dickinson's usage of the word is likewise consistently unusual and interesting. In Poem 79 she refers to the day of a funeral as "the mighty Autumn afternoon/I left them in the ground". In Poem 524 she again refers to "A Mighty afternoon –/Great Clouds – like Ushers – leaning –/Creation –". Poem 660, *ll* 3-4, contains another reference to the "Mighty Funeral –/Of All Conceived Joy –". In Poem 304 she uses it tellingly as an adverb in describing a spectacular sunrise: "How mighty 'twas – to be/A Guest in this stupendous place – /The Parlor – of the Day – ". Poem 520 presents another unusual extended image as she personifies the sea as a suitor who, with a "Mighty look", relinquishes her with mock-courteous reluctance after having taken significant liberties. I quote this charming poem in full:

> But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
> Went past my simple Shoe –
> And past my Apron – and my Belt
> And past my Bodice – too –
>
> And made as He would eat me up –
> As wholly as a Dew
> Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
> And then – I started – too –
>
> And He – He followed – close behind –
> I felt His Silver Heel
> Upon my Ankle – Then my Shoes
> Would overflow with Pearl –
>
> Until we met the Solid Town –
> No One he seemed to know –

And bowing – with a Mighty look –
At me – The Sea withdrew –

In a similar context Wordsworth's usage is possibly more conventional, but similarly arresting. In 'On a High Part of the Coast of Cumberland', *l* 11, he refers to "the earth-voice of the mighty sea" and in 'Highland Boy" line 100 reads, 'Down to the mighty Sea'. In 'On the Power of Sound' he says that the "towering Headlands ... know/That Ocean is a mighty harmonist;". In Book 6 of *The Prelude*, 1805, he describes the vale of Chamonix in terms of a frozen sea:

The wondrous Vale
Of Chamouny did, on the following dawn,
With its dumb cataracts and streams of ice –
A motionless array of mighty waves,
Five rivers broad and vast – make rich amends,
And reconciled us to realities (*ll* 457-62).

Wordsworth's skilful use of oxymoron adds substantially to the impact of these lines. In Poem 575 Dickinson again refers to a 'mighty look':

A mighty look runs round the World
And settles in the Hills –
An Awe if it should be like that
Upon the Ignorance steals –

I wish to elaborate somewhat on the idea that poets possess awesome, godlike creative powers, a concept that recurs frequently in the poetic *oeuvres* of both Dickinson and Wordsworth. Dickinson believes that poets are powerful creators in their own right who are empowered to make their own glorious world – indeed, they are entitled to homage:

Their Summer – lasts a Solid Year –
They can afford a Sun
The East – would deem extravagant –
And if the Further Heaven –

Be Beautiful as they prepare
For Those who worship Them –
It is too difficult a Grace –
To justify the Dream – [569, *ll* 9-16].

Wordsworth feels that the creative ability that poets have to capture and distil the power of Nature in their work, holds enrichment for others:

> ..., but he doth furthermore,
> In measure only dealt out to himself,
> Receive enduring touches of deep joy
> From the great Nature that exists in works
> Of mighty poets (*Prelude*, 1805, V, *ll* 616-19).

Dickinson is similarly convinced that poetry, the mighty poet's creation, carries such enormous and dangerous power that it can frighten Creation. In truth, the poet's powers of creation seem to rival the creative power of God:

> To pile like Thunder to its close
> Then crumble grand away
> While Everything created hid
> This – would be Poetry – [1247, *ll* 1-4].

Surely this holds an allusive echo of Wordsworth's proud claim that the poet's mind is so powerful that he passes the very thunder of God and his angels and the heavenly thrones unalarmed, though the poet's path is indeed a perilous one? Let me quote this marvellous passage, also briefly referred to on pp 45 and 144, at some length:

> For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
> Deep – and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
> To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.
> All strength – all terror, single or in bands,
> That ever was put forth in personal form –
> Jehovah – with his thunder, and the choir
> Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones –
> I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
> The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
> Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
> By help of dreams – can breed such fear and awe
> As fall upon us often when we look
> Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man –
> My haunt, and the main region of my song (Preface to *The Excursion*, *ll* 28-41)

This extraordinary passage holds many teasing nuances, and has been much lauded, discussed, criticized and maligned from Blake[17] onwards. Does the

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17 Blake, significantly more orthodox than Wordsworth, noted sardonically after reading

image of 'shouting angels' hold more than a hint of disrespect? Is the passage indeed simply rank with arrogance? Does the word 'haunt' (though used as a noun) serve to remind us that Wordsworth was also overwhelmingly aware of those haunted corridors of the brain that so preoccupied Dickinson? And surely it was in those very corridors that Dickinson confronted not only herself in the guise of assassin, but also Wordsworth and other precursors as presences that haunted her art and informed her poetry.

In this context it is surely relevant as well to refer to the startling originality of the minds of both poets. While Dickinson's is possibly the more overtly original, Wordsworth's originality is no less real. Bloom writes as follows as early as 1985:

> Whereas Whitman masked his delicate, subtle and hermetic art by developing the outward self of the rough Walt, Dickinson set herself free to invest her imaginative exuberance elsewhere. The heraldic drama of her reclusiveness became the cost of her confirmation as a poet more original even than Whitman, indeed more original than any poet of her century after (and except) Wordsworth. Like Wordsworth, she began anew upon a *tabula rasa* of poetry, to appropriate Hazlitt's remark about Wordsworth. Whitman rethought the relation of the poet's self to his own vision, whereas Dickinson rethought the entire contents of poetic vision. Wordsworth had done both and done both more implicitly than these Americans could manage ... (1985:2).

And as regards this aspect of originality, probably nobody captures this facet of Wordsworth's art better than Geoffrey Hartman. Hartman writes unforgettably about the radical originality that underlies the seemingly pedestrian subject matter of Wordsworth's poetry:

> ... the poetry is occasional, the depicted experience usually quite ordinary, and the narrator, though quirky, no more than a passing observer or very sensitive tourist. ***Yet the fantasy within stirs like a coiled snake*** [my emphasis] (1987:212).

Indeed! And Judith Farr makes a very similar point about Dickinson's poetry

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the said passage: "Solomon, when he married Pharaoh's daughter & became a Convert to the Heathen Mythology, Talked in this way of Jehovah as a Very inferior object of Man's Contemplations; he also passed him by unalarm'd & was permitted. Jehovah dropped a tear & followed him by his Spirit into the Abstract Void; it is called Divine Mercy".

when she points out that Dickinson also "attempts to envision the most inchoate, unspeakable, structureless conceptions, such as immortality, in the practical, specific details of every day" (1992:248).

I wish to conclude this chapter with a brief quotation from Joanne Feit Diehl that perfectly encapsulates the view of both Dickinson and Wordsworth about their mission and their quest, which is, of course, the immensely challenging, dangerous and rewarding business of writing poetry. Both believed that there was nothing more important than being a poet. In writing poetry they both believed that they were engaged in a most vital endeavour that rivalled the very act of Creation itself. They both knew that in writing poetry they were accessing immortality and, in a sense, overcoming death itself. And, of course, they were right.

> For both poets, the power associated with the act of writing depends upon the ability of that act to wrest from death its intimidating silence, to create a province of language that remains impervious even to the threat of death itself (1981:67).

And they both succeeded magnificently – not only is their poetry as vividly alive today as when they wrote it, but it remains as challenging and intriguing as it ever was.

CHAPTER 3

"Landscapes so lone": Shared thematic and stylistic elements in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and William Wordsworth

Dickinson shares Wordsworth's concern with the relationship between the self and the world as can be seen in many of the themes and preoccupations that surface in their poetry. The centrality of the self is consequently one of the most notable themes that manifest themselves in the work of both poets. Nature is such a dominant preoccupation for both of them that I have devoted a separate chapter to it (see Chapter 4). Other concomitant themes that they share include a preoccupation with solitude, the inner life of the heart and mind, loss, the split parts of consciousness, the many different states of consciousness and perception, imagination, and the unknowable that 'lurks' in the everyday and in language. Both are concerned with immortality, light and the symbolic significance of morning. Both are intrigued by darkness in its many different guises – most notably as it manifests in the mind and in language. I believe that it is in these common themes that occur in their *oeuvres* that Wordsworth's transumptive influence on Dickinson is most clearly perceptible, and that it is these themes that manifest in Dickinson's work that most clearly indicate that she stands firmly in the Romantic tradition, a tradition indelibly marked by Wordsworth.

In this chapter I will look in some detail at the following themes that they share: solitude, the inner life of heart, mind and soul, their preoccupation with consciousness, being and the imagination, the pervading sense of loss one encounters in their poetry, their preoccupation with states of perception, their engagement with the unknowable, their preoccupation with immortality, and how they both identified the morning as 'the poet's hour'. In concluding this chapter I will also list some further topics/matters that can be very fruitfully explored in the above regard, but that I am prevented from doing through space and time constraints.

Before embarking on a discussion of the themes, however, I just wish to make a few points that I believe to be germane. Though Dickinson was influenced by Emerson (whose work is permeated by Wordsworth) and possibly by Thoreau, I do not believe that she adhered fully to the ethics of transcendentalism that informed their work. Nor was she a purely 'American' poet as has previously been maintained by some of the earlier critics. As stated before, Dickinson read many English writers and poets – Shakespeare of course, Wordsworth, the Brontës, George Eliot, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Ruskin and, of course, Elizabeth Barrett Browning whom she frequently professed admiration for after Barrett Browning's death. Though her style differs radically from the various and sometimes fairly idiosyncratic styles of the Romantics (and from everybody else's, for that matter!) she shows a marked affinity with the aims, preoccupations, subjects and general tenor of thought of the Romantics. This is not only true about the themes that one can identify in her work, but also in the opinions that she expresses about poetry and language.

In the 1850s she was perhaps the "single most eminent representative of a dwindling band" who saw the Romantics and their followers as "the major voices of nineteenth-century English poetry and as praiseworthy inspirations for the literature of the future" (Stonum, 1990:35). And in this 'literature of the future' Wordsworth's influence is still undeniably and powerfully at work. In Poem 312 (*ll* 1-3) Dickinson mourns Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death: "Her – "last Poems" –/Poets – ended –/Silver – perished – with her Tongue –". One is tempted to wonder if she is not, perhaps only subliminally, also mourning what was then perceived as the end of the great Romantic tradition, with its emphasis on emotional intensity and the self, in the face of the encroaching more rational and earnestly down-to-earth Victorians.

I will now proceed to look at some of the common themes that manifest in the *oeuvres* of Dickinson and Wordsworth.

1 Solitude and the solitary

Dickinson and Wordsworth are both strongly drawn to solitude and the idea of

the solitary. Bradley maintains that "all solitude and all things solitary had an extraordinary fascination" for Wordsworth (1972:18). Dickinson shared Wordsworth's fascination with the solitary and solitude – indeed Nancy Mayer claims that Dickinson's "natural habitat is solitude" (2005:2). I believe that Dickinson's work displays an acceptance of Wordsworth's premise of humanity's essential and intrinsic aloneness. Though it is not known whether Dickinson read *The Excursion*, she certainly had access to it, and was just as certainly exposed to it and Wordsworth's Solitary through her reading of Shelley, as Wordsworth's great protagonist informed Shelley's poet-figures from 'Alastor' onwards (Blank, 1988:77). In Book 3 of *The Prelude* of 1850 Wordsworth expresses the belief that solitude is an inescapable human condition very tellingly when he maintains that "Points have we all of us within our souls/Where all stand single"/ (*ll* 188-189). In a letter written in 1878 Dickinson expresses this very sentiment when she claims that there are "depths in every consciousness from which we cannot rescue" ourselves, and "to which none can go with us". In Poem 750 she gives expression to this thought

> Each – its difficult Ideal
> Must achieve – Itself –
> Through the solitary prowess
> Of a silent Life – (*ll* 1-8).

Wordsworth also refers to "the deep quiet and majestic thoughts/Of loneliness" that rewardingly replaced "empty noise/And superficial pastimes" (*Prelude*, 1805, 3, *ll* 210-212).

I am therefore convinced that Dickinson's concept of isolation is a strongly Wordsworthian one. Richard Gravil seems to agree when he says that Dickinson's conception of solitude is a "recognition of tragic and inescapable isolation" (2000:199). Wordsworth poignantly describes his belief in humanity's essential loneliness, if cut off from the healing contact with Nature which elevates the mind. "Musing in solitude [on] ... the "good and evil of our mortal state" (*ll* 2 and 9) in the Preface to *The Excursion*, he words it as follows:

... if I oft
must turn elsewhere – to travel near the tribes
And fellowships of men, ...
Must hear Humanity in fields and groves
Pipe solitary anguish; or must hang
Brooding above the fierce confederate storm
Of sorrow, barricadoed evermore
Within the walls of cities – (*ll* 73 – 80).

Wordsworth was known as the recluse (remember that his *magnum opus* was going to be entitled *The Recluse*) who withdrew to the Lakes to practise his poetic craft in solitude; likewise Dickinson literally withdrew from the world and became far more reclusive than Wordsworth ever was. In a paradoxical way it can be stated though, that despite this 'withdrawal', neither poet actually withdrew from experiencing the world vividly and passionately – on the contrary. As Wordsworth himself put it, he endeavoured always to look closely and steadily at his subject matter. So intense was his involvement with his subject matter that composing often made him feel physically ill. Inder Nath Kher identifies a similar methodology regarding Dickinson and writes perceptively that "like a true existentialist-romanticist, she gazes upon the world so intensely, and encounters its mystery and paradoxes so passionately, that the whole external world becomes a concrete metaphor of her work and art" (1974:62). As has been discussed, I believe that both Dickinson and Wordsworth 'withdrew' in order to exercise their poetic vocations away from distractions.

In a very recent article, that I feel I have to refer to if only briefly, Shira Wolosky posits a very different reason for Dickinson's withdrawal from the world. She claims that the reason for Dickinson's reclusion lay in the fact that she saw the world as ultimately deeply flawed and indeed alarming, and that her "reclusion protests the lack of design in the external world of phenomena and events, where she holds that intelligibility should (but does not) reside", as finally proven by the American Civil War (2006:444-45). Though Wolosky's argument is cogently presented, and her points regarding God and gender are indeed intriguing, I find that I cannot agree with her assessment regarding the reason for Dickinson's reclusion. I believe that Dickinson's passionate love of the beauties of the world and Nature, and her connection with the world and

Nature, are simply too evident in her poetry. Like Wordsworth, I believe that she did see an element of unintelligibility in the world, but that she accepted this as part of being, and indeed as an intriguing part. As Wordsworth did, I am convinced that she found, in the absorbing inner life that they both pursued so passionately in the exercise of their poetic crafts, abundant "recompence" so that "the heavy and the weary weight/Of all this unintelligible world" indeed was lightened, to put it somewhat simplistically. (Lines 89 and 40-42 from 'Tintern Abbey' are quoted.)

Wordsworth's poetry abounds with solitary figures: the discharged soldier, the old Cumberland beggar, the young girl of 'The Solitary Reaper', the forsaken Indian woman, 'Lucy Gray'[18] (also known in fact, as 'Solitude'), and 'A Fragment' in which the ghostly Danish Boy is absolutely solitary in his "lovely dell" (*l* 22), to mention just a very few. Similarly, Dickinson's protagonists are also frequently alone, experiencing creative instants or powerful emotions, often intense pain, in isolation. In Poem 280 she is stranded alone in a nightmarish world that borders on insanity, "And I, and Silence, some strange Race/Wrecked, solitary, here – " In the enigmatic Poem 822 the solitary soul is "attended by a single Hound/Its own identity." The intriguing Poem 378 possibly describes the ultimate experience of enriching and rewarding poetic isolation:

> I saw no Way – The Heavens were stitched –
> I felt the Columns close –
> The Earth reversed her Hemispheres –
> I touched the Universe –
>
> And back it slid – and I alone –
> A Speck upon a Ball –
> Went out upon Circumference –
> Beyond the Dip of Bell –

Sharon Cameron speculates that this poem might deal with the loss of faith (1992:31). I see it rather as the poet's high-risk quest that takes her beyond the tangible, beyond the verifiable, where "the grand terraqueous spectacle" is

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[18] See page 183 for a discussion of Dickinson's p. 344 as a palimpsestic reiteration of this Wordsworth poem.

unveiled "From centre to circumference" to borrow two memorable lines from Wordsworth's 'Written with a Slate-Pencil on a Stone, on the Side of the Mountain of Black Comb'. I believe that it is possible that Dickinson transferred Wordsworth's description, that refers to the limits of observable nature, to her inner life where she uses it to possibly suggest the furthest limits that her poetic creativity and imagination can access or aspire to. She is in short attempting to access the "unsaid that inheres in the said" as Alison Phinney so aptly puts it (1987:71), in fulfilment of the poet's mission to interpret not only the mysteries of existence, but in doing so, to foreground the mystery and power of language.

Wordsworth was correspondingly very well aware of the attraction that solitude held for him:

> ... and gradually produced
> A quiet independence of the heart.
> And to my friend who knows me I may add,
> Unapprehensive of reproof, that hence
> Ensued a diffidence and modesty
> And I was taught to feel – perhaps too much –
> The self-sufficing power of solitude (*Prelude*, 1805, 2, *ll* 72-78).

In Book 4 of *The Prelude* he writes further about this tendency in himself:

> A favourite pleasure hath it been with me
> From time in earliest youth to walk alone
> Along the public way, when, for the night
> Deserted, in its silence it assumes
> A character of deeper quietness
> Than pathless solitudes (*Prelude*, 1805, *ll* 364-69).

In Letter 310 Dickinson writes about the impact of solitude, and the importance that it held for her, in a way that shows marked similarities to the *ambience* that typifies Wordsworth's approach to the subject:

> I would paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be – solitude, and the figures – solitude – and the lights and shades, each a solitude. I could fill a chamber with landscapes so lone, men should pause and weep there[19] ... .

[19] Judith Farr points out that that this was the kind of landscape that Cole described when he was completing *The Tower*, a painting inspired by Wordsworth's 'Elegiac

This passage brings to mind an incident that occurred in Wordsworth's life and which clearly illustrates the extraordinary impact of solitude on his mind and the significance it held for him. In 'Yarrow Unvisited' the following lines occur: "The Swan on still St Mary's Lake/Float double, Swan and Shadow!". Walter Scott misquoted the first line in *Marmion* in 1806 as "The swans on sweet St Mary's lake". Wordsworth not only pointed out the mistake to Scott, but felt so strongly about the error that he requested that the mistake be corrected in future editions – this when Scott was very much more prominent than Wordsworth, and was in fact paying the relatively unknown young poet a significant compliment by quoting his work! And it all had to do with solitude and the impact it had on the poet, and the importance that he attached to it in his mind. Many years later, in the 1840s, Wordsworth still remembered the incident and told Aubrey de Vere:

> Never could I have written "swans" in the plural. The scene when I saw it, with its still and dim lake, under the dusky hills, was one of utter loneliness; there was *one* swan, and one only, and the pathetic loneliness of the region gave importance to the one companion of that swan – its own white image in the water. It was for that reason that I recorded the swan and the shadow. Had there been many swans and many shadows, they would have implied nothing as regards the character of the place, and I should have said nothing about them (Sykes Davies, 1986:123).

The preoccupation with solitude and the solitary provides an intriguing dimension to the poetry of both poets. In Book 12 of *The Prelude* (1850), in one of Wordsworth's significant spots of time, an extraordinarily powerful sense of solitude is created. The young Wordsworth, "Feverish, and tired, and restless" (*l* 289), is waiting at the beginning of the school holidays for the horses to arrive to take him and his brothers home. He settles down to wait in a spot that overlooks the two possible roads that they could come along:

> ... 'twas a day
> Tempestuous, dark and wild, and on the grass
> I sate half-sheltered by a naked wall;
> Upon my right hand couched a single sheep,
> Upon my left a blasted hawthorn stood;
> With those companions at my side, I sate

Stanzas'.

Straining my eyes intensely, as the mist
Gave intermitting prospect of the copse
And plain beneath ... (*Prelude*, 1850, 12, *ll* 297-305).

Despite his two 'companions' and "the bleak music of that old stone wall" (*l* 320), the impression of solitude and desolation is hauntingly evoked. The presence of the natural elements (the mist, rain, wind, sheep and tree) add to the boy's solitary state rather than succeed in diminishing it.

Indeed, both poets often present solitude as a desirable condition because they feel it is only in solitude that poetic creativity can truly flourish. Judith Farr points out that it was Wordsworth and Emerson who "preached the virtues of silence, solitude, even isolation to aspiring artists" (1992:82). In Book 3 of *The Prelude* of 1805, Wordsworth begrudges the distractions of his social life as he almost yearningly states that it is only possible for him to "cleave to solitude/In lonesome places" (*ll* 233-34). The shepherd is privileged because he is an inmate "of deep solitude" (*The River Duddon*, xiv, *ll* 1-2). Inder Nath Kher accurately points out that Dickinson also believes that creativity is best fostered when "each individual is alone and immersed in the silence of his own solitude" (1974:53) as is expressed in Poem 741:

Perish in the recitation –
This – the best enact
When the Audience is scattered
And the Boxes shut –

This theme occurs in other poems too. In Poem 99, *l* 4, Dickinson seemingly even perceives the bird's song as a negative element in that it "Betrays the solitude", and in Poem 750 she maintains that solitude is a precondition for achieving spiritual growth and that true experience and perception is an interior phenomenon, fostered and promoted by solitude:

Growth of Man – like Growth of Nature –
Gravitates within –
Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it –
But it stir – alone –

The same thought is voiced possibly even more strongly in Poem 1168:

The Soul's Superior instants
Occur to Her – alone –
When friend – and Earth's occasion
Have infinite withdrawn –

This is as clear a verbalisation of the artist's need to have a creatively inviolable space in which to allow the artist's imagination and creativity the chance to fulfil the poetic vocation as one will find. This withdrawal from the world – Wordsworth to his Cumbrian mountains and Dickinson to her Amherst bedroom – must not, however be seen as a negative thing. In terms of the poet's vocation that both espoused so passionately, it is no more and no less than obedience to the vocational imperative of the poet. As early as 1932 Allen Tate wrote with great insight:

> All pity for Miss Dickinson's "starved life" is misdirected. Her life was one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent.
>
> When she went upstairs and closed the door, she mastered life by rejecting it. Others in their way had done it before; still others did it later. If we suppose – which is to suppose the improbable – that the love affair precipitated the seclusion, it was only a pretext; she would have found another (1932:19-20).

Wordsworth writes about his heightened senses when immersed in solitude:

... suffice it here to add
That whatsoe'er of Terror or of Love,
Or Beauty, Nature's daily face put on
From transitory passion, unto this
I was as wakeful, even, as waters are
To the sky's motion; in a kindred sense
Of passion was obedient as a lute
That waits upon the touches of the wind.
So was it with me in my solitude (*The Prelude*, 1805, 3, *ll* 131-39).

In this same context in Poem 1495 Dickinson sees solitude as "sumptuous" in that it allows her the luxury of employing her poetic powers, and in Poem 1677 I believe she claims that solitude fosters awesome poetic powers:

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

How red the Fire rocks below –
How insecure the sod
Did I disclose
Would populate with awe my solitude.

A similar tone of awe in regard to solitude is heard in Wordsworth's description of the shepherd who tends his flocks and "treads/Companionless your awful solitudes [the moors and mountains]" (*I* 221). The solitude of Nature in which the shepherd spends his working life bestows on him an aura of the heroic. In Wordsworth's description of the tall shepherd silhouetted against the skyline in Book 8 of *The Prelude* of 1850, the shepherd acquires more than human stature:

His form hath flashed upon me, glorified
By the deep radiance of the setting sun:
Or him I have descried in distant sky,
A solitary object and sublime,
Above all height! Like an aerial cross
Stationed upon a spiry rock
Of the Chartreuse, for worship ... (*ll* 270-75).

In Poem 1450, Dickinson also has her imagination sparked by a distant figure on a hill. As in the Wordsworth passage the figure acquires more that human significance, and indeed, one feels, almost becomes an emissary of the beyond:

The Road was lit with Moon and star –
The Trees were bright and still –
Descried I – by the distant Light
A Traveller on a Hill –
To magic Perpendiculars
Ascending, though Terrene –
Unknown his shimmering ultimate –
But he indorsed the sheen –

It must be stressed, however, that in no sense is the search for solitude, in either poet, a weakness. It is rather an actualization of an absolute prerequisite for the flowering of their poetic abilities. Dickinson puts it very succinctly when she states that solitude is the "Maker of the soul/Its caverns and its Corridors/Illuminate – or seal – (P 777). Poem 1116 states this creative imperative even more forcefully:

There is another Loneliness
That many die without –
Not want of friend occasions it
Or circumstances of Lot

But nature, sometimes, sometimes thought
And whoso it befall
Is richer than could be revealed
By mortal numeral –

Wordsworth agrees. In 'A Poet's Epitaph' he states that the poet can only experience "impulses of deeper birth" in solitude (*l* 47). In Book 8 of *The Excursion* the Solitary maintains that "solitude permits the mind to feel" (*l* 55). In Book 2 of *The Prelude* of 1805 Wordsworth recounts how in solitude he would establish an inspiring and enriching connection with Nature:

... and I would stand
Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are
The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
Or make their dim abode in distant winds.
Thence did I drink the visionary power (*ll* 326-30).

And to conclude this section on solitude – in Book 9 of *The Prelude of* 1850, Wordsworth refers most tellingly to the healing power of solitude:

When from our better selves we have too long
Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired,
How gracious, how benign, is Solitude (*ll* 353-56).

The Wanderer in *The Excursion* bears this out – living in solitude and "solitary thought" amid the "peace/And liberty of nature" he keeps his mind in a "just equipoise of love", "unvexed, unwarped" by the cares of ordinary life and in sympathy with everything around him (*ll* 350-380). Both Wordsworth and Dickinson would have aspired to a like condition, though it is strongly debatable whether they believed that this would be achievable. Dickinson in particular would have had reservations. Come to think of it, so would Wordsworth – he, after all, wrote the deeply pessimistic lines that the Sceptic voices in Book 6 of *The Excursion*, that even in the midst of Nature "Amid the groves, under the shadowy hills"

The generations are prepared; the pangs,
The internal pangs are ready; the dread strife
Of poor humanity's afflicted will
Struggling in vain with ruthless destiny (*ll* 553-57).

2 The inner life of heart, mind and soul

Dickinson and Wordsworth both extend their preoccupation with the solitary to their psychic lives. Their attitudes and perceptions regarding the mind and its powers are explored more fully in Chapter 7. In brief, let it suffice to say here that they both emphasize and dwell on the powerful and absorbing inner life of the heart, mind and soul. 'Center', the absorbing and often frightening inner landscape of the poet, is a key concept in Dickinson's poetry and Wordsworth's *magnum opus*, *The Prelude,* is all about the growth of the poet's mind. It is also interesting to note that they both seem to use the three terms (heart, mind and soul) interchangeably – Kher even claims that Dickinson uses intuition, imagination and consciousness synonymously with these (1974:100), and I suspect strongly that this is the case with Wordsworth as well. In Book 3 of *The Prelude* (1805), Wordsworth writes as follows:

Of genius, power,
Creation, and divinity itself,
I have been speaking, for my theme has been
What passed within me. Not of outward things
Done visibly for other minds – words, signs,
Symbols or actions – but of my own heart
Have I been speaking, and my youthful mind.
O heavens, how awful is the might of souls,
And what they do within themselves ...
....
Points have we all of us within our souls
Where all stand single; this I feel, and make
Breathings for incommunicable powers.
....
... for there's not a man
that lives who hath not had his god-like hours,
And knows not what majestic sway we have (*ll* 171-93).

Dickinson expresses similar thoughts in Poem 1354. The poem not only stresses the organic unity of heart, mind and soul, but the self-sufficiency that the solitary being creates for itself in this unity:

The Heart is the Capital of the Mind –
The Mind is a single State –
The Heart and the Mind together make
A single Continent –

One – is the Population –
Numerous enough –
This ecstatic Nation
Seek – it is Yourself.

It must be noted, however, that the mind was, for both Dickinson and Wordsworth, not just a source of power and creativity, but also of fear and darkness. This can be best explored by looking at the references to 'the dark' and 'darkness' which frequently feature in the poetry of both of them. Let me start by quoting the intriguing Simplon Pass (Gondo Gorge) passage by Wordsworth from Book 6 of *The Prelude* of 1805:

... downwards we hurried fast,
And entered with the road which we had missed
Into a narrow chasm. The brook and road
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy pass,
And with them did we journey several hours
At a slow step. The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And everywhere along the hollow rent
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears –
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them – the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream
The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,
Were all like the workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great apocalypse,
The types and symbols of eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end (*ll* 551-72).

The most important point to be made here is that it is the mind of the poet that imbues the geographical elements of the Alpine Pass with the disturbing significance that makes this such a disorientating experience, and which gives rise to the visionary speculations at the end of the passage. With reference to the final six lines of the above passage, Judith Farr highlights a very

interesting link between Dickinson and Wordsworth. She points out that like Wordsworth and Emily Brontë (another Wordsworthian![20]), Dickinson sees in darkness a principle of "fecundity" that nourishes the powers of poetic creativity (1992:56,351n20). I am in partial agreement here – though I believe that there is definitely an element of this in Dickinson's poetry, I believe that she also sees, as Wordsworth does, that darkness is an inescapable component of life and the mind. Indeed, Wordsworth makes the claim that our very being rests on "dark foundations" (*The Excursion*, Book 4, *l* 970) and that our "haughty" lives are "crowned with darkness" ('Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg', *ll* 29). In 'Ode to Lycoris' Wordsworth even refers to "life's dark goal" (*l* 53). In Book 3 of *The Prelude* of 1905, *ll* 246-47, Wordsworth intriguingly refers to "caverns ... within my mind which sun/Could never penetrate". One of Dickinson's key texts regarding this darkness that lies at the centre (that very Dickinsonian term) of being and the human mind, has to be Poem 419 in which she evocatively explores "Those Evenings of the Brain" when the mind expands its boundaries, and moves beyond the known and the verifiable. Dickinson claims that "We grow accustomed to the Dark" as we "fit our vision to the Dark – "

> And so of larger – Darknesses –
> Those Evenings of the Brain –
> When not a Moon disclose a sign –
> Or Star – come out – within –
>
> The Bravest – grope a little –
> And sometimes hit a Tree
> Directly in the Forehead –
> But as they learn to see –
>
> Either the Darkness alters –
> Or something in the sight
> Adjusts itself to Midnight –
> And Life steps almost straight (*ll* 9-20).

---

[20] Irene Tayler claims that Wordsworth is probably the foremost of Brontë's "holy ghosts" (male muses/precursors) and that his influence permeates her work. Brönte not only shared Wordsworth's insight that language shapes the thoughts that they "clothe", but also his love of solitude and perception of a pre-existence. Tayler argues persuasively that Brontë's most famous poem 'Rosina's Lament' ('R. Alcona to J Brenzaida') not only shows her indebtedness to her Romantic predecessors, especially Wordsworth, but that it has the same theme as Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode', namely a searing consciousness of the loss of past glory (1990:15, 32, 51-68).

Wordsworth refers to a comparable mind-expanding experience after the frightening boat-stealing episode in Book 1 of *The Prelude* of 1805. The huge cliff seemingly coming to life and striding after the young boy as he is rowing, along with the guilt of having stolen the boat, combine to have a profound effect on the mind of the young Wordsworth:

> ... and after I had seen
> That spectacle, for many days my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
> There was a darkness – call it solitude
> Or blank desertion – no familiar shapes
> Of hourly objects, images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
> But huge and mighty forms that do not live
> Like living men moved slowly through my mind
> By day, and were the trouble of my dreams (*ll* 417-27).

It has to be emphasised, therefore, that for both poets darkness can be both positive and negative, with, I suspect, a definite slant towards the intriguing and alluring aspects of darkness predominating in both their *oeuvres*. Wordsworth's Simplon passage quoted above bears this out – it teems with oxymorons that serve to emphasise, in an extraordinarily evocative fashion, the contradictory elements that combine to make up not just the Alpine chasm, but, by a visionary extension of consciousness as these perceptions work on the poet's mind, also the human lot. Wordsworth again refers to these in Book 1 of *The Prelude* of 1805:

> The mind of man is framed even like the breath
> And harmony of music. There is a dark
> Invisible workmanship that reconciles
> Discordant elements and makes them move
> In one society (*ll* 351-55).

It is interesting to note that in the 1850 version of *The Prelude* Wordsworth altered this passage to read "There is a dark/***Inscrutable*** workmanship" (my emphasis). And in Poem 797, in a variant of the final line of the poem, Dickinson also intriguingly refers to the divine intimations that the pine tree may reveal being "extended inscrutably". In Poem 1173 Dickinson writes along similar lines about "The Apparatus of the Dark" that functions in the

universe and that remains teasingly beyond full comprehension:

> Of mansions never quite disclosed
> And never quite concealed
> The Apparatus of the Dark
> To ignorance revealed.

In Poem 7 she refers to her faith "that Dark adores – " and in Poem 55 to smiles that "blossom in the dark– ". In 'The White Doe of Rylstone' (Canto 2, stanza 12) Wordsworth's protagonist intriguingly claims that there is even "A comfort in the dark abyss". In Poem 611 Dickinson even states that "I see Thee better – in the Dark" and in Poem 593 she maintains that "The Dark – felt beautiful" In Poem 793, however, she refers to grief as "that Vast Dark – /That swept His Being – back – " and in Poem 850 the protagonists in the poem sing to keep "the Dark [mortality?, the terror that inheres in life/the mind?] away". In Book 13 of *The Prelude* of 1850, *l* 327, Wordsworth even "Called on Darkness" in a nightmarish description of cruelty, and in Poem 1109 Dickinson says enigmatically that "I seek the Dark" in an effort to "fit". In Poem 820 she speculates about an "illegible" God who (menacingly?) exercises "The Leisure of His Will" in the "Dark". Is there an echo here of Wordsworth's reference in 'Tintern Abbey" to the "heavy and the weary weight" of "this unintelligible" world (*ll* 40-41)?

In one of his Ecclesiastical Sonnets (1:18, *l* 3) Wordsworth states that "death, darkness, danger, are our natural lot". Likewise, in Dickinson's Poem 786 the darkness is far more than just the darkness of night, it is an integral part of being:

> Affliction would not be appeased –
> The Darkness braced as firm
> As all my stratagem had been
> The Midnight to confirm
>
> No Drug for Consciousness – can be –
> Alternative to die
> Is Nature's only Pharmacy
> For Being's Malady –

One of Wordsworth's most amazing applications of the concept of darkness occurs in Book 5 of *The Prelude* where, in a superb evocation of the

mysterious power inherent in words, he claims that darkness lives in language:

> Visionary power
> Attends upon the motions of the winds
> Embodied in the mystery of words:
> There darkness makes abode, and all the host
> Of shadowy things do work their changes there
> As in a mansion like their proper home.
> Even forms and substances are circumfused
> By that transparent veil with light divine,
> And through the turnings intricate of verse
> Present themselves as objects recognised
> In flashes, and with a glory scarce their own (*ll* 620-29).

The above passage is a crucial one in Wordsworth's *oeuvre* in that it is a key passage in revealing his ambiguous feelings about language as is more fully discussed in Chapter 6.

Let me conclude here though by just quoting a few more evocative usages of dark/darkness in their work: Wordsworth refers to the "dark sense" that he had at the University of Cambridge,[21] that many in "the garden of great intellects" (Newton ia) seem "humbled in these precincts"; in Book 6 of *The Excursion* he writes intriguingly about the "darksome centre of a constant hope" (*l* 249), and in Book 6 of *The Prelude* he refers rather beautifully to "the darksome windings of a broken stair" (*l* 213). And finally, I simply have to quote this truly amazing poem by Dickinson:

> His Heart was darker than the starless night
> For that there is a morn
> But in this black Receptacle
> Can be no bode of Dawn (P 1378).

Dare one not say a bit whimsically that in the heart of the protagonist of this poem darkness truly "makes abode" to use Wordsworth's memorable and evocative phrase?!

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[21] Wordsworth attended Cambridge from October 1787 until 21 January 1791 when he was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Arts. In 1839 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Oxford University. Durham University had done the same the year before.

The concern that Dickinson and Wordsworth both display with solitude and their inner lives leads inevitably to the next point that they have in common, namely a notable preoccupation with being, states of consciousness and the imagination.

3 Preoccupation with states of consciousness, being and the imagination

In the poetry of both Dickinson and Wordsworth there is an intense engagement with the states of consciousness, the perceptions that occupy their minds and fuel their imaginations and poetic creativity, and being. I feel that in the work of both Wordsworth and Dickinson there is a questioning of the world of rational thought, and an acknowledgement of a less easily defined 'world' or 'place' that exists in their minds and unconsciousnesses, and which holds both enrichment and fear, and that manifests as vague and often troubling, 'intimations' and 'admonitions' that surface into the everyday. One of Wordsworth's famous "spots of time" episodes, described in what must surely rank among the most evocative blank verse that Wordsworth ever wrote, is a very good example to illustrate this. In the well-known boat-stealing incident (quoted in part on p 68) from Book 1 of *The Prelude* of 1805, the young boy Wordsworth steals a boat one moonlit night and rows it out onto the lake (Ullswater) in what is an "act of stealth/And troubled pleasure". Suddenly a huge cliff "Upreared its head" above the horizon and in a very frightening way, growing ever larger, seems to stride after the young boy who turns the stolen boat around and with "trembling hands" rows it back to its mooring place. The boy returns home, but cannot put the incident from his mind. His consciousness and sleep are invaded by "darkness" and by huge and otherworldly "forms" that troublingly seem like heralds from "unknown modes of being" (*ll* 412-27). So I believe that one is justified in saying that Dickinson and Wordsworth share a recognition that the human mind holds great power and frightening potential – that it is the site of not only immense, indeed godlike creativity, but also of that uncanny and terrifying interior haunting that Dickinson describes so evocatively in Poem 670:

> One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –

One need not be a House –
The Brain has Corridors – surpassing
Material Place –

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
External Ghost
Than its interior Confronting –
That cooler Host.

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

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

The Body – borrows a Revolver –
He bolts the Door –
O'erlooking a superior spectre –
Or More –

Hugh Sykes Davies writes as follows about this poem and the similar views that Dickinson and Wordsworth share about this frightening aspect of the mind:

> ... most penetratingly, she [Dickinson] suggests that the characteristic source of real 'hauntedness' is one's own self, encountered as something at once internal and separate. She sees it, in fact, as the specific effect of the *Doppelgänger,* the meeting with another self (1986:137).
>
> Wordsworth never saw a ghost ... But he saw many sights which he described as ghostly. Of him, indeed, Emily Dickinson's profound aphorism was profoundly true: 'One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted'. Yet his intelligence, skill in introspection, that wary solidity of mind ... and above all his characteristic northern determination not to be fooled – all these qualities made him treat these gleams and glimpses of what might have been the supernatural with a steady scepticism, even at the moments when he was most nearly haunted. It was this not very common combination that made him so vivid a reporter of the stranger moods of his own mind and of everyone's mind (1986:141).

Poem 1323 is almost a companion piece to 'One need not be a Chamber'. The danger that inheres in the mind's usurping power, and the terror that lies

in confronting consciousness is just as evocatively enunciated. I quote the final stanza to illustrate:

> I do not know the man so bold
> He dare in lonely Place
> That awful stranger Consciousness
> Deliberately face –

In like fashion Wordsworth acknowledges the frightening power of the mind and imagination in a memorable passage from *The Prelude* (1805). The poet describes how the imagination usurps reality so that he finds himself in a mental and emotional space that is not rational, in fact reason is set aside and "the light of sense" is seemingly snuffed out. This frightening mental place teems with intimations of those unknown modes of being referred to earlier in a scenario very similar to the one evoked by Dickinson's frightening confrontation with the 'assassin' that also inhabits her mind. Whilst the power of the sublime that inheres in the poet's mind enables him to glimpse infinity, it goes hand-in-hand with a very distinct sense of disquieting inner dislocation. Paradoxically though, this usurpation by the imagination is not just frightening, but reveals and revels in the glory that the human mind is capable of. So Wordsworth's passage manages to capture both the magnificent potential of the mind and its frightening, indeed largely incomprehensible, capacities perfectly:

> Imagination! – lifting up itself
> Before the eye and progress of my song
> Like an unfathered vapour, here that power
> In all the might of its endowments, came
> Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
> Halted without a struggle to break through,
> And now, recovering, to my soul I say
> 'I recognise thy glory'. In such strength
> Of usurpation, in such visitings
> Of awful promise, when the light of sense
> Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
> The invisible world, doth greatness make abode (6, *ll* 525-36).

It is therefore a valid statement to make that in the poetry of both poets there is an acknowledgement that they have more than one 'being' inhabiting their consciousnesses, and that the existence of this other being is both an

enrichment to them, but also a source of fear.

Wordsworth evokes these two distinct beings that inhabit his consciousness in Book 2 of *The Prelude* of 1805, in a passage that not only describes his schooldays, but which also emphasises the power of memory:

> A tranquilising spirit presses now
> On my corporeal frame: so wide appears
> The vacancy between me and those days,
> Which yet have such self-presence in my mind
> That, sometimes, when I think of them, I seem
>
> Two consciousnesses – conscious of myself
> And of some other Being (*II* 27-33).

Frances Ferguson makes an extremely interesting point regarding what she refers to as the "doubling of consciousness" that one encounters in Wordsworth's poetry. (I regard the point that she makes as totally applicable to Dickinson as well.) Ferguson claims that Wordsworth is at all times able to imagine his writing "as something to be read, by himself, as well as by his audience" so that he functions as a *spectator ab extra* in his poetry (1977:xiv-xv). Thomas Weiskel voices a rather similar view when he claims that the person Wordsworth addresses in *The Prelude*, though ostensibly Coleridge, is in fact Wordsworth himself in the form of the "other Being" he identifies above. And this "other Being" is in part a remembered state of mind (a previous consciousness), and in part the inferred protagonist of scenes that Wordsworth now, consciously, remembers for the first time. Wordsworth now not only unconsciously addresses his speech, "in the immensely mediated languages of memory and desire" to this Other, but also listens to this other consciousness. Weiskel in fact claims that it is mainly as a listener that Wordsworth shapes his identity in *The Prelude* (1976:96). The editors of Hugh Sykes Davies's marvellous book *Wordsworth and the Worth of Words*, Jonathan Wordsworth and John Kerrigan, make a parallel point – they refer to Wordsworth as a "haunted poet" who is "visited by images of a former self" (Sykes Davies, 1986:vii).

One could possibly argue that Dickinson's consciousness of this other being is overtly more complex than Wordsworth's. With reference to Poem 505

(quoted on p 37), it is interesting to note that Joanne Feit Diehl believes that the body and soul that Dickinson is afraid to own is the masculine side of a self whose identity she assumes frequently in both her poems and letters. Her need to face this internalized Other/Master so that she may receive the requisite energy to revolt against the trauma that a confrontation of her two internal selves provokes, is another source of anxiety (1981:25-6) that spills over into her perception of being.

It would certainly seem as if Dickinson's perception of this internalised Other is more frightening and confrontational than Wordsworth's. I believe that a link can be made here to the problem of the woman poet having to deal with the fact that her muse, that sparks and feeds her creativity, and her male precursors, is one and the same. She therefore states that "... since Myself – assault Me" (P 642), and claims fearfully that "Of Consciousness, her awful Mate/The Soul cannot be rid –" (P 894). As already said this 'Other' gains greatly in significance it one accepts Feit Diehl's seductive premise that this Other is the loved/feared putative spectre of her predominantly male precursor poets as is discussed more fully elsewhere (see pp 27 and 185). An even stronger evocation of this dilemma occurs in Poem 670 (quoted above on p 72) where, in a rather Gothic scenario, this interior Other is seen as far more fearsome than an assassin or a ghost encountered at midnight in a grave-yard.

The moving and deceptively childlike Poem 196 gives a different slant to this aspect of Dickinson's poetry and reveals the almost traumatic cost that this confrontation with her internal Other can on occasion hold for the poet. In contrast with the confident poet of 'My Life had stood' (P 754 – see pp 23 and 155), Poem 196 reveals a poet overcome with uncertainty and doubt (and awe in the face of the powerful precursor?):

> We don't cry – Tim and I,
> We are far too grand –
> But we bolt the door tight
> To prevent a friend –
>
> Then we hide our brave face
> Deep in our hand –

Not to cry – Tim and I –
We are far too grand –

Nor to dream – he and me –
Do we condescend –
We just shut our brown eye
To see to the end –

Tim – see Cottages –
But, Oh, so high!

Then – we shake – Tim and I –
And lest I – cry –

Tim – reads a little Hymn –
And we both pray –
Please, Sir, I and Tim –
Almost lost the way!

We must die – by and by –
Clergymen say –
Tim – shall – if I – do
I – too – if he –

How shall we arrange it –
Tim – was – so – shy?
Take us simultaneous – Lord –
I – "Tim" – and – Me!

The poem is a moving evocation of the fragility of the human psyche, and the poetic psyche in particular, as it struggles to assert itself in a poetic world crowded with influential forebears. It also underlines the interdependency of Dickinson and her own inner Other, whoever this Other may be. Intriguingly, in this poem the Other shares the poet's insecurity and fear. Does this cast doubt on Feit Diehl's premise that this Other is the awe-inspiring male entity of her precursor Romantic poet/s? Or is it simply the male element of her creative spirit that is somewhat fearfully attempting to affirm its existence? Feit Diehl even suggests that her creative energies are lodged in this masculine part of her mind (1981:184). Surely this male part of her creativity had been heavily informed, indeed, formed by exposure to poets like Wordsworth, Tennyson and Shelley? What is frustratingly mystifying is that this Other (and is it even *this* Other?) manifests in so many other Dickinson poems in a completely different guise, most notably in Poem 670 (quoted in full on p 72)

where it emerges as more terrifying than an assassin hiding in one's home, or a ghost in a cemetery, or in Poem 754 (see p 23), where, though a 'tool' of the Master, the poet is immensely powerful. But then, in the latter the protagonist might not even be the poet, but language itself, which puts yet another slant on this particular truth!

But then of course, Dickinson often assumes a male persona in her poetry. In Poems 389 and 986 she refers to times when she was a boy (*ll* 12 and 11 respectively), in Poem 466 she is the boundlessly wealthy "Prince of Mines" (*l* 5), and in 704 she is an influential Earl, and a prince in Poem 959, to mention only a few. Which all just serves to remind one of how challenging Dickinson is! Harold Bloom admitted that the "various times that I have taught her poems have left me with fierce headaches, since the difficulties force me past my limits" (1994:296). One can certainly empathise!

4 Consciousness of loss

In the poetry of both poets one encounters an intriguing sense of loss – a feeling of some indefinable 'something' that has been lost but cannot really be defined or pinned down. In Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper' the poet cannot understand what the girl is singing about, but he finds it "melancholy" and "plaintive" and speculates that it is about some recurring loss and sorrow. Harold Bloom refers to a very similar "melancholia of loss" that one encounters in Dickinson's poetry (1996:303). Nancy Mayer words it even more strongly when she refers to "the ongoing theme of inconsolable loss that haunts so many of Dickinson's poems" (2005:4). Roland Hagenbüchle points out accurately that this feeling of loss is a profoundly Romantic element (1974:38). Hartman writes with his usual insight about this aspect of Wordsworth's poetry – and in doing so could with as much validity have been referring to Dickinson. He says that Wordsworth's poetry " ... depicts the flux and reflux of a mind aware of loss that cannot be fixed precisely, a thinking which is always already a grieving, as if thought and grief had an immemorial connection" (1987:203). This grieving mode forms the powerful subtext of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' and 'Tintern Abbey', and underlies much of Dickinson's poetry as well. Dickinson words it with poignant simplicity in the

first stanza of Poem 959 where she describes her feeling of having lost an indefinable 'something' as a child:

> A loss of something ever felt I –
> The first that I could recollect
> Bereft I was – of what I knew not (*ll* 1-3).

She mourns this loss and feels like a prince that has been cast out of his "Dominion". As an adult she still finds herself "softly searching/For my Delinquent Palaces" and wonders whether she is looking "oppositely/For the site of the Kingdom of Heaven". Is the writing that surfaces through the Dickinson palimpsest here not Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode'? There is the same sense of past glories having been lost in Wordsworth's great 'Ode". The poet claims that whereas earlier everything had been "Apparelled in celestial light", he now feels that "there hath passed away a glory from the earth" and wonders "Whither is fled the visionary gleam?/Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" (*ll* 4,18 and 56-57). He senses that though the kingdom of "heaven lies about us in our infancy", and the child merely plays at life – "A wedding or a festival,/A mourning or a funeral" – as life progresses, it does its utmost to rob man of the memory of "that imperial palace whence he came" (*ll* 66 and 84).

Wordsworth experiences this sense of loss in other poems as well of course, for example in 'Resolution and Independence' where he, in the very midst of a cheerful, sunny morning after a stormy night, finds that " ... fears, and fancies, thick upon me came/Dim sadness, and blind thoughts I knew not nor could name" (*ll* 27-8). On this occasion the poet is shaken out of his mood of foreboding by encountering the frail old Leech-gatherer who impresses the poet with his courage and fortitude – "I could have laughed myself to scorn, to find/In that decrepit Man so firm a mind" (*ll* 144-45). This brings to mind the interesting point raised by Feit Diehl that Dickinson and Wordsworth develop similar strategies for coping with this indefinable sense of loss in that "both invoke the sheer staying power of the self as it endures as well as embodies what most threatens it and what it most fears" (1981:59) as is expressed in Dickinson's Poem 1181:

When I hoped I feared –
Since I hoped I dared
Everywhere alone
As a Church remain –
Spectre cannot harm –
Serpent cannot charm –
He deposes Doom
Who hath suffered him –

In the rather tantalising Poem 840 Dickinson almost tells us what it is she has lost, but stops short of doing so – however, whatever it is/was, it was unique and irreplaceable. Kher speculates that it is love that has been lost (1974:137) but I am not entirely convinced. Intriguingly Dickinson tells us that she lost it due to negligence:

I cannot buy it – 'tis not sold –
There is no other in the World –
Mine was the only one

I was so happy I forgot
To shut the Door And it went out
And I am all alone –

It I could find it Anywhere
I would not mind the journey there
Though it took all my store

But just to look it in the Eye –
"Did'st thou?" "Thou did'st not mean," to say,
Then, turn my Face away.

Of course, in Dickinson's poetry this loss is often the loss of a loved one, for instance in Poem 49 Dickinson upbraids God for taking a friend from her through death. Frequently, however, it is more complex and manifests as the loss of something that she cannot define, and can therefore not hope to recover. She writes as follows about this in Letter 429: "To lose what we have never owned might seem an eccentric Bereavement but Presumption has its Affliction as actually as Claim – ". This statement not only validates the desire to have and the validity of the claim to have, but also poignantly affirms the not-ever-to-have as it cannot be defined, and therefore cannot be attained, but only yearned for, and mourned in its absence. Poem 23 seemingly gives name to what has been lost (a lost friend?), but clearly in symbolic terms only

– a "guinea golden" that was lost in the sand, a crimson robin that "too, did fly away – ", and "a star in heaven" that wandered off when the poet was "not heeding". Poem 262 refers plangently to the "lonesome for they know not What". The first three stanzas of Poem 812[22] refer to a certain quality of light that almost "speaks" about what has been lost but, alas, it still remains undefined as stanzas four and five show:

> Then as Horizons step
> Or Noons report away
> Without the Formula of Sound
> It passes and we stay –
>
> A quality of loss
> Affecting our Content
> As Trade had suddenly encroached
> Upon a Sacrament.

At other times, however, it does manifest as the loss of a loved one as one sees in the Poem 25 with its strong evocation of a Lucy-like figure sleeping in the earth, mourned only by the poet:

> She slept beneath a tree –
> Remembered but by me.
> I touched her cradle mute –
> She recognized the foot –
> Put on her carmine suit
> And see!

Richard Gravil confirms my contention that the Wordsworthian 'Lucy'-echoes are unmistakable here, not only of 'She dwelt among th' untrodden ways' (particularly in the poem's final lines where the poet laments his loss), but also of 'The two April Mornings' in which Matthew recalls the death of his daughter "Six feet in earth my Emma lay" (2000:197-98). I quote the former poem in full as the stronger allusion:

> She dwelt among th' untrodden ways
>   Beside the springs of Dove,
> A Maid whom there were none to praise
>   And very few to love.
>
> A Violet by a mossy stone

[22] This poem is quoted in full on p 101.

Half-hidden from the Eye!
– Fair, as a star when only one
Is shining in the sky!

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and Oh!
The difference to me.

One can also not help wondering whether Poem 28, with its daisy imagery and elegiac tone, does not recall Wordsworth's vanished violet in 'She dwelt among th' untrodden ways' – "So has a Daisy vanished/From the fields today – ". Likewise in Poem 72 the daisy's disappearance engenders loss that is "unrecorded"/Save by tearful rill – ".

I believe that a very brief comment about some of the daisy imagery that occurs in the poetry of both poets is apposite here. Both poets refer to 'crimson' in relation to the daisy. In the second stanza of 'To the Daisy' Wordsworth notes that melancholy autumn "Doth in thy crimson head delight/When rains are on thee". In the previously referred to Poem 28 the crimson of the sunset similarly reminds Dickinson of a daisy, and I suspect that the "Crimson Scouts" that she sends out in Poem 1582 to go where roses "would not dare to go" might very well be daisies! Both poets also use the daisy in conjunction with death. In *The Excursion* (Book 7, *l* 635) the grave in which the little girl lies, is a "daisied hillock, three spans long". In Poem 54 Dickinson views death as a time when "we with Daisies lie", and in Poem 187 neglect is evident in the house because the "Indolent Housewife" is "in Daisies – lain". In Poem 96 "Daisies point the way" to the grave where "my Master" is sleeping.

Both poets likewise refer to massed displays of daisies. In '"There!" said a stripling, pointing with meet pride' Wordsworth refers to "Myriads of daisies" that "have shone forth in flower"; in Poem 124 Dickinson points out that "A Myriad Daisy play" at the foot of the Alps. In Poem 142 the daisies "tiny beds" are "thick upon the plain". In "Soft as a cloud is yon blue Ridge" Wordsworth notes that it is only when twilight has caused the daisies to close up that the green of the grass can be seen that "while the sun rode high, was lost

beneath their dazzling sheen". Both poets also imbue the daisy with greater significance that its modest stature would seem to suggest, rather in the same vein as the final lines of 'The Immortality Ode' where Wordsworth points out that the most insignificant little flower can often engender thoughts that lie too deep for tears. In Poem 85, the daisy is a fitting companion for Jesus in his "dishonour", in Poem 93 the daisy seems to carry some insight into the mysteries of "life's diverse bouquet – ". In Poem 46 a "Daisy[23] called from the hillside" sanctifies the poet's oath, in Poem 102 it is a fitting present for "Great Caesar"; even the mighty "Himmaleh was known to stoop/Unto the Daisy low – " (P 481). In Wordsworth's rather whimsical 'The Cuckoo and the Nightingale', stanza XLIX, the speaker recommends that the Nightingale "go look on the fresh daisy" to find comfort at the thought of her own mortality. And in perfect consonance with the sentiment expressed at the end of his great Ode, Wordsworth sees the modest little daisy as a protector – "The Daisy, by the shadow that it casts,/Protects the lingering dew-drop from the Sun" ('To a Child: Written in her Album').

To return to Dickinson's engagement with 'Lucy' – surely Wordsworth's Lucy also underlies Poem 1396:

> She laid her docile Crescent down
> And this confiding Stone
> Still states the Dates that have forgot
> The News that she is gone –
>
> So constant to its stolid trust,
> The Shaft that never knew –
> It shames the Constancy that fled
> Before its emblem flew –

I detect echoes here of 'Strange fits of passion I have known' with its connection of the moon and Lucy in "crescent", as well as of "A slumber did my spirit seal" with its strong evocation of mortality and of an ineluctable loss unshared, not even remembered, by others or indifferent Nature. There is possibly even a hint of Lucy's unassuming life, lived like a half-hidden violet

[23] It is interesting to note that 'Daisy' was one of Dickinson's names for herself. She used it notably in her letters to Samuel Bowles, one of the 'candidates' for Master, and in the so-called 'Master letters'.

by a mossy stone, in "docile" and "Stone". I even wonder if the "confiding Stone" of line 2 does not hold traces of Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs*[24] with their emphasis on the information[25] that the tomb-stones impart to the living about the dead buried there, and their strong regard for the idea of immortality. In Poem 1666 the stone is "impassive" and yet it still conveys more than the reflection in a mirror would be able to do, though the occupant of the grave is oxymoronically both better known – "I see thee clearer for the Grave" – through the act of dying that "made thee first unknown". The mystery of death possibly imbues the protagonist of the poem with more significance than he/she had in life. And surely there is an allusion here to 'She dwelt among th' untrodden ways' in which Lucy lives "unknown" but in death her true significance is revealed to the poet who now knows the extent of his loss, though few others share this knowledge. In Poem 671 another Lucy-like woman "dwelleth in the Ground" that she shares with some Wordsworthian daffodils. I even detect an echo here of 'We are Seven' in which the little girl's deceased siblings similarly live in the ground while the girl and her mother dwell no more than twelve paces from them and share the activities of daily life with them. And isn't there an echo here of Wordsworth's thought that the grave is not simply a place of death, but almost a comforting place of rest and safety – merely a place "of thought where we in waiting lie" ('Immortality Ode", *l* 123) before rebirth? And isn't this somewhat similar to the thought that Dickinson expresses in Poem 141 she when she refers to the "thoughtful grave" that provides shelter from the winter winds?

Many of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Ruined Cottage* and the stories in *The Excursion* dwell not only on "the deprivations of age, isolation, and grief", but also deal with the pain of loss as Stephen Gill points out (1998:133). Most notably one can think of Margaret's loss in *The Ruined Cottage* – she loses not only her husband, children, home, hope, but subsequently also her life.

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24 Wordsworth's first of the three *Essays upon Epitaphs* originally appeared in Coleridge's journal *The Friend* in February 1810. In 1814 he reprinted it as a note to *The Excursion* as the essay is "congenial" with Books V, VI and VII of the said work.

25 In this regard it is interesting to note that Feit Diehl writes that Dickinson's poems "assume the functions of epitaphs ... chiselled words ... spoken in the face of the final silence of death (1981:67).

Judith Farr points out that in Dickinson's *oeuvre* the loss scenario is often enacted as "profound love between two people, the terrible loss of one, and permanent reunion of both in heaven" (1992:5). With reference to the short but tantalising Poem 1556, Roland Hagenbüchle points out that the entire poem is an expression of the peculiar dialectics of gain and loss – the message that the bird imparts is a negative one because it reminds the poet of her desire for something ultimate but absent (1974:38).

In conclusion I wish to refer to Dickinson's Poem 181 that deals with another unexplained loss that could possibly be considered as summarising the whole subject of loss. The loss suffered is so severe that the protagonist of the poem feels as if she has lost an entire world:

> I lost a World – the other day!
> Has Anybody found?
> You'll know it by the Row of Stars
> Around its forehead bound.
>
> A Rich man – might not notice it –
> Yet – to my frugal Eye,
> Of more Esteem than Ducats –
> Oh find it – Sir – for me!

In a curious way the final stanza reminds me of the last lines of Wordsworth's 'She dwelt among th' untrodden ways'. Lucy's death has gone virtually unnoticed by the world, but the impact on the poet is devastating. A similar scenario is depicted in Dickinson's poem where it is stated that a rich man will more than likely pass the object of her loss without even noticing it, but to her, as to Wordsworth, the loss is overwhelming.

5 Preoccupation with the various states of perception.

Both Wordsworth and Dickinson adhered to the literary tradition of the 'poetry of sensation'. The phrase was coined in 1831 by Arthur Hallam to describe the so-called 'second' Romantic tradition (Keats, Shelley and Tennyson) in an article entitled "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry" that appeared in the *Englishman's Magazine*[26]). Though Hallam felt that

[26] Reprinted in *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage*, edited by John D Jump (London:

Wordsworth is a poet of reflection rather than sensation, I disagree – I believe along with Kerry McSweeney that sight and hearing are the dominant senses that inform Wordsworth and Dickinson's poetry – what Wordsworth so memorably refers to as "the mighty world/Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,/And what perceive" ('Tintern Abbey', *ll* 106-108), thus emphasising both the sensory input from the world and Nature, and the imaginative and poetic interpretation thereof. I also emphatically agree with McSweeney that "much of Dickinson's most significant experience is referential and is found in her sensory-perceptual relationship to the natural world" (1998:xi,50,51). One only has to think of her superb rendering of Nature in poems dealing with birds (just think of the hummingbird as depicted in Poems 500 and 1462) and sunsets to realise the truth of McSweeney's comment. McSweeney's comment is equally applicable to Wordsworth, particularly as it pertains to the faculty of sight and to an only slightly lesser extent, the ear. McSweeney appositely remarks that the "dynamic interplay of eye and ear is a fundamental constituent of the "spots of time" and related experiences" in *The Prelude* (1998:x). Wordsworth refers to vision being very dominant as follows:

> The state to which I now allude was one
> In which the eye was master of the heart,
> When that which is in every stage of life
> The most despotic of our senses gained
> Such strength in me as often held my mind
> In absolute dominion (*Prelude*, 1805, 11, *ll* 170-75).

Wordsworth also acknowledges the importance of the auditory sense, however, and the many effects different sounds can have:

> … And a Spirit aerial
> Informs the cell of hearing, dark and blind;
> Intricate labyrinth, more dread for thought
> To enter than oracular cave;
> Strict passage, through which sighs are brought,
> And whispers, for the heart their slave;
> And shrieks, that revel in abuse
> Of shivering flesh; and warbled air,
> Whose piercing sweetness can unloose
> The chains of frenzy, or entice a smile

Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967).

Into the ambush of despair ("On the Power of Sound", *ll* 3-13).

One of the attributes Wordsworth identifies as essential to the poet is a more than usual organic sensibility, that enables him to perceive the world and Nature with greater immediacy and clarity, and thus informing his perceptions and triggering his emotional response more strongly. This implies that the poet's capacity to receive sensory perceptions vividly and respond to them powerfully is greater than that of most other people. Both Dickinson and Wordsworth refer to intense moments of perception that expand the consciousness and heighten the emotional content of the moment. These moments even occasionally seem to transcend the poet's mortality and grant him/her an almost divine status. Descriptions of these vivid moments of sublimity are indeed a central theme of much of Romantic literature. Daria Donnelly also refers to the "volatility" that Dickinson perceives in the interaction between Nature and the human mind (1998:125).

In discussing the sensory acuity and haptic sensitivity underpinning the poetry of Dickinson and Wordsworth, along with Coleridge, Whitman and Thoreau, Kerry McSweeney states what can almost be regarded as a given – that what they have in common is that perception or primary imagination is an essential aspect of the creative process. So is the detection of analogies. A key premise for all of them is, in Emerson's formulation, a "radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts" (1998:15).

Emerson's formulation of the close link between mind and the world is similar to Wordsworth's own theory, as expressed in his contentious Preface to *The Excursion*. In this remarkable piece of writing about the power of the human mind, Wordsworth celebrates, in "words/Which speak of nothing more than what we are", of the "great consummation" between "the discerning intellect of Man/When wedded to this goodly universe":

> ... while my voice proclaims
> How exquisitely the individual Mind
> (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
> Of the whole species) to the external World
> Is fitted – and how exquisitely, too –
> Theme this but little heard of among men –

> The external World is fitted to the Mind;
> And the creation (by no lower name
> Can it be called) which they with blended might
> Accomplish: – this is our high argument (Preface to *The Excursion*, *ll* 52-71).

I believe that Dickinson shared this preoccupation, as is the case with other Romantics (particularly Wordsworth of course), with the interaction between the self and the world outside the self, as Wordsworth expresses it so clearly in the above extract. Regarding Dickinson, I believe that this is illustrated by Poem 451 that I interpret as dealing with the interaction of the mind and the world in the creative poetic process, during which the inner state of the poet determines how s/he interprets the outer world that provides him/her with the subject matter that is then imaginatively and creatively transformed into the resultant poetry. I quote the first and the third stanzas:

> The Outer – from the Inner
> Derives its Magnitude –
> 'Tis Duke, or Dwarf, according
> As is the Central Mood –
>
> The Inner – paints the Outer –
> The Brush without the Hand –
> Its Picture publishes – precise –
> As is the inner Brand –

As stated, this is a theme that constitutes a central feature of much Romantic literature. In the Preface to *The Excursion* referred to and quoted above, Wordsworth refers to this conjunction, almost fusion, between mind and world as a 'marriage' in which his best poetry, "spousal verse", is conceived and born "of this great consummation", as referred to above in lines 57-58. In 'Tintern Abbey' Wordsworth writes about this inspiring and mind-expanding process as well:

> ...that blessed mood,
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world
> Is lightened: – that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on,
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
> And even the motion of our human blood

> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
>
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things (*ll* 38-49)[27]

With reference to the above passage John Beer very interestingly points out that these lines from 'Tintern Abbey' enunciate the principles of an unbroken natural faith between the universe and the human heart and soul that has became a part of the sub-Romantic ethos, and which would be adopted by later writers like DH Lawrence (2003:128). Wordsworth endorses and defines this faith further on in 'Tintern Abbey' as "Knowing that Nature never did betray/The heart that loved her" (*ll* 123-24)[28]. This hangs together, of course, with Wordsworth's claim that the poet, being possessed of greater sensitivity and perceptual acuity, can experience the world with greater vividness, and can, through poetry, pass this on to others as part of the fulfilment of the poetic vocation. Dickinson was also aware of these moments of heightened consciousness and refers to them as "Heavenly Moments" that are grants "of the Divine" that leave the soul bedazzled (P 393, *ll* 8-11). I believe that Wordsworth is talking along similar lines when he writes as follows about "There was a Boy":

> Guided by one of my own primary consciousnesses, I have represented a commutation and transfer of internal feelings, co-operating with external accidents, to plant for immortality, images of sound and sight, in the celestial soil of the imagination (*LB*, 1991:300n).

And is this is not almost exactly what Dickinson has in mind in Poem 627 when she refers to those moments of heightened consciousness that leave the soul tantalised by almost, but not quite, glimpsing immortality?

> The Moments of Dominion

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27 It is interesting to note, seeing that one is discussing influence, that Wordsworth acknowledged the influence of Edward Young's 'Night Thoughts' on 'Tintern' in a footnote in *Lyrical Ballads.* He also referred to Young by name in the 1805 version of *The Prelude* and as the Bard in the 1850 version.

28 As stated elsewhere, this is a somewhat simplistic interpretation. Both Dickinson and Wordsworth share moments in which they experience estrangement from the world and Nature.

That happen on the Soul
And leave it with a Discontent
Too exquisite – to tell –

With reference to 'Tintern Abbey' it is extremely interesting to note that Daria Donnelly interprets Dickinson's Poem 652, formerly believed to have been written over the palimpsest of Byron's 'The Prisoner of Chillon', as a "wry rewriting" of the Wordsworth poem. I quote stanzas 1, 4, 7 and 8 of the Dickinson poem:

A Prison gets to be a friend –
Between its Ponderous face
And Ours – a Kinsmanship express –
And in its narrow Eyes –

As plashing in the Pools –
When Memory was a Boy –
But a Demurer Circuit –
A Geometric Joy –

The narrow Round – the Stint –
The slow exchange of Hope –
For something passiver – Content
Too steep for looking up –

The Liberty we knew
Avoided – like a Dream –
Too wide for any Night but Heaven –
If That – indeed – redeem –

Donnelly points out persuasively that whereas Wordsworth's poem, with its abundant flow of comparatives ('more deep', 'purer', 'coarser', 'remoter', 'warmer', 'deeper', 'holier') is an extended argument for personal progress in vision and understanding, the Dickinson poem argues against that flow of comparatives, suggesting that Wordsworth's intensifying flow of comparatives constitute an effort to suppress loss and an "unwarranted evasion of the prison house of being". Donnelly believes that Stanza 4 ("As plashing in the Pools/When Memory was a Boy") reproduces Wordsworth argument of boyish pleasure, and "Demurer Circuit" evokes the "remoter charm/By thought supplied" (1998:126-27). Whether one accepts Donnelly's seductive argument and it seems difficult not to, I believe that I detect other Wordsworthian allusions in Poem 652. In Book 1, *ll* 292 and 294 of *The Prelude* of 1805,

Wordsworth cherishes the memory of when as "a naked boy", he "Made one long bathing of a summer's day". In 'Resolution and Independence' the unusual and very low frequency word[29] "plash" occurs – the running hare raises a mist from the "plashy" earth as she runs. I also wonder if there is not some slight transumptive echo of 'Nuns fret not at their Convent's Narrow Room' in Dickinson's poem with its reference to the prison's "narrow Eyes" and "The narrow Round" that the prisoner becomes accustomed to, as well as the idea of the prison ceasing to be a prison – "In truth, the prison, unto which we doom/Ourselves, no prison is". It has to be stressed, however, that Dickinson's use of these allusive ideas, if she used them at all, is covert and ambiguous in true Dickinson fashion – she refashions them to suit her own poetically creative purposes.

6 An engagement with the 'unknowable'

With reference to the previous point, the common tenor that I detect here in the poetry of both poets is a shared belief that there is something beyond the everyday, whether it be immortality, a pre-existence, the Divine, the presences in Nature, or the essence of Being. David Porter refers to this as a "presentiment of the nebulous, irrational opacity that subsists beyond knowledge" (1981:35) that is found in Dickinson's poetry. The moments of heightened consciousness referred to above are for both poets moments of sublimity when they can almost break through this cloaking opacity – when "Authentic tidings of invisible things" are imparted by Nature, as the Wanderer tries to reassure the Solitary in *l* 1144 of Book 4 of *The Excursion*. In these moments the invisible world that lies beyond the knowable is almost revealed, and one can see "into the life of things" as Wordsworth puts in line 49 of 'Tintern Abbey', and when Dickinson goes beyond the verifiable to the outermost limits of "Circumference/Beyond the Dip of Bell –" (P 378 – quoted in full on p 58). In Poem 1247 Dickinson muses on the "Lilac" being an ancient shrub, and on the sunset, the "Firmamental Lilac" being even "ancienter", in

[29] Wordsworth uses it only once more in *l* 106 of Book 8 of *The Excursion*, as "formidable length of plashy lane". Dickinson uses it only twice more in Poems 243and 328 – "A plash of Oars" in the former and in the latter, where "Butterflies" ... Leap, plashless as they swim"[!!].

much the same way that Wordsworth stands beneath some rock at night listening to the sounds of Nature in an attempt to understand the "ghostly language of the ancient earth" (*Prelude*, 1805, 2, *l* 328). Dickinson's lilac, much like Wordsworth's "meanest flower that blows" in the final lines of 'The Immortality Ode', carry with it thoughts and insights that are far weightier than its relative significance would suggest.

In Poem 797 Dickinson wonders whether, in an attempt to transcend reality and approach the unknowable, the pine tree outside her window can provide some "Apprehensions" of immortality. I believe that these "apprehensions" that Dickinson refers to can be equated with Wordsworth's intimations of immortality that we find throughout his 'Immortality Ode', the "shadowy intimations" of *l* 88 of Book 3 of *The Excursion,* of his "many recognitions dim and faint" ('Tintern Abbey', *l* 60) that all combine to grant the soul a glimpse of that "immortal sea/Which brought us hither" and which enables us, in moments of sublimity, to "hear the mighty waters rolling evermore" in a transcendence of reality. The "Moments of Dominion" from Dickinson poem (P 627) quoted at the end of the last section is another valid example here as well. It almost seems as if one can access "Some Secret – " or see the mystery that is cushioned "with Tulle" during these moments of heightened consciousness, but it does not happen – the eye remains cheated until it closes in the grave.

On a lighter note I will let Dickinson have the final word in this section. In Letter 559 she claims that "the unknown is the largest need of the intellect". In the charming Poem 191 she considers bribing a bird to learn the secrets of the skies, but wisely decides against it:

> The Skies can't keep their Secret!
> They tell it to the Hills –
> The Hills just tell the Orchards –
> And they – the Daffodils!
>
> A Bird – by chance – that goes that way –
> Soft overhears the whole –
> If I should bribe the little Bird –
> Who knows what *she* would tell?

I think I won't – however –
It's finer – not to know –
If Summer were *an Axiom* –
What sorcery had *Snow*? (P 191).

7 Preoccupation with the idea of immortality

In her book *Choosing Not Choosing*, Sharon Cameron investigates Dickinson's poetry in the context of the 'fascicles' or packets in which Dickinson bound her poems. Cameron argues persuasively that a reading of the poems *within* the context of the fascicle in which Dickinson placed them, adds materially to an understanding of the poem. She believes that consideration of this placement of a poem is essential in order to establish its "identity" – indeed, consideration of a poem's placement frequently changes the accepted 'sense' of a poem (1992:6, 32). This, rightly I believe, places a definite question mark over the purported 'scenelessness' of Dickinson's poetry. I agree with Cameron that the fact that Dickinson placed certain poems together in fascicles bears serious consideration and should be interpreted as a guideline from the poet as to how she wished her poems to be read. I also believe that Cameron's insight that Dickinson's grouping of her poems possibly parallels Wordsworth's classification of his poems is a very valid one. Cameron makes the very interesting point that Dickinson's ordering of her poems into fascicles, i.e. the order and way in which she intended them to be read, is possibly similar to the way in which Wordsworth grouped his poems together in classifications (i.e. 'Poems of Sentiment and Reflection', 'Poems Founded on the Affections', 'Poems of the Imagination', etc) (1992:49). In this context the last fascicle, (number 40), seems to deal largely with the concept of immortality. Dickinson's work showed a marked and almost excessive preoccupation with death, the moment of dying and the afterlife. Wordsworth also believed in immortality as a pre-existence from which one entered life "trailing clouds of glory ... From God, who is our home" ('Immortality Ode', *ll* 64-65).

Though Dickinson joked about being a 'pagan', she also referred to her 'Puritan spirit'. Both comments were valid, in typical teasing Dickinson mode. It must always be borne in mind that she grew up in the Puritan culture of New

England and was indelibly marked by it. Thus, structured into her psyche, was the belief that God was the omnipotent Creator of everything that had existed in harmony until Man's fall from grace. Within this framework, sinful and flawed humanity had to confront the universe and contrive to live as virtuous and moral a life as possible. God could punish or reward as He saw fit. Emerson rebelled against this stark doctrine and Dickinson, partly influenced by Emerson's *Essays* but mostly as a result of her profoundly original and questioning mind, found it impossible to commit herself to its frigid tenets, and in fact viewed its theology with marked distrust. Hence her receptiveness to the "warm, swelling, swirling notions of the Romantic poet-prophets" as Gelpi puts it (Bloom, 1985:40). An 1847 series of lectures by John Lord, reputed to have been daringly transcendental and pantheistic, may also have influenced her. So could one of her Amherst friends, Leonard Humphrey, who was very interested in Wordsworth. She was also likely to have been influenced by Thoreau, another 'Wordsworthian'. When Thoreau states the transcendental concept of God or "that everlasting Something to which we are allied" and where we have "our abode" the Wordsworthian echoes are almost deafening.

In whichever way it was that Dickinson departed from the Puritan road, she certainly started stepping along the 'sinful' and creative road of the imagination that her powerful male precursor poets had established (see p 21). In her own mind she had no doubt that she was a poet. Gelpi raises the interesting point that other critics have also made, namely that in signing herself 'Emilie' as she sometimes did, she was assuming the "the mask of the child-poet (in the Blake-Wordsworth-Emerson tradition)" (Bloom, 1985:45). I think that though she certainly did stand in the said tradition, she was also simply enjoying and playing with her new craft.

Dickinson claims that death is "but our rapt attention/To Immortality" (P 7). She speculates extensively about an afterlife and how she might gain access to it. She writes many poems about the latter that she sees as an idealized land that she refers to as eternity, infinity, immortality or centre. In typical Dickinson fashion, however, her concept of the afterlife is complex and ambiguous. Though immortality could almost seem to her to be a "member of

the family" (L 644), other images of the afterlife also abounded in her work. Albert Gelpi captures her ambiguous feelings well when he writes as follows:

> Often Heaven seemed "a fictitious Country: merely a name for "what I cannot reach," a designation for the furthest extension of experience to an unknown but intuited absolute (Bloom, 1985:54).

As will be more fully discussed in Chapter 4, Gelpi argues persuasively that because she could not accept the harsh and frigid tenets of Puritanism, she in fact found heaven in Nature. Though this was certainly not "Emerson's pagan paradise" as Gelpi puts it (p 58), it definitely was an Eden situated in Nature, though it was a Nature that was informed by Christian images and metaphors. In the peerless moments revealed by natural forces like the wind or lightning, Gelpi convincingly argues that Dickinson saw the earth revealed as Eden before the fall, as can be seen in Poem 180:

> As if some little Arctic flower
> Upon the polar hem –
> Went wandering down the Latitudes
> Until it puzzled came
> To continents of summer –
> To firmaments of sun –
> To strange, bright crowds of flowers –
> As if some little Arctic flower
> And birds, of foreign tongue!
> I say, As if this little flower
> To Eden, wandered in –
> What then? Why nothing,
> Only, your inference therefrom!

About this Gelpi comments perceptively that it was

> ... under the thrust of that "bright" strain of the Romantic spirit of which Wordsworth and Scott are good examples in England, and Bryant, Emerson, and Whitman in America, Emily Dickinson was able to break open the dark inner void to a shining world outside in which, paradoxically, she could both lose and fulfill herself. We dwell in Eden every day, she said, would we but open our eyes, for "Paradise is of the option," is "always eligible". "Not – 'Revelation' – 'tis that waits/But our unfurnished eyes" (Bloom, 1985:58).

And how close is this not to Wordsworth's injunction to be receptive to Nature and the world. In 'The Tables Turned' he writes

And Hark! How blithe the throstle sings!
And he is no mean preacher;
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless –
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by chearfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man;
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Wordsworth tells us that in order to be enriched by the sweetness and wealth of Nature, all we need to do is "Come forth, and bring with you a heart/That watches and receives" as he says in the final lines of this deceptively simple poem. In a gently teasing vein he reiterates these sentiments in 'Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman':

O reader! Had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle reader! You would find
A tale in everything.

What more I have to say is short,
I hope you'll kindly take it;
It is no tale; but should you think,
Perhaps a tale you'll make it (*ll* 73-80).

Judith Farr writes that Dickinson's poetry "attempts to envision the most inchoate, unspeakable, structureless conceptions, such as immortality, in the practical, specific details of the everyday" (1992: 248). Wordsworth and Dickinson both saw immortality in the everyday and, and in their original and radical mining of this seemingly unpromising matrix, both succeeded in distilling "amazing sense/From ordinary Meanings' as Dickinson so memorably puts it in Poem 448. But possibly Wordsworth voiced this best of all in the final lines of his immortal 'Immortality Ode' when he said that the smallest, most insignificant little flower can give rise to "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears". In a similar context I wish to reiterate Geoffrey Hartman's memorable comment about the teasing and challenging

metalingual aspects of Wordsworth's language, and his poetry of the everyday:

> ... the poetry is occasional, the depicted experience usually quite ordinary, and the narrator, though quirky, no more than a passing observer or very sensitive tourist. ***Yet the fantasy within stirs like a coiled snake*** [my emphasis] (1987:212).

In coining this powerful and evocative image, Hartman possibly remembered Wordsworth's own striking and menacing description of the future and of language:

> Why sleeps the future, as a snake enrolled
> Coil within coil, at noon-tide? For the Word
> Yields, if with presumptuous faith explored,
> Power at whose touch the sluggard shall unfold
> His drowsy rings. ...('Conclusion', *Ecclesiastical Sketches*).

In conclusion of this section it is apposite I believe to note that both poets ascribe almost godlike powers to the immortal soul that both, interestingly, see as female, and to end with a quotation from each of them. Dickinson describes this almost godlike soul as follows in Poem 306:

> The Soul's Superior instants
> Occur to Her – alone –
> When friend – and Earth's occasion
> Have infinite withdrawn –
>
> Or She – Herself – ascended
> To too remote a Height
> For lower Recognition
> Than Her Omnipotent –
>
> This Mortal Abolition
> Is seldom – but as fair
> As Apparition – subject
> To Autocratic Air –
>
> Eternity's disclosure
> To favorites – a few –
> Of the Colossal substance
> Of Immortality

Wordsworth ascribes a similarly elevated status to the soul:

... but I had hopes and peace
And swellings of the spirits, was rapt and soothed,
Conversed with promises, had glimmering views
How life pervades the undecaying mind,
How the immortal soul with godlike power
Informs, creates, and thaws the deepest sleep
That time can lay upon her, how on earth
Man if he do but live within the light
Of high endeavours, daily spreads abroad
His being with a strength that cannot fail (*Prelude*, 1805, vi, *ll* 140-61).

8 The celebration of the morning in their poetry of 'light'

Both Wordsworth and Dickinson wrote about light, in its various manifestations, exhaustively. This includes numerous references to and descriptions of sunsets and sunrises, the morning, sunshine, moonlight and lightning. Both describe the sunset in particular in vivid colours and vigorous images. Both similarly associate light with poetic inspiration and renewal. This is partially in line with the Biblical tradition of a new day being, in a metaphorical sense, a resurrection, but as often it is seen as a stimulus to poetic creativity. Though I will mainly concentrate on their depictions of morning, I will make some reference to their descriptions of sunsets as well. In this regard it may be interesting to note that Kerry McSweeney claims that Dickinson's *oeuvre* contains more than forty renderings of the metamorphosis of day into night. The Wordsworth and Dickinson Concordances literally contain pages of references to sun(s), sun's, sunbeam(s), sunbright, sun-gilt, sunlight, sunny, sunrise, sunset(s/'s) and sunshine. An exhaustive study of this subject will indeed be exhausting, and of a scope far beyond what I can attempt here, hence my decision to concentrate mainly on their 'morning' poetry which does, however, contain some of their most beautiful poetry.

Judith Farr points out that there are various books in the Dickinson collection, like the Joseph and Laura Lyman's *Philosophy of House-Keeping* referred to before, and Charles Knight's essay (that Farr believes may have been extensively used by Emily Dickinson) in Edward Dickinson's collected works of Shakespeare, that owe much to the celebrations of morning as found in Wordsworth and Emerson (1992:54). These works not only reflect the philosophy of an era influenced by Wordsworth and Emerson, but also show

the influence of the Romantics in praising the morning as "the poet's hour" (1992:53). Farr confirms my belief that Dickinson's "continual identification of life with light" and poetic inspiration/creativity, is a clear indication that she was familiar with Wordsworth's poetry, as well as that of "Emerson, Cole and the artists of the nineteenth century" (1992:303).

Wordsworth's association of early morning with emotional and psychic enrichment, and poetic inspiration, dated right back to when he was a schoolboy, as he describes in a memorable passage from Book 2 of *The Prelude* of 1805. He would often rise early, and "before the vernal thrush/Was audible" would experience a visionary moment of sublime revelation and connectedness with Nature as

> ... among the hills I sate
> Alone upon some jutting eminence
> At the first hour of morning ["first gleam of dawn-light" in the 1850 version], when the vale
> Lay quiet in utter solitude.
> How shall I trace the history, where seek
> The origin of what I then have felt?
> Oft in those moments such a holy calm
> Did overspread my soul that I forgot
> That I had bodily eyes, and what I saw
> Appeared like something in myself, a dream,
> A prospect [view, landscape] in my mind (*ll* 360-71).

Dickinson shared Wordsworth's concept of morning as a time of inspiration, emotional enrichment and revelation emphatically. Poem 304 describes the morning in wonderfully evocative words and images. The light springs before the hills like "Hindered rubies", the purple colour of the east cannot be contained and the "Orchard sparkled like a Jew –" In the final stanza she writes about the amazing privilege of experiencing the dawn: "How mighty 'twas – to be – /A Guest in this stupendous place –/The Parlor – of the day –". In Poem 931, morning is the sill to the whole world. Poem 728 equates liberty, sight and new life with the "Cunning Reds of Morning" that can "Make the Blind – leap – " and the "first Miracle/Let in –with Light –". Poem 323 depicts a gift holding bewildering, indeed shattering, riches like a Kingdom in terms of the morning:

As if I asked the Orient
Had it for me a Morn
And it should lift its Purple Dikes,
And shatter me with Dawn!

Poem 812 is probably Dickinson's best-known poem about light. Let me quote it in full before I start engaging with it:

A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period –
When March is scarcely here

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.

Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay –

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.

Inder Nath Kher believes that the poem deals not only with the uniqueness of the quality of the light in spring, but that the poem then also makes the light a metaphor for a "permanent inner truth" (1974:61-62). Though this interpretation certainly has merit, I am not entirely convinced. I wonder if Poem 812 is not, at least in part, a comment on or a 'correction' of Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas', (quoted in part on p 31) which sees the light "that never was" as a product of the poet's creative imagination. I wonder if the passing away of the light in Dickinson's poem is not to some extent a comment on the powers of the imagination possibly diminishing, leaving a sense of loss very much in line with that which is expressed in Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' and 'Tintern Abbey', as well as in certain passages in *The*

Prelude that mourn the loss of haptic sensitivity with time. Possibly the element of loss in Dickinson's poem may even hearken back subliminally to 'Elegiac Stanzas' that was written in the aftermath of Wordsworth's brother's death. We know that Dickinson knew 'Elegiac Stanzas' as she takes issue with Wordsworth about this poem on the very subject of light! In Letter 315, written to Mrs Holland, Dickinson writes that "February passed like a Skate and I know March. Here is the "light" the Stranger said "was not on land or sea." Myself could arrest it but we'll not chagrin Him." Here Dickinson specifically refers to a line from Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas': "To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,/The light that never was, on sea or land". She also quotes the same line in Letter 394 to her Norcross cousins: "... "The light that never was on sea or land" might just as well be had for the knocking." These almost confrontational comments by Dickinson about Wordsworth's poem make it almost impossible for me not to think that Dickinson had Wordsworth's poem in mind when she wrote her own elegiac stanzas about the passing of the light, as depicted in Poem 812.

Dickinson and Wordsworth share the idea that the morning is connected with the ability to see clearly and without distortion under the "aesthetic and spiritual stimulus of dawn" (Farr, 1992: 58) when "Mists – are carved away" (P 664). In Wordsworth's 'Thanksgiving Ode' of 1816, he indeed refers to the morning hour as holding special significance for the poet. In the second stanza he claims that there is a radiant flame that "burns for poets in the dawning east/And oft my soul hath kindled at the same/When the captivity of sleep had ceased". In the deep quiet of the "Morning hour,/All nature seems to hear me when I speak" and the beneficent influence of the morning enables him to find "Apt language" to express his thoughts.

In Poem 944, Dickinson likewise claims that the morning enables her to see more vividly: "Till Sunrise take us back to Scene – /Transmuted – Vivider –". In Wordsworth's 'There is a Pleasure in Poetic Pains' the poet rejoices when he has at last overcome the difficulties of poetic composition so that " ... his thought stand clear/At last of hindrance and obscurity,/Fresh as the star that crowns the brow of morn". At the end of Canto 4 of 'The Waggoner'

Wordsworth similarly refers to the morning as "that delicious hour of balm" that is marked by "stillness, solitude, and calm".

Some further telling references to 'morning' occur in *The Prelude*. In Book 6, as a metaphor for continued hope and optimism regarding a successful life as a poet, he claims that, at the age of thirty-four, "the morning gladness is not gone/which then was in my mind" (1805, *ll* 63-64), 'then' being the time when he decided not to pursue an Honours degree at Cambridge as a student in 1789, but rather to pursue a life as a poet. In the 1850 version he words it as follows: " ... yet for me/Life's morning radiance hath not left the hills,/Her dew is on the flowers" (*ll* 51-52). After the death of Robespierre, Wordsworth welcomes the news and wishes that better times will now arrive after the Terror "as the morning comes/From out the bosom of the night" as a symbol of hope and renewal (Book 10, 1850, *ll* 580-81). *The Excursion* also contains references to morning. In Book 2, the poet rather whimsically wonders if the "rays of the morning/aided by the exhaling dew" might not with its "gladsome influence ... reanimate/The faded garlands" dangling from the sides of the maypole (*ll* 134-37). In Book 4, the Wanderer, in an attempt to address the despondency of the Solitary, muses in beautiful blank verse on the fortuitous circumstance that "a Being/Of infinite benevolence and power" (*l* 15-16), who controls man's destiny and guides his life, "Restor'st us, daily" from the "anarchy of dreaming sleep,/Or from its death-like void, with punctual care,/And touch as gentle as the morning light" (*ll* 87-89).

Much of Wordsworth's most memorable 'light' poetry occurs in conjunction with what that very fine Wordsworth critic, Hugh Sykes Davies, perceptively identifies as the 'gleam cluster' in Wordsworth's poetry. Charting the course of development of this 'gleam-cluster' (consisting of gleam, flash, sparkle, light, glister, lustre, burnished, glitter, glisten) that originated in the so-called 'shield' image (which I believe comes to suggest a stirring of the imagination or poetic creativity, or a glimpse or intimations of the unknowable) from its origin in *The Prelude*, 1805, Book 1, will demonstrate not just the growth of this particular group of words, but will also highlight an important aspect of Wordsworth's poetic craft, namely his use of words in groups that mutually strengthen and

enrich each other. Exploring the 'gleam-cluster' will also serve to illustrate a further dimension of Wordsworth's light poetry. As stated it first occurs in Book 1 of *The Prelude*:

> Thus often in those fits of vulgar [sensual] joy
> Which through all seasons on a child's pursuits
> Are prompt attendants, 'mid that giddy bliss
> Which like a tempest works along the blood
> And is forgotten, even then I felt
> Gleams like the flashing of a shield (*ll* 610-15).

It recurs in Book 8 where it is identified as nothing more than the sun shining on a wet rock in a distant copse, yet the imagination transforms it into something magical:

> There was a copse,
> An upright bank of wood and woody rock
> That opposite our rural dwelling stood,
> In which a sparkling patch of diamond light
> Was in bright weather duly to be seen
> On summer afternoons, within the wood
> At the same place. 'Twas doubtless nothing more
> Than a black rock, which, wet with constant springs
> Glistered far seen from out its lurking-place
> As soon as ever the declining sun
> Had smitten it. Beside our cottage hearth
> Sitting with open door, a hundred times
> Upon this lustre have I gazed, that seemed
> To have some meaning which I could not find –
> And now it was a burnished shield, I fancied,
> Suspended over a knight's tomb, who lay
> Inglorious, buried in the dusky wood;
> An entrance now into some magic cave,
> Or palace for the fairy of the rock (*ll* 560-77).

One also encounters it in *Descriptive Sketches* where a stormy scene, with mist, blustery wind and rain, is described, along with a marvellous evocation of a warrior where "the Sun walking on his western fields/Shakes from behind the clouds his flashing shield (*ll* 336-7).

It occurs again in *The Borderers* (written in the late 1796 and 1797, but revised extensively until it was published in 1842 in *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years*), as Oswald/Rivers remembers the spot where their hated captain was deliberately and ruthlessly marooned:

Naked was the spot –
Methinks I see it now – how in the sun
Its stony surface glittered like a shield:
It swarmed with shapes of life scarce visible;
And in that miserable place we left him – (*ll* 1721-24).

Thereafter it recurs in one of the 'Michael' drafts of 1800 where Thirlmere "... flashes like a Warrior's shield/His light high up among the gloomy rocks" (*ll* 11-10, *PW*, 2:483). In 1815 it reappears in 'Artegal and Elidure' where the clouds of disgrace and misfortune are dispelled by the memories of the beauties of spring when "The frith [lake] ... glittered like a warrior's shield". Another manuscript version of this line reads "The Lake that glittered like a sunbright shield" (Sykes Davies, 1986:79). In 'On her First Ascent to the Summit of Helvellyn' the image surfaces yet again where the distant ocean gleams "like a silver shield". The effect of these words, as they are used together in poem after poem, is subtly heightened by Wordsworth cleverly exploiting the effect of contrast – he often uses them in conjunction with words that suggest darkness, for example 'black', 'gloom', and 'naked'.

This latter is germane to a previous topic, namely, that both Dickinson and Wordsworth often use 'darkness' along with 'light' in passages that frequently suggest that the dark is in some way not just an intrinsic part of the light, but which also imbues the dark with an alluring quality. These passages frequently highlight the contrast and almost as frequently subvert the surface meaning of the poem. In his famous Simplon Pass passage (quoted in full on p 66 and also referred to on pp 9, 105 and 127), Wordsworth writes that the contrasting elements that they experienced in their disorienting traversing of the chasm in the Alps, depicted in the passage in a veritable flood of oxymoronic images, are yet part of the whole apocalyptic creation of the geography of the Alps:

Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,
Were all like the workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great apocalypse,
The types and symbols of eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end (*ll* 567-72).

In a similar fashion Dickinson, in Poem 593, one of her poems about Elizabeth Barrett Browning, says that the "Dark – felt beautiful –" as she came under the spell of poetry.

Some of Wordsworth's 'gleam cluster' words, (gleam, flash, sparkle, light, glister, lustre, burnished, glitter, glisten), also occur in Dickinson's poetry in some really memorable usages, of which I would like to mention a few. In Poem 1383 the poet claims that "the embers of a Thousand Years" "Will gleam and understand – " if they are uncovered by the hand that "fondled them when they were "Fire". In Poem 1581 thunder and lightning is portrayed as long-lasting poetic inspiration. The poet's vocation is strengthened, indeed enforced, by "every clamor bright" which is "the gleam concomitant" of the light of inspiration that waylays the poet and enforces the "obligation" to poetry. A interesting variant of line seven exchanges "Bolt" with "Flash" (here also I believe used in a similar way to its occurrence in Wordsworth's 'shield' image as poetic inspiration) so that it reads "But I would not exchange the Flash/For all the rest of life". In Poem 974 'flash' is used in a comparable sense to Wordsworth in that it suggests an intimation of the unknowable, immortality, as a flash of lightning reveals the "Not yet suspected – but for Flash – /And Click – and Suddenness". In Poem 9 the lightning beautifully manifests as 'poinards" that "gleamed" in the storm. And in Poem 1672 a variant of 'lustre' occurs in the marvellous image of the Moon removing "her silver hat/From her lustral Face".

I wish to round off this section with some more references to 'light' from the poetry of both poets as these will reveal the versatility with which both employ the image of light. These will include some descriptions of sunset that occur in the poetry of both poets. Interestingly, both use the colour 'purple' with great regularity in their descriptions of the sunset and sunrise.

In Poem 120 the beauty of the sunset reminds Dickinson of a peacock – "*Peacock* presumes to die". Poem 219 contains the lovely image of the sunset being a housewife that "sweeps with many-colored Brooms". Whimsically Dickinson suggests that she is not being very thorough seeing that she has "dropped a Purple Ravelling" as well as "an Amber thread". Poems 667, 757,

1016, 1622 and 1650 all likewise use the colour purple imaginatively – the poet endows the day with a "Purple Sowing" (P 667); the purple mountains provide the sun with "fellowship" as it "Looks long – and last – and golden" on their "Eternal faces" at the end of the day (P757) and in a really marvellously imaginative four-line poem the hills recount the "Day's Adventures" "in Purple syllables" to little groups of "Continents" on their way home from school! Poem 1622 depicts the sunset as a "Sloop of Amber" that slips away "Upon an Ether Sea" and which then "Wrecks in Peace a Purple Tar/The Son of Ecstasy -" Poem 228 depicts the day as a juggler who magically transforms the west into leaping leopards as it blazes out in gold and purple, just touching the roof and tinting the barn as it goes. The sunset in Poem 552 carries some message from the unknowable, possibly immortality, in its "Amber Revelation. Poem 1650 reminds me somewhat of a description of a sunset in Wordsworth's 'An Evening Walk' – in both poems the image of trees in wood being illuminated by the rays of the setting sun occur. Dickinson's poem contains the lines "A lane of yellow led the eye/Unto a Purple Wood" that "Surpasses solitude". The Wordsworth passage refers to "a ray of gold" that betrays a "purple gleam" and describes how "Deep yellow beams the scattered boles illume/Far in the level forest's central gloom" ('An Evening Walk', *ll* 159-64).

As stated before Wordsworth also often uses the colour 'purple' in his descriptions of sunrise and sunset. Some of these occur in 'An Evening Walk' and 'Descriptive Sketches" In the first of these, the "broadening sun appears" with its "edge all flame"; it spreads 'its golden tides"/And now it touches on the purple steep" ('Evening Walk', *ll* 152-54). In 'Descriptive Sketches' the evocative usage occurs in "Where falls the purple morning far and wide/In flakes of light upon the mountain side". The sonnet 'A Volant Tribe of Bards' closes with a description of the utmost tranquillity: "... while day's purple eye/Is gently closing ... Where even the motion of an angel's wing/Would interrupt the intense tranquillity/Of silent hills, and more than silent sky". In Book 6 of *The Prelude* (1850), Wordsworth describes how he and his sister Dorothy, newly reunited with him, would explore the ruins of Brougham Castle. Having climbed up the precarious "darksome windings of a broken stair" and crept along a fractured wall, they would gaze out from "some Gothic

window's open space" and gather "with one mind a rich reward/From the far-stretching landscape, by the light/Of morning beautified, or purple eve". And finally, the last example that I wish to quote comes from Book 2 of *The Excursion*, and likewise refers to far off mountains "stern and desolate" that "to our ken appearing fair/Of aspect, with aerial softness clad,/And beautified with morning's purple beams" (*ll* 92-96).

As stated at the beginning of this chapter I believe that there are various further thematic convergences between Dickinson and Wordsworth that can be explored fruitfully. The first of these would be an analysis of the sun imagery as it occurs in their poetry – this would be a very wide-ranging exploration as already indicated, due to the high incidence of the image in both *oeuvres.* It would also be rewarding to analyse their use of flower imagery more intensively, seeing that flower images abound in their poetry and the thematic use of flowers as symbols is prevalent in the *oeuvres* of both poets. In Dickinson's Poem 927 there is surely more than a hint of Wordsworth's daffodils, that in memory bring joy and pleasure:

> Absent Place – an April Day –
> Daffodils a-blow
> Homesick curiosity
> To the souls that snow –
>
> Drift may block within it
> Deeper than without –
> Daffodil delight but
> Him in duplicate –

The use of the wind as an image and symbol of poetic inspiration could also I believe be productively explored in their poetry, as could images of sight and eyes, to mention just two more avenues into the transumptive Wordsworth as he lurks in Dickinson's *oeuvre.*

Chapter 4

More than a theme: "The deathless power of nature over the minds of poets" in Dickinson and Wordsworth

Wordsworth, for most people, is simply the poet of Nature. Dickinson's poetry also frequently addresses Nature in all its different moods and manifestations. Both poets not only implicitly and explicitly acknowledge that "nature's life and human life are bound together" but their poetry also "assert[s] the deathless power of nature over the minds of poets" as Hartman so aptly puts it with reference to Wordsworth's sonnet 'To the Torrent at the Devil's Bridge, North Wales, 1824' (1987:87). In Book 2 of *The Prelude* of 1850, Wordsworth says that the baby absorbs from the close contact with his mother a consciousness of the "filial bond" that connects us with Nature (*ll* 232-44). Like Wordsworth, Dickinson seems to see an analogy between the human mind and Nature – in Poem 750 she states that "Growth of Man – like Growth of Nature – /Gravitates within – ". Cynthia Wolff confirms my belief that Wordsworth's Nature coloured Dickinson's concept of this quintessential Romantic concern when she points out that " ... Dickinson was not immune to the attractiveness of Wordsworth's optimism" [regarding nature] and that she does indeed also refer "to nature as if it were an independent force with which humans might have a positive relationship" (1986:283). Wolff does point out, however, that this is not always the way in which Dickinson approaches Nature. And of course, neither does Wordsworth.

So whereas Joanne Feit Diehl claims that Wordsworth and Dickinson differ fundamentally in their approach to Nature, I am convinced that Wordsworth and Romanticism were directly and fundamentally responsible for Dickinson's 'conversion' to Nature. Feit Diehl claims that, whereas Wordsworth sees a reciprocal relationship with Nature (which of course he does), Dickinson perceives a struggle between two forces that find themselves in a confrontational stance. These opposing forces are the consciousness of the

poet, and everything that stands outside it. Feit Diehl believes that Wordsworth stands in a receptive, passive and non-confrontational stance to Nature and the world (which, along with Hartman, I question substantially) and that he exhibits a consciousness that is open to and receptive of the landscape. She does, however, concede that elements of Dickinson's more sceptical attitude to Nature do also occur in Wordsworth, but in a covert form (1981:42), but claims that in contrast to Wordsworth's concept of reciprocity between the world and the mind, Dickinson

> ... will either appropriate the landscape by internalizing it, or, obversely, deny the boundaries between self and nature by describing the landscape in the anatomical language of arteries and veins, impressing herself upon the land. Either strategy expresses aggression, the need to win dominance from a competing, potentially destructive, province located in the land (1981:35).

I believe that there may be elements of this in the equation, but only if one is considering the 'simple Wordsworth' rather than the 'complex Wordsworth'. Let me elucidate.

M.H. Abrams identifies two schools of thought regarding Wordsworth. The first ('founded' by Matthew Arnold and adhered to by critics like Helen Darbishire) views Wordsworth as "... the simple, affirmative poet of elementary feelings, essential humanity, and vital joy ... [who restores our] lost capacity for spontaneous and uncomplicated responsiveness" (Abrams, 1972:2,3) to the beauty and freshness of Nature and the world. This is, however, an incomplete, compromised Wordsworth, as he can only do this by averting his eyes from the dark side of the human lot. Donald G. Marshall gives this thumbnail sketch of the simple Wordsworth in his foreword to Geoffrey Hartman's memorable and thought-provoking book *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*:

> According to the common view, in Wordsworth the synthetic, creative and sympathetic power of imagination, nourished on a popular tradition of ballad and romance with roots in the great poetry pre-dating the Enlightenment, asserted itself against an instrumentalist reason, which in poetry took the form of a masquerade in the robes of conscious and merely willed classicism. Wordsworth found the true source of imagination: in nature and particularly in the poet's experience of

nature during childhood, when he was most open to its varied and spirited influence. The language in which this recollected experience was transformed into the guide of later life and feeling derived from the ordinary language of men, particularly rural men, whose lives preserved the great rhythms of pastoral and agricultural life, recorded in and mediated by the Bible, anonymous folk poetry, and related literary forms (1987:vii).

The second school of critical opinion propounds, I believe, a far more accurate assessment of Wordsworth and challenges and indeed refutes this view. In 1909 A.C. Bradley first expressed a very different opinion about Wordsworth's poetry. He sees Wordsworth as

> ... the complex poet of strangeness, paradox, equivocality, and dark sublimities .... In Bradley's view, that which is most distinctive in Wordsworth's poetry is "peculiar", "audacious," "strange", and Wordsworth's characteristic attitudes are a complex of contraries or contradictions (in Abrams, 1972:2-3).

And surely, the whole of that paragraph is extraordinarily apposite to Dickinson as well. I believe that this stance of Wordsworth's *vis-à-vis* Nature brings him much closer to Dickinson than has been previously acknowledged, and this, as well as other key Wordsworthian concepts about the mind and solitude for example, impacts fundamentally on the very genesis of her poetry. This seems to be borne out by Richard Gravil who states that

> Dickinson's Wordsworth forms a large part of the quarrel over Nature out of which her poetry is born. Accepting Wordsworth's view that "the brain is wider than the sky" as she puts it in Poem 632, and his view that there are two natures, one given by God, and the other nature created by the poets, she makes the human mind the main region of her song[30] and mines, chiefly, that "second Nature" of the poets. Poem 308 is her delightfully whimsical comment on Wordsworth's sublimer sense of competition: she can finish two "sunsets" while day is making one, and while "His own was ampler ... / Mine – is the more convenient/ To carry in the hand." (2000:199).

I therefore believe it is in her acceptance of Wordsworth's concept of Nature that much of Dickinson's poetry is born. Feit Diehl seems to be in at least partial agreement here – she claims that Dickinson absorbed Wordsworth's

[30] Gravil is drawing on lines 40-41 of Wordsworth's Preface to *The Excursion*, in which Wordsworth identifies "the Mind of Man" as his "haunt, and the main region" of his "song" (poetry).

"conscious involvement" with Nature, but that she then intensified and literalized the relationship with Nature to reflect her own personal vision (1981:49).

Hartman very validly questions the unproblematic relationship that the simple Wordsworth is supposed to have with Nature. In his Foreword to Hartman's *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* Donald G. Marshall goes so far as to say that Hartman demonstrates a dialectic or antagonism between Nature and the imagination in Wordsworth. Wordsworth was terrified of the mind and the imagination's dangerous ability to, in conjunction with Nature, draw the self into an autonomous, "apocalyptic" transcendence. Whilst I would possibly not state it quite so strongly, I am convinced that Wordsworth's attitude to Nature *is* very complex and possibly even deeply ambiguous. Whereas he certainly sees

> In nature and the language of the sense,
> The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
> The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
> Of all my moral being ('Tintern Abbey', *ll* 109-12),

he also knows that Nature has other, more dangerous sides to her. She can be indifferent ('A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags'), she can be 'jealous' ('The Town of Schwytz', *l* 5) and 'savage'('Descriptive Sketches' Quarto, *l* 554), and 'crude' (*Prelude*, 1850, vi, *l* 275). She dooms some people to toil (*Prelude*, 1805, xiii, *l* 175), she can foment rebellion (*Prelude*, 1805, ix, *l* 571) and she has a threatening voice ('Ode, Composed Upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendor and Beauty', *l* 70), to rather simplistically mention but a few other aspects of Nature.

In 'Written with a Slate Pencil on a Stone, on the Side of the Mountain of Black Comb', Wordsworth unambiguously acknowledges the danger that inheres in the awesome power of Nature. A "geographic labourer" doing measurements of "height and distance" on the summit of the mountain, is abruptly plunged into darkness by a sudden eclipse as he gazes out from the summit over the landscape below:

> ... suddenly

The many-coloured map before his eyes
Became invisible: for all around
Had darkness fallen – unthreatened, unproclaimed –
As if the golden day itself had been
Extinguished in a moment; total gloom,
In which he sat alone, with unclosed eyes,
Upon the blinded mountain's silent top!

Wordsworth writes tellingly about the untrustworthiness of Nature in the following inscription – 'Not Seldom Clad in Radiant Vest':

Not seldom, clad in radiant vest,
Deceitfully goes forth the morn;
Not seldom evening in the west
Sinks smilingly forsworn

The smoothest seas will sometimes prove,
To the confiding bark, untrue;
And, if she trust the stars above,
They can be treacherous too.

The umbrageous oak, in pomp outspread,
Full oft, when storms the welkin rend
Draws lightning down upon the head
It promised to defend.

In a very similar way, Dickinson's attitude to Nature is ambiguous. In many poems (P 304 immediately springs to mind here in which the poet celebrates the privilege of being a "Guest" in Nature's "Parlor"), she lauds Nature's beauty and versatility. In Poem 1170, however, she describes Nature as a necromancer and a juggler, with all the implications of trickery, untrustworthiness and sleight-of-hand that that implies – and this while Nature deceitfully "affects to be sedate"! The same idea occurs in Poem 628 – a sunset is actually a herd of cattle, no, wait, it has been transformed into a sea with massive ships which in turn is conjured away by the "Showman". Roland Hagenbüchle astutely points out that these "unstable phenomena in Nature such as the rising and the setting of the sun or its precarious poise at the meridian hour of noon, the changing of the seasons at the solstices, and certain fleeting effects of light" (1974:39) are very much a part of Dickinson's Nature poetry. (I discuss the 'light' poetry of both poets in Chapter 3 – see pp 98-108.) This ambiguity towards Nature is therefore very much a factor in the poetry of both poets, but I do not believe that this affects either poet's

passionate appreciation of the beauty of Nature materially, or that it compromises the enrichment that they find in Nature.

Dickinson was of course an early devotee of Nature which positively intoxicated her. She frequently displays what Harold Bloom refers to as "her imaginative exuberance" (1985:2) in her Nature poetry as one can see in Poem 214 where, in a blissful celebration of Nature's largesse, she refers to herself as an "Inebriate of Air" and a "Debauchee of Dew" who, though reeling through "endless summer days/From inns of Molten Blue" ..., "shall but drink the more!" of the unequalled liquor of Nature. Indeed, John Felstiner points out that by the time she wrote her first letter to Higginson in 1862 to find out if her poetry was 'alive', she had already 'transplanted' the Holy Trinity of Nature into her garden in Poem 18 – "In the name of the Bee – /And the Butterfly – And of the Breeze – Amen!" (2007:1). Albert Gelpi would no doubt agree!

I therefore believe that Wordsworth's influence on Dickinson is clear in the shaping of her perception of nature. As stated above, Richard Gravil seems to share this view emphatically. Judith Farr likewise maintains that in her well-known first letter to Higginson, Dickinson "presented herself as the heir of romantic tradition, composing in order to cope with emotional pain and inspired by the benign and tutelary powers of nature" and that, like Wordsworth, she was conscious of the role of childhood in the shaping of perceptions (1992:248, 251).

As pointed out by Inder Nath Kher, Nature fills Dickinson "with a sense of awe and wonder" (1974:39) as it did Wordsworth. Both poets were haunted by Nature and speculated endlessly about Nature in their poetry in which they both succeed in conveying this 'hauntedness'. Kerry McSweeney refers rightly to the "hauntingly suggestive quality" that some of Dickinson's Nature poems manage to convey, for instance Poem 1068 in which the sound of the crickets celebrating their "unobtrusive Mass" in a "spectral Canticle" is evoked. Wordsworth's poetry abounds with references to the haunting qualities of Nature. I will quote just two instances here. In *The Excursion*, the Wanderer refers to the "shadowy intimations" that "haunt" him "Among these rocks and stones" (Book 3, *ll* 88 and 80). Probably the best known reference in this

regard comes from 'Tintern Abbey' (quoted below) where Wordsworth claims that as a young man, Nature "To me was all in all" and "The sounding cataract" along with the "tall rock, the mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood," "Haunted me like a passion" (*ll* 76-79).

Hartman refers to Wordsworth's adoption of the vocation of poet by seeing boughs silhouetted against the evening sky in his fourteenth year, a memory, with its association of "extreme pleasure" that remained vivid all his life. Hartman concludes that

> ... such nature-consciousness, joined to an answering self-consciousness, is the "incumbent mystery" from which Wordsworth's poetry springs. ... Nature – for Wordsworth chiefly rural nature, the abiding presences of mountain, lake, and field under the influence of the changing seasons – is **a haunted house** [my emphasis] through which we must pass before our spirit can be independent. Those separated too soon from this troubling and sensuous contact with nature – the strongest passages in Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude* are devoted to Nature's ministry of fear rather than her ministry of beauty – may grow up with an empty, if powerful, sense of self (1987:3).

In view of the fact that Dickinson herself writes about Nature as a haunted house, Inder Nath Kher refers to Nature in Dickinson's poetry in a quite remarkably similar way:

> But I would like to point out that Dickinson apprehends nature as **a haunted house** [my emphasis], with all its terror, awe, wonder, freedom and creativity. The meaning of nature, with all its inherent ambivalence, is manifest to her mind. That is why she wants her art to become both haunted and haunting like nature (1974:290n11).

One is irresistibly reminded here of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' (also referred to above) in which Wordsworth was indeed haunted by Nature:

> For nature then
> To me was all in all. – I cannot paint
> What then I was. The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to me
> An appetite: a feeling and a love (*ll* 73-81).

In Poem 1400 Dickinson's view of Nature is perfectly enunciated:

> What mystery pervades a well!
> The water lives so far –
> A neighbor from another world
> Residing in a jar
>
> Whose limit none have ever seen,
> But just his lid of glass –
> Like looking every time you please
> In an abyss's face!
>
> The grass does not appear afraid,
> I often wonder he
> Can stand so close and look so bold
> At what is awe to me.
>
> Related somehow they may be,
> The sedge stands next the sea –
> Where he is floorless
> And does no timidity betray
>
> But nature is a stranger yet;
> The ones that cite her most
> Have never passed her *haunted house* [my emphasis],
> Nor simplified her ghost.
>
> To pity those that know her not
> Is helped by the regret
> That those who know her, know her less
> The nearer her they get.

To state the blindingly obvious, both Dickinson and Wordsworth see much more in Nature than the surface of pretty daffodils and lovely sunsets. Both are strongly aware of the "inherent ambivalence" in Nature, to repeat Kher's evocative phrase quoted above. It is therefore indeed true that both poets are aware of the enriching and "ennobling interchange", to use Wordsworth's phrase from *l* 375 of Book 12 of *The Prelude* of 1805, that exists between Nature and the receptive spirit. Wordsworth believes that Peter Bell's disreputable life-style and hardened heart are the result of his indifference to the beauties of Nature: "But Nature ne'er could find the way/Into the heart of Peter Bell"; he "... never felt/The witchery of the soft blue sky" (*ll* 214-15, 234-35). Wordsworth is indeed convinced that the most insignificant little flower in existence " ... can give/Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" and

Dickinson seems to share this insight when she writes to Adelaide Hills in 1874 that "Flowers are not quite earthly" (L 2). Dickinson voices a remarkably similar thought to the one expressed by Wordsworth at the end of 'The Immortality Ode' in Poem 100 when she claims that the "meekest flower of the mead ... Stands representative in gold" and is therefore of much deeper and wider significance. In this way the growth of the lily in Poem 392 signifies a process of spiritual maturation and indeed ultimate fulfilment of the artist's soul:

> Through the Dark Sod – as Education –
> The Lily passes sure –
> Feels her white foot – no trepidation –
> Her faith – no fear –
>
> Afterward – in the Meadow –
> Swinging her Beryl Bell –
> The mold-life – all forgotten – now –
> In Ecstasy – and Dell –

In Poem 1241, the ancient lilac expands to stand as an emblem of eternity, alongside the even more ancient phenomenon of the sunset. Both Wordsworth and Dickinson see Nature as a rich and enriching fount of wisdom that humanity can draw on and learn from:

> Nature is what we know –
> Yet have no art to say –
> So impotent Our Wisdom is
> To her Simplicity (P 668).

Wordsworth words a similar thought when he urges humanity to listen to Nature and to allow Nature to be its teacher:

> She has a world of ready wealth,
> Our minds and hearts to bless –
> Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
> Truth breathed by chearfulness.
>
> One impulse from a vernal wood
> May teach you more of man;
> Of moral evil and of good,
> Than all the sages can.
>
> Sweet is the lore that nature brings;

Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;
We murder to dissect ('The Tables Turned', *ll* 15-28).

Likewise Dickinson wants to impart the "simple News that Nature told" her with "tender Majesty" to the world, though she seems to share the reservations that Wordsworth expresses in the third stanza above. Dickinson is also uncertain as to how the unknown hands that will receive "Her Message" will deal with it (P 441). And, in an almost startlingly telling reworking of the final line of Wordsworth's poem, Dickinson concedes that if one splits "the Lark" one might very well "find the Music", but the lark will surely be brutally destroyed – murdered, in fact.

As has already been intimated, however, the attitude of both Wordsworth and Dickinson towards Nature is vastly more complex than this. They are not only aware of its beauty, but of the fear and awe that it inspires – remember that they both view it as a haunted house that the receptive spirit has to pass through and be enriched by, rather like a crucible that refines, strengthens and purifies the poetic spirit, but which can be a painful and indeed terrifying process. This can be seen in the imaginative way that both poets use the word/image of 'frost' in their poetry.

In the poetry of both poets, the frost is often personified and it frequently becomes a very frightening protagonist. In Book 1 of *The Prelude*, 1805, 1, 563-4, Wordsworth with marvellous oxymoronic effect depicts the frost as a silent yet raging killer – "... the frost/Raged bitterly with keen and silent tooth". Dickinson also refers to the frost having teeth in Poem 332 where the "teeth of Frosts alone disclose" the ripening process that occurs in the seed. The idea of the 'silent' depredations of the frost also occurs in Dickinson's Poem 1202 where the "alarming strangeness" of the frost can seen in the damage to the flowers, but "is beyond analysis" as Kher points out (1974:186):

The Frost was never seen –
If met, too rapid passed,
Or in too unsubstantial Team –
The Flowers notice first

A Stranger hovering round

A Symptom of alarm
In Villages remotely set
But search effaces him

Till some retrieveless Night
Our Vigilance at waste
The Garden gets the only shot
That never could be traced.

Unproved is much we know –
Unknown the worst we fear –
Of Strangers is the Earth the Inn
Of Secrets is the Air –

To analyze perhaps
A Philip [disciple] would prefer
But Labor vaster than myself
I find it to infer

In both the Wordsworth and the Dickinson poems the frost carries an extraordinary sense of menace. In Wordsworth's poem the frost is depicted as a raging, sharp-toothed predator made all the more threatening because it is silent. In Dickinson's poem it is a silent and stealthy assassin that disappears leaving death and destruction behind. The image of the garden being shot is extremely effective because of its incongruity and element of over-kill – the brutality of the 'murder method' is emphasized by the fragility and defencelessness of its victim – the flowers in the garden. It engenders a sense of unease and inchoate threat that leaves the poet baffled and unable to understand the mysteries of existence. She experiences a feeling of alienation as if she is a stranger (that loaded concept in Dickinson) in a world abounding with secrets that she cannot fathom. One is reminded of the nest-robbing incident in *The Prelude* when Wordsworth experienced a similar feeling of disorientation:

............................., oh, at that time
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears; the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds! (1805, 1, *ll* 346-350).

Wordsworth concludes on a more positive note than Dickinson, however. He feels that the mysteries of existence, though incomprehensible, do form part

of some underlying pattern:

> ... There is a dark
> Invisible workmanship that reconciles
> Discordant elements, and makes them move
> In one society (*The Prelude*, 1805, 1, *ll* 352-54).

It is intriguing to note that in the 1850 version Wordsworth replaces 'invisible' with 'inscrutable' which places even more stress on the unreadable and mysterious elements of being. In this version of the passage Wordsworth says that the discordant elements "cling together". It suggests to my mind an element of fearfulness, a seeking of reassurance in the confusion of the world. One indeed finds many instances in Dickinson and Wordsworth of this feeling of dislocation; of the existence of another dimension of being that is only dimly and imperfectly perceived. In Dickinson's Poem 1624 this sense of mystification in the face of the mysteries of existence has hardened into anger; the poem offers not just an indictment of the depredations of the frost, but is a biting comment on the callousness of God:

> Apparently with no surprise
> To any happy Flower
> The Frost beheads it at its play –
> In accidental power –
> The blonde Assassin passes on –
> The Sun proceeds unmoved
> To measure off another Day
> For an Approving God.

As can be seen in the above examples, the frost is often personified in the poetry of both poets. In Poem 163 the frosts lay "their punctual fingers" on the forehead of the protagonist who is not protected from death by her elevated standing. In Poem 1230 the frost is depicted as more faithful and punctual than love, and in Poem 337 the summer is in competition with "a practised Frost" but sadly loses the fight to protect her daisies. In Poem 804 "the steady Frost" piles up implacably on the protagonist's breast in death. Similarly, in Book 4 of *The Excursion*, the Wanderer also equates impending death with frost that "will gather round my heart" (*l* 55). In Dickinson's Poem 517 the Frost possesses the World and manifests as a cocoon or "Sepulchre of quaintest Floss" rather like the mountain top in Wordsworth's second sonnet

in 'The River Duddon' series, in which the word 'quaint' is also used in conjunction with frost – "Not seldom, when with heat the valleys faint /Thy hand-maid frost with spangled tissue quaint /Thy cradle decks … " (2, *ll* 4-6).

Wordsworth's attitude to Nature has long been the topic of intense and widely diverging debate among critics. Geoffrey Hartman makes the imaginative claim that Wordsworth was the first poet to have granted Nature "due process" by which I believe he means that Wordsworth gave Nature full stature and independent being, free from pre-conceived ideas, in his poetry. He allowed Nature to speak in her own defence, so to speak, if one may be a mite facetious.

In the Sixties three influential critics, Paul de Man, Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman raised intriguing points that basically amounted to the fact that there is an almost antagonistic quality in Wordsworth's poetry *vis-à-vis* Nature and the imagination, that seem to privilege the mind and the imagination over Nature and the ennobling interchange previously referred to. Other critics, like Thomas MacFarland and Jonathan Wordsworth, refuted these claims strongly. My own feeling is that both schools of thought raise valid points – Wordsworth did find in Nature the most powerful fount of love and inspiration for his poetry, but he also went in awe of her – whereas he loved Nature with a great and intensely imaginative passion, she also inspired fear and awe in him, especially in conjunction with that other frightening entity, the imagination. He acknowledges this himself – growing up in Nature, being made aware from a very early age "of the calm/ Which Nature breathes among the hills and groves", he yet was "Fostered alike by beauty and by fear" (*Prelude*, Book 1, *ll* 284-85, 306). One can indeed refer to Wordsworth's attitude to Nature on occasion being one of "troubled pleasure" to quote his own phrase from the boat-stealing incident in Book 1 of *The Prelude* of 1805 (*l* 389). In Wordsworth in particular I cannot help wondering whether the contradictory elements in his attitude towards Nature, because they do exist without question, cannot be partially elucidated if one wonders whether he did not feel the need to attempt to reduce Nature to manageable proportions, as it were, in order to 'capture' her in his poetry, knowing all the time, however, that

this was not possible. I believe that this is very much what Feit Diehl suggests that Dickinson does when she attempts to appropriate Nature by internalising it and describing it in terms of the body (see p 110), though she may be overstating it somewhat to suggest that in Dickinson's Nature poetry "the land *becomes* the self" (1981:49).

I believe that the different aspects of the approach of both poets to Nature can be seen in the way that they refer to 'moon' in their poetry and I wish to look at this in some detail. 'Moon' is a very significant word in the poetry of both poets and their respective usages show some similarities, not least in the tone that they employ. Both poets personify the moon, refer consistently to the moon as female, and often address the moon. The moon often speaks in their poetry as well, and expresses opinions. In both their *oeuvres* the moon is frequently seen as beautiful and desirable, often dominant, as can be seen in Dickinson's Poem 429, which is an extended personification of the moon as a commanding woman who controls the tides, and though distant from the Sea, yet "leads Him – docile as a Boy". Poem 1605 constitutes an interesting reversal of roles here – in this short 4 line poem the moon is "summoned by the tides". The moon can also convey threat, even menace, especially in Wordsworth's 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill", where a more vengeful picture of the moon emerges – the "cold, cold moon above her head," seems to condone Goody's vengeance (*I* 101).

In the poem 'To the Moon' (composed at the sea-side on the coast of Cumberland), Wordsworth depicts the moon as a "wanderer" who "through the cottage lattice softly peeping/Dost shield from harm the humblest of the sleeping;" This part of the poem bears a curious resemblance to Dickinson's Poem 286 where the moon is also involved in peeping through the window at sleepers, however, not as a protector, but in company with robbers! There is something slyly gleeful in the image of the moon sliding down the stair to see "who's there!" In Wordsworth's poem, the moon is also referred to as "the SAILOR'S FRIEND" and as the "Empress of Night" "enthroned aloft in undisputed power" whose beams gladden the "aspiring Mountains and the winding Streams". The "lovely Moon" can touch "a sensitive, a tender part" in

'every human heart,/For healing and composure." The mighty sea feels "through her lowest depths thy sovereignty". In another poem with the same title 'To the Moon' (composed at Rydal), a similar tone is maintained. The moon is addressed as the "Queen of the stars" who is "gentle" and "benign", and who was worshipped in the past. The moon is also referred to as a "silent Monitress" who is the bearer of the "moral intimations of the sky" and promotes love, purity and peace. As has already been mentioned (see p 63) I perceive an allusive link between Dickinson's Poem 1450 – "The Road was lit with Moon and star – /The Trees were bright and still –" and Wordsworth's shepherd in Book 8 of *The Prelude*.

The early Wordsworth was referred to by Coleridge as a "semi-atheist". He was seen as a pantheist who was not a conventional Christian at all but who saw an immanent God in Nature. Emily Dickinson similarly often jokingly referred to herself as a pagan. Albert Gelpi maintains that these comments actually reflect an honest recognition on her part of the unacceptability of, indeed her very real distrust of, Puritan Christian dogma (Bloom, 1985:37). Gelpi describes it rather effectively as follows:

> To the Puritan, God was the self-existent Being who devised the magnificent harmony of Creation and sustained it in contingent existence while He reigned above in incomprehensible sovereignty. But God's plan had been ruined by man's original sin, through which he lost grace. The loss of grace, that projection of the divine whose indwelling presence united man and nature and God, left man in solitary need and ushered in death, pain, depravity – the consequences of man's descent to a purely natural existence. Blind and impotent, crippled in mind and will, he stood in cringing dependence before an unseen and now angry Jehovah, who could elect to strike him with thunderbolts ... (1985:37).

Dickinson could not accept or adopt this grim scenario. In fact she was convinced that "Jehovah's watch" was wrong (Poem 415)! In her rejection of orthodox religion, Dickinson was influenced by not only Emerson and Thoreau, who in their turn had both been significantly influenced by Wordsworth and his philosophy, and rather as it had done for William Hale White/Mark Rutherford (see p 2), it gave her an alternative to the harsh Puritan ethic. Nature afforded her a new perspective that encompassed "the

immanent dignity of life and the validity of human intuition" and dwelt "on what is "grand or beautiful" in nature and books" (Habegger, 2002:218). Dickinson's poem 1545 "The Bible is an Antique Volume – /Written by faded Men" is crucial to one's understanding of her reservations about orthodox religion.

Dickinson came to intellectual and artistic maturity at a time when the intellectual and religious order of her Puritan world was breaking down, in no small measure under the thrust of Transcendentalism. Gelpi discusses this with clarity and insight in the chapter entitled 'The Mind against Itself' in his still highly regarded work *The Mind of the Poet* (1965). Alfred Habegger also refers to this in his excellent new Dickinson biography *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books* (published in 2002). It was at this auspicious time, when the Puritan ethic was being questioned, that Dickinson came in contact with "the warm, swelling, swirling notions of the Romantic poet-prophets" (1965:60). It even seems likely that if she did not actually attend a series of lectures, described as "scandalously "pantheistic" and "transcendental", on the history of literature by John Lord at Amherst College, that she was familiar with their content. Likewise her close friend, Leonard Humphrey, was a supporter of Wordsworth which also brought her into the poet's Romantic ambit. Her close friend and the influential 'teacher' who taught her "Immortality", Benjamin Newton, was likewise a committed Wordsworthian:

> One reason Newton's lesson sank so deep was that it gave her an exit from the Calvinist evangelicalism she both accepted and resisted – in which state she was blocked, "without hope". Whether he is judged to be cause or catalyst, he stimulated her to reinterpret her rich Puritan endowment, which she eventually transformed into a kind of Romanticism. Her account of his teaching is so full of Wordsworthian echoes one suspects him of recommending this author to her. Certainly, the developmental stages she describes – from enjoyment of nature to an apprehension of the "sublimer" things of the spirit – are in harmony with "Tintern Abbey," where the speaker grows from an unreflecting enjoyment of natural beauty to "a sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused" (Habegger, 2002:218-19).

Her adoption of her poetic mission may, interestingly, even be likened to Wordsworth's consecration of himself to the poetic life as depicted in *The*

Prelude as Gelpi makes clear in the following lengthy excerpt from *The Mind of the Poet:*

> In April 1850 ... she wrote Jane Humphrey a long letter which, underneath all the inarticulate confusion, bespoke a special sense of dedication. The importance of the passage to the emergence of the poet – as stated it may even be roughly analogous to the moment of consecration in Wordsworth's *Prelude* – merits its quotation in full:
>
> I would whisper to you in the evening of many, and curious things – and by the lamps eternal read your thoughts and response in your face, and find out what you thought about me, and what I have done, and am doing ... I have dared to do strange things – bold things, and have asked no advice from any – I have heeded beautiful tempters, yet do not think that I am wrong ... Oh Jennie, it would relieve me to confess ... what *you only* shall know, an experience bitter, and sweet, but the sweet did so beguile me – and life has had an aim, and the world has been too precious for your poor – and striving sister! The winter was all one dream, and the spring has not yet waked me, I would *always* sleep, and dream, and it should never turn to morning, so long as night is so blessed. What do you weave from these threads ... I hope belief is not wicked, and assurance, and perfect trust – ... do you dream from all this what I mean? Nobody *thinks* of the joy, nobody *guesses* it, to all appearance old things are engrossing, and new ones are not revealed, but there *now* is nothing old, and things are budding, and springing, and singing, and you rather think you are in a green grove, and it's branches that go, and come (1965:65).

After this she felt entitled to regard herself as a poet. In 1853 she referred to her brother Austin as 'Brother Pegasus' indicating that they were both poets. Similarly she identified herself with Longfellow's village poet as depicted in *Kavanagh*. Her signature was now quite often 'Emilie', which Gelpi interestingly believes is her assumption of the mask of the child poet in the Blake-Wordsworth-Emerson tradition (1965:66).

During the years 1862-63, largely under the impetus of emotional stress, the source of which has been the subject of much critical speculation (no clear consensus has yet been arrived at regarding the reasons for this emotional upheaval in Dickinson's life, and more than likely this will never be completely clarified), Dickinson experienced a great surge of creative power and composed in excess of 500 poems. These included many nature poems

which now start to project her powerful connection with Nature and an ever "deepening wonder at the awesome beauty of the world" (Gelpi, 1965:68). Kher[31] concurs – she points out aptly that Nature fills Dickinson "with a sense of awe and wonder" (1974:38). Wordsworth's influence on Dickinson is unmistakable here, as it is in her recognition of the poet as humanity's interpreter of the universe and her acknowledgement of the creative faculty as almost a divine element in humankind.

Gelpi further elaborates the similarities of Dickinson's view of Nature with that of the Romantics:

> With the great Romantics poets she celebrated the mysterious and vital process of growth in which self realized itself in cosmic unity. Time was preferable to eternity, "for the one is still, but the other moves." Immortality was an "ablative estate" which carried us from the dynamic drama of experience, and death's encroachment, which alone kept life from being perfect (that is from being eternity), nonetheless provided the pressure which made life more intensely experienced, the more frugally felt. The process – for Dickinson as for Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Emerson, and Thoreau – made the world "Fairer though Fading." Besides, the individual process contained and revealed the pattern: to Thoreau's "The revolution of the seasons – is a great and steady flow," Emily added: "Changelessness is Nature's change ..." (1965:82).

And how strongly is one not reminded in that final statement regarding the paradoxical elements in Nature of Wordsworth's description of exactly this aspect of Nature in his memorable Simplon Pass (or Gondo Gorge) passage

> ... downwards we hurried fast,
> And entered with the road which we had missed
> Into a narrow chasm. The brook and road
> Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy pass,
> And with them did we journey several hours
> At a slow step. The immeasurable height
> Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
> The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
> Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,
> Were all like the workings of one mind, the features
> Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
> Characters of the great apocalypse,

---

31 Kher's writing about Dickinson's nature poetry is frequently insightful and interesting. She does miss the point, though, that many of the influences that she ascribes to Emerson and Thoreau are Wordsworth in transumptive guise.

The types and symbols of eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end (*Prelude*, 1805, 6, *ll* 551-72).

Gelpi further claims that it was "under the thrust of that "bright" strain of the Romantic spirit of which Wordsworth and Scott are good examples in England, and Bryant, Emerson, and Whitman in America" (1965:84) that Dickinson was able to embrace and find solace in Nature so that she could declare that we live in Eden or Paradise on a daily basis in our contact with Nature. And I cannot help but wonder whether Dickinson did not share with Wordsworth a certain measure of animism, the belief that there was indeed a consciousness in Nature so that in both their *oeuvres* Nature is revealed as "a sentient and powerful being" as Hartman notes so persuasively, particularly with reference to 'Hart-leap Well' (1987:56). I further believe that like Wordsworth, Dickinson tried to find her poetic identity in a reciprocal relationship with the universe and Nature. But again like the complex Wordsworth, she is aware not only of the light, but also of the abyss, so it can truly be stated that both poets share ambiguous attitudes to Nature. It bears repeating that whereas Nature is seen by both Wordsworth and Dickinson as a tutelary power and fount of inspiration and comfort, they are both also deeply aware of it as a source of fear and terror, even as they both laud its "tutelary powers" (Farr, 1992:250) as Wordsworth does so memorably in 'Tintern Abbey':

... well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being (*ll* 108-12).

In a remarkably similar vein Dickinson describes Nature as a caring mother who protects, guides and teaches:

Nature – the Gentlest Mother is,
Impatient of no Child –
The feeblest – or the waywardest –
Her Admonition mild –

In Forest – and the Hill –
By Traveller – be heard –
Restraining Rampant Squirrel –
Or too impetuous Bird –

How fair Her Conversation –
A Summer Afternoon –
Her Household – Her Assembly –
And when the Sun go down –

Her Voice among the Aisles
Incite the timid prayer
Of the minutest Cricket –
The most unworthy Flower –

When all the Children sleep –
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light Her lamps –
Then bending from the Sky –

With infinite Affection –
And infiniter Care –
Her Golden finger on Her lip –
Wills Silence – Everywhere – (P 790).

At the beginning of Book 12 of *The Prelude* of 1805, Wordsworth writes about Nature again:

From Nature doth emotion come, and moods
Of calmness equally are Nature's gift:
This is her glory – these two attributes
Are sister horns that constitute her strength;
This twofold influence is the sun and shower
Of all her bounties both in origin
And end benignant. Hence it is
That genius, which exists by interchange
Of peace and excitation, finds in her
His best and purest friend – from her receives
That energy by which he seeks the truth,
Is rouzed, aspires, grasps. Struggles, wishes, craves
From her that happy stillness of the mind
Which fits him to receive it when unsought (*ll* 1-14).

I believe that this passage, with its contrasts of both peace and 'excitation', is clearly indicative of Wordsworth's ambiguous attitudes to Nature. Joanne Feit Diehl perceptively points out that Dickinson shares with "the naturalizing Romantics, pre-eminently Wordsworth, an abiding concern with the

relationship between self and world" but then claims that the power of her poems comes, "not from any perceived reciprocity, but rather from the struggle she describes between two competing forces: the individual consciousness and all that is external to it" (1981:34). I absolutely agree with this, but then I also believe that the same is very much applicable to Wordsworth as well. Whereas it is certainly true, as Feit Diehl believes, that Wordsworth is conscious of a reciprocal generosity between man and Nature, the Wordsworth/Nature relationship is much, indeed hugely, more complex and problematic than Feit Diehl makes it sound here, as Geoffrey Hartman has so eloquently expounded. Whilst Wordsworth certainly believed that the "discerning intellect of Man" was "wedded to this goodly universe/In love and holy passion" (Preface to *The Excursion, ll* 52-4), "there is something strange, too about Wordsworth's relation to Nature" as Hartman puts it with such superb understatement (1987:20). When Wordsworth's claims, in 'Tintern Abbey', "that Nature never did betray/The heart that loved her" (*ll* 123-24), his poem simultaneously and paradoxically conveys a sense of loss and "somewhat of a sad perplexity" (*l* 61). So even as Wordsworth makes the claim that for the loss of that time when Nature to him "was all in all" (*l* 76) there has been "abundant recompence" (*l* 89), he cannot escape the knowledge that "That time is past,/And all its aching joys are now no more,/And all its dizzy raptures" (*ll* 84-6) – he is in fact speaking as a person who has at least in part already been betrayed! So Hartman's speculation, that there may even be a "resentment of nature" in Wordsworth, may not be so far off the mark (1987:27). And yet, when all is said, Wordsworth does remain "a worshipper of Nature ... [and remains] Unwearied in that service" as he reiterates towards the end of 'Tintern Abbey' (*ll* 153-54).

In Wordsworth's relationship with Nature the poetic mission of the poet to interpret is strongly present. As he immerses himself in Nature and opens himself to her influence, he listens not only to the sounds of Nature but accesses the ancient wisdom that the earth has to impart – that 'vernal impulse' that he refers to so persuasively in 'The Tables Turned'. This is clearly enunciated in the following extract from Book 2 of *The Prelude* of 1805:

> ... For I would walk alone
> In storm and tempest, or in starlight nights
> Beneath the quiet heavens, and at that time
> Have felt whate'er there is of power in sound
> To breathe an elevated mood, by form
> Or image unprofaned; and I would stand
> Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are
> The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
> Or make their dim abode in distant winds.
> Thence did I drink the visionary power (*II* 321-30).

And in an extract that perfectly captures the paradoxical qualities of Wordsworth's stance *vis-à-vis* Nature, Hartman writes that Wordsworth

> ... projects nature as something that speaks "rememberable things," as something that textualizes phantom voice: perhaps "the ghostly language of the ancient earth," perhaps the language of dream image and phrase. The result is lyric poetry precariously extended, even *The Prelude*'s stumblingly progressive form: a lengthened night music, the residue of a long day's night (1987:102).

So that when Feit Diehl claims, that Dickinson "will either appropriate the landscape by internalising it, or obversely, denying the boundaries between self and Nature by describing the landscape in the anatomical language of arteries and veins, impressing herself on the land", I do not believe that this is all that dissimilar to the way in which Wordsworth appropriates Nature and internalises it himself. I emphatically question Feit Diehl's claim that Wordsworth's relationship to Nature is distinguished by his own passivity as he envisions his role as that of a "responsive yet calm observer who accepts but does not actively pursue the gift of special insight that he receives from the land – moments of communication are marked by an aura of rest and receptivity" (1981:35). Whereas this is certainly not untrue in some instances, it falls far short of portraying the whole of Wordsworth's extremely complex relationship with Nature. Wordsworth frequently experiences the creative and evocative moment in Nature very strongly and then embodies it in passionate and highly emotive, sometimes even tumultuous language (if one thinks for instance of the well-known Gondo Passage with its passionately evocative rhetoric (quoted on p 66), often filled with contradictions and oxymorons, which I believe is indicative of his ambiguous attitudes to Nature. As he succeeds in capturing and internalising/eternalising Nature in language,

Nature frequently speaks in his poetry in the deeply significant but also disturbing "Characters of the great Apocalypse,/The types and symbols of Eternity (*Prelude*, 1805, 6, *ll* 638-39). Dickinson 'read' these characters as well and speculated about their message in poems like "What mystery pervades a well!" (P 1400 – quoted on p 116).

Judith Farr makes an important point regarding Fascicle 22. She points out that central to Fascicle 22 "is the idea of the poet's nature, role and development according to an aesthetic held by Emerson[32] and conveyed to him by Wordsworth" (1992:51). With reference to 'I dwell in Possibility,' (P 657), 'I was the slightest in the House' (P 486), 'Myself was formed – a Carpenter' (P 488), and 'A Solemn thing within the Soul' (P 483), Farr perceptively points out that these poems not only describe Dickinson's understanding of the relationship between life and poetry, but also demonstrate the working patterns by which the 'speaker/poet' of this Fascicle learns and applies the secrets of the former, life, in order to serve the latter, poetry. In an excerpt that also highlights the preoccupation with solitude that she shares with Wordsworth, and that resonates with Gelpi's claim that Dickinson found her heaven in Nature, Farr continues as follows:

> As Emerson enjoins poets in *Nature,* as Wordsworth describes his poet in *The Prelude*, Dickinson's speaker offers herself in solitude to nature's influence and predicates the sacramental connection between landscape and humanity, between landscape and the divine, which was the hypothesis of the [R]omantics and the chief principle of Ruskin. Solitary, she surveys the scene outside her window, submitting it to a measured analysis that will link in language the magical frontiers of her street or garden with heaven's (1992:51).

In conclusion of this chapter it is important to note the given that memories of Nature have restorative power for Wordsworth. He describes this most memorably in 'Tintern Abbey'. In "hours of weariness", experienced "in lonely rooms, and mid the din/Of towns and cities", he experiences "tranquil restoration" when he remembers the beauties of Nature (*ll* 27-31). To these memories he has owed, in "hours of weariness, sensations sweet" and has

[32] As is the case with Tennyson and Shelley, Emerson is frequently the 'conduit' through which Wordsworth's influence reaches Dickinson.

found that the "heavy and the weary weight" of the world is ameliorated by the "blessed mood" that is induced by Nature (*ll* 27-42). He reiterates this in *The Prelude*, 1850, 1, *ll* 586-96, where he claims that the "earth/And common face of Nature spake to me/ [of] Rememberable things ... Until maturer seasons called them forth/To impregnate and to elevate the mind". In 'Tintern Abbey' he expresses the belief that his contemplation of the beautiful Wye and its surroundings will literally nourish and sustain him in future years – "That in this moment there is life and food/For future years" (*ll* 65-66). And like Wordsworth, Dickinson also drew on memory in the creation of her often deeply enigmatic poetry. She also gained inspiration from childhood, like Wordsworth did. "Like Wordsworth or Whitman ... she goes faithfully back to childhood, tracing the river to its source" as Judith Farr pertinently puts it (1992:251).

Dickinson and Wordsworth share similar concepts of childhood – they both saw it not only as a time of bliss, but as a privileged time of heightened psychic awareness and profounder insight into the mysteries of existence. This ideal state is eroded by the process of growing up as human beings lose their sense of connectedness to Nature and the universe. In Poem 600 Dickinson suggests that the child's vision, though ostensibly wrong, holds a greater wisdom than that which is required to solve the "larger – problems" life confronts the adult with. In Poem 637 "The Child's faith is new - / ... [and] Wide – like a Sunrise"; his "Dominion" is the "broadest of Sovereignties" in which he deals with emperors and caesars as his inferiors. Growing up and acquiring the "skill/Sorrowful" of having to deal with men instead of kings, is an impoverishment. Poem 959 (also referred to on p 78) mourns the loss of something inchoate from childhood. It contains the telling lines "Elder, Today, a session wiser/And fainter, too, as Wiseness is – " clearly suggesting that the wisdom of adulthood is a loss rather than a gain as the child finds herself "still softly searching/For my Delinquent Palaces". The same idea surfaces very strongly in Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' that probably contains his most famous statements regarding childhood. He refers to the child as a "Mighty Prophet" and a "seer blest" who is in possession of the truths and insights "we are toiling all our lives to find" again (*ll* 114-16). Though "Heaven lies about us

in our infancy/Shades of the prison-house begin to close/Upon the growing Boy" as he starts to grow up and life does its best to make him forget the "glories he hath known/And that imperial palace" from which he came (*ll* 66-68, 83-84). In the same poem Wordsworth's refers to the happy child "among his new-born blisses" (*l* 85) and in Poem 1553 Dickinson states that "Bliss is the plaything of the child – ".

In conclusion of this section I wish to refer to Book 2 of *The Prelude* of 1805 which contains more claims that Wordsworth makes about the amazing status of the child as he sees it, and which explains how that status is arrived at. The baby absorbs, from the close contact with the beloved presence of his mother, feelings that "like an awakening breeze" quicken his "recipient faculties" and mind so that "his infant veins are interfused" with "The gravitation and the filial bond/Of Nature that connect him with the world" so that he becomes an "inmate of this active universe" and receives from Nature no less than "the first/Poetic spirit of our human life" which will remain "Preeminent till death" (*ll* 240-80). Wordsworth would, however, experience doubts about this connectedness with Nature being permanent, as he says in Book 11 of *The Prelude, ll* 337-38 – "I see by glimpses now, when age comes on/May scarcely see at all". He also voices these doubts in the 'Immortality Ode'. It is, however, interesting to note that it is the close connectedness of the child with Nature and his undimmed perceptions, what Wordsworth calls "the infant sensibility/Great birthright of our being" (*ll* 286-87), that confer on him the amazing, indeed almost godlike, stature that the poet ascribes to him:

> For feeling has to him imparted strength,
> And – powerful in all sentiments of grief,
> Of exultation, fear and joy – his mind,
> Even as an agent of the one great mind,
> Creates, creator and receiver both (*ll* 269-73).

Small wonder then that like-minded Dickinson's child has the courage to look God unflinchingly in the eye:

> If I believed God looked around,
> Each time my Childish eye
> Fixed full, and steady, on his own
> In Childish honesty – (P 576).

Chapter 5

"The mind's uncharted possibilities": the powers of the mind in Dickinson and Wordsworth

In the work of both poets there is a huge emphasis on the mind and its power as has already been touched on in the discussion of Being (see Chapter 3: Preoccupation with consciousness, being and the imagination, pp 71-78). Suzanne Juhasz even claims that for Dickinson the mind is the setting for "the most significant experience" (1983:1) in her life. I only partially agree with this. Whereas she certainly did spend a great deal of time exploring the "undiscovered continent" as she referred to the mind in Poem 832, and whereas she undoubtedly did go "adventuring, dangerously and alone, in the very deep and very wide terrain of her mind" and had many experiences there "so profound and powerful that they could be the subject of great poetry" (Juhasz, 1983:11), she also experienced the world and Nature vividly and passionately and with almost startling immediacy at times. One only has to think of her description of the hummingbird in Poem 1463 to realize the truth of this. This is also true of Wordsworth. He said it himself after all – in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* he describes the poet as "being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility" (Brett & Jones, 1999:246). I therefore agree emphatically with Kerry McSweeney's statement that "sensory perceptual acuity informs the finest achievements of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Thoreau, Whitman, and Hopkins" and that "much of Dickinson's most significant experience is referential and is found in her sensory-perceptual relationship to the natural world" (1998:x,xi). Like Wordsworth, she knows that strength and inspiration is to be found in Nature[33], and that there is nobody

> That lives who hath not had his godlike hours
> And knows not what majestic sway we have,
> As natural beings in the strength of Nature (*Prelude*, 1805, 3, 192-94).

In the Preface to the 1814 edition to *The Excursion* Wordsworth makes the sweeping statement that absolutely nothing is more fear-inspiring than the

[33] This, though true, gives a somewhat simplistic view of their concept of Nature. Their more complex relationship to Nature is discussed in Chapter 4.

human mind, and that this frightening place is his "haunt, and the main region of his song" (this passage is quoted in full below.) I have the same opinion as Richard Gravil when he states that Dickinson accepts Wordsworth's view of the incredible capacities of the human mind and consequently "makes the human mind the main region of her song" (2000:199) as well. In Poem 1223 she states that the mind will determine the quality of one's life experiences:

> Who goes to dine must take his Feast
> Or find the Banquet mean –
> The Table is not laid without
> Till it is laid within.

The Preface to *The Excursion* contains some of Wordsworth's most telling statements regarding the mind. It is more than likely that Dickinson read these passages – the Dickinson Collection at the Houghton Library at Harvard University includes *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (which contains not just *The Excursion* but also *The Prelude*) and some passages in it are marked with the thin pencil lines that are believed to have been made by Dickinson. As he says in the Preface, Wordsworth views the mind as almost sacrosanct – "... the individual Mind that keeps her own/ Inviolate retirement" (*ll* 19-20). Dickinson seems to echo this very thought in Poem 1663 when she states that "His mind of man, a secret makes" that is "Impregnable to inquest" (*ll* 1 and 7). In what is probably Wordsworth's strongest claim for the power of the mind, he states that nothing is more impressive than the human mind and that its power of is such magnitude that it almost rivals God's:

> All strength – all terror, single or in bands,
> That ever was put forth in personal form –
> Jehovah – with his thunder, and the choir
> Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones –
> I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
> The darkest pit of lowest Erebus[34],
> Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
> By help of dreams – can breed such fear and awe

[34] In Greek mythology Erebus, representing darkness and shadow, was the son of the primordial god, Chaos. I believe that Wordsworth drew on a later legend that depicts Erebus as part of Hades, the underworld that the dead reputedly enter immediately after dying.

As fall upon us often when we look
Into our Minds, into the mind of Man –
My haunt, and the main region of my song (*ll* 38-41).

Dickinson shares this concept of the almost limitless capacity and scope of the human mind. There is even the same (slightly blasphemous? Blake thought so regarding the Wordsworth passage!) suggestion that the human mind can challenge God. Joyce Carol Oates perceptively refers to the "heightened sense of the mind's uncharted possibilities" (1988:19) that one encounters in Dickinson's poetry:

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

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

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

Dickinson writes as tellingly about the mind's remarkable powers in Poem 1421:

Such are the inlets of the mind –
His outlets – would you see
Ascend with me the eminence
Of immortality –

Wordsworth expresses similar sentiments when he claims that the highest pinnacles of creativity and achievement and enrichment are reached in those moments when

We have had the deepest feeling that the mind
Is lord and master, and that outward sense
Is but the obedient servant of her will.
Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
Are scattered everywhere, taking their date

From our first childhood – in our childhood even
Perhaps are most conspicuous[35] (*Prelude*, 1805, 11, *ll* 270-76).

In Book 4 of *The Prelude* of 1805 Wordsworth writes along very similar lines:

... – but I had hopes and peace
And swellings of the spirit, was rapt and soothed,
Conversed with promises, had glimmering views
How life pervades the undecaying mind,
How the immortal soul with godlike power
Informs, creates, and thaws the deepest sleep
That time can lay upon her, how on earth
Man if he do but live within the light
Of high endeavours, daily spreads abroad
His being with a strength that cannot fail (*ll* 152-61).

In Book 2 of *The Prelude* of 1805 Wordsworth even maintains that it was the light generated by his own mind which strengthened and deepened his appreciation of Nature:

An auxiliary light
Came from my mind, which on the setting sun
Bestowed new splendor; the melodious birds,
The gentle breezes, fountains that ran on
Murmuring so sweetly in themselves, obeyed
A like dominion, and the midnight storm
Grew darker in the presence of my eye (*ll* 387-93).

It is clear, however, that both Dickinson and Wordsworth find the mind's powers both awesome and frightening, however much these qualities contribute to the greatness of the human mind. Both know that the mind has powers that are not easily controlled. In fact, both refer to the "mind's abyss". In Poem 1323 Dickinson even wonders whether confronting the mind's powers may not lead to madness:

Too mighty for the Daily mind
That tilling its abyss
Had Madness, had it once or twice
The yawning Consciousness,

I do not know the man so bold
He dare in lonely Place
That awful stranger Consciousness

[35] Another example of Wordsworth view of the child as a powerful and privileged being.

Deliberately face – (Stanzas 2 and 4).

Wordsworth refers to "that awful Power", the imagination, that rises from the mind's abyss and usurps rational thought:

> Imagination – here the Power so called
> Through sad incompetence of human speech
> That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
> Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
> At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
> Halted without an effort to break through;
> But to my conscious soul I now can say –
> 'I recognise thy glory': in such strength
> Of usurpation, when the light of sense
> Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
> The invisible world, doth greatness make abode (*Prelude*, 1850, 6, *ll* 592-602).

Regarding this passage Edward Hirsch points out perceptively that it is so frightening and yet so rewarding because, as the poet's mind usurps the visible universe, it reveals to him a second, invisible world, "profound and impalpable" in which he has glimpses of infinitude, and which affirms his poetic vocation in a terrifying yet enriching moment of the sublime (1999:3). He further speculates that Dickinson experiences very similar moments in her contemplation of pain in which the mind also usurps consciousness and ruptures time, and creates its own sense of infinity as she points out so memorably in Poem 967:

> Pain – expands the Time –
> Ages coil within
> The minute Circumference
> Of a single Brain –
>
> Pain contracts – the Time –
> Occupied with Shot
> Gamuts of Eternities
> Are as they were not –

In a slight digression I would like to state that I believe that this is also profoundly true of Wordsworth who has a similar experience in 'Elegiac Stanzas', subtitled 'Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, painted by Sir George Beaumont', one of the Wordsworth poems that Dickinson specifically refers to (quoted in part on p 31, and also referred to on

pp 60n18, 101, 140 and 187). The grief that Wordsworth experiences on his brother's death changes his perceptions of Peele Castle, that he has always thought of as calmly "sleeping on a glassy sea", so that he views the painting by Sir George Beaumont with radically new insights. Whereas he previously saw the Castle, and would so have painted it himself "if mine had been the Painter's hand", as a symbol of "of lasting ease/Elysian quiet, without toil or strife" with the Castle basking in sunshine "beneath a sky of bliss" beside a "sea that could not cease to smile", he now appreciates the painter's different rendering of it – the sea is angry, the shore dismal, a ship battles in the waves and the huge Castle, symbol of endurance in the midst of suffering, braves "The lightning, the fierce wind, and the trampling waves". The "deep distress" caused by his brother's death has "humanized" the poet's soul and deepened his insights into the vicissitudes of the human condition, so that he views the painting with a far better understanding of the dark sublimities of existence; indeed, he pities his former light-hearted attitude "for 'tis surely blind". He now knows that pain and suffering and endurance are inescapable requirements to plumb the painful but also the deeply rewarding and enriching depths of life. And isn't this exactly what Dickinson says in Poem 571?

> Must be a Woe –
> A loss or so –
> To bend the eye
> Best Beauty's way –

To return to the subject of the imagination – in Book 4 of *The Excursion* the Sceptic questions the wisdom of giving the imagination full sway: "Is it well to trust/Imagination's light when reason's fails,/The unguarded taper where the guarded faints?" In Book 13 of *The Prelude* Wordsworth returns to this topic again. After the evocative ascent of Snowdon passage he writes as follows:

> A meditation rose in me that night
> Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
> Had passed away, and it appeared to me
> The perfect image of a mighty mind,
> Of one that feeds upon infinity,
> That is exalted by an under-presence,
> The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
> Or vast in its own being – above all,
> One function of such mind had Nature there

Exhibited by putting forth, and that
With circumstance most awful and sublime:
That domination which she oftentimes
Exerts upon the outward face of things,
So moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines,
Or by abrupt and unhabitual influence
Doth make one object so impress itself
Upon all others, and pervades them so,
That even the grossest minds must see and hear,
And cannot chuse but feel. The power which these
Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus
Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express
Resemblance – in the fullness of its strength
Made visible – a genuine counterpart
And brother of the glorious faculty
Which higher minds bear with them as their own.
This is the very spirit in which they deal
With all the objects of the universe:
They from their native selves can send abroad
Like transformation, for themselves create
A like existence, and, when'er it is
Created for them, catch it by an instinct (*Prelude*, 1805, 13, *ll* 66-96).

In his perceptive note to this intriguing, indeed amazing, passage, Jonathan Wordsworth writes as follows:

> For Wordsworth and Coleridge imagination was at once creative and receptive of what is apprehended through sense experiences. ...In his imaginative acts, the individual who is endowed with a "higher" mind is at once godlike, and perceptive of the existence of God, [and] draws on the dim and vast in his own being ... (*Prelude*, 1805:462, n 2).

Dickinson is similarly aware that the mind has dangerous powers:

The Brain, within its Groove
Runs evenly – and true –
But let a splinter swerve –
'Twere easier for You –

To put a current back –
When Floods have slit the Hills –
And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves –
And trodden out the Mills – (556).

The mind almost seems to contain an element of voracity in the *oeuvres* of both poets. In Wordsworth's powerful ascent of Snowden passage the whole evocative scene is described as the "perfect image of a mighty mind" that

"feeds upon infinity" (*Prelude*, 1805, xiii, *ll* 69-70). And Dickinson refers to "our immortal mind (P 105) that rather similarly feeds "on the Heart/Like any Parasite" (P 1355).

As has been previously pointed out, Dickinson sees the mind as an actual place, with spatial dimension – an "undiscovered continent" and a "landscape of the spirit" (Juhasz, 1983:1). Wordsworth similarly refers to the world as a place that he created in his mind:

> So often among multitudes of men.
> Unknown, unthought of, yet I was most rich,
> I had a world around me – 'twas my own,
> I made it: for it only lived to me,
> And to the God who looked into my mind (*Prelude*, 1805, 3, *ll* 140-44).

In this regard it is very interesting to note that Judith Farr very validly points out that, in opting for a life of reclusion, Dickinson was doing much the same as Wordsworth had done. In creating her own interior landscape, which was a landscape of "the human mind, heart, and soul as well as nature", she was "creating a world of measured and deliberate shapes" that in fact amounted to a "personal world in art". The proportions of this interior world were "both calculable and mysterious", and in it she "observed and disposed the outlines of the real in order to suggest their evocation of the unseen" (1992:50). As has been suggested previously, this latter aspect is an important element in the poetry of both poets (see pp 92, 120 and 139).

Both Dickinson and Wordsworth often refer to the mind's powers in terms of its ability to deal with the burdens that life imposes on it. In Poem 1123, Dickinson states roundly that "The mind was built for mighty Freight/For dread occasion planned". Wordsworth also refers to the strength lodged in the mind in the 1842 version of *The Borderers* when Oswald (Rivers in the earlier version) refers to murder as "A mighty evil for a strong-built mind! –". With reference to the word 'freight', it is interesting to note that both Wordsworth and Dickinson often refer to the burdens of life as the 'freight' that human beings have to bear. In Poem 878 Dickinson points out perceptively that the sun can be "gay or stark" – he can add to one's happiness if one is happy; if, however, one is troubled, the sun adds to the burden:– "His mighty pleasure

suits Us not/ It magnifies our Freight". In the 'Immortality Ode' Wordsworth adjures the child not to grow up too soon as the years bring the "inevitable yoke" and "Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight/ And custom lie upon thee with a weight,/ Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life! (*ll* 127-31). In Dickinson's Poem 1343 the "sudden Freight of Wind" destroys the Bumble Bee. Poem 1409 speculates that if the destructive potential in the "undeveloped Freight/Of a delivered syllable" could be accurately assessed, it would inhibit or possibly even destroy speech. (This short but powerful poem is quoted on p 158.) Consequently they both share the belief that the mind is not only inextricably linked to the external world, but also to language with its power and inadequacies. They are both convinced that language and the human mind are connected in an almost organic unity. Wordsworth believes that language is interpreted in the "inner cell of the mind" (*PrW*, 1974, ii, *l* 70) and is aware of the way that "language and the human mind act and react on each other" (Preface to *LB*, 1991:243) in what Kerry McSweeney refers to as Wordsworth's concern "with the mind's minds capacity to move beyond nature and access the transcendent" (1998:45). Dickinson shares this belief in the mind's remarkable powers:

> Such are the inlets of the mind –
> His outlets – would you see
> Ascend with me the eminence
> Of immortality – (P 1421).

I believe that in this poem Dickinson is not only referring to the symbiotic relationship that exists between the poet's mind and the outside world, but also to the mind's capacity to access what lies beyond the ordinary verities. In Poem 1634 Dickinson writes about exactly this potential of the mind:

> Talk not to me of Summer Trees
> The foliage of the mind
> A tabernacle is for birds
> Of no corporeal kind
> And winds do go that way at noon
> To their ethereal Homes
> Whose bugles call the least of us
> To undepicted Realms

Let me end this chapter with what is possibly the strongest statement from

Dickinson about the godlike power of the mind:

> The Brain – is wider than the Sky –
> For – put them side by side –
> The one the other will contain
> With ease – and You – beside –
>
> The Brain is deeper than the sea –
> For – hold them – Blue to Blue –
> The one the other will absorb –
> As Sponges – Buckets – do –
>
> The Brain is just the weight of God –
> For – Heft them – Pound for Pound –
> And they will differ – if they do –
> As Syllable from Sound – (P 632).

What *would* Blake have made of *this* in view of his criticism (see p 51) of Wordsworth's 'arrogance' in the following contentious passage from *The Excursion*'s Preface?

> For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
> Deep – and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
> To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.
> All strength – all terror, single or in bands,
> That ever was put forth in personal form –
> Jehovah – with his thunder, and the choir
> Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones –
> I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
> The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
> Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
> By help of dreams – can breed such fear and awe
> As fall upon us often when we look
> Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man –
> My haunt, and the main region of my song (Preface to *The Excursion*, *ll* 28-41).

I think he would have been astounded.

Chapter 6

"Saving language for poetry": Dickinson and Wordsworth on the powers and perils of language

Wordsworth and Dickinson were both unabashed worshippers at the altar of the Word[36]. In apposite fashion they both loved and revered language, but also feared and mistrusted its capacities. Both were deeply aware of its insidious emblematic and symbolic influence, and its determining function and 'dominion' over thoughts and the mind. Both were notable linguistic innovators and the linguistic styles of both are noted for their complexity and multi-layered nature. They both attempted to construct, indeed reconstruct, a language to suit their complex poetic and linguistic quests and vocations, and both essentially had self-fashioned styles that they developed to suit their own unique vision. Dickinson wrote against the Victorian grain (Leder with Abbot, 1987:1) and Wordsworth outraged the sensibilities of his time as regards notions of what constituted language suitable for poetry.

Joyce Carol Oates perceptively and very appositely refers to Dickinson's poetic language as a kind of unfathomable witchcraft – "private, allusive, teasing, sly, idiosyncratic as the spider's web" (1988:4). Michelle Boisseau concurs: "Dickinson is a poet of the secret and the sidelong" who "mines silence" (2001:178). Michael O'Neill argues along very similar lines when he claims that Wordsworth's words "act as enigmatic signs towards a barely graspable significance" and that his poetry contains many intuitions and intimations that hover on the very "margins of language" (1996:3). Similarly Roland Hagenbüchle refers to the ambiguous syntax and the many polysemantic words that typify Dickinson's style. Inevitably this greatly adds to the demands her poetry makes on her readers because it contains "metonymically constructed metaphors, ambiguous signs, and multiple, often hypothetical analogies" (1974:39, 40). One is reminded here of Jonathan Wordsworth's perceptive statement that Wordsworth's poetry makes

[36] Since 'epeolatry' is the 'worship of words', should one perhaps refer to them as 'epeolatrists'?!

"dangerously few concessions to the reader" (1969:84). Frances Ferguson refers to this aspect of Wordsworth's poetry as well. She claims that Wordsworth's language throws "the burden of consciousness back upon the reader" (1977:34). Alison Phinney concurs and states that "the reader must become active as a self-conscious producer" to do Wordsworth's poetry justice (1987:70). Hagenbüchle points out that an analogous scenario pertains regarding Dickinson. Since Dickinson uses metonymy rather than metaphor, the reader of her poetry is forced to try and supply the "figurative associations" required to understand her poetry her/himself (1974:36).

But then, both Dickinson and Wordsworth ask outrightly for their readers' participation. In the final stanza of 'Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman' (also referred to on p 96) Wordsworth says that his reader's interpretive and imaginative input is needed to give meaning to the poetry:

> O reader! Had you in your mind
> Such stores as silent thought can bring,
> O gentle reader! You would find
> A tale in everything.
>
> What more I have to say is short,
> I hope you'll kindly take it;
> It is no tale; but should you think,
> Perhaps a tale you'll make it (*ll* 73-80).

And in Poem 526 Dickinson repeats the very same sentiment though she addresses her reader in a somewhat more acerbic fashion than Wordsworth does! She says that the quality of the perception and appreciation that is brought to bear on the perceptive process – what comes from 'within' in other words – will determine the quality of the response that it evokes:

> The hear an Oriole sing
> May be a common thing –
> Or only a divine.
>
> It is not of the Bird
> Who sings the same, unheard,
> As unto Crowd –
>
> The Fashion of the Ear
> Attireth that it hear

In Dun, or fair –

So whether it be Rune,
Or whether it be none
Is of within.

The "Tune is in the Tree – "
The Skeptic – showeth me –
"No Sir! In Thee!"

Wordsworth wanted to create a language in which to express his radically new poetics and was deeply concerned about how "language and the human mind act and react on each other" (Preface to *LB*, 1991:243), and how language is interpreted in the "inner cell of the mind" as he puts it in his second *Essay upon Epitaphs* (*PrW*, 1974, 11:70). In opposition to the artificial diction prevalent at the time, Wordsworth wanted to find "a way of using words in which their full incantatory power and simplicity" would be released (Sykes Davies, 1986:4). Dickinson was a linguistic innovator in a similar fashion as she struggled to create a language in which to express her highly individualized perception of the world, humanity, religion and Nature, and she wanted no less than to "capture the living inner form of language itself" and record in her poetry "her explorations and discoveries in the life of language" as E. Miller Budick puts it (1985:ix). Along similar lines Albert Gelpi suggests that Dickinson's "struggle for stylistic effects grew out of the necessity to make a language adequate to the more ambitious descriptions of nature that she was attempting" (1985:45). I believe that this statement can be expanded to encompass all of her *oeuvre* as it reflects her own singular and unique vision. In 1976, Adrienne Rich pointed out accurately that Dickinson created a language that was "more varied, more compressed, more dense with implications" and "more complex of syntax, than any American poetic language to date" (1976:55) and this is just as true today as it was then. In this regard I wish to quote an intriguing comment of Joanne Feit Diehl's again, namely that in her poetry

> ... Dickinson strives to find a voice that will carry her between the living and the dead. For both poets [Dickinson and Wordsworth], the power associated with the act of writing depends upon the ability of that act to wrest from death its intimidating silence, to create a province of

> language that remains impervious even to the threat of death itself (1981:67).

Small wonder then, that Dickinson wanted to know from Higginson whether her poetry was alive, and that Wordsworth was equally concerned about whether his poetry would live.

Keith Hanley believes that Wordsworth's theory and practice was "historically prefigurative" of a radically new "signifying practice" that would only be fully realised later in the work of *avant-garde* nineteenth-century writers (1998:1). Surely Dickinson stands squarely among these heirs. David Porter points out appositely that Dickinson is the "first practitioner" of "an extreme ... American modernism" (1981:1), and Judith Farr refers to the "beauty and the verbal/visual complexity" of Dickinson's language (1992:ix). Consequently, as already stated, both poets demand the participation of their readers to unearth the great riches that their *oeuvres* hold. Frances Ferguson states concisely that because Wordsworth was at all times deeply conscious of the power and dangers of language, he imposed the burden of that knowledge not only on himself but also on his readers (1977:xv). One can therefore make the claim that both poets were overwhelmingly conscious of the power and dangers inherent in language, and deeply concerned with "the life within language" to refer to Miller Budick again (1985:x).

Both Wordsworth and Dickinson are extremely strong presences in their work. Anthony Easthope's apt comment about Wordsworth being always present in his work as a "textual ghost" (1993:84) is just as applicable to Dickinson, possibly even more so. And so many of the descriptions about Wordsworth's language are astonishingly apposite to Dickinson as well. I will quote a few instances to illustrate. When Alison Phinney makes the very valid claim that Wordsworth frequently plays a "language game ... in which the reader [has to be] an active player" (1987:70) this is totally applicable to Dickinson as well. When she further claims that the language in Wordsworth's poetry is frequently "presented as transparent embodiment and cloaking veil, a place of darkness and a source of light" (1987:70), she can indeed just as well be describing Dickinson's poetry. Similarly, when Mary Jacobus says that

Wordsworth's language " ... gestures towards a ghostly revelation beyond the scope of writing" (1979:618), one cannot avoid feeling that she could just as appositely be referring to Dickinson's poetry as well. And when RJ Robinson claims that Wordsworth succeeded in creating "a language that tantalizes and intrigues us with its haunting, echoing qualities and its frequently contradictory elements" (2000:35), she could likewise be referring to the poetry of Emily Dickinson. In a quotation that probably best captures the extraordinarily elusive and the extraordinarily difficult-to-pin-down yet very powerful magic that Wordsworth's poetry holds for me, Hartman writes in his usual perceptive, indeed highly intuitive, manner regarding Wordsworth's poetry:

> Greatness and scrupulousness combine to make a difficult poetry hardly recognised as such even today. It is in many ways the most ghostly poetry ever written ... This extreme calculus of words, and this internal, obstinate questioning of every ghostly or glorious mood, is what all readers feel in Wordsworth, though they may not be happy with it if they expect from poetry a decisive rhetoric or a seductive animation (1987:150).

The young Emily Dickinson called letters to her friends "symbols traced on paper" (L. 46) and also exclaims tellingly "What a Hazard a Letter is!" (L. 656). Wordsworth was also concerned with the symbolic aspects of language. This is eloquently expressed in Book 7 of the 1805 *Prelude*:

> Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
> Abruptly to be smitten with a view
> Of a blind beggar, who, with upright face,
> Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest
> Wearing a written paper, to explain
> The story of the man, and who he was.
> My mind did at this spectacle turn round
> As with the might of waters, and it seemed to
> To me that in this label was a type,
> Or emblem, of the utmost that we know,
> Both of ourselves and of the universe;
> And on the shape of the unmoving man
> His face and sightless eyes, I looked
> As if admonished from another world (*ll* 610-23).

What makes this even more intriguing is that in Wordsworth's first version of this passage it read:

> That even the most of what we know,
> Both of ourselves and of the universe,
> The whole of what is written to our view,
> Is but a label on a blind man's chest (Woodman, 1993:133).

This insight into the power of language is a significant area of convergence between Dickinson and Wordsworth. They were both aware not only of the power and potential of language, but also of its "lethal fictiveness" (Homans, 1985:135), and its limitations. Wordsworth not only refers to the "wondrous power of words" (*Prelude*, 1805, 7, *l* 121), but is regretfully aware that he needs to depend "upon a few weak words to say/What is already written in the hearts/Of all that breathe" (*Prelude,* 1805, 5, *ll* 186-88). He is similarly aware that much of what he wants to express "lies far hidden from the reach of words" (*Prelude*, 1850, 111, *l* 187). It is indeed as a result of the "sad incompetence of human speech" that the awesome power of the mind can only be referred to by the inadequate term 'imagination':

> Imagination – here the Power so called
> Through sad incompetence of human speech
> That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
> Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
> At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
> Halted without an effort to break through;
> But to my conscious soul I now can say –
> 'I recognise thy glory': in such strength
> Of usurpation, when the light of sense
> Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
> The invisible world, doth greatness make abode (*Prelude*, 1850, 6, *ll* 592-602).

In the 1815 Essay, Supplementary to the Preface, Wordsworth had already voiced the thought that the naming of this powerful faculty of the mind lies beyond the inherent powers of language:

> ...the word, Imagination, has been overstrained, from impulses honourable to mankind, to meet the demands of the faculty which is perhaps the noblest of our nature ... Poverty of language is the primary cause of the use we make of the word, Imagination (*PrW*, 1974, 111:81).

Like Wordsworth, Dickinson knew that language is not only central to life and the human condition, but that it has a mediating and determining role in the

way life and experience are 'read' and interpreted. In Letter 342a, in which Higginson tells his wife about his meeting and conversation with Dickinson in August 1870, he reports Dickinson as having said that she knows that language is poetry when it "makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me ... [when] I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off". Like Wordsworth, however, Dickinson was ambiguous about language and was acutely aware of its dangerous, destructive potential as well. Indeed, as Wordsworth puts it, she knew that language holds the characters of both danger and desire:

> Ye presences of Nature, ...
> ... – when ye through many a year
> Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,
> On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills'
> Impressed upon all forms the characters
> Of danger or desire, and thus did make
> The surface of the universal earth
> With triumph, and delight, and hope, and fear (*Prelude*, 1805, 1, *ll* 496-97).

As can be seen from the above extracts, Wordsworth was overwhelmingly aware of not just the power of language, but also of its dangers and its limitations. Language was not just the medium that he employed in his poetry, but was "an explicit subject of speculation" for him that he thought about in a coherent and serious fashion (Ferguson, 1977:xi). Murray D. Arndt likewise refers succinctly to Dickinson's committed "marriage to the word" (1986:22) that is "witnessed" over and over, particularly in her letters, though I believe this is just as true, if not truer, of her poetry.

Wordsworth's work also manifests a recognition of the inability of language to account for itself in an adequate fashion:

> Hard task to analyse a soul in which
> Not only general habits and desires,
> But each most obvious and particular thought –
> Not in a mystical and idle sense,
> But in the words of reason deeply weighed –
> Hath no beginning (*Prelude*, 1805, ii, *ll* 231-36).

Dickinson, by cutting herself off from social interaction with the world around her, similarly chose to concern herself with:

> ...words themselves – with the isolated processes of mental and verbal apprehension by which objects, people and events are made known and acquire meaning. Withdrawing from traditional ways of seeing, she involved herself ever more intensely in a search for new modes of human perception...Most importantly, she "published" in her dresser drawers little volumes of carefully, if eccentrically, bound manuscript poems that endeavoured to capture the living inner form of language itself. Dickinson's poetry is the record of her explorations and discoveries ***in the life of language*** [my emphasis] (Miller Budick, 1985:IX).

Wordsworth has long been regarded by many critics as the poet who caused a literary revolution with effects reaching to our very day. J.P. Ward claims that Wordsworth "saved language for poetry" (1984:3). Harold Bloom states that Wordsworth "invented modern poetry" and refers repeatedly to the radical originality of Wordsworth's mind and vision (1994:239-263). He uses 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' as a notable example in which Wordsworth's startlingly original vision manifests itself most tellingly. Porter, as do many other critics, similarly believes that Dickinson has a startlingly original identity and refers to the "otherness" that awaits us in her multivalent words (1981:1). Michael Yetman similarly refers to the "staggering poetic originality" of Dickinson's mind and poetry (1973:131).

One of the most interesting aspects of Wordsworth's poetics, as has been pointed out, is his advanced perception of the power of language, as well as its limitations and dangers. In his third *Essay upon Epitaphs* he puts it extremely succinctly:

> Words are too awful an instrument for good or evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not ... an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, ... is a counter-spirit unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve (PrW, 1974,11:84-85).

Dickinson shares this knowledge emphatically, almost fearfully. In a comment that seems extraordinarily similar to the spirit expressed in the Wordsworth quote above, Miller Budick points out that Dickinson was overwhelmingly aware of the "symbolic liabilities" (1985:x) that are present in language and that her poetry reveals both a condemnation and a celebration of the powers inherent in poetic language. In Poem 479, Dickinson marvellously and with superbly chilling effect depicts words as veritable instruments of torture:

> She dealt her pretty words like Blades –
> How glittering they shone –
> And every One unbared a Nerve
> Or wantoned with a Bone –

And in 'There is a Pleasure in Poetic Pains', Wordsworth ruefully refers to the dangers inherent in poetic composition:

> How oft the malice of one luckless word
> Pursues the enthusiast to the social board,
> Haunts him belated on the silent plains!

David Porter claims persuasively that like Wordsworth, Dickinson knew that in wielding words she was engaged in a dangerous pursuit, and that the enigmatically subversive poem 'My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun' (P 754):

> ... deals with the dilemma of instrument and purpose, that is, with the exercise of great, even destructive, power without coherent design. The gun in this poem, as the second stanza makes plain, is the instrument of language. Wordsworth had borne similar witness to the potency of the medium: "Words are too awful an instrument for good or evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts." [PrW, 1974,11:84-85] Dickinson's poem, with all its difficulties, is the symbol of her undefined life and the power of her language.
>
> Three related functions create the signification of the poem: the poem's voice is language itself, the language gun has the power to kill and language to be purposeful and not randomly destructive must be under some mature authority (1981:209-10).

Whereas I do not agree with Porter that Dickinson's life was "undefined" (I believe that it was very concisely defined in being utterly dedicated to her craft as a poet), I agree that Dickinson shared with Wordsworth the concept that

language was, firstly, enormously powerful, and that secondly, it held if not controlled (could this control even be effectively exerted? I do not think that either poet believed that it could), equally enormous destructive power. If one accepts Porter's premise that Poem 754 is about the power of language (and I emphatically do), this aspect is powerfully evoked by this riddling poem that has been interpreted in so many differing ways. I quote it in full again:

> My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –
> In Corners – till a Day
> The Owner passed – identified –
> And carried me away –
>
> And now we roam in Sovereign Woods –
> And now we hunt the Doe –
> And every time I speak for Him –
> The mountains straight reply –
>
> And do I smile, such cordial light
> Upon the Valley glow –
> It is as a Vesuvian face
> Had let its pleasure through –
>
> And when at Night – Our good day done –
> I guard My Master's Head –
> 'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
> Deep Pillow – to have shared –
>
> To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
> None stir the second time –
> On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
> Or an emphatic Thumb –
>
> Though I than He – may longer live
> He longer must – than I –
> For I have but the power to kill,
> Without the power to die –

In this poem Dickinson presents language itself as the protagonist, not only allowing it to acknowledge its own destructive power, but also the importance of attempting to control that power. And, if one accepts Feit Diehl's intriguing premise that the Master is indeed a composite of Dickinson's male precursor poets, the subversive power of this poem is extraordinary. Not only is 'she' (the poet? language? the female poet's language?) more powerful than 'they' are, but a mutually dependent relationship is evoked in which neither can do

without the other. If one also accepts that language itself is speaking in the poem, it is indeed more powerful that the poets who went before and wielded it before, because it will outlive them. It is also, however, dependent on them because only through being employed by them (and thus being under their control), does language gain life and is it allowed to 'speak'. If one accepts that it is the female apprentice poet speaking, it is possibly even more subversive – her precursors empower her to produce poetry by 'fructifying' her creativity and allowing her to draw on their power and in effect use 'their' words as empowerment. In fact she says so quite clearly:

> 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 – (P. 711).

She has, however, already superseded her precursors in that they are dead and she holds the power to use their words as she wishes – possibly in order to produce poetry that may outlive theirs! Surely there is an element of this very thought in the final stanza of Poem 1273:

> August the Dust of that Domain –
> Unchallenged – let it lie –
> You cannot supersede itself
> But it can silence you –

Wordsworth created his own 'idiolect' that has probably still not been fully appreciated in the scope of its influence. Emily Dickinson is probably best known for her highly individualised and intriguing use of language, so that one can justifiably refer to her having her own idiolect as well. E. Miller Budick writes perceptively that Dickinson made an active choice, in withdrawing from social interaction, "...to concern herself, not with objects or people or events, but with words themselves ..." (1985:ix). While this possibly constitutes a somewhat narrowly simplistic way of looking at it (Dickinson was closely concerned with many other things – her family, friends and relatives, flowers,

birds, even her dog Carlo!) it is in essence a valid statement as it emphasises her passionate and life-long engagement with language.

Interestingly, Dickinson was only thirteen when she started writing; likewise Wordsworth was thirteen

> ... when first
> My ears began to open to the charm
> Of words in tuneful order, found them sweet
> *For their own sakes* – a passion and a power –
> And phrases pleased me, chosen for delight (*Prelude*, 1805, v, *ll* 576-80).

Wordsworth's awe in the face of the power of language, strongly tinged with ambiguity, surfaces superbly in the following extract, that I have referred to before, from Book 5 of *The Prelude* of 1805:

> Visionary power
> Attends upon the motions of the winds
> Embodied in the mystery of words:
> There darkness makes abode, and all the host
> Of shadowy things do work their changes there
> As in a mansion like their proper home.
> Even forms and substances are circumfused
> By that transparent veil with light divine,
> And through the turnings intricate of verse
> Present themselves as objects recognised
> In flashes, and with a glory scarce their own (*ll* 620-29).

Wordsworth believes that language does not just contain visionary power, but also mystery and darkness in which "shadowy things" effect changes that can only be partially glimpsed. The "glory" that language imparts to "forms and substances" is possibly illusionary since it is just an insubstantial veil. Meaning can only be traced by negotiating a deceptive linguistic maze in which one can lose one's way. The whole passage suggests to my mind an awesome, dangerous power that is truly wonderful, but not quite to be trusted.

Dickinson is similarly aware of this and refers to the incendiary potential of words as follows:

> A Man may make a Remark –
> In itself – a quiet thing

That may furnish the Fuse unto a Spark
In dormant nature – lain –

Let us deport – with skill –
Let us discourse – with care –
Powder exists in Charcoal –
Before it exists in Fire (P 952).

She reiterates this in Poem 1467 when she points out that a "little overflowing word" will remain "eloquent" though "Generations pass away". Poem 1409 expresses most forcefully her conviction that language holds immense power:

Could mortal lip divine
The undeveloped Freight
Of a delivered syllable
'Twould crumble with the weight.

And in a little poem that gives a threatening, organic life to language, she claims that when a word is enunciated, its awesome power is loosed upon the world:

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.

I say it just
Begins to live
That day [1212].

Poem 1261 echoes this and also voices her belief that the power of language is long-lasting:

A Word dropped careless on a Page
May stimulate an eye
When folded in perpetual seam
The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds
We may inhale Despair
At distances of Centuries
From the Malaria – (P 1261).

This poem also seems to suggest that language is so dangerous that one can be infected by it rather like one can contract a long-lasting, insidiously destructive and recurring disease like malaria. This reminds one of

Wordsworth's references to the dire effects that could result for the lovers "If ever an unobtrusive word were dropped" about their situation ('Vaudracour and Julia', *l* 113), and to a "word in which a thousand scorpions lodge" (*The Borderers*, *l* 2094). His claim that it is in the "mystery of words" that "darkness makes abode" (*Prelude*, 1805, v, *ll* 620-21) also springs to mind here. As said before, Dickinson was aware that the dangers of language were also abundantly present in letter writing and said so unambiguously when she exclaims "What a Hazard a Letter is!" (L 656). Like Wordsworth, Dickinson was also deeply concerned with words themselves as E Miller Budick discusses very cogently in a chapter aptly entitled 'The Dangers of the Living Word'. (1985:1). Just like Wordsworth, Dickinson searched for new modes of expression and wanted to create a 'new language' to give expression to:

> ... the things which I had shaped
> And yet not shaped, had seen and scarcely seen
> Had felt, and thought of in my solitude (*Prelude*, 1805, viii, *ll* 514-16).

There seems to be a fine irony in the fact that Dickinson and Wordsworth, two poets both overwhelmingly aware of the powers and perils of language, should produce poetry of which linguistic indeterminacy and multiplicity of meaning should be such strong characteristics. As regards Dickinson, this has often been seen in a negative light and ascribed to shortcomings in her powers of perception. Roland Hagenbüchle confirms my opinion, however, that this is a quite deliberate tactic that Dickinson employs and that it has a decisive role in her poetry (1974:1). I believe that it enriches her poetry, not least by imbuing it with teasing ambiguities that engage and challenge the reader, but also by developing the multi-layered aspect that is such an intriguing characteristic of her work. In a markedly similar vein, Mary Jacobus says that " ... Wordsworth writes like a man trying to net the wind in the "turnings intricate" of his own blank verse ... his meaning can only be glimpsed in the interstices of the web, behind the veil, as a ghostly and unrepresented presence" (1979:618-20).

Both Dickinson and Wordsworth employ heavily pronominal styles in their poetry of the self. This creates a language of the self that seems to question the "very ability of language to represent consciousness" to use Joan

Burbick's memorable phrase (1982:83). Burbick also refers to Dickinson's "process of obscuration" (!982:88) which is as good a phrase as I have heard to describe what others have referred to as Dickinson's deliberate coding (Farr, 1992:5). Roland Hagenbüchle even suggests that Dickinson offers an "incarnation" of the unsayable in her poetry (1974:42). As does Wordsworth, of course. Mary Jacobus refers to this same 'ghostly quality' in Wordsworth's poetry

> ... when the limits of comprehension and of language are reached together, and the invisible world is disclosed. The tumultuous rhetoric of the Vale of Gondo passage [also referred to as the Simplon Pass passage and quoted on p 66] – "Characters of the great Apocalypse/The types and symbols of Eternity" [*Prelude*, 1805, vi, *ll* 570-71] – gestures towards a ghostly revelation beyond the scope of writing ...(1979:618).

Apart from giving a highly evocative image of Wordsworth's elusive linguistic impact, this quotation raises a very valid point about Dickinson as well, as Cristanne Miller points out that in looking:

> ... for meaning in a poem's language alone, the reader finds extraordinary multiplicity. The poet's metaphors and extended analogies, her peculiar brevity, lack of normal punctuation, irregular manipulation of grammar, syntax, and word combination all invite multiple, nonreferential interpretations of what she means (Miller, 1987:2).

For both Wordsworth and Dickinson language is primarily communication, often the language of speech in written form. Their work requires engagement with the audience that they write for and indeed demand participation from them, though they do not make this easy, as has been mentioned before! Both evoke a powerful engagement of the self with reality, equally powerfully embedding themselves as textual presences in their reflexive texts. They both similarly engage in what Cristanne Miller aptly refers to as "unrestricted play with language" (1987:2). By employing this strategy, their words acquire not just various layers of meaning, but become active (if indeed not dominant) players on the intriguing verbal stage they create for their deeply personal and revealing poetry of the self. And this poetic stage is vigorously inhabited, not just by the language and the poetry, but by the poets themselves, in

whichever persona they adopt. The following extract from Book 4 of *The Prelude* of 1805 that describes Wordsworth's eagerly waited first holiday in Hawkshead after going up to Cambridge as a young student will show what I mean:

> Delighted did I take my place again
> At our domestic table; ....
> The joy with which I laid me down at night
> In my accustomed bed, more welcome now
> Perhaps than if it had been more desired,
> Or been more often thought of with regret –
> That bed whence I had heard the roaring wind
> And clamorous rain, that bed where I so oft
> Had lain awake on breezy nights to watch
> The moon in splendour couched among the leaves
> Of a tall ash that near our cottage stood,
> Had watched her with fixed eyes, while to and fro
> In the dark summit of the moving tree
> She rocked with every impulse of the wind (*ll* 68-83).

This passage is as vividly alive to his reader as the experience was to the young Wordsworth. Not only does one share the intense pleasure of the poet to be back in these beloved surroundings, but one participates in his engagement with the moment, and relive his memories of similar moments in the past when his attention was wholly absorbed by the illusory movement of the moon. And one shares Dickinson's appreciative apprehension of the snake in Poem 986 (I only quote the first and final stanzas):

> A narrow Fellow in the Grass
> Occasionally rides –
> You may have met Him – did you not
> His notice sudden is –
>
> But never met this Fellow
> Attended, or alone
> Without a tighter breathing
> And Zero at the Bone –

The language of both poets has this quality of metonymy – their words gain greatly from their contiguity in the linguistic *milieu* that they both create. Though the snake is referred to almost playfully as a "Fellow", his threatening qualities are no less frightening for being understated. Is it too fanciful to interpret the 'zero' at the bone as a coil of the snake's supple body? And does

one not shudder at the thought of what could have happened to the barefoot 'boy' had s/he managed to catch hold of the snake's tail as it slithered through the grass? Indeed, the fantasy here also stirs like a coiled snake ... .

With reference to Wordsworth in particular, but equally applicable to Dickinson, J P Ward writes as follows:

> As said already, this term [metonymy] can be used more widely than in its reference to a particular figure, and can talk generally of words that name and perform linking, joining, tension, engagement, question and answer, ejaculation, exaggeration and the like (1984:102).

And in both their *oeuvres* it is hard to overestimate the role of verbs in the creation of their singular and distinctive lexicons of passionate engagement with their subject matter. Miller refers to the high ratio of verbs to nouns and adjectives in Dickinson's work (1987:60, 64), and J P Ward declares unambiguously that in Wordsworth's language it "is a matter of verbs" (1984:104). Ward likewise refers to pivotal words that "leap out" at you and which, along with the verbs, contribute to the remarkable energy that often characterises Wordsworth's language (1987:96). Here one is irresistibly reminded of the tumultuous play of words in the Simplon Pass passage (see p 66). It is therefore true to say that in the language of both poets there is a vigour that irresistibly sucks the reader into the poet's experience. I quote Wordsworth's 'Nutting' and Dickinson's Poem 673 to illustrate their compelling usage of action words. In a poem that contains intriguing sexual imagery, the young Wordsworth sets off to go nutting on one "... of those heavenly days which cannot die ... Trick'd out in proud disguise of Beggar's weeds" so his better clothes won't be damaged:

> Among the woods,
> And o'er pathless rocks, I forc'd my way
> Until, at length, I came to a dear nook
> Unvisited, where not a broken bough
> Droop'd with its withered leaves, ungracious sign
> Of devastation, but the hazels rose
> Tall and erect, with milk-white clusters hung,
> A virgin scene! – A little while I stood,
> Breathing with such suppression of the heart
> As joy delights in; and with wise restraint
> Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed

The banquet ....

The following seventeen lines are filled with gentle images – the poet muses about violets blooming unobserved in this lovely spot, he plays with some flowers, imagines "fairy water-breaks" murmuring, and, laying his cheek on a moss-grown stone, listens to the "murmur and the murmuring sound" of his utterly peaceful surroundings. The change that follows on this "sweet mood" is startling in the violence of its tempestuous verbs

> Then up I rose,
> And dragg'd to earth both branch and bough, with crash
> And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
> Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower
> Deform'd and sullied, patiently gave up
> Their quiet being: and unless I now
> Confound my present feelings with the past,
> Even then, when from the bower I turn'd away,
> Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings
> I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
> The silent trees and the intruding sky.

In Dickinson's Poem 673 "The Love a life can show" is described in the final stanza in a flood of oxymoronic verbs that evoke the complexity of the emotion superbly:

> 'Tis this – invites – appalls – endows –
> Flits – glimmers – proves – dissolves –
> Returns – suggests – convicts – enchants –
> Then – flings in Paradise –

Dickinson's Poem 41 shows curious resonances with Wordsworth's 'Nutting', one of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection that I suspect that Dickinson was familiar with as she refers to 'We are Seven' from the same book. In Dickinson's poem she also robs the unsuspecting, trusting trees, reminiscent of Wordsworth's "virgin scene", she also roughly grasps her bounty, and then carries it away with more than a hint of the guilt that the boy displays in 'Nutting':

> I robbed the Woods –
> The trusting Woods
> The unsuspecting Trees
> Brought out their Burs and mosses

My fantasy to please.
I scanned their trinkets curious –
I grasped – I bore away –
What will the solemn Hemlock –
What will the Oak tree say?

Wordsworth and Dickinson both employed repetition very effectively in their poetry. Though it is less prevalent in Dickinson than in Wordsworth, the instances thereof are so striking that it is clear that she employed it as a deliberate literary strategy much in the way that Wordsworth did. In the work of both poets it serves to intensify and strengthen the emotion or ambience in the poem. It also often adds a teasing nuance that subverts the surface meaning of the poem.

Wordsworth was often criticized for using so much repetition or tautology in his poetry and much critical energy has been expended on the discussion thereof. Wordsworth's so-called 'tautology' is, however, not only an integral part of his style and language usage, but indeed an enriching one. Wordsworth himself was quite unapologetic about this aspect of his work – he himself regarded it as an essential and enriching aspect of his poetry. In the Note to 'The Thorn' he writes forcefully to explain his continued adherence to this strategy:

> There is a numerous class of readers who imagine that the same words cannot be repeated without tautology: this is a great error: virtual tautology is much oftener produced by using different words when the meaning is exactly the same. Words, a Poet's words more particularly, ought to be weighed in the balance of feeling and not measured by the space they occupy upon paper. For the Reader cannot be too often reminded that Poetry is Passion: it is the history or science of feelings: now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language. During such efforts there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character. There are also various other reasons why repetition and apparent tautology are frequently beauties of the highest kind. Among the chief of these reasons is the interest which the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of passion, but as *things*, active and efficient, which are themselves part of the passion[37]. And further, from a spirit of

[37] It is interesting to note here that Joanne Feit Diehl also points out that Dickinson's

> fondness, exultation and gratitude, the mind luxuriates in the repetition of words which appear successfully to communicate its feelings (*WW*, 1986:594).

In the final part of this excerpt it becomes clear that for Wordsworth words are not simply a conduit for the passage of meaning or emotions, but real entities that stimulate and delight the mind with their inherent and often covert, non-articulable qualities. And many perceptive critics are in agreement with Wordsworth! As Frances Ferguson points out, Wordsworth does not simply use tautology and repetition as "significant forms of expression", but indeed as forms of "argument and statement" (Ferguson, 1977:12-13). If one thinks of 'The Thorn' for example, the sustained use of repetition emphasises the many questions that hang over the whole poem, as well as the covert elements of horror that underpin it. In Wordsworth's poetry, and possibly even more so in Dickinson's, words are not mere words but become absorbing and intriguing entities in their own right. Indeed, they provide an example of the powerful ability of language

> ... to appear as almost self-sufficient; the relationship between words and things and thoughts which underlies representational schemes of language shifts to become a relationship between things and word-things and thoughts because of Wordsworth's concern with the interest of the mind in words "as *things*, active and efficient." Words become themselves entities which the mind delights in, not mere vehicles through which the mind arrives at the entities or emotions of the world (Ferguson, 1977:15-16).

Dickinson shares Wordsworth's quest for the right word:

> 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

---

words become transmuted and that they become the "thing itself" (1981:124)

Not unto nomination
The Cherubim reveal – (P 1126).

In Poem 1651, that strongly evokes the corporeality of words, she even seems to suggest that the word's "consent" is required before it can be used safely and yield its true meaning and sustenance:

A Word made Flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But I have not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength –

A Word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He –
"Made Flesh and dwelt among us"
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology.

Wordsworth's repetition occurs in two ways. The first is overt and obvious. In 'A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags' the repetition of "dead" is particularly effective:

And in our vacant mood
Not seldom did we stop to watch some tuft
Of dandelion seed or thistle's beard,
Which, seeming lifeless half, and half impelled
By some internal feeling, skimmed along
Close to the surface of the lake that lay
Asleep in a **dead** calm, ran closely on
Along the **dead** calm lake, now here, now there, (*ll* 16-23)

Too weak to labour in the harvest field,
The man was using his best skill to gain
A pittance from the **dead** unfeeling lake
That knew not of his wants. ... (*ll* 69-72)

What Wordsworth achieves with the repetition of "dead" is a poignant evocation of the sick fisherman's lot. Not only is he rashly misjudged by the poet and his companions as idle and lazy, but the lake, source of the meagre

living that he is attempting to gain from it, is completely unaware of his plight and thus totally indifferent and unresponsive to his needs. In the marvellous and so often short-sightedly and ignorantly maligned poem, 'The Thorn'[38], a similar evocation occurs – the main thoughts of the poem are reiterated over and over: the thorn that **looks so old** and is overgrown with **lichens**, the heap of moss that is like **an infant's grave in size**, the plaintive repetition of **wherefore? wherefore?** that emphasizes all the unanswered questions and suppositions raised by the poem. Did the woman kill her baby? Did she drown her in the pond or hang her from the ancient, stunted thorn tree? Is the murdered baby buried under the beautiful heap of multi-coloured moss? Was there even a baby? And throughout the poem some variant of the lines "Oh misery! Oh misery!/Oh woe is me! Oh misery!" runs like a ballad's haunting refrain. In 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' the repetition of **chatter** and words that echo it, makes the hard-hearted Harry's retributory shivering shake the very poem. A rather similar instance of repetition occurs in Dickinson's Poem 26 – the phrase "This, and my heart" is repeated three times in the short eight line poem and serves to emphasize the insignificance of the heart in comparison with "the meadows wide", while it in actual fact accentuates the great value of the gift of the heart.

Kerry McSweeney perceptively points out that the repetition in Wordsworth's first 'spot of time', which depicts the five-year old Wordsworth getting lost and coming across an old gibbet (*Prelude*, 1805, 11, *ll* 278-327), serves not only to emphasise the subjectively terrifying experience that the young boy undergoes, but also helps to convey the visionary nature of this experience very powerfully, which reinforces the indelible impression it left on the poet's psyche (1998:57-58). I quote the last 15 lines:

> ... forthwith I left the spot,
> And, reascending the bare common, saw
> A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
> The beacon on the summit, and more near,
> A girl who bore a pitcher on her head

38 One is reminded in this regard of Hazlitt's perceptive comment that fools laughed at the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, which includes 'The Thorn' of course, while wise men scarcely understood them (1823:24).

And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,
An ordinary sight, but I should need
Colours and words that are unknown to man
To paint the visionary dreariness
Which, while I looked round for my lost guide,
Did at that time invest the naked pool,
The beacon on the lonely eminence,
The woman, and her garments vexed and tossed
By the strong wind (*Prelude*, 1805, 11, *ll* 301-315).

As already illustrated, repetition also forms part of Dickinson's poetic arsenal, and she puts it to very effective and often subversive use. In the memorable 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant – ' (P 1129) the repetition of the word 'truth' subtly underpins the idea that truth-telling is in fact being undermined in the poem. In Poem 313 the repetition of "I see" and the "I should have been too glad/lifted/saved/rescued" constructions almost deafeningly contradict what purports to be a comforting religious message, but which is in fact nothing of the kind – it is a searing indictment. In the second version of Poem 824 (discussed in greater detail further on in this chapter) the menacing potential of the storm and a warning of the destruction to come, are very successfully evoked by the repetition of "menace" in the third and fourth line:

The Wind began to rock the Grass
With threatening tunes and low –
He threw a Menace at the Earth –
A Menace at the Sky.

Dickinson's powerful Poem 280 has been interpreted in many and various ways. Is it about making a thought unconscious as Sharon Cameron claims (1992:141)? Is it an imaginative evocation of the process of the speaker's dying as E. Miller Budick suggests (1985:206)? Is Inder Nath Kher correct when she claims that in this poem Dickinson is imagining her own death and funeral and lying in her coffin (1974:204)? Does the poem evoke emotions experienced before a fainting spell? Or does it denote thoughts experienced under the alienating influence of almost unbearable emotions of grief as I personally suspect? Whatever one's interpretation, the pounding of feverishly circling thoughts is superbly conveyed and strengthened by the repetition in the first two stanzas:

I felt a Funeral in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
That Sense is breaking through –

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum –
Kept beating – beating – till I thought
My Mind was going numb –

The impression of sense impressions piling up frantically is further strengthened by the repetition of "and" throughout the poem, particularly in the final three stanzas:

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then space – began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then –

Whatever one's interpretation of the poem, the repetition is a strongly evocative element in the poem and emphasises the frantic, relentless circling of thoughts superbly.

The second way in which Wordsworth employs repetition is much more covert, but possibly even more pervasive and influential. By employing in his highly individualized lexicon favourite 'word-clusters' (groups of words used together in poem after poem after poem) the individual words become laden with echoes and emotional resonances from previous usages thus heightening their impact and adding teasing ambiguities to their usage. That very fine critic of Wordsworth, Hugh Sykes Davies, describes this phenomenon in Wordsworth's poetry with great perception as he identifies the so-called 'gleam-cluster', consisting of gleam, flash, sparkle, light, glister, lustre, burnished, glitter, glisten. (I discuss the development of this 'gleam-

cluster' in detail above – see pp 103-105.) In plotting the development of this image, Sykes Davies shows the ever increasing number of associations that the words in the 'gleam-cluster' acquire, particularly by Wordsworth's subtle exploitation of the light/dark contrast. And once a word has gone through this progress in the Wordsworth idiolect it is effectively changed for ever in the Wordsworth lexicon:

> Once a word, together with its close associates, 'words of the same character' as he puts it, had effectively become a *thing*, or a group of things [word-cluster], in his mode of expressing his feeling and thought, it was never quite the same again. And when it had been used repeatedly, by a kind of extended tautology, in poem after poem, in year after year, as his meditations eddied round in their circling progress, such word-things would acquire a power in *his* vocabulary, in *his* poetry, quite out of proportion to their usual force in the language really spoken by men, even though they might very well be a very common part of it. The 'selection', in fact, was made by this completely personal, individual process, and not by any general or philosophic or political principles whatever. And it was upon words thus selected that his highly individual poetry was based (1986:46-47).]

Dickinson was also deeply concerned with the same primacy of words – in her poetry language also becomes not just the medium of expression, but active protagonists, 'things', as is the case with Wordsworth. As does Wordsworth, she knows that words "naturally have resonances that range beyond the limits of logic" as Murray Arndt points out (1986:22). With reference to J. Hillis Miller's comments regarding Shelley, Feit Diehl writes as follows:

> Shelley seeks, according to Miller, a "performative apocalypse in which words will become the fire they have ignited[39] ..." Pursuing a related apocalypse of language, Dickinson invokes images that describe natural catastrophe – lightning, earthquake, astronomical collisions – to articulate her desire to convert the word from its function as a sign to the status of the signified. ....In terms of poetics, the Word for Dickinson becomes transubstantiated, becomes the thing itself ... .this is Dickinson's ... most radical experiment in language (1981:124)

Along with the high frequency of use of these personalised 'idiolectical' words, Wordsworth also displays a marked *penchant* for certain sounds that subtly

39 J. Hillis Miller, 'The Critic as Host', *Deconstruction & Criticism*, p 237.

enhance the emotional content of his poetry. JP Ward first made me consciously aware of this fascinating physical aspect of Wordsworth's work:

> Impregnating all Wordsworth's work, certainly all his most memorable work, is a lexicon based on the consonantal sounds which originate inwardly and emerge vibrantly through the nasal letters m, n, ng or combinations of them. These words include mind, man, mountain, murmur, mourn, thing, element, memory, moon, motion, mean, gleam, dream, living, haunt, gentle, moment, margin, imagine, time, calm, blend, theme, enchant, melancholy, eternity, end and many more. They occur in what are usually regarded as the most deeply felt passages, and often seem to *embody* [my emphasis] the actual expression, the putting-out, of thought and feeling in the most natural union of mind and body possible (1984:39].

The effect of these emotive words is substantially heightened by the presence of sibilant sounds like s, ss or the soft c. The following well-known examples will illustrate how feeling and linguistic expression converge to create Wordsworth's unique impact:

> There was a time when meadow, grove and stream
> The earth, and every common sight
>   To me did seem
>   Apparelled in celestial light
> The glory and the freshness of a dream ('Immortality Ode', *ll* 1-5).
>
> A single Field which I have looked upon
> Both of them speak of something that is gone
>   The pansy at my feet
>   Doth the same tale repeat:
> Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
> Where is it now, the glory and the dream? ('Immortality Ode', *ll* 52-57).

One of the most telling examples occurs in Book 1 of *The Prelude* of 1805. After a frightening experience of the awesome power of Nature in the shape of a huge cliff that seemingly comes alive and strides after him, the guilty boy returns the stolen boat, in one of the famous 'spots of time' incidents, to its mooring place:

>   With trembling hands I turned
> And through the silent water stole my way
> Back to the cavern of the willow tree.
> There, in her mooring-place, I left my bark
> And through the meadows homeward went with grave
> And serious thoughts; and after I had seen

> That spectacle, for many days my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
> There was a darkness – call it solitude
> Or blank desertion – no familiar shapes
> Of hourly objects, images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
> But huge and mighty forms that do not live
> Like living men moved slowly through my mind
> By day, and were the trouble of my dreams (*ll* 412-27).

In this passage, with its recurring sibilants and nasal sounds, the tentative and groping language effectively conveys the confusion that haunts the young poet.

This brings me to another aspect of Wordsworth and Dickinson's poetry, namely that the appearance of their text on the page, the physiognomy of their poems, is important in that it enacts and strengthens the message of the poem. Mary Jacobus points out astutely that Wordsworth's "meaning can only be glimpsed if we actually look at the lines (and the spaces between them) rather than [just] read them. We have, so to speak, to *see*, not [just] feel how beautiful they are" (1979:616-20). This is profoundly true of Dickinson's poetry as well – as is the case with Wordsworth's poetry, the ***appearance*** of her text on the page is extremely important. The force of her poetry, with its eccentric usage of capitals, punctuation and dashes, is substantially strengthened by the visual impact of her poetry on the page. The way her poetry ***looks*** indeed embodies and demonstrates the visual and intellectual force of not only her words, but of words and language in general. Judith Farr is also aware of this aspect of Dickinson's work; she refers to the "verbal/visual complexity" of Dickinson's poetry (1992:ix). Cristanne Miller also makes the very valid point that the "disruptive punctuation, inverted and elliptical syntax, occasional metrical irregularity, off-rhyme, and general ungrammaticality" (1987:44) that are such features of Dickinson's poetry add substantially to the effect of her work. The effect of disjunction thus achieved is a potent Dickinsonian tool that underlies the effect of defamiliarization that is such a potent characteristic of her work.

E Miller Budick validly makes the same claim regarding Dickinson's poetry, namely that the impact of her poems is achieved both linguistically and visually. In discussing Poem 824, dealing with the destruction caused by a violent storm, the perceptive point is made that the destructive elements of the storm are 'enacted' in the poem. Miller Budick then claims, in what I see as a rather negative interpretation, "that the poem becomes the jumbled multiplicity of the elements it describes ... both natural and human language fall apart. ... Ideas grotesquely metamorphose into things ... Animate and inanimate exchange places ... Identities merge and things turn into each other ... hands that are supposed to uphold order, cosmic and poetic, fail to do their job ... Words destroy each other" (1985:14-16). I really cannot agree with this interpretation. I rather see the poem as a superb linguistic and visual enactment of its subject matter in words that, far from destroying each other, actually reinforce each other's metalingual aspects in a veritable linguistic *tour de force.* The poem does indeed, as Miller Budick claims, "become the jumbled multiplicity of the elements" that it describes, but it does so in a positive, challenging and marvellously evocative manner. I quote the second version of this poem in full to illustrate:

> The Wind began to rock the Grass
> With threatening Tunes and low –
> He threw a Menace at the Earth –
> A Menace at the Sky.
>
> The leaves unhooked themselves from Trees –
> And started all abroad
> The Dust did scoop itself like Hands
> And threw away the Road.
>
> The Wagons quickened on the Streets
> The Thunder hurried slow –
> The Lightning showed a Yellow Beak
> And then a livid Claw.
>
> The birds put up the Bars to Nests –
> The Cattle fled to Barns –
> There came one drop of Giant Rain
> And then as if the Hands
>
> That held the Dams had parted hold
> The Waters Wrecked the Sky,

But overlooked my Father's House –
Just quartering a Tree –

The almost bathos of the final two lines just serves to highlight the violence of the storm by suggesting that splitting a tree into four pieces is in reality quite mild compared to the severity of the damage done by the storm elsewhere!

Ambiguity, indeterminacy and paradox are strong elements of Wordsworth's poetry. Alison Phinney points out that the reader of Wordsworth has to unearth the "unsaid that inheres in the said" (1987:71). Referring to lines 620-29 of Book 5 of the 1805 *Prelude* (quoted further on in this chapter), she writes as follows:

> Language is here represented simultaneously as transparent embodiment and cloaking veil, a place of darkness and a source of light, pure presentation of things in themselves, and as a radiant addition to them. The very duplicity of Wordsworth's metaphors suggests a hesitation between the two views of language. While he wants language to be pure transparence, it would seem to be the very obscurity of language that constitutes its brilliant sublimity(1987:70).

Murray D. Arndt makes a very similar statement about Dickinson. In a comment referred to before, he states insightfully that Dickinson, like Wordsworth, knew that words "naturally have resonances that range beyond the limits of logic" and that she consciously exploited this in her poetry so that it is often "ambiguously complex, richly mysterious, and courageously unresolved" (1986:22, 24). With reference to Poem 675, which describes the creation of lasting poetry in terms of the process of making perfume, an arduous and painful process, he confirms my belief that it is the "perfect Dickinson poem, bursting beyond all logic and reasonableness into the dark dynamics of paradox, crushed to essentiality between affirmation and denial, content to take off the top of your head" (1986:27):

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

The General Rose – decay –
But this – in Lady's Drawer
Make Summer – When the Lady lie

In Ceaseless Rosemary –

The use of contradictions and oxymorons similarly characterises the work of both Dickinson and Wordsworth. These invariably add to the metalingual and evocative qualities of their poetry and often impart a teasing ambiguity that makes the images more striking. In this context I will look at just a few of the many instances of this enriching linguistic device that they both use so skilfully. Wordsworth refers to "the stationary blasts of waterfalls" and a "motionless array of mighty waves" from Book 6 of *The Prelude* of 1805, *ll* 58 *and 459*, "*Blithe ravens*" that "croak of death" ('A Morning Exercise', *l 7*) and the frost that "raged" with "keen and "silent tooth" (Two-Part *Prelude,* First Part, *l* 27). In like fashion, Dickinson refers to "solid witchcraft", "the Lunacy of Light", "Divine Insanity" which are all from Poem 593. In the second version of Poem 824 there is the memorable line "The Thunder hurried slow –" which evokes the latent threat of the thunder wonderfully. Poem 1129 contains "Infirm delight" and "dazzle gradually", Poem 1382 intriguingly refers to "sumptuous Destitution" ("blissful" as a variant), and Poem 505 has as the final line of the first stanza "Such sumptuous – Despair – ", and Poem 1749 contains the truly startling "this revolting bliss". Poem 522 refers to "Confident Despair" with "diligent" as an interesting variant for "confident".

As already said, however, both poets are also overwhelmingly conscious of the deficiencies of language. Wordsworth refers to this in the well-known Simplon Pass passage quoted earlier in this chapter (see p 66). And Dickinson whimsically refers to the inability of language to encompass all imaginative thought:

> 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
>
> To Races – nurtured in the Dark –
> How would your own – begin?
> Can blaze be shown in Cochineal –
> Or Noon – in Mazarin? (P 581).

In a chapter aptly entitled 'The Dangers of the Living Word', E. Miller Budick refers to an additional and serious complication for Dickinson, namely "the powerful reductiveness of human language that can constrict the vital, aggressive fragments of our perception into dead and deadening words" (1985:37-8). This is strongly reminiscent of Wordsworth's regretful claim that he has to "call upon a few weak words to say/What is already written in the hearts/Of all that breathe" (*Prelude*, 1805, 5, *ll* 186-88). Dickinson refers to words that can be merely a "paltry melody" (P 1750). Miller Budick further points out that "Dickinson's words show us the tendency of language to create its own scenes" (1985:40-41) which comment Wordsworth would certainly have understood! In a passage frequently referred to before, he writes compellingly about the darkly transforming and creative power that inheres in language:

> Visionary power
> Attends upon the motions of the winds
> Embodied in the mystery of words:
> There darkness makes abode, and all the host
> Of shadowy things do work their changes there
> As in a mansion like their proper home.
> Even forms and substances are circumfused
> By that transparent veil with light divine,
> And through the turnings intricate of verse
> Present themselves as objects recognised
> In flashes, and with a glory scarce their own (*Prelude*, 1805, 5, *ll* 620-29).

I believe that this passage is a cogent example, in Wordsworth's poetry, of what Miller Budick so imaginatively refers to as the "the monstrous, dictatorial power of the word" as it shapes and determines the form of Dickinson's poetry on the page as the poet struggles to capture and embody perception in words (1985:29).

Mary Jacobus voices a similar hypothesis regarding the "dual power of language to estrange and transfigure", and the appearance of Wordsworth's text on the page. With reference to the Wordsworth quotation above, she writes as follows in a remarkably perceptive passage that I have referred to before, but wish to quote here in full:

> Wordsworth writes like a man trying to net the wind in the "turnings intricate" of his own blank verse; for all its insubstantiality, his meaning can only be glimpsed if we actually look at the lines (and the spaces between them) rather than read them. We have, so to speak, to see, not feel, how beautiful they are. The deadening of a text already slowed by its solemn rhythms allows us, paradoxically, to endow it with a living spirit – lodged in the interstices of the web, behind the veil, as a ghostly and unrepresentable presence. As always, Wordsworth's straining of language to its limits has its own fullness; if the motions of the wind can never be embodied, if the mystery of words must remain ineffable, still, the veil of poetry irradiates and makes strange the objects it obscures ... (1979:619-20).

In a very similar context Gary Stonum (1990:67) makes a similarly perceptive point that Dickinson's "conspicuously deviant style ... is meant to cherish a power [language] that extends considerably beyond the author's direct control". In doing so she opts, just like Wordsworth did, for the sublime as a modality of expression where the mind's power joins forces with the "mercurial capacities of language" (Stonum, 1990:67) and also with the tutelary powers of Nature. Dickinson shares with Wordsworth a strong sense of the ambiguity inherent in language – consequently they share a troubling, but also enriching perception that the poet may be unable to control "syllogistic words" (see below) that can be a 'counter-spirit unremittingly ... at work to derange, "to subvert ... " as Wordsworth puts it so memorably in his third *Essay upon Epitaphs*, *ll* 186-87.

So obviously, Wordsworth was overwhelmingly aware of this defamiliarising aspect of language. Hugh Sykes Davies points out that Wordsworth could apply this very positively and had the ability to create an environment of linguistic resonance in which the words mutually strengthen and support each other (1986:46-7). But, as previously pointed out, Wordsworth was also overwhelmingly aware of the destructive potential of words:

> In such strange passion, if I may once more
> Review the past, I warred against myself –
> A bigot to a new idolatry –
> Like a cowled monk who hath forsworn the world,
> Zealously laboured to cut off my heart
> From all the sources of her former strength;
> And as, by simple waving of a wand,

The wizard instantaneously dissolves
Palace or grove, even so could I *unsoul*
As readily by ***syllogistic words*** [my emphasis]
Those mysteries of being which have made,
And shall continue evermore to make,
Of the whole human race one brotherhood (*Prelude*, 1850, 11, *ll* 75-87).

In like fashion Dickinson even claims that the very act of putting something into words destroys something in the experience:

I should not be so glad –
But when I cannot make the Force,
Nor mould it into Word,
I know it is a sign
That new Dilemma be
If I could tell how glad I was
From mathematics further off
Than from Eternity (P 1668).

And Wordsworth knew that very same thing! In the 1800 Note to 'The Thorn', he says:

For the Reader cannot be too often reminded that Poetry is Passion: it is the history of or science of feelings: now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feeling without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language (*WW*, 1984:594).

Dickinson states this dilemma with devastating succinctness in this four-line poem that fairly hums with tension:

If What we could – were what we would –
Criterion – be small –
It is the ultimate of Talk –
The Impotence to Tell – (P 407).

Another absorbing aspect of the language usage of both poets is their ability to evoke the uncanny with their 'haunted' vocabularies. Hartman's description of Wordsworth as "preeminently the poet of "dark passages"" (1987:xxvii) is surely apposite to Dickinson as well. This aspect hangs together very strongly with both poets' concept of the mind and its often frightening power, as well as their acknowledgement of another consciousness or level of being that exists in the mind. Joanne Feit Diehl even suggests that this other consciousness in

Dickinson's mind is her "masculine identity" in which her creative energies are lodged and which manifests as an "essential adversary" (1981:184-85). In Poem 670 (also referred to as 'Ghosts' in some textbooks) Dickinson refers to this frightening internal division most evocatively:

> One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -
> One need not be a House -
> The Brain has Corridors - surpassing
> Material Place –
>
> Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
> External Ghost
> Than its interior Confronting –
> That cooler Host.

Hugh Sykes Davies makes a perceptive connection with Wordsworth here when he claims that "of him, indeed, Emily Dickinson's profound aphorism [voiced in the above poem] was profoundly true ..." and that it is this awareness of the uncanny that underlies the everyday that makes him "...so vivid a reporter of the stranger moods of his own mind, and of everyone's mind" (Davies, 1986:141).

And who is better known than Dickinson for the strangeness of her mind and perception?

Conclusion

"Connected in a mighty scheme of truth": Can Dickinson be identified as a literary inheritor of Wordsworth?

Yes, I truly believe that she can, as can be almost every poet that came after him. This is being acknowledged more and more. But, because she often absorbed his influence through other poets and authors, Dickinson's Wordsworthian inheritance has not always been obvious. As discussed before (see p 82), Richard Gravil points out that Dickinson's long "engagement" with Wordsworth's Lucy poems has been masked by Tennyson's poetry – Dickinson absorbs and transmutes Wordsworth through Tennyson. This is also the emphatically the case with Shelley, as I discuss on pp 10-12 and 56.

So while the influence of Tennyson on Dickinson has been acknowledged, it is often Wordsworth's writing that is surfacing through Dickinson's writing on the palimpsest. Indeed, Gravil makes a convincing case that Dickinson's *oeuvre* – in at least twenty poems – represents the longest engagement with Wordsworth's Lucy in American poetry, and that this has been masked by Dickinson's ostensible indebtedness to Tennyson (2000:196). Gravil writes as follows:

> The Lucy poems that seem to have mattered most to Dickinson were "Strange fits of Passion," with its alarming premonition of death, "She dwelt among th' untrodden ways," with its lament for the loss of a girl-woman almost unknown to her kind, "A slumber did my spirit seal," with its sublime intimations of life in nature, and "Three Years she Grew," with its drama of early mortality. "Lucy Gray," vanishing into the snow like a fleeting premonition of Dickinson, is a lesser presence (2000:196).

In an ingenious critical *tour de force* Gravil then proceeds to draw an intriguing and completely convincing line from Wordsworth's Lucy poems through Tennyson's *Maud* and 'Tears, idle Tears" (with its consciously Wordsworthian theme of the irretrievability of the past), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Coleridge's 'France, an Ode' and Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', to Dickinson's Poems 25 ('She slept beneath a tree' with its silently sleeping

Lucy figure) and 28 ('So has a Daisy vanished' with the same two stanza form of 'A slumber did my spirit seal') back to one of Wordsworth's Matthew poems, 'The Two April Mornings', with *its* silently sleeping Lucy figure – "Six feet in earth my Emma lay" (2000:196-198)! Presented like this, Dickinson's allusions to Wordsworth seem indisputable – the writing surfacing through the Dickinson palimpsest is indubitably Wordsworth's. I also wonder if Poems 149 and 150 are not also in the 'Lucy' mode – both deal with a woman or girl who died in a quiet and unobtrusive manner; both poems share the eight line format of 'Slumber" and both share the elegiac tone of the Wordsworth poem. Maybe even Poem 308 holds a very faint echo of 'Slumber' in the second four-line stanza in the reference to "no Motion" and the controlled tone of grief. I even wonder whether Poem 1505, with the female protagonist who is "gently owned" by Nature, did not somewhere along the route of its genesis stop off to nod at the Lucy of 'Three years she grew in sun and shower' who is also appropriated by Nature. Lucy dies after the poet has come to love her so that he is left grieving her amidst "This heath, this calm and quiet scene" and the memory of what has been and "never more will be" (*ll* 40-41).

I have also long wondered if Poem 898 does not hold echoes of Wordsworth's 'Lucy Gray' with its reference to a little child who perishes "of the cold" like Lucy Gray was surmised to have done. And I am completely convinced that Poem 344 holds strong allusive echoes of 'Lucy Gray' with the references to little tracks that are followed and which suddenly and inexplicably stop. I quote the longer second stanza of this intriguing Dickinson poem:

> This – was the Town – she passed –
> There – where she – rested – last –
> Then – stepped more fast –
> The little tracks – close prest –
> Then – not so swift –
> Slow – slow – as feet did weary – grow –
> Then – stopped – no other track!

And now some comparable and thought-provoking stanzas from 'Lucy Gray'. Lucy is sent to the town by her father with a lantern to "light" her mother home because snow is expected. Alas, the snowstorm arrives sooner than expected and Lucy gets lost and disappears. Her parents search for her all night to no

avail. At daybreak they are on their way home when "in the snow the Mother spied/The print of Lucy's feet":

> Then downward from the steep hill's edge
> They tracked the footmarks small;
> And through the broken hawthorn-hedge,
> And by the long stone-wall;
>
> And then an open field they crossed,
> The marks were still the same;
> They tracked them on, nor ever lost,
> And to the Bridge they came.
>
> They followed from the snowy bank
> The footmarks, one by one,
> Into the middle of the plank,
> And further there were none.

Likewise Prose Fragment 49 shows truly striking similarities to parts of Wordsworth's famed Simplon Passage. Dickinson says "Tis a dangerous moment for any one when the meaning goes out of things and Life stands straight – and punctual – and yet no content come. Yet such moments are. If we survive them they expand us" (*L.* p 919). Referring to the power of the imagination, Wordsworth puts it as follows:

> ... In such strength
> Of usurpation, in such visitings
> Of awful promise, when the light of sense
> Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
> The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
> There harbours whether we be young or old.
> Our destiny, our nature and our home,
> Is with infinitude – ... (*Prelude*, 1805, 6, *ll* 532-37).

Douglas Kneale's intriguing comment about *The Prelude's* concern with the deficiencies of language and the difficulty of translating the self into language is singularly applicable to Dickinson as well:

> Where these rhetorical difficulties are often seen is in what Wordsworth calls an act of "usurpation"[vi, 532], which for him characteristically involves (to use his own trope) an act of "unfathering" – that is, the putting in question of a figural "father", source, light of sense or point of reference in order to liberate the power of the Imagination (1984:112).

This is particularly interesting in the light of Bloom's theories of anxiety of influence that explore the "dilemma of a poet wrestling with his precursors" (1973:96) and Feit Diehl's arguments that Dickinson both wanted the influence of her male precursor 'father' poets (Master/Stranger/Sire), but that she also had to reject that influence to function as a woman poet in her own right. Feit Diehl writes insightfully as follows:

> ... I maintain that Dickinson's perception of influence leads us to ... a paradigm that applies more generally to nineteenth-century women poets as they seek independence from powerful male precursors. For Rossetti and Browning as well as for Dickinson, the precursor becomes a composite male figure; finding themselves heirs to a long succession of fathers, these women share the vision of a father/lover that surpasses individuals. And so for them the composite father is the main adversary (1981:15-6).

This "Master Poet ... composite Precursor, who represents the collective force of the major influences upon her writing" (p18), is loved and desired, but also feared, and subsequently has to be rejected in order for the woman poet to retain her own poetic identity. The loved and feared "masculine muse" (p 19) is manifested in Dickinson's poetry as the Master or visitor or Stranger that she has strongly ambivalent responses to:

> Dickinson wavers between feeling that she must wait to receive her Master/muse and radical rejection of his presence. Threat of dependence foments rebellion; by casting off her Precursor, she fears that she may be relinquishing her muse as well. In the process of exorcising her Precursor, she may banish the source of her art. In her late poems, Dickinson asserts her independence of any master, yet she remains haunted by the possibility that she may have been robbed of his potency and power. Her poems vacillate between these two poles – the conflict remains unresolved and so must be reenacted in poem after poem (p 21).

Feit Diehl argues persuasively that Dickinson's poems provide many instances of the difficult balance she tries to maintain between independence and the power of the Precursor/father. While responding to the lure of the powerful male precursor and seeing him as the origin and source of her creative energy, she also resists his influence (p 32). While trying to avoid either subjection or capitulation, she none-the-less continuously feels the pressure of an "all-seeing, invisible scrutiny" (p 32), which is as good a

description of Bloom's anxiety of influence as I believe one can find. Dickinson puts it as follows:

> Tried always and Condemned by thee
> Permit me this reprieve
> That dying I may earn the look
> For which I cease to live – (P 1559).

Dickinson refuses to relinquish her identity or autonomy to the intruder with the result that the struggle continues and remains unresolved and the agonistic struggle veers from side to side in poem to poem after poem. The "paralysing ambivalence she feels facing person, Precursor, or death results from the psychic resonance of confrontation." Even in death, as she writes to her Norcross cousins, "Called Back!", she is listening to this mysterious voice, and subverts its power one last time as she voices its command, thus ending a lifetime of confronting the presence that has haunted her:

> He was my host – he was my guest,
> I never to this day
> If I invited him could tell,
> Or he invited me.
>
> So infinite our intercourse
> So intimate, indeed,
> Analysis as capsule seemed
> To keeper of the seed (P 1721).

If one accepts Feit Diehl's persuasive premise (and I find it hard to avoid doing so) that this male presence in Dickinson's poetry, the Master or Stranger or Sire, is indeed her male precursor poets in the guise of her male muse, it opens the way to a fascinating extrapolation that I have explored before but that I wish to go back to in the context of seeing Dickinson as an inheritor of Wordsworth. If, as Feit Diehl suggests, she both welcomed her muse and felt that she had to reject him, then it is surely significant that she specifically refers to Wordsworth as "the Stranger" and twice explicitly rejects what he says. To reiterate the point I made in my Introduction Dickinson wrote in a letter to Mrs J. G. Holland: "February passed like a Skate and I know March. Here is the "light" the Stranger said "was not on land or sea." Myself could arrest it but we'll not chagrin Him." Letters 315 and 394 specifically

quote 'The Elegiac Stanzas' and she refers to 'We are Seven' in Letter number 96. Here she refers to a line from Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas': "To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,/The light that never was, on sea or land". She also quotes the same line in a letter no. 394 to her Norcross cousins: "... "The light that never was on sea or land" might just as well be had for the knocking" (L 394).

One can't help asking why she was so preoccupied with this line or issue. I firmly believe that there is an agonistic quality here – Dickinson is deliberately resisting Wordsworth's influence by belittling him. And Feit Diehl does raise the interesting possibility that Dickinson may "explicitly reject the voice of another who had earlier fostered a dependency within her" (1981:27). Isn't there at least an element of that in what is happening here? I strongly suspect that there is.

As explored in Chapter 6, I believe that Dickinson can clearly be regarded as one of Wordsworth's inheritors regarding their preoccupation with the power and the deficiencies of language, and their acceptance of what Margaret Homans so evocatively refers to as the "lethal fictiveness of language" (1980:135-36). Both poets share not just an intense engagement with language, as a specific topic of speculation and the powerful tool that they both employ in their respective poetic missions/quests/vocations, but they also share an equally strong, and indeed advanced, acknowledgement of the powers that inhere in language as it exerts its dominion over the mind. As regards the latter, explored in Chapter 5, Dickinson also treads in Wordsworth's footsteps as they both laud what they see as the godlike power of the human mind, even as they both acknowledge it as a frightening place, not least because it contains the usurping power of the imagination, but also because it harbours consciousness(es), that/those 'other' being(s) that their poetic psyches have to contend with.

I believe that Dickinson is greatly in Wordsworth's debt as regards her view of poetry and the elevated role that they both ascribe to the poet. Dickinson's recognition of the poet as humanity's interpreter of the universe and her acknowledgement of the creative faculty as almost a divine element in man

owes much to Wordsworth and his writings, most notably his contentious prefaces to *Lyrical Ballads*, as I show in Chapter 2.

And of course, as regards Nature, the topic that I explore in Chapter 4, I believe that Wordsworth's influence on Dickinson is irrefutable. Much of what she absorbed from other writers and poets regarding nature is Wordsworth transmuted, to a greater or lesser extent. The whole subject of Nature is so synonymous with Wordsworth that this is almost a given, I believe. For Dickinson, as for Wordsworth, the relationship with Nature was a crucial and inescapable one. Indeed, as Albert Gelpi points out in view of the 'failure' of religion for Dickinson, it was the "original relationship with the universe" for her, as it was for "Wordsworth and Emerson and Whitman". Along with "the great Romantic poets" she truly "celebrated the mysterious and vital process of growth in which self realized itself in cosmic unity" (1985:62), thus accepting I believe, Wordsworth's tenet of man's natural connection with the universe (see p 20).

I agree with Feit Diehl's claim that Dickinson's quality of radical experimentation finds its source in her feeling of estrangement, as a woman poet, from the powerful male precursor poets of the Romantic Tradition. This brought both freedom and the "dark courage" (1981:12) to establish her own poetic voice, but it also burdened her with the fear of losing her muse, and thus compromising her creativity even as she audaciously often assumes a male persona in her poetry. Feit Diehl writes perceptively that it is when one reads Dickinson's poetry in the context and light of Romanticism, that one gains an added insight into her poetry as one comes across many themes and preoccupations that she shares with the Romantics. I explore many of these, which places Dickinson very much in Romanticism's, and particularly Wordsworth's ambit, in Chapter 3 thus, successfully I believe, identifying her as a literary inheritor of Wordsworth in view of the many of the common themes and preoccupations that manifest in both their *oeuvres.* With this in mind I believe that the following comment from Joanne Feit Diehl is singularly apt as it simultaneously brings Dickinson 'closer' whilst at the same time highlighting her originality. Feit Diehl points out that it is when one sees

Dickinson against the Romantics, "with the voices of Romanticism echoing in our ears" that we most truly hear her own voice – "a voice uncompromising in its austerity" yet at the same time "more ***familiar*** than we had formerly chosen to acknowledge, and more ***strange*** [my emphasis] (1981:12).

In moving towards the end of this Conclusion I want to quote that great literary mind, M H Abrams, as he sums up Wordsworth's seminal role beautifully. And it has to be stressed that what Abrams said in 1972 is as valid now as it was then, if not more so:

> For Wordsworth criticism is in a flourishing condition these days, and its vigorous internal disputes testify to the poet's continuing vitality and pertinence. We are rediscovering what a number of Wordsworth's major contemporaries acknowledged – that he has done what only the greatest poets do. He has transformed the inherited language of poetry into a medium adequate to express new ways of perceiving the world, new modes of experience, and new relations of the individual consciousness to itself, to its past, and to other men. ***More than all but a very few English writers, Wordsworth has altered not only our poetry, but our sensibility and our culture*** [my emphasis] (Abrams, 1972:11).

And, without a shadow of a doubt in my mind, he succeeded in making Emily Dickinson his heir – not just regarding language, though that is indeed a significant portion of his legacy to her, but also regarding those new ways that Abrams refers to of perceiving the world, nature and the self. Through his transumptive and often deeply covert and transmuted influence he entered her mind and indelibly coloured the pigments of her poetic *palette*. As he shaped her concept of poetry and the role of the poet, he covertly moulded her poetry though it ostensibly differs radically from his. As he contributed to her awareness of the power of the mind, his radically original mind fructified her own highly original sensibilities and perceptions. And, as he offered her Nature as an alternative to the harsh Puritan tenets that she could not live with, he sowed at least some seeds that would flower into her often startlingly beautiful and original poetry.

Dickinson could not and did not escape Wordsworth's influence. This is also true of virtually every lyrical poet who has come after him. G Kim Blank makes

the following insightful comment about Wordsworth's extraordinary impact and influence:

> Regardless of whether Wordsworth's contemporaries parodied or imitated him, reacted against him or dismissed him, he dominated the poetry of the time – the era has been called, after all, the 'Age of Wordsworth'. Shelley's poetry perhaps best marks this ambivalence of the age, the simultaneous imitation and rejection of Wordsworth. Even at the level of verbal influence, we can note how, for example, Shelley might use a Wordsworthian lexicon to construct his own particular syntax, or conversely, how he might take Wordsworthian syntax and substitute his own vocabulary, or how he might create a Wordsworthian scene only to transcend it (1988:74).

And so, *inter alia,* did Emerson and Thoreau and Whitman, Tennyson and George Eliot and Keats, and yes, Byron and Dickinson.

But maybe I should allow have another poet to have the last word in this Conclusion as he speaks about the power of Wordsworth and the magic of his poetry. Philip Larkin recounts the following incident:

> Poetry can creep up on you unawares. Wordsworth was almost the price of me once. I was driving down the M1 on a Saturday morning; they had this poetry slot on the radio, 'Time for Verse': it was a lovely summer morning, and someone started reading the Immortality ode, and I couldn't see for tears ... I don't suppose I'd read the poem for twenty years, and it's amazing how effective it was when one was totally unprepared for it (McSweeney, 1998:192, n4).

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