place in his poems, he insisted on his aesthetic novelty and above all, in symbolist fashion, on "the image-making faculty, coping with material creation, and rivaling, almost triumphing, over it." Proposing a new relation between observing poet and what he observes, his aim was experimental—as was America's. He always felt that his *carte de visite* was to the coming generations and not alone to his own:

> One main contrast of the ideas behind every page of my verse, compared with establish'd poems, is their different relative attitude towards God, towards the objective universe, and still more (by reflection, confession, assumption, &c) the quite changed attitude toward the ego, the one chanting or talking, towards himself and towards his fellow-humanity. It is certainly time for America, above all, to begin the readjustment in the scope and basic point of view of verse; for everything else has changed.

This was the spirit of Ezra Pound's later determination to "Make It New." With it, Whitman made himself central to the legacy of nearly every later American poet of scale, for the multivalent imagery he cultivated posed long-term questions of the relation in America between symbol and reality, ego and epic. That fertile tradition of the expansive and incorporative American poem that haunted so many twentieth-century American poets—Pound with *The Cantos,* Hart Crane with *The Bridge,* Wallace Stevens with *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,* William Carlos Williams with *Paterson,* Charles Olson with *The Maximus Poems*—took its rise and guarantee from Whitman's faith in the open assimilative poem, ever in process of creative renewal in its reach toward the future.

·V·

"The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it," Whitman wrote in the early confident days of his 1855 preface, only to find how long it would take before reciprocal absorption would indeed begin to develop. It is one of the ironies of American literature that the later nineteenth century should produce

two major poets who would prove to be the genuine antecedents of most serious modern American poetry, yet that, of those two, one should be a public poet who virtually lost the public he so confidently addressed, while the other was so private that scarcely any of her poems appeared in her own lifetime.

Emily Dickinson so shunned public disclosure that most of her verses imply a total inwardness, a refusal to share in the collective utterance of the world; there is no ideal of chanting or talking here, rather a universe of rugged inward meditation and drama that takes on expression but no clear social form. Indeed, to set Whitman and Dickinson side by side seems almost a breach of propriety—though one way of understanding modern American poetry is to say that many of its poets did just that. Yet this quiet resident of Amherst, Massachusetts—where Calvinist and Unitarian traditions mingled in doubt and uncertainty—is so private and subtle where Whitman is so public and garrulous, her poems are so brief, tight and oblique where his expand, circle, ramble and repeat, that many forget they were contemporaries. Did they in any way know of each other? She was told his book was disgraceful and never read it. He might just have known of her, but her "letter to the World/That never wrote to Me" was not ever really mailed. Seven of her poems appeared, anonymously, during her lifetime, but the remaining works, close to eighteen hundred of them, did not come to light until after her death. They were published in 1890, just before Whitman died, but it was not until the 1920s that they were fully acclaimed, and not until 1958, when Thomas H. Johnson edited them, that a satisfactory edition and full impression was possible. Only then was it fully clear that these enigmatic short lyrics were the work of America's greatest poet. As with Edward Taylor, another part-Puritan spirit before her, her poetry was a metaphysical and moral secret which might never have been fathomed.

This was because, although she did now and again try to publish, for Dickinson the writing seemed a satisfying secret, sufficient to itself. The continent she sang was that of Emerson's inner self, and her vocation was the liberation of—in Emerson's phrase—a private chicken coop. We know that she read Emerson and heard him lecture and that he had some effect on her. We also know the people she met and corresponded with, but there biography virtually ceases to illu-

minate her or her verse. There is no egotistical sublime here, no dramatic self on show and no trascendentalist outreach. Rather there is an inreach, a guiding concept of privacy and selfhood which creates a metaphysical distillation from its own being. We need only look to some of her famous opening lines—"The Soul selects her own Society," "I dwell in possibility," "Renunciation—is a piercing Virtue"—to feel the pained self-anatomizing, the willed self-enclosure, which is the field of her verse. Unlike Whitman's, her poetry articulates a life carefully hidden, even from the Puritanism and Evangelicalism of her Amherst neighbors and of her own family. With few forays out, the sum of her life was conducted in her father's house. Even here she kept her distance. As she said of her family in a letter to her one literary mentor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson: "They are religious—except me—and address an Eclipse every morning—whom they call their 'Father.' "

Even this remark is oblique. Dickinson is religious, but her world of faith seems homemade. She knew very well the painful erosion of belief that was taking place among the orthodox who surrounded her, the troubles that marked the transition from Calvinism to Unitarianism, and she felt this in her own conscience and consciousness. But although the subtly rewritten iconography of Christian discourse provided her essential material and transcendentalism evidently stirred her, neither provided her with a solution to the agonized experience of life, nor did the optimistic spirit masking the divisions of her age ever color her spirit. The years of the Civil War saw her most concentrated poetic work, but the war itself did not impinge directly on her poems—though we may speculate that it had something to do with the doubt and horror they so often express. The Emersonian vision is there, too. The artist becomes the spider of her poem, who "holds a silver Ball,—/In unperceived hands" and rears "supreme/His theories of light." Her poet sings the inner self, but also searches in vain for the truth outside—for "Not unto nomination/The Cherubim reveal." Poetry is thus as devious as the meaning of the universe. When she sees Truth, she must tell it all, but "tell it slant . . /The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every Man be blind."

Hence not only the themes of Emerson but the devotional intricacies and metaphysics of a John Donne or George Herbert appear to lie beneath her poetry. Yet no single familiar artistic convention seems to match the slanted truth of her verse. She writes with condensation, with tight formal control and hymnlike construction, but there is also fragmentation. Whitman broke with the metric of stresses, turning to free-verse forms that roll rhythmically and to "bare lists of words" that work through reiteration to amplification, while dashes and dots imply incompleteness, language's pressure otherwise limiting what pushes to be said. A similar struggle with the limits of traditional discourse breaks open Dickinson's verse, which rejects conventional punctuation and completed phrasing, employs dashes for pacing, and thereby creates ambiguity and multiplicity. Where Whitman used lists, she scattered alternative words about her manuscripts—synonyms, close pairings or rival locutions that keep the poems incomplete so that final print seems to imprison them. This is doubtless deliberate, part of the method of "circuit" which she celebrates. Apparently simple or even naive perception takes on extreme tension that holds contradictions in balance. In this sense, too, she seems a metaphysical poet. One of the most powerful of all her contradictions is between the banal and the momentous, as in the familiar "I heard a Fly buzz when I died," that subtly disturbing poem wherein

> I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
> What portion of me be
> Assignable—and then it was
> There interposed a Fly—
>
> With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
> Between the light—and me—
> And then the Windows failed—and then
> I could not see to see—

Dickinson's reclusive nature so masked her intense dedication to the discipline of her craft that confidants like Higginson mistakenly thought she was unable to reach the smooth rhymes and rhythms of Tennyson or Longfellow. And yet for today's reader, no single sampling can adequately represent the range of play and speculation that explodes in the tiny cosmos of her individual poems. There are several

Emily Dickinsons: a poet of wit, the creator of the riddling, sometimes overcute description of the snake, "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" who brings "a tighter breathing/And Zero at the Bone—" and the railroad—"I like to see it lap the Miles—/And lick the Valleys up." There are the wry reflections on death, that dominant preoccupation where the wit functions doubly, not just as a voice of condensation but as the extreme, postmortal source of her meditation—"Because I could not stop for Death,—/He kindly stopped for me." And there are poems of vision, of mystical experience—"Better—than Music! For I—who heard it—/. . . 'Twas Translation—/Of all the tunes I knew—and more. . . ." There are transcendental poems of nature and poems appalled at nature, where the vision recalls the doubtful questioning of Melville or the icy abyss of Poe. In "I tried to think a lonelier Thing/Than any I had seen," the only hope she can imagine for one "Of Heavenly love forgot" is another poor soul to touch in mutual pity. "The Soul has Bandaged moments—/When too appalled to stir," she suggests. Despite occasional respite, the "moments of Escape—/When bursting all the doors—/She dances like a Bomb, abroad," she faces unflinchingly the loss of such gay freedom,

> The Soul's retaken moments—
> When, Felon, led along,
> With shackles on the plumed feet,
> And staples in the Song,
>
> The Horror welcomes her, again. . . .

these things, she concludes, are "not brayed of Tongue."

These were certainly not frequently brayed of tongue in nineteenth-century America. We are hearing here the accents of the modern world, a world of doubt, of Kurtz's "the horror" that Emerson, Thoreau or even Whitman could not or would not imagine. This world could grow cold and harsh, as in "It was not Death, for I stood up,/And all the Dead lie down," where living comes to seem "like Midnight, some—"

> When everything that ticked—has stopped—
> And Space stares all around—
> Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns,
> Repeal the Beating Ground—
>
> But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
> Without a Chance, or Spar—
> Or even a Report of Land—
> To justify—Despair.

Traditional faith yields for Dickinson and the America of her age, and ours, to present doubt, as in this extraordinary short poem:

> I reason, Earth is short—
> And Anguish—absolute—
> And many hurt,
> But, what of that?
>
> I reason, we could die—
> The best Vitality
> Cannot excel Decay,
> But, what of that?
>
> I reason, that in Heaven—
> Somehow, it will be even—
> Some new Equation given—
> But, what of that?

The Emerson of "Experience," "Politics" and "Fate" had explored the flaws in his own special optimism and felt the anguished strain of acknowledging death as inescapably part of his affirmation of life. In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Whitman had sought to make death the source of beauty by turning the sea into an eloquent mother of natutal motion who whispers "the low and delicious word death." But it is Dickinson who fully distilled the darker Janus-vision of her age against the grain of a culture that called its popular poetry increasingly toward sentimentality. It is this Janus-vision that made her seem so contemporary to the modernist poets of the next century.

They responded as well to her insistence on the discipline and formality of art, the craft by which the words are placed rightly on the page. In consequence her reputation grows daily as one of the best of America's writers, a writer in whom the legacy of nineteenth-century Romanticism turns toward the complexities of twentieth-century Modernism.