John Donne and Emily Dickinson: a study in insights and techniques

Jeanette Hubert Whatley

Atlanta University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/dissertations

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

JOHN DONNE AND EMILY DICKINSON: A STUDY
IN INSIGHTS AND TECHNIQUES

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN
PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
JEANETTE HUBERT WHATLEY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
JUNE 1968
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. ORIGINS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. INSIGHTS</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. TECHNIQUES</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUMMARY</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ii
When Emily Dickinson shocks her reader into attention and proceeds with her ingenious development of a thought, one could well be reminded of John Donne. Both poets seem strangely modern and seem to speak to us in our own accents across the centuries. Their sense of the anguish of personal existence and of the precariousness of human life seems to recommend them to a contemporary age which is seeking secular modes of thought more severe, more realistic and more durable than the easier optimisms which have sometimes characterized our intellectual life.

Many critics seem to support the writer in her belief that Miss Dickinson and John Donne show striking resemblance. Some remark that Emily Dickinson's style is essentially metaphysical — that she, as Donne, had the metaphysical vision of the unity of experience and strove to articulate it in a language and rhythms that emerge unconventional and eccentric in nature. Some marvel at how deftly these two writers can topple religious ideas or abstractions from the rational plane to the level of perception while others complain that both Donne and Miss Dickinson manifest a too singularly morbid concern for personal revelation.

Yet, in spite of the frequent statements of this nature that one encounters in regard to these two literary figures, the writer has not been able to uncover a study that documents evidences of such observations in a satisfying manner.

This paper is an attempt to uncover the evidence that would seem to substantiate the conclusion that there is a link between these two
poets.

The thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter examines dominant factors in the lives of the two poets toward a better understanding of the forces that went into the molding of their complex personalities. Here the writer has chosen only such biographical information and such elucidatory comment that make for a better appreciation of the poems to be considered. The second chapter considers the psychological and philosophical insights that the two poets seem to share in common and presents works in evidence of such considerations. Chapter three explores similarities of techniques exhibited by the two authors and works of the two poets in evidence. Finally, the writer has attempted to summarize the findings, and to point out their significance in relation to the original assumption.

I should like to acknowledge my thanks to Dr. Thomas D. Jarrett of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Atlanta University for his meticulous attention and unfaltering support throughout the preparation of this study. While he is in no way responsible for the shortcomings of this paper, he is in various ways responsible for its existence. Here let me salute him as a challenging and demanding teacher and as a sensitive and understanding human being.
CHAPTER I

ORIGINS

Emerson has noted that the biography of genius is internal rather than external. And certainly history has proved that an author may be apart from and different from everything in his age. So, indeed, if the judgment of a man's private affairs is extended into a judgment of his art, the result is very likely to be a distortion. But the writer feels that some background and biographical sense can be helpful to a reader in understanding certain implicit attitudes and feelings that underly the tone of a writer's art. It is with this in mind, that we shall begin our study by exploring the origins of John Donne and Emily Dickinson.

Critics seem to agree that John Donne is an enigmatic figure. But when one searches for factors that helped to mold the controversial Mr. Donne, one meets with a variety of opinions. One trend of thought is that Donne was indebted to the times in which he lived -- "that Donne lived in a world which was witnessing the decay of an old way of thinking and was struggling to find a new way to establish itself."¹ Alvarez feels, as do many other scholars, that Donne was intensely intellectual and that the restricted confines of popular poetic patterns could not possibly serve as a suitable vehicle for his thought.² Others lean


toward the idea that "... his /Donne/ training as a Catholic in an age of religious polemic, together with the scholastic element that was still part of the university education of his day, helped to determine the set of his mind."¹ Yet another school of thought is that "Donne loved and suffered much and thus writes with perceptive passion."²

Certainly, when one considers the world of John Donne, it is evident that many factors could have helped to shape his thinking. Seventeenth century England, of which Donne was a part, saw the spirit of the Renaissance reach its fullest development. During this era there was a revolt against scholasticism and a renewed emphasis on humanism. Men began to seek for truth in nature and man rather than in the writings of those to whom truth had been divinely revealed; Aristotle's deductive methods of reasoning gradually gave way to Bacon's inductive methods.

Sober men of the seventeenth century were beginning to realize that Copernicus' revolutionary theory that the universe was heliocentric rather than geocentric was more than mere fantasy. This evolving "new science" troubled the minds of scholars; men began to question the authority of the scholastic dogma and all fundamental institutions. Philosophers heralded this search for truth, and as a result there were political, social and religious re-appraisals. "The pervading questions of the century were, can I know anything of reality? and if so, how


and what?¹

Donne had a vast knowledge and interest in the advance of science and the new philosophies of his day. It would seem that one could justifiably conclude, as have many critics, that Donne's revolution in poetry occurred during a time of revolution -- that he may indeed have been a product of his age. On the other hand, the private life of John Donne was far from uneventful.

John Donne was born in the city of London in 1572 of a family with a strong Roman Catholic tradition. His father was a tradesman and his mother was a daughter of the dramatist, John Heywood, and was also descended from the Saint and Martyr, Sir Thomas More. Under Queen Elizabeth Catholics were considered aliens and exposed to insult, suspicion and suffering for their faith. "Our history textbooks make so little of the English Catholics that one is apt to forget they existed and were, for themselves at any rate, not a political problem, but real and suffering individuals."²

We gather than Donne was carefully and religiously educated at Oxford and Cambridge, but that since Catholics could not take a university degree, was taken or sent abroad, perhaps with a view to entering foreign service. In 1591 he settled in London to study law and was admitted to the Society of Lincoln's Inn in 1592. During this time he read veraciously and lived gaily. "He flung himself into the life of


a student and the life of a young man about town. He joined the band of reckless and raffish young men who sailed with Essex to Cadiz and the Islands in 1597.\textsuperscript{1}

Following this period of military activity, he traveled, read, and lived the life of a man about town - fond of women, wine, good conversation and expensive company. In 1597 Donne entered the service of London’s Sir Thomas Egerton, who in 1596 had become Lord Keeper of the Seal of England. By this time Donne had quietly dropped the Catholic faith so that he could secure a good job.

About 1601, Donne fell passionately and seriously in love with the niece of the Lord Keeper and married her, and was imprisoned for a time by his angry father-in-law. For several years after his release, he and his growing family were dependent on friends and patrons; then at the persuasion of influential admirers, he entered the Anglican church in 1615 where he rose rapidly to be Dean of Saint Paul’s and the most famous preacher of his time.

Donne’s later life, though not as turbulent as his early life, was not filled with happiness. Moody and Lovett proclaim that

After the death of his wife in 1617, he fell more and more under the shadow of a terrible spiritual gloom. As his life drew near its close, he had himself sculptured in his winding-sheet, standing upright in his coffin, and this monument was placed above his grave in Saint Paul’s.\textsuperscript{2}

Some critics would imply that there is a one to one relationship\textsuperscript{1}\textsuperscript{Ibid.}.

between the details of Donne's life and his art. For example, Daiches states that "In his youth he combined the gaiety and sophistication of a city spark with omniverous reading which helps to account for the tone of curious wit in much of his early poetry."\(^1\) He further points out that "Donne's Divine Poems were written in the last phase of his life when the witty and worldly Jack Donne of Lincoln's Inn had given way to the grave divine" and that "... after his wife's death, Donne had put the worldly and sensuous life completely behind him and was probing with fierce anxiety for the right relationship with eternity."\(^2\) Grierson feels that "The central theme of Donne's poetry is over his own intense personal needs as a lover, a friend, an analyst of his own experiences worldly and religious."\(^3\) And Grandsen injects that "One can believe that Donne's abandonment of Catholicism in order to secure a good job and the troubled early years of his marriage may have caused him to become cynical."\(^4\)

The writer is inclined to believe that many factors were at work in the molding of the spirit of John Donne and that it would be difficult to isolate any one controlling influence.

When one addresses himself to the life of Emily Dickinson, he must deal with difficult circumstances, because there is a dearth of material.

\(^1\)Daiches, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 360.

\(^2\)\textit{Ibid.}, p. 366.

\(^3\)Grierson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 28.

The fact that Miss Dickinson went into seclusion more and more after 1862, and became an almost complete recluse after 1870, produces a vacuum which legend makers rush to fill up. One critic comments that:

Despite all the activity and research in recent years, Emily Dickinson remains a shadowy figure. Hers is a very private world: a polar place of resonating silence. She left no memoirs, no essays. Her guarded remarks about herself, about religion, metaphysics and art are scattered in fragments which are usually indirect, often cryptic and sometimes indecipherable.¹

Another critic has this to say: "We look for sources in her external life to account for the rich and vivid life of her poems, and find ourselves frustrated at almost every turn."²

We do know, however, that Emily Dickinson was very much a part of New England, and that two great forces seem to have shaped the New England mind of her day: the Puritan tradition and the romantic and Transcendental idealism that flourished in her girlhood.

The Puritan's vision of himself and the cosmos was formulated into theological tenets the truth of which rested not on scriptural authority alone but on the individual's sense of things. 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,

¹Gelpi, op. cit., p. 7.
²Richard B. Sewall, Emily Dickinson (New Jersey, 1963), p. 5.
depravity -- the consequences of man's descent to a merely 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 or to confer through Christ's mediation the grace which, all undeserved, would span the gaping separation, raise man's faculties, and restore him to unity with his God and his world. The Scriptures were God's words to man, through which he could understand the truth of his plight and the nature of his regeneration. Man's duty was to ponder and elucidate God's message and to carry out His Commandments. Hence the single-minded concern of Puritan divines was applying man's reason to God's revelation; and the unrelenting labor to erect a vast theological system on which fallen men could rely and within which he could think and act. In relating these facts to Emily Dickinson, one writer observes that

The sense of her own unworthiness that seems to permeate Emily Dickinson's poetry may be related to the Puritan theology of the Connecticut Valley in which she was brought up. Certainly it was intensified, as her letters show, by her inability in adolescence at Mt. Holyoke Seminary to experience the religious conversion that was expected of her. Obstinately, but with characteristically honest refusal to simulate something that she did not feel, she alone of her family never did make the formal confession of faith necessary for full membership of the Congregational Church. Of course it would be difficult to adequately trace her debt to the Puritan tradition, but what is of paramount importance is the breakdown of that tradition that was taking place in her lifetime.

During her girlhood, a form of idealism known as Transcendentalism

---

1 Gelpi, op. cit., pp. 56-57.

took on a special significance in the United States. This philosophical romanticism based on doctrines of ancient and modern European philosophers (particularly Kant) was sponsored in America chiefly by Emerson. While holding different opinions about many things, the "new thought" groups seemed in general harmony in their conviction that within the nature of man there was a something which transcended human experience -- an intuitive and personal revelation of what constituted right and wrong. A respected authority comments on the philosophy thusly:

The transcendental movement was a spiritual affirmation and an intellectual effort to restore the high conception of the human soul and destiny in which Puritan New England had been schooled so long but which a rationalism based on the senses had overlaid with a burden become intolerable. It differed from its New England background of Calvinism in celebrating not the omnipotence of God but the limitless possibilities of the self.¹

The New England Transcendentalists preached that man's relationship to God was a personal matter and was established directly by the individual rather than through the medium of chosen representatives and ritualistic proceedings. They held that man had within himself the essence of divinity and urged the development of individual self-trust and self-reliance as opposed to a dependence upon tradition and authority. Feeling was exalted above logic. The group advocated that man live close to nature and resist commercialism in all forms. A critic observes that "The movement had tremendous influences upon American thought and literature..." and that "Emily Dickinson's writings

reflected much of the spirit of individualism, self-reliance and humanitarianism."¹ Gelpi comments that

The complexity of her mind is not the complexity of harmony, but that of dissonance. Her peculiar burden was to be a Romantic poet with a Calvinist's sense of things; to know transitory ecstasy in a world tragically fallen and doomed. In Emily Dickinson the opposing tendencies that divided the New England mind met at cross-purposes. She came after the fatal cleavage that split the Puritan mind, and in her the dislocated elements came together to struggle for articulation.²

It would not seem illogical to conclude, then, that Emily Dickinson, even as John Donne, could well have been a product of her age. Now let us examine the details of her biography.

The main features of her life may be quickly summarized. She was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, into a world which offered her a high measure of economic security, social position and devoted family life. In childhood and youth Emily Dickinson enjoyed the usual experiences of friendship, and up to the age of twenty-five, Emily Dickinson's outward life followed the usual pattern for a New England village girl of the times. Her formal schooling, appropriate to a young lady of her position, consisted of six years at Amherst Academy and one in a boarding school at nearby Mount Holyoke Seminary. We have pointed out that while here, she refused to make the formal confession of faith that was expected of her, thus deviating from the pattern. After her return Mount Holyoke, she lived all her days at Amherst, except for some rare visits to Washington, Philadelphia, and Boston. Her published

²Gelpi, op. cit., pp. 91-92.
correspondence adequately indicates the number and range of her friends and documents her most important means of contact with them. Particular reference is needed here only to four of them, all men, all of them older than she was, and all regarded by her primarily as guides and mentors. The first, and the only one with whom she was in frequent contact was Benjamin Franklin Newton, a gentle, grave law student who joined her father's office when she was 17 and who died some six years later. The full extent of his contribution to her development remains conjectural, but it was obviously important. In one of her letters Miss Dickinson states that it was he who taught her what to read, what authors to admire, what was beautiful in nature and a faith in things unseen. He also encouraged her to write poetry.

Then as a result of a visit to Philadelphia, she formed a similar friendship with the Presbyterian minister, Charles Wadsworth. They corresponded. He called on her in 1860 in Amherst and on one or two other occasions. Critics are quick to point out that it was in 1860 that Miss Dickinson discovered herself as a poet and began to write love poems; they further infer that she was devastated when he moved to San Francisco in 1862 and hasten to point out that it was very soon after this occurrence that she withdrew from village society.

The third of Miss Dickinson's masculine friends was the writer, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who corresponded with her, served as her critic and encouraged her to continue writing; and the fourth was her father's friend, Judge Otis P. Lord, a lifelong acquaintance with whom her relationship is said to have deepened between the death of his wife in 1877 and his own in 1884.
Emily Dickinson died a spinster in 1886. Only seven of her poems appeared during her lifetime. These were printed anonymously, and most of them against her wishes. After her death, her sister turned over the poems she could find to Higginson and Mrs. Mabel Loomis Todd to be edited.

It is fascinating to explore the diverse opinions that writers have advanced on the biography of Emily Dickinson. One author states that "Emily Dickinson's retirement from the world had a tradition behind it. For it had always been a possible way of life for New England spinsters and widows." Another author, advocating that she saw "New Englandly" states that

Loneliness was the most striking characteristic of the New England existence. Emily Dickinson's poetry bespoke a mind which the New England scene had made better acquainted with death than with life. No one knew better than she what she called the "lone effort to live and its bleak reward." Another opinion in the same vein states that "There was something about the way women lived in the late nineteenth century that encouraged repression. Pale, dressed in white, consecrated to their God, they were waited upon, protected, repressed." Thus we can see that some critics felt that the time and the place had their effect on Miss Dickinson.

Others would attach special significance to personal relationships. Pooley admonishes that "Those who would say that there was no romance

---


between Wadsworth and Emily must consider that it was in the year 1860 that he called on her in Amherst and that it was in 1860 that she developed a professional interest in poetic techniques and began to write love poems.\(^1\) And Bianchi and Hampson would concur with Pooley's assumption. They state that

According to Emily's closest contemporaries, two predestined souls recognized each other -- the man a powerful preacher, a scholar, a poet, already married. The inevitable renunciation followed. Its effect however, was to be enduring. Gradually Emily withdrew from the world and her poems become her absorbing passion.\(^2\)

Other critics would inject another view on the matter. Whichner states that

Though she gave her heart more than once and entirely, she never had a love affair as the world understands such things. Something in her made certain that she would love only where fulfillment was impossible. One need not indulge in Freudian speculations to notice that she loved only men whom she could imagine in the role of a father. This clearly was true of the great love of her life, the dedicated, married, middle-aged Philadelphia preacher, Charles Wadsworth, who plays a lover's role in some of her poems which this exemplary man most certainly did not play in life.\(^3\)

Gelpi says, in interpreting Emily's romantic entanglements, that

Emily felt that holding back is both selfless and passionate. Emily had only what could be encompassed by not conferring, by not permitting anyone to lift the bars -- in short, by the capacity of the word, "no." The private and inner excitement which that wildest word afforded was,

---


she insisted, more than enough; it seemed, indeed superior to the painful task of yielding one's self, which might mean losing one's self, to another... thus the men in her life managed and fitted into the scheme of her life, while she remained vigilantly aloof.¹

The writer is inclined to agree with Spiller that

Whether she loved this man or that, or none at all except in her imagination, makes little difference to her poetry, for she knew love with a depth and violence that could only come from repression. Driven in upon herself, she lived intensely in the mirror of her own unrealized passions... Death was always present; but whether it was someone dear to her who had just died or the sudden conviction of death itself is unimportant. Because most other avenues of expression were closed, her brief stanzas come to hold the distillation of all that it means to be human. They are her letters to the world, which she wrote but failed to mail.²

It is obvious, then, that critics do not concur on factors that shaped the art of Emily Dickinson. The writer feels, as in the case of Donne, that it would be difficult to single out one all prevailing influence, that many forces were at work in molding the mind of Emily Dickinson.

When one reflects on the origins of John Donne and Emily Dickinson, some interesting observations can be made. Both poets were caught up in a tide of transition, witnessing a decay of an old way of thinking and the advent of a new; both authors wrestled with the problem of religious concepts and convictions; and both seem to have experienced deep personal relationships.

However, when one juxtaposes the stormy, worldly life of John Donne with the seemingly placid, secluded life of Emily Dickinson, one is

¹Gelpi, op. cit., p. 29.

²Spiller, op. cit., p. 166.
plagued with some frustrating questions. If indeed the poetry of Emily Dickinson does resemble that of John Donne, how can one link such poetry to personal experience? Was their poetry the expression of life lived or life repressed? Do they tell of experience or wish? Are the sources of our poets' "articulate inarticulateness" (to use Samuel G. Ward's expression) to be found in their culture and their relationship to it or should we conclude, as Emerson, that the biography of genius is after all, internal rather than external?

These, of course, are the types of problems one must face when one attempts to link an artist's private affairs to his art. The writer's chief concern, however, is with the poems themselves, rather than biographical speculations about the experiences that produced them. Such considerations have been presented solely in the belief that if one has a feeling for a poet as a human being, one is better able to understand that poet's works. Let us turn now to an examination of some poems by John Donne and Emily Dickinson to see if we can uncover some of the ideas that these two authors seem to share in common.
CHAPTER II

INSIGHTS

Insight is defined as "The power or act of seeing into a situation; the act of apprehending the inner nature of things; the ability to see intuitively." The person who has insight has a power to see what is not evident to the average mind. Insight stresses accuracy; it implies quick and often sympathetic discernment of shades of feeling, and it implies a searching mind that goes beyond what is obvious or superficial.

Anyone who has read John Donne and Emily Dickinson extensively, would have to admit that these two poets exhibit insight in the literal sense of the word. The writer feels, further, that some of the insights revealed by these two poets bear striking resemblance. Two insights that the poets seem to share are of particular interest to the writer: their ability to view life in a realistic light and their ability to perceive the entirety of an experience. This latter insight has been termed by various names, but in this study it will be referred to as "the compound vision."

The term Realism, admittedly, has many ramifications. Realism, as discussed here, will be applied in the context of presenting the actualities of life without coloration induced by subjective prejudices, idealism or romantic fancy. The writer will attempt to show that John Donne and Emily Dickinson display their realism by depicting life as it is.
The compound vision will be interpreted as a sort of double consciousness -- a realization that multiple complexities characterize the life of consciousness, but that there is in the end, a oneness of being. The writer will attempt to show that Donne and Dickinson strove to depict this totality of experience.

The realist, in his attempt to face facts and portray life as it is, has certain definite concerns. He is more concerned with everyday happenings than with the unusual and strange; he writes of contemporary life and everyday living, however humdrum or sordid they may be. His characters, instead of being exceptional or glorified, are more likely, commonplace. The realist recognizes truth in inner life, yet he is keenly aware of the physical world. He has an objective, detached outlook upon life and strives to analyze life in a factual manner; thus, his interpretation of life tends to be materialistic, instead of idealistic and his portraits are often depressing rather than inspirational.

Donne's poetry purports to deal with life descriptively, and the first thing to strike the reader is Donne's extraordinary frankness and penetrating realism. Donne shows passions of human experience with their masks off: sorrows, scorns, angers, disgusts of love; and oftimes the picture is not a pretty one. For example, in "The Relic," a poem of his early Songs and Sonnets, there are touches of the macabre as he states:

When my grave is broken up again
Some second guest to entertain
........................................
And he that digs it spies
A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,
Will he not let us alone?\(^1\)

But then, matters of death were a constant concern to Donne. He deals with the subject at great lengths in his poetry. Consider the pessimistic but realistic message of this holy sonnet:

Oh my black soul! now thou art summoned
By sickness, death's herald, and champion;
Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
Treason, and durst not turn to whence he is fled,
Or like a thief, which till death's doom be read,
Wisheth himself delivered from prison;
But damned and haled to execution,
Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned.

Or consider the mocking truth of these lines from "The Anniversary:"

Alas, as well as other princes, we
(Who prince enough in one another be)
Must leave at last in death, these eyes, and ears,
Oft fed with true oaths, and with sweet salt tears;

One author comments that "the horrified fascination with which he contemplated the processes of dissolution and the awful event of death are rendered with amazing intellectual ingenuity and imagination."\(^2\)

In addition to dealing with depressing subjects, Donne makes profound comment on the human condition, which condition, if viewed realistically, is not a happy one. In a rather lengthy poem entitled "An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary," Donne talks about the sicknesses of the world, the shortness of life, the smallness of man, the weaknesses of man, and concludes by saying: "This man so great, that all that is, is his, Oh what a trifle, and poor thing he is."

---

\(^1\) A. L. Clements (ed.), *John Donne's Poetry* (New York, 1966), p. 37. Poems or portions of poems by John Donne cited hereafter will be taken from this volume unless otherwise indicated.

\(^2\) Moody and Lovett, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
Donne questions the unhappy state of man over and over. In this holy sonnet he asks:

If poisonous minerals, and if that tree
Whose fruit threw death on else immortal us
If lecherous goats, if serpents envious
Cannot be damned, alas, why should I be?
Why should intent or reason, born in me
Make sins, else equal, in me more heinous?

Such impudence certainly bordered on sacrilege in his day; but who can question the logic of his reasoning?

Donne constantly points to the helplessness of man in his relationship to the universe -- of man's insignificance and feelings of alienation. In "Song" he says:

"O how feeble is man's power
That if good fortune fall
Cannot add another hour
Nor a lost hour recall!
But come bad chance,
And we join it to our strength,
And we teach it art and length
Itself o'er us to advance.

Or he mourns:

Poor soul, in this thy flesh what dost thou know?
Thou know'st thyself so little that thou know'st not
How thou did'st die, nor how thou was begot.
Thou neither know'st how thou at first comest in,
Nor how thou took'st the poison of man's sin;
Nor dost thou though thou know'st that thou art so
By what way thou art made immortal know.

In this little poem entitled "In the Blossom," Donne comments on the transitory nature of existence:

Little think'st thou, poor flower,
Whom I have watched six or seven days,
And seen thy birth, and seen what every hour
Gave to thy growth, thee to this height to raise,
And now dost laugh and triumph on this bough,
Little think'st thou
That it will freeze anon, and that I shall
Tomorrow find thee fal'n, or not at all.
In a poem entitled "The Progress of the Soul," Donne reflects on the paradox that human progress often springs from the works of bad men, with the conclusion that moral values are relative:

Who ere thou beest that read'st this sullen writ,
Which just so much courts thee as thou dost it,
Let me arrest thy thoughts: wonder with me
Why plowing, building, ruling and the rest
Or most of those arts whence our lives are blest
By cursed Cain's race invented be,
And blest Seth vext us with Astronomy.
There's nothing simply good nor ill alone;
Of every quality comparison
The only measure is, and judge, opinion.

This poem strikes a sullen, satirical, and pessimistic tone indeed.

In addition to dealing with grim and unconventional themes, Donne attempts an analytical approach to experience. He subjects emotions to objective analysis; and in his attempt to interpret life scientifically, he ransacks the whole of art and experience for illustrations and uses specific details as he attempts to render his facts verifiable.

Let us examine a passage from his "Satire III:

Judges are Gods; he who made and said them so
Meant not that men should be forc'd to them to go
By means of Angels; when supplications
We send to God, to Dominations,
Powers, Cherubims, and all heaven's Courts, if we
Should pay fees as here, daily bread would be
Scarce to kings; so 'tis. Would it not anger
A Stoic, a coward, yea a Martyr
To see a Pursuivant come in, and call
All his clothes, copes; books, primers; and all
His plats, challices; and mistake them away,
And ask a fee for coming?

This poem is written with a strain of ingenious ratiocination.

Here again we find that union of passion and ratiocination for which Donne is famous: the opening question, and then the development of the original thought in terms of ideas derived from scholastic
philosophy or from new scientific notions -- as in "The Good Monow" he exclaims:

I wonder by my troth what thou and I
Did, till we lov'd? Were we not weaned till then,
But suck'd on country pleasures childishly?
Or snorted we in the seven sleepers' den?
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see
Which I desir'd and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

In "A Nocturnal upon Saint Lucy's Day" he uses every kind of philosophic ingenuity to build up a picture of the lover reduced to a state of absolute nothingness by the death of the lady who is the subject of the poem:

Study me then, you who shall lovers be
At the next world, that is, at the next Spring;
   For I am every dead thing
   In whom love wrought new alchemy.
   For his art did express
   A quintessence even from nothingness,
   From dull privations and lean emptiness.
He ruin'd me, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not.

The writer is inclined to agree with Duncan in his statement that "Donne's poetry seeks to discover something permanent and unchanging in a world of appearance. He, like the scientist, was in quest of truth."\(^1\)

It seems evident, then, that Donne proves himself a realist in the choice of subjects and in the manner of approach. But perhaps we see Donne best as a realist in his handling of love. Donne consciously reacts against the extreme idealization of women encouraged by the Petrarchan tradition. In Donne's poems, the psychology of love has the

---

\(^1\) Duncan, *op. cit.*, p. 668.
quality of real experience rather than of literary convention. He writes of requited love in physical terms. He celebrates the joy of mutual and contented passion and emphasizes the interdependence of body and soul. One author comments that "Donne's early poems are startlingly different from most of the Elizabethan lyrics. He broke sharply with the Petrarchan tradition, cut wide from the path of courtly polish and restraint, and wrote poetry characterized by directness, irony and cynicism."\(^1\) Daiches contends that "Some of Donne's poems are cynical, dealing with the paradoxes and fatuities of lust at work and some celebrate a clandestine love with an uncomfortable realism. He transmutes the naked sexual experience directly into poetry in a way quite foreign to the Petrarchan tradition."\(^2\)

In "Woman's Constancy" we get a glimpse of Donne's ironic wit, for the theme of the poem is really woman's inconstancy as he asks:

Now thou hast loved me one whole day,  
Tomorrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?  
Wilt thou then antedate some new-made vow?  
Or say that now  
We are not just those persons which we were?

Here he intimates his awareness of the fact that both time and truth are relative concepts -- that a lady may be true now, but in a moment may be false. Then he ends that same poem by saying in a flippant manner: "For by tomorrow, I may think so too."

In his most serious love poetry he argues that love is a

---


relationship between two persons loving each other with mutual physical fire and passion. He presents an anatomy of love as a fusion of the spiritual and the physical. In "The Good-Morrow," for example, mutual love is a fusion of two separate souls into a single soul, lovers in one little world of their own:

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp north, without declining west?
Whatever dies was not mixed equally,
If our two loves be one, or thou and I
Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die.

In "Community" he goes to dizzying lengths of hyperbole to proclaim that no woman can be counted on to be true:

Changed loves are but changed sorts of meat,
And when he hath the kernel eat,
Who doth not fling away the shell?

Consider the audacity of this passage from "The Apparition:"

When be thy scorn, 0 murd'ress I am dead
And that thou thinkst thee free
From all solicitation from me,
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed.

In "The Flea" he says that there is no difference in sex art and being bitten by a flea:

This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;

And in "The Ecstasy" he gives steps to the consummation of a sexual experience and of course there is his classic statement that "the body is the book of love." Truly Donne writes on all sides of the question of love, and indeed his approach is unconventional for his times. His emphasis on physical passion, his throwing out of constancy, his elaborate sexual imagery truly recommend him to modern times.
Thus we have established that Donne, through his concern for life in the unadorned state, through his objective, factual approach to experience, and through his materialistic, rather than idealistic revelations of life, proves himself to be a realist of first order. Now let us search for evidence of realism in Emily Dickinson.

If one were to consider only the commonplace subjects that Emily Dickinson used for her poems: the fly, the bee, the spider, the snake, the bird, the rat, etc., one could with justification term her a realist. Or if one would observe how many of her poems involve small incidents such as "I tie my Hat," "I crease my Shawl," or "Life's little duties," again, one could with reason label her a realist. But the characteristic that definitely establishes her as a realist, in the writer's opinion, is that she asks passionately the question of the meaning of our existence, even knowing that the answer might hurt.

As in the case of John Donne, this desire to apprehend the inner nature of things, links her to the modern dilemma. As one author has astutely observed, "Committed to nothing, but dedicated to a search for truth and beauty, hers was a free spirit for whom living was a succession of intense experiences, and art an endless exploration of their meanings."¹

Emily Dickinson had a solid sense of reality -- not just of scene and thing, but of thought and feeling. She knew how to discriminate between vision and fact, and was aware of how small a part ecstasy makes in the sum total that comprises life. In an early poem she

observes that

The Heart asks Pleasure—first—
And then—Excuse from Pain—
And then—those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering—...

Her effect of reality is achieved by dramatic use of the interaction between pleasure and pain. She declares, for example, that

"Water is taught by thirst," and again that

Delight—becomes pictorial
When viewed through Pain—...
Transporting must the moment be—
Brewed from decades of Agony!

Another of her poems is constructed almost entirely of such contrasts:

For each extatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the extacy...
Defeat whets Victoria—they say—
The Reefs in Old Gethsemane
Endear the Shore beyond—
'Tis Beggars—Banquets best define—
'Tis Thirsting—vitalizes Wine—
Faith bleats to understand—

Miss Dickinson clearly recognizes that the human way is not the easy way, but realist that she is, she over and over reminds us that one must go through pain to a fuller understanding of what heaven can be:

Earth would have been too much—I see—
And Heaven not enough for me—
I should have had the Joy
Without the Fear—to justify
The Palm—without the Calvary
So Savior—Crucify.

We clearly discern that Miss Dickinson has the insight to observe that

---

1Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson, (eds.), Poems by Emily Dickinson (Boston, 1948), p. 6. Poems or portions of poems by Miss Dickinson cited hereafter will be taken from this volume unless otherwise indicated.
pain and loss, sharpened by a momentary vision of ecstasy, constitute
the human condition one must adjust to.

A wide range of pain is explored in her poetry. Some of her poems
relate extreme suffering to a loss of love:

Not with a Club, the Heart is broken
Nor with a Stone-
A Whip so small you could not see it
I've known

To lash the Magic Creature
Till it fell
Yet that Whip's Name
Too noble then to tell.

Some of her poems stress the loneliness of man in relationship to his
universe. For example, here she recognizes man's estrangement from
nature:

I dared not meet the daffodils,
For fear their yellow gown
Would pierce me with a fashion
So foreign to my own.

And again she implies that safety consists in being beyond the touch of
nature:

Safe in their alabaster chambers,
Untouched by morning and untouched by noon,
Sleep the meek members of the resurrection,
Rafter of satin, and roof of stone.

While we live, she seems to say, a kind of noblesse oblige requires
that we not be craven or paltry. Even after we are struck down, we
must still accord "beloved recognition" to a cosmos which slays in
order to enthrone:

Magnanimous of bird
By boy descried
To sing unto the Stone
Of which it died.

Instead of the Puritan view of her New England predecessors that
earthly suffering is the ordained path to a heavenly reward of bliss, she makes the momentary glimple of ecstasy both measure and cause of the despair that is the essence of the human condition as she says:

The joy that has no stem nor core,
Nor seed that we can sow,
Is edible to longing
But ablative to show...

To be human, in other words, is to yearn for the heavenly ecstasy we are deprived of on earth (since ablative is the Latin for the case of deprivation). In Chapter I it was pointed out that as a school girl, Miss Dickinson did not accept the faith expected of her. I believe that she would have rejoiced in the modern view that religion is a search for the relation between human desire and purpose on the one hand and cosmic change and indifference on the other. This poem seems to suggest her pained sense of estrangement from the religion of her fathers and her integrity that gave her courage to go her own way:

Of God we ask one favor,
That we may be forgiven-
For what, he is presumed to know-
The Crime from us, is hidden-
Immured the whole of Life
Within a magic Prison
We reprimand the Happiness
That too competes with Heaven.

Here, in the writer's opinion, we find a strain of satire against conventional ideas of God, and the hypocrisy of religion and morality. One author has observed, "Her poetry is a magnificent personal confession, blasphemous and, in its self-revelation, its honesty, almost

\[\text{Supra, p. 7.}\]
She, like Donne, is objective in handling her subjects. Her best poetry is not concerned with the causes, but the qualities of pain. In fact, her approach at times seems almost clinical. The qualities she sought to fix with great precision were pain's intensity, its duration, and the change it brings about. A few of her expressions will illustrate the point. She uses time as a measure of degree in defining extremity of pain when she says "Pain expands the Time-/Pain contracts-the Time." In other words, pain makes clock and calendar meaningless with its intensity.

Spatially, pain is equally limitless and without definable locality: it "ranges Boundlessness" -- unlike contentment which resides in a "quiet Suburb;" and agony cannot stay "In Acre--Or Location-" It rents Immensity." In a scientific manner, it seems, she has arrived at a generalization that pain is a quality of being that exists outside time and space.

Consider her excessive concern with mortuary detail, as she examines a corpse in this morbid poem:

Try- can you stir the awful rivet-
Try- can you lift the hasps of steel!

Stroke the cool forehead- hot so often-
Lift- if you care- the listless hair-
Handle the adamantine fingers
Never a thimble-more-shall wear...

This, of course, is her way of depicting lifelessness as opposed to life; men do die, and this truth can be observed and reported.

When she was analytical, her skepticism used a modern vocabulary, as, for example, in "A Clock Stopped," where she seizes upon the audible ticking of a Swiss clock to represent life and its stopping to mean death; or in the poem "The Soul Selects Her Own Society," where she closes the "Valves of her attention." The organic "Valves" in this latter poem, of course, makes the exclusion more vital as the mechanical doors shut out further vision by voluntary action.

Leaving Emily Dickinson's concern with analysis, the writer would like to discuss briefly a few of Miss Dickinson's poems about death; because it is my belief that while Donne reveals his realism best in his handling of the subject of love, Miss Dickinson reveals her realism most vividly with the subject of death. The principle of death is one of her most striking themes. In this little poem, it would seem that death all but replaces God; for death is a free agent, itself beyond the necessity it imposes on human and natural life:

Death is a dialogue between
The spirit and the dust.
"Dissolve," says Death. The Spirit, "Sir,
I have another trust."

Death doubts it, argues from the ground.
The Spirit turns away,
Just laying off, for evidence,
An overcoat of clay.

In the poem that begins

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm...

the poet dramatizes herself in a deathbed scene, with family and friends gathered around. In another little poem, she calmly talks about the day after losing a loved one:
The Bustle in a House  
The Morning after Death  
Is solemnest of industries  
Enacted upon Earth-  

The Sweeping up the Heart  
And putting Love away  
We shall not want to use again  
Until Eternity.  

And here she speaks of the finality of death:  

All but Death, can be Adjusted  
Dynastics repair,  
Systems- etc.  

Also in this poem that describes a funeral procession, not all the status symbols can conceal the fact that the occupant of this coach is a corpse:  

One dignity delays for all-  
One mitred Afternoon-  
None can avoid this purple-  
None evade this Crown!  

. . . . . . . . . .  
What dignified Attendants!  
What service when we pause!  
How loyally at parting  
Their hundred hats they raise!  

How pomp surpassing ermine  
When simple You, and I  
Present our meek escutcheon  
And claim the rank to die!  

The formal ceremony, though regal, leads but to the graveyard. There is also the irony that man becomes a king only when he is dead.  

Thus Emily Dickinson, even as John Donne, in her choice of contemporary subjects and disillusioning themes, in her analytical and psychological approach, and in her sense of the complexities and contradictions of life identifies with the realist. One author has described her aptly by saying:
Emily Dickinson is not a moralist; she is interested in reality. Her blasphemy and satire issue from her impatience with those who allow timid conventions to misrepresent the reality of the human plight.¹

In addition to being committed to realism, John Donne and Emily Dickinson shared a conviction of the oneness of being. This insight has been called by many names, and I have chosen to call it a compound vision. They viewed the spiritual in terms of the physical, the remote in terms of the near, the abstract in terms of the concrete, the sublime in terms of the commonplace. Thought and passion could co-exist in their poetry; and instead of the emotion confusing and dissipating the thought, the emotion could actually stimulate and clarify the thought. So intricately did they interweave the concrete and the abstract that it appeared often that these poets actually perceived abstractions and thought sensations.

John Donne is commonly termed a metaphysical poet. This name was assigned to him and others of the seventeenth century poets by Samuel Johnson, who claimed that in their writings "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together." The writer is not concerned with the veracity of this entire statement; but certainly there is evidence that Donne strove to amalgamate disparate experiences. Particularly did he strive for a union of passion and intellect. Let us observe this compound vision of John Donne at work by examining one of his famous poems, "Batter My Heart Three Personed God:"

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend

¹Chase, op. cit., p. 179.
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labor to admit You, but Oh, to no end!
Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captivated, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto Your enemy:
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to You, imprison me, for I,
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.

Nothing could be further from the conventional religious hymn than this poem. Actually, Donne views devotional experience under erotic metaphors. He addresses God familiarly, with petulance, awe, and passion as a divine love. He uses sexual images such as "weak," "untrue," "take me to you," "enthrall me," "chaste," and "ravish me." We begin to see the misery and passion of the poet. His longing for God is the same as that of the unfaithful lover whose weakness in no way diminishes his desire to be faithful. He wants to be consumed, and we realize this desire fully if the appeal to passion is both understood and felt. The emotion or passion aroused is sudden and almost savage. There is the feeling of enveloped submission and the wretchedness that comes with the knowledge of weakness. We are struck by the strong emotional appeal of the poem; and we are struck that his ideas and abstractions seem to topple from the rational plane to the level of perception. Certainly, here, we have intellectualized emotion at its best.

In "What if This Present Were the World's Last Night?" we find such lines as "...but as in my idolatry/I said to all my profane mistresses,/Beauty, of pity, foulness only is/A sign of rigor: so I say to Thee./ In "Good Friday: Riding Westward" he is going west, but his thoughts turn east, where Christ was crucified; Donne explores the
possibilities of this paradox and ends with a grave and passionate conclusion:

O think me worth thine anger, punish me,
Burn off my rusts and my deformity,
Restore thine image so much by thy grace
That thou mayst know me, and I'll turn my face.

In all of these poems, as in many others, we find the same combination of passion and argument. We find that mixture of hope and anguish that characterize the religious man searching for the right relationship with God, aware of both his own unworthiness, and of God's infinite greatness. Donne's poetry thrives on paradox, and of course there have always been paradoxes at the heart of religious experience as well as other experiences of life.

Having seen how Donne views spiritual experiences in physical terms, let us explore how he takes physical experience and gives it spiritual essence. Donne, in "The Estasie," attempts by a series of involved analogies to explain the union of the flesh as a union of the spirit. In his struggle to verify this theory, he draws on theories of the nature of souls and the way the heavenly influence may work on man; he draws on physiological notions of animal spirits, on medieval cosmology, alchemy and chemistry, negotiations between armies during a truce, imprisoned princes, sepulchral monuments, the transplanting of flowers, and the threading of beads on a string. Donne tries to prove in this poem that a man and a woman united by love may approach perfection more nearly than either could do alone:

A single violet transplant
The strength, the colour, and the size,
(All which before was poore, and scant,)
Redoubles still, and multiplies.
When love, with one another so
interinanimates two soules,
That abler soule, which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controules.

He says that "For soul into soul may flow/ Though it to body first
repair."/ and "Love's mysteries in souls do grow/ But yet the body is
his book." Thus through intellectualism, Donne would establish that
the body is a medium between souls.

Daiches comments that "Although Donne was no stranger to sexual
passion, he was at the same time desperately concerned with the search
for some principle of divine unity underlying both emotional experience
and religious longing."1 Certainly Donne seems to recreate thought
into feeling -- to find common ground for passion and intellect. This
power of indicating the entirety of an experience, in my opinion, can
be attributed to his insight of compound vision.

The habit of Emily Dickinson's mind led her to construct a "Double
Estate" in which this world was "furnished with the Infinite," in which
God was her "Old Neighbor," and death, agony, and grace were fleshly
companions. She too argued the eternal from the transient, the foreign
from the familiar. She too practiced the awareness of the unity of
experience. Consider this little poem:

    The Soul that has a Guest
    Doth seldom go abroad-
    Diviner Crowd at Home-
    Obliterate the need-

    And Courtesy forbid
    A Host's departure when
    Upon Himself be visiting
    The Emperor of Men.

1Daiches, op. cit., p. 367.
Here a communion with God is referred to as a host with visitors. She, as Donne, so intricately weaves the concrete and the abstract, that it is easy for us to conceive of God's greatness, of his relationship to man, of his inspirational power, when the soul is looked upon as the "host" and God "The Emperor of Men."

Emily Dickinson uses the conversational tone and the surprising image as she strives to reproduce the exact experience, to make the abstract concrete. How like Donne is her intellectualized passion here:

After great pain a formal feeling comes-
The nerves sit ceremonious like tombs.
The stiff Heart questions-- was it me that bore?
And yesterday-- or centuries before?

The feet mechanical
Go round a wooden way
Of ground or air or Ought, regardless grown,
A quartz contentment like stone.

This is the hour of lead
Remembered if outlined,
As freezing persons recollect the snow
First of chill, then stupor, then the letting go.

Here, phrases like the "feet mechanical," "the hour of lead," "the nerves sit... like tombs," "The stiff heart questions," topple ideas and abstractions from the rational plane to the level of perception and we actually begin to think sensations.

Here she views the spiritual in terms of the physical:

Twas here my summer paused,
What ripeness after then
To other scene or other soul?
My sentence has begun,

To winter to remove
With winter to abide.
Go manacle your icicle
Against your tropic brides.

Summer and winter are used to symbolize a degree of time.
One is truly reminded of Donne in this poem where she pictures death as a lover who transports her in his carriage:

Death is the supple Suitor
That wins at last-
It is a stealthy Wooing
Conducted first
By pallid innuendoes
And dim approach
But brave at last with Bugles
And a bisected Coach
It bears away in triumph
To Troth unknown
And Kinsmen as divulgeless
As Clans of Down-

Here she sets up a system of correspondences between the changes brought about by death and the changes in roles of the unnamed partners in this spiritual love game. There is a striking resemblance here to the amorous framework of Donne's "Batter My Heart." When "Death" first appears as a suitor she changes from a girl to a coy virgin. This must be a "stealthy Wooing," for though she knows it will result in a glorious new statue for her, she is vaguely aware that it will mean a renunciation of all the world she has known. Her maidenly reserve is indicated by the manner in which he is forced to conduct his courtship, by "pallid innuendoes" and a "dim approach." But he is a "supple Suitor" and attains his goal at long last. Then he bears her away "in triumph," both from a proxy wedding and towards a final one, to the sound of "brave Bugles" such as would announce a royal marriage, or the Day of Doom. Here we see Miss Dickinson's compound vision grasping the strange duality of this journey as reflected by the odd vehicle in which they travel, "a bisected Coach." As a hearse it separates her body in the glass enclosure from the driver on his seat above; as a wedding coach it divides the wife-to-be from the virginal life left behind; as
a heavenly chariot, the mortal from the immortal. Then she only knows
that she is going to a "Troth unknown." The final change of status
lies beyond the poem because it lies beyond death. Thus we see that
Miss Dickinson transforms the suitor into a bridegroom and a prospec-
tive husband, as she expresses her awareness of death, the act of death,
and the state after death.

An eminent critic has said that "Her /Miss Dickinson/ best poems
present their themes in the full context of intellect and feeling, and
are concerned with rendering the experiences that fuse them both. Like
Donne, she perceives abstraction and thinks sensation."\(^1\)

The same realization of the reality of spirit and the chemistry
of dissolution that prompted John Donne to decry that "Love's mysteries
in soul do grow/ But yet the body is his book," probably inspired Miss
Dickinson to exclaim that:

\[
\text{The Music in the Violin}
\text{Does not emerge alone}
\text{But Arm in Arm with Touch, yet Touch}
\text{Alone is not a Tune-}
\text{The Spirit lurks within the Flesh}
\text{Like Tides within the Sea}
\text{That make the Water live estranged}
\text{What would the Either be?}
\]

And even as Donne advised "doubt wisely," Miss Dickinson never relin-
guished her "old codecil of Doubt." Yet both poets addressed God
familiarly, with awe and passion. Donne demanded of God both intellec-
tual rest and emotional satisfaction as he cried out:

\[
\text{Divorce me, untie or break that know again}
\text{Take me to you, imprison me, for I}
\text{Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,}
\text{Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.}
\]

\(^1\)Anderson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 221.
And Emily demanded the same as she begged to be:

Immured in Heaven! What a Cell!
Let every bondage be,
Thou Sweetest of the Universe
Like that which ravished thee!

This quest for God and for permanence would seem to indicate that both poets enjoyed an ambivalent attitude toward God -- perhaps for the aesthetic stimulus it supplied. One critic has said of Miss Dickinson: "Her mind was charged with paradox, as though her vision, like the eyes of birds, was focused in opposite directions on the two worlds of the material and immaterial values."¹ And certainly the same statement could be applied to Mr. Donne.

Thus we can see that Emily Dickinson, like John Donne, recognized the divided joys of earth and spirit -- that she as Donne, possessed the insight of compound vision and sought a unity of experience.

In the foregoing discussion, I have tried to show that John Donne and Emily Dickinson prove themselves realists by their use of everyday subjects and disillusioning themes, by their factual approach to experience, and by their acceptance of life in its unadorned state.

I have also tried to establish that both poets possessed the compound vision -- that they sensed the complexity of experience and tried to depict it in its entirety.

In revealing these facts, I hope to have put into a favorable position my belief that these poets have strong points of likeness. In Chapter III I shall endeavor to present further evidence to this end,

by discussing the techniques employed by these two writers.

When poets write with such artistry that all facets of a work contribute to the total effect of the whole, as in the cases of Donne and Miss Dickinson, it is difficult to discuss one phase of a composition without involving other phases. Therefore, admittedly, some aspects of technique have been tacitly dealt with already. The next chapter, however, will give special attention to exploring kindred techniques employed by John Donne and Emily Dickinson in their writing of poetry.
CHAPTER III

TECHNIQUES

Personal revelation of the kind that John Donne and Emily Dickinson strove for in their effort to understand their relationship to the world, understandably, called for a vehicle of expression unique in mode. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that these poets used techniques considered unconventional in nature. It is interesting to observe, however, how many of their techniques bore striking resemblance. Of particular interest to the writer are the colloquial and dramatic qualities of their works and the kindred methods that they used to achieve these qualities. It will be my purpose in this chapter to explore some of these techniques.

It was pointed out in Chapter II that John Donne rejected the Petrarchan tradition of love.\textsuperscript{1} He also ousted the Petrarchan ideal of graceful diction -- the choosing of words for sound and smotheness, for regularity and rhythm, and supplanted a new range of homely and colloquial speech. His plain, unadorned speech with its idiomatic turns, gave his works the ring of a living voice. For example, in "Love's Growth," Donne compares love's increase with "new taxes" and in some of his most elegant poems he uses words like "itchy" and "snorted." In "Lover's Infiniteness" there is petulance in words like "bargain," "stocks," or "outbid" as he makes the bitter suggestion of a love-market. In "The Canonization" we are startled by phrases like "...Or chide my

\textsuperscript{1}Supra, p. 20.
palsy, or my gout,/ My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune flout;" And
in one of his Elegies entitled "Jealousy" we find the lines "...Ready
with loathsome vomiting to spew," and "... Sits down and snorts, caged
in his basket chair." Then there is the utterly shocking beginning of
a phrase of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" that exclaims, "Off with
that girdle...". We can see that not only does Donne desire to approx-
imate direct, everyday speech, but that he likewise enjoys startling
his reader into attention.

In addition to utilizing locative language, Donne also combines
simple words in unexpected ways, forming strange compounds or odd
phrases or sentences. Consider the drama of these unusual usages found
in his various poems:

And makes one little room, an everywhere.
"The Good-morrow"
My rage of heart-
"The Broken Heart"
Thou are so truth-
"The Dream"
And if some lover, such as we,
Have heard this dialogue of one-
"The Ecstasy"
A she-sigh from my mistress' heart-
"Love's Diet"
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
"A Valediction; forbidding mourning"
But since this god produced a destiny,
And that vice-nature, custom, lets it be;
"Love's Deity."

Surely, one must take a second look to fully comprehend Donne's mean-
ing, but there is a certain intimacy conveyed by such inventions.

In addition to using words in a colloquial and idiomatic sense,
Donne shows that he is alive to the sound values of words; and many
times his sound is interwoven with his sense, as is evidenced by titles
like: "The Expiration," "The Apparition," Twickenham Garden," and
"Love's Alchemy."

Another dramatic device that Donne employs is the explosive opening. We find dynamic, colloquial lines like the opening lines of "The Sun Rising:"

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus
Through windows and through curtains call on us?

Again, there are the opening lines of "The Canonization" where he exclaims: "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love." There is the intimate, introspective beginning such as that of the "Good Morrow:"

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I Did, till we loved?

And again in "A Lecture Upon the Shadow:"

Stand still, and I will read to thee
A lecture, love, in love's philosophy.

Such beginnings convey a brilliant colloquial voice and asserts the self as its subject. This dramatic use of the "I" is characteristic of so many of Donne's poems; and his Songs and Sonnets capitalize on the dramatic device of an imagined hearer being addressed in the heat of an imagined conversation. Furthermore, the addresses are usually of a violently argumentative character. In this way his poems can present the poet's state of mind indirectly; and Donne seems obviously concerned with badgering, wheedling, convincing, or upbraiding his imagined hearer.

In Donne's Holy Sonnet 11, the speaker makes himself vividly present at the scene and is so dramatically conscious of his sins, that he cries out to Christ's persecutors in lines that throw a colloquial emphasis on the words "my," "mee," and "I:"
Spit in my face, you Jews, and pierce my side
Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie mee,
For I have sinn'd, and sinn'd, and only hee,
Who could do no iniquities hath dyed.

These lines also illustrate Donne's fondness for crowding his lines with verbal excitement by the switching of verbs to convey the intensity of emotion. Another famous example of this technique is his Holy Sonnet, "Batter my Heart," in which he exclaims:

...for You
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'ver throw me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

There is a certain urgency to lines like these, and one feels as though the poet has a message and is determined to be heard. We hear the living voice of a man like ourselves whispering or shouting at us from the printed page with all the heat of life. A critic observes that

The general tone of the language of Donne's poems is colloquial. The poems have the flexibility and liveliness of spoken language. The openings are often particularly colloquial in tone. This has the effect of making the poems seem to grow naturally out of definite situations in individual lives and thus makes them more convincing.¹

Donne also rejects regularity of rhythm. Grierson observes that

Donne's verse has a powerful and haunting harmony of its own. For Donne is not simply, willing to force his accent, to strain and crack a prescribed pattern; he is striving to find a rhythm that will express the passionate fullness of his mind, the fluxes and refluxes of his moods; and the felicities of verse are as frequent and startling as those of phrasing. He is a master of the elaborate stanza or paragraph in which the discords of individual lines or phrases are resolved in the complex

---

and rhetorically effective harmony of the whole group of lines.1

The writer concurs with Grierson in this observation. It is amazing how Donne can fit his stanza forms to his respective poems. For example, let us examine Elegy XVI. One of the remarkable things about the poem is the contrast between the solemn, tender music of the verse whenever Donne addresses the woman, and the boisterous stacatto in which he describes the foreign lands to whose dangers she will be exposed if she insists upon following him abroad:

By our first strange and fatal interview,
By all desires which thereof did ensue,
By our long starving hopes, by that remorse
Which my words masculine persuasive force
Begot in thee, and by the memory
Of hurts, which spies and rivals threatened me,
I calmly beg...

Here we find melodious pleading with his beloved; and in the same poem when he wants to express contempt, his music is very different:

Men of France, changeable Camelions,
Spittles of diseases, shops of fashions,
Loves fuelers, and the rightest company
Of Players, which upon the worlds stage be,
Will quickly know thee, and no lesse, alas!
The indifferent Italian, as we passe
His warme land, well content to thinke thee Page,
Will hunt thee with such lust, and hideous rage,
As Lots faire guests were vexed.

Notice the bored, flippant tone of such lines as:

Will no other vice content you?
Will it not serve your turn to do, as did your mothers?
Or have you all old vices spent, and now would finde out others?

And the tone of angry scorn in lines like

Must I alas
Frame and enamell Plate, and drinke in Glasse?
Chase waxe for others seales? breake a colts force
And leave him then, beeing made a ready horse;

And, the controlled emotion in

I scarce believe my love to be so pure
As I had thought it was,
Because it doth endure
Vicissitude, and season, as the grasse;

In "To His Mistress Going to Bed" the rhythms are bold, swaggering and theatrical; in "The Apparition" we have a versification that imparts controlled fury; the opening lines of "The Fever" suggest poignant longing; in "Song" we are made to recognize protective tenderness; and in "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day," we realize desolate grief.

Sometimes the varieties of the rhythms within individual poems are fashioned to suggest varieties of moods as is illustrated by "The Sun Rising," where negative feelings rise in a positive poem in this happy poem of consumated love that is strewn with insults and scornful references. And in "The Canonization" there is a vigorous glorification of love, but a beginning with a voluminous outpouring of exasperation and contempt.

It is obvious, then, that Donne writes without regard for conventions of poetic diction or smooth verse. He sought to use true speaking language, springing straight from passion and vigorous, subtle thinking; and he would not allow the strait-laced demands of external metres to thwart him. What Donne has to say is subtle and surprising and so are the metrical effects with which it is presented.

Donne shows a fondness for the actual dramatic situation. "To His Mistress Going to Bed" well illustrates this point. The poem is
apparently spoken by a lover who is lying in bed waiting for his mistress to join him. It is cast in the form of an argument urging her to undress and get into bed, and it maintains a certain argumentative character throughout. Then the latter part of the poem evolves into what is less a direct address to the mistress than a transcript of the private workings of the lover's excited imagination as he anticipates the successive stages of his love-making. At the end of the poem the mistress is still undressing and her lover is still waiting for her. The Elegy is a dramatized love letter, and could really be compared to an Ovidian verse epistle. Donne starts the poem powerfully, with one of his explosive, theatrical openings: "Come, madam, come, all rest my powers defy,/ Until labor, I in labor lie." This beginning is in reality a call to battle, a vigorous challenge delivered in a tone of swagger and arrogance. And the poem is a good example of the dramatic Mr. Donne at his best.

Donne shows a fondness for paradox. In "Batter My Heart" he juxtaposes the words "batter" and "mend," and goes on to declare "Except you enthrall me, I never shall be free,/ Nor even chaste, except you ravish me." In "Love's Infiniteness" he offers the paradoxical argument:

Thou cans't not everyday give me thy heart,
If thou canst give it, then thou never gavest it;
Love's riddles are, that though thy heart depart
It stays at home, and thou with losing savest it.

In "The Ecstasy" he argues:

Our bodies why doe wee forbeare?
They are ours, though they are not we, We are
The intelligence, they the spheare
We owe them thanks because they thus
Did us, to us, at first convey,
Yielded their forces, sense to us
Nor are drosse to us, but alloy.

In his Holy Sonnet number V Donne begs that he may be eaten that he may be made whole:

Let their flames retire,
And burn me, O Lord with a fiery zeal
Of Thee and Thy house, which doth in eating heal.

The title of Donne's "Canonization" involves a sort of paradox, for despite the title, the poet here daringly treats profane love as if it were divine love. The canonization is not that of a pair of holy persons who have renounced the world and the flesh; the hermitage of each is the other's body. The poem "Woman's Constancy" in truth treats woman's inconstancy. Donne's love of paradox is tied up with his love of surprise. Donne obviously plays at intellect and enjoys having his reader wonder how he will resolve a situation and perhaps marvel, "Ah, how did he think of that?"

Donne has come in for severe criticism for his eccentric imagery. The Petrarchans, in their choice of imagery, drew on mythology and natural objects. Donne avoids the obviously poetical image; his imagery draws on the most diverse thought and illusions. In his love poetry, for example, references are made to such varied fields as astronomy, law, religion, war, military affairs, medicine, eating, drinking, the human body, time, weather, scholastic philosophy, politics, alchemy, death, fire, heat, astrology, human learning, and everyday life. As he dramatizes and analyzes, he illustrates with a wealth of analogy. In the "Ecstasy," for example, he compares love to warfare and two lovers to a pair of compasses. The metaphysical poets possessed a view of the world founded on universal analogy and derived habits of
thought which prepared them for finding and easily accepting the most heterogeneous analogies.

Closely connected with his eccentric imagery is his dazzling wit as expressed in the use of the conceit. The conceit is a figure of speech, either brief or extended, displaying excessive ingenuity or lack of taste or both. The conceit is a kind of imagery, and like all imagery arises from the perception of a likeness or likenesses between different things. Instead of, as is characteristic, comparing one physical object or process with another, Donne compares an object with an abstraction, especially a scientific or philosophical abstraction, or bases his comparison of two objects upon an abstract likeness. He tries to amalgamate disparate experiences, and the likenesses he perceives are remote rather than familiar, logical rather than sensuous. For example, again in "The Ecstasy," Donne says in attempting to describe his love union-

Our hands were firmly cemented
With a fast balm, which thence did spring;
Our eye-beams twisted and did thread
Our eyes upon one double strong.

Now this extended comparison is over-ingenious, but interesting, nevertheless.

In the conclusion of "The Sun Rising" he makes a difficult conceit when he congratulates the sun on the fact that the two lovers have shortened his task for him:

In that the world's contracted thus;
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art every where
This bed thy center is, these walls thy sphere.

In this same poem, he infers that morning comes from his mistress' eyes
and that they wake him like the light of a taper.

Consider the far-fetched ring of this comparison from "A Valediction: of weeping:"

Let me pour forth
My tears before thy face whilst I stay here,
For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,
And by this mintage they are something worth,
For thus they be
Pregnant of thee;

Then, of course, there is his famous physical description of a blush in "The Second Aniversary:"

...her pure, and eloquent blood
Spoke in her cheekes, and so distinctly wrought,
That one might almost say, her body thought;

and, his infamous elaboration in "The Flea" where he proclaims "In this flea our two bloods mingled be," and goes on to conclude:

Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

Donne's best conceits leave us with a sense of our own blindness at not having seen the likeness which Donne convinces us do exist; and we marvel at the insight of a mind which can go on discovering new facets of comparison which one would have thought exhausted. His worst conceits are far-fetched, extravagant, and oftimes in poor taste.

Thus we see that Donne achieves the colloquial and dramatic effects of his verse with diverse techniques. He employs homely and idiomatic language, unusual combinations of words, explosive opening lines, "I" and the imagined conversation. He crowds his lines with verbal excitement, employs a variety of rhythms, exploits the dramatic situation and utilizes paradox, argument, surprise, eccentric imagery and the conceit.
Donne's insolence and subtlety of expression sometimes startles; but again he can flash light and meaning into what at first would appear commonplace and strike upon many unexpected truths.

Now let us turn to an examination of some of the techniques employed by Miss Dickinson.

Just as John Donne sought out the plain, unadorned speech and idiomatic turns to give his works the ring of a living voice, so Emily Dickinson wrote of "The Grave's Repeal," pronounced doom "The House Without the Door," and used "heft" to describe the solemn tenor of church music. Her locative language, as does Donne's, invites us to transcend the limits of our experience.

Emily Dickinson uses the homely language as she states the anguish of bereavement in terms of broom and dustpan:

The sweeping up the heart,  
And putting love away  
We shall not want to use again  
Until eternity.

and employs trite phrasing as she contrives to exhibit an indifferent Providence in the figure of a village storekeeper:

The mighty merchant smiled.  
Brazil? He twirled a button,  
Without a glance my way:  
"But, madam, is there nothing else  
That we can show today?"

Attesting to her love of the locative language (and her lack of reverence) are such verses as:

God is a distant, stately Lover  
Woos, so He tells us, by His Son  
Surely a vicarious courtship,  
Miles and Priscilla's such a one.

And consider the conversational tone of such expressions as "Our little
secrets slink away / Beside God's 'will not tell'" or "The Heavens with a smile / Sweep by out disappointed heads / But deign no syllable."

Throughout her poetry, we find words used in unusual contexts. She calls God "Reverend Divinity," "Old Neighbor," "Papa Above," etc.; or she calls nature a "Haunted House" or herself the "Empress of Calvary." In her little poem entitled "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed," the liquor never brewed is the exhilarating aspects of nature; and "the little tippler leaning against the sun" is an example of some of the unusual imagery Miss Dickinson can create with her unusual use of words.

Emily Dickinson has been criticized for her poverty of expression. In many of her poems, she deliberately suppresses rhetorical forms and shows a preference for the austere, laconic, carefully guarded utterance. Her short cramped lines, her crabbed cryptic phrases, all lead to a certain monotony of expression. But it is believed by many critics, that this style is deliberate -- that her distaste for rhetoric stems from a belief that the speaking voice bears the weight of personal credo. Griffeth observes that

Her drab and narrow language sprang from her conviction that a world of uncertainties makes viable speech terse and astringent-- gives it a quiet, careful elusiveness.1

And the writer concurs in this opinion. Let us examine, for example, a poem entitled "The Last Night that She Lived:"

She mentioned and forgot-
Then lightly as a Reed
Bent to the Water, struggled scarce-
Consented, and was dead-

First we are struck that the lines emerge as blunt, literal, statements of fact. The tonelessness -- the sheer, unvaried monotony of the description seems curiously at odds with a description of the event of death. But the style leads to her mood of the poem which is an atmosphere of rigidly curbed hysteria. Her aim in this poem, it would seem, is to portray a dry-eyed grief, and she accomplishes her purpose by setting grief to the measure of the spare, inflexible line -- as though the speaker is left benumbed. She uses this same technique in "I Heard a Fly Buzz:"

I willed my Keepsakes-- Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable-- and then it was
There interposed a Fly--

In this poem her style involves a sort of studied ugliness -- an attempt to record the treacheries of experience by the blunt antithesis, the inept word. Her dry understatement fitted her vision of man's difficult place in a difficult world.

Using poetic language thusly, she departs sharply from the custom of her contemporaries. Throughout the Nineteenth Century, the prevailing view was, the more musical the poetry, the greater the emotional fervor it could communicate. It was believed that the concentration of high feelings was directly related to regularity, a melodiousness and a heavily cadenced pattern. But Miss Dickinson chose to show that suffering might result in a situation where the tongue seems fixed and the "Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs."

Another indication that she writes with studied simplicity is that some of her definitions are simple to the point of obviousness, yet unforgettable, and often, almost unanalysable. Consider these famous
Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell.

This statement has simplicity and clarity; and yet this is more a moment of vision than an exercise in logic. A platitude as hackneyed as "Life is what we make it" can be developed into a poetic statement which acquires new meaning from its colloquial questions:

Life is what we make it--
Death-- we do not know--
Christ's acquaintance with Him
Justify Him-- though

Thus we can see that Miss Dickinson, like Mr. Donne, understood the appeal of the speaking voice; and though Donne's voice rises to a passionate cry, while hers ebbs to an undertone, both found colloquialism an able vehicle for transporting their meanings.

The use of "I," the keen personal consciousness which analyzed its every awareness, is similar in the expressions of both poets. Miss Dickinson says "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" or "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" And her calling herself the "Empress of Calvary" or her talking with God or a bee is in the same spirit that Donne uses the "I." Sewall comments that

Poem after poem-- more than a hundred and fifty of them begin with the word "I," the talker's word. She is already in the poem before she begins it, as a child is already in the adventure before he finds a word to speak of it. Few poets-- Donne comes to mind-- have written more dramatically than Emily Dickinson, more in the live locutions of dramatic speech, words born living on the tongue, written as though spoken. Few have committed themselves as actors more livingly to the scene. You are not able to stop reading. Something is being said to you and you have no choice but to hear."

---

1Sewall, op. cit., p. 160.
Miss Dickinson also perceives the drama of the imagined audience. In some of her grim poems, her speakers function as some bereaved onlookers who recount the circumstances of someone else's passing. Here, for example, the poet and other mourners follow a loved one to the brink of death; then, left themselves among the living, they seek without much success, to interpret the experience they have watched:

The last Night that She lived
It was a Common Night
Except the Dying-- that to Us
Made Nature different.

We noticed smallest things...
. . . . . . . . . . . . .
And We--We placed the Hair
And drew the Head erect--
And then an awful leisure was
Our faith to regulate.

Clearly, the emphasis in the poem lies with the living as they perceive death and when the anonymous She has become a corpse, the mourners are still faced with the terrible task of finding purpose in the scene before them. This poem also illustrates her barrenness of diction. There are no poetic words, and the poem exhibits contrast between dramatic situation and dry, spare diction.

Miss Dickinson, like Donne, liked the unexpected phrase that startles. Consider the unusual phrasing here:

If nothing larger than a World's Departure from a hinge,
Or Sun's extinction be observed,
'Twas not so large that I Could lift my forehead from my work
For curiosity.

Or observe the shock of the colloquial phrasing in this little poem:

Papa above!
Regard a Mouse
She had a flair for crowding her lines with verbal excitement. Her constant practice of compiling a thesaurus of word choices for a single line reminds us of Donne. For example, the final lines of a poem entitled "The Bible is an Antique Volume" reads:

Had but the tale a thrilling, typic, hearty, bennie, breathless, spacious tropic, warbling, ardent, friendly magic, pungent, winning, mellow letter
All the boys would come-
Orpheus's sermon captivated,
It did not condemn.

Each of the variant adjectives apparently occurred to her as refined gradations or aspects of her total conception. Or note the accumulation of verbs in the following stanza:

'Tis this invites, appals, endows, Flits, glimmers, proves, dissolves Returns, suggests, convicts, enchants-
Then flings in Paradise!

No one word is adequate to her idea; and she, as Donne, thereby imparts a dramatic urgency to her message.

Miss Dickinson was also unconventional in her stanziac forms. The Bible was the book whose words she echoed most frequently, and the hymnal the most important source of her verse forms. But she avoids regular rhythms and perfect rhymes and violates grammatical rules when she wishes. One critic comments that

She uses inversions, short six or eight syllable lines that are terse and end-stopped. She uses a strange punctuation, substituting the dash for the comma, semi-colon and period and left her last lines open-ended or dash stopped. These forms appear simple, but she handles them
with skill to achieve the pauses and emphases she wants. Her devices sharpened her antithesis, and gives an intentional fragmentary effect that underscores her intended inconclusiveness. She set out to picture the divided response of a disordered world, and her lack of conventionality was functional, rather than an eddity.1

Her style, as Donne's, could show differing qualities to suggest different modes of being. For example, in these stanzas from "The Chariot:"

We passed the school where children played
At wrestling in a ring;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.

Since then 'tis centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity.

First we have a mood of light, warmth and vitality, represented by the sun, the children and the field of gazing grain set to a light strain of music. We have incessant motion as indicated by such verbs as passed, played, wrestling. Then there descends darkness, cold, and pause. All of this shifting from light to dark, from warmth to cold, from motion to rest, is suggested by her language and her varying rhythms.

In the following poem, the verses seesawing back and forth in syntax and sound suggest the oscillation from loss to recovery, from resonant correspondence back to hollow isolation:

1 Sewall, op. cit., p. 15.
Quiet scorn pervades her sketch of the conventional Amherst lady:

What Soft- Cherubic Creatures-
These Gentlewomen are-
One would as soon assault a Plush
Or violate a Star.

Slow, solemn pacing suggests the motionlessness which is the subject of this poem:

The Clock strikes one that just struck two-
Some schism in the Sum-
A Vagabond from Genesis
Has wrecked the Pendulum.

One authority observes, in reference to Emily Dickinson's style:

All her short lyrics are in simple forms-- usually couplets or quatrains and often at first they seem unfinished. Sometimes the sentences are twisted awkwardly and there is odd grammar in them. The poet often prefers assonance, or the matching of sounds that are similar, but not the same to rhyme. But the more her poems are read, the less important these oddities seem. The poems dart at beauty and truth with an intensity and dancing magic, that nothing seems to matter but the life of them.

And another critic has this to say about the irregularity of Emily's rhymes and rhythms:

Emily composed by instinct. She used the basic rhythms of the hymns she had heard from childhood, adapting them to the need of the moment. Her instinct told her that mechanical regularity makes for monotony. There is more variety than the formal appearance of the poems would suggest, and a study of the rhythmic variations in any half-dozen of her best poems would reveal

---

considerable subtlety.\textsuperscript{1}

In her experimentation with rhythms, Miss Dickinson struck a note that is distinctly modern. Her exceedingly unlyrical lyrics stand outside the tradition of the Nineteenth Century poetics and are more nearly at home with the poetical tendencies of our own time. Indeed, Emily Dickinson, as John Donne, could not set her thought to the measures of the conventional forms; it is not surprising that she, as he, developed a style of her own.

Miss Dickinson had a sense of drama. She, as Donne, explored the sensation of death in shockingly intimate accents. Her best known dramatization of personal death may be illustrated by "The Chariot," a narrative that involves character, episode, plot-line. Up to the door come two callers (Death and Immortality). They dally for a little, then presently ride off with the Lady-poet into the Sunset. The leisurely pace taken by death, Immortality sanctifying the relationship between Death and the Lady, the journey into darkness -- all these details are dramatic in nature. And her verbal indirection, as usual, allows her to say one thing, while implying another. Another of her poems which thrives on the dramatic situation is entitled "I Felt a Cleaving:"

\begin{verbatim}
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
Like Balls-- upon a Floor.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{1}Sewell, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 123.
Once the shock has worn off -- the grinding violence. The aim is to present the mind in its last extremity through three stages which build toward a climax. The crack-up is first portrayed through the short, sharp, explosive and highly destructive verbals of the beginning. Next, it is set forth imagistically, as thought is likened to a fabric which comes apart at the seams and then remains too torn and ragged to be repaired. Then comes the climax of the balls scattering on the floor; and the harder one struggles to pick them up, the farther away the ball rolls. The effect is one of utter frustration and absolute chaos. One is truly reminded here of Donne's famous account of disorder into the mind - "tis all in pieces, all coherence gone." And one is also reminded that this is drama of the highest order. Miss Dickinson is directly concerned with the problem of communicating an emotion. She is interested in those verbal devices which could best be used to render visible and articulate the nebulous and the private inner state. Let me quote one of my favorite poems to illustrate this point:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes-
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs-
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round-
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought-
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone-

This is the Hour of Lead-
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow-
First-Chill-then Stupor- then the letting go-

This is a cold, cheerless poem with absolute absence of emotion.
Intense suffering has dehumanized, has made the person automatic. In hard, specific language, she embodies emotional and psychological states she makes the mind a stage where a mental idiosyncrasy is put on display, and we are made to feel the dramatic impact of objective poetry.

"I Felt a Funeral in My Brain" is really a psychological drama. First comes the procession of pallbearers, then the mourners parade before the open casket to a slow, solemn tempo. Then a beating threat-ens to paralyze her mind and render it numb. And with rich, symbolic words, the poet is actually able to put a feeling into words. The dramatic situation was a technique that received full exploitation by Miss Dickinson.

Like Donne, Emily Dickinson was inordinarily fond of the paradox, which she used to express the fundamental disharmonies of life. Here, for example, she constructs an entire poem solely on the multiple aspects of the elusiveness of love:

The Love a Life can show Below
Is but a filament, I know,
Of that diviner thing
That faints upon the face of Noon-
And smites the Tinder in the Sun-
And hinders Gabriel's Wing-

'Tis this-in Music-hints and sways-
And far abroad on Summer days-
Distills uncertain pain-
'Tis this enamors in the East-
And tints the Transit in the West
With harrowing Iodine-

Tis this- invites-appalls-endows-
Flits-glimmers-proves-dissolves-
Returns-suggests-convicts-enchants-
Then- flings in Paradise-

Instead of trying to define this indefinable essence, she piles verb
on verb to tell what it does to her, in its evanescence and ambiguity. The paradoxical nature of its effect gives the poem its structure and some of its finest phrases as in the sunset coloring of "harrowing Iodine" or "Tis this enamors and afflicts." Consider some of her other many paradoxical statements:

A Wounded Deer- leaps highest-
I've heard the Hunter tell-

To learn the Transport- by the Pain-
As Blind Men learn the Sun...

Just lost- when I was saved...

We lose-- because we win-

Tell all the Truth- but tell it slant-
Success in Circuit lies-

In each instance, paradox derives from the way antithetical concepts of experiences have been yoked together into a meaningful, if bitter perception. This technique, of course, ties up with her recognition of how disparity and contradiction rule human experience; and she, as Donne, is constantly trying to unite the disparities of life. She was fond of using religious phraseology for profane love; and she was fond of the paradoxical argument - such arguments as:

A Death blow is a life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become-
Who had they lived, had died but where
They died, Vitality begun.

Or here she argues that art is a distinctly human process of destruction and creation in which the artist makes from the materials of nature something new and superior:

Essential Oils- are wrung-
The Attar from the Rose
Be not expressed by Suns-alone-
It is the gift of Screws-
Foerester comments that "She had faith and skepticism, reverence and irreverence, sober directness and elfish indirectness. Highly typical is her trick of aggrandizing the small, or, diminishing the large."\(^1\)

Emily Dickinson has been criticized, as has Donne, for her eccentric imagery. Some of her poetry shows the influence of the coming of technology. For example, in this poem, she tries to invest a mechanical product of science with aesthetic effects:

```
I like to see it lap the Miles
And lick the Valleys up-
And stop to feed itself at Tanks
And then- prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains-
And supercilious peer
In Shanties--by the sides of Roads-
And then a Quarry pare

To fit its sides
And crawl between
Complaining all the while
In horrid--hooting stanza-
Then chase itself down Hill-

And neigh like Boanerges-
Then- prompter than a Star
Stop- docile and omnipotent
At it's own stable door-
```

Here we see that she uses words in unusual senses. "Prodigious" and "Boanerges" are certainly used unusually, and the images seem far-fetched and forced. In her popular poem, "The Soul Selects her Own Society," she closes the "Valves" of her attention. The organic "Valves" in this climatic image makes the exclusion more vital, because mechanical doors shut out further vision by voluntary effort. But this anatomical reference is unusual, to say the least. Then there is the

\(^1\)Foerester, op. cit., p. 1175.
Miss Dickinson invented some imagery that was fresh and exciting. But at other times, in her effort to make the abstract concrete, her imagery, and analogies become over-ingenious and many critics have even labeled them metaphysical.

Consider the far-fetched nature of this comparison:

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 Sponge- 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.

Is she saying that perhaps the heavenly reality, as well as the reality of the external world, exists only in the mind? Whatever her implication, this comparison shows excessive ingenuity. Or consider this artificial combination of mode and meaning:

And He and I perplex us
If positive, twere we-
Or bore the Garden in the Brain
This Curiosity.

But He, the best Logician,
Refers my clumsy eye-
To just vibrating Blossoms!
An Exquisite Reply.

These conceits result in structured images instead of logic.

Her unpredictable boldness sometimes obscured her poems. For example, she attempts in many of her poems to picture the theoretic
experience of life after death:

Great streets of silence led away
To neighborhoods of pause;
Here was no notice, no dissent,
No universe, no laws.

By clocks 'twas morning, and for night
The bells at distance called;
But epoch had no basis here,
For period exhaled.

Here she selects a number of terms representing familiar abstractions or perceptions, and one by one negates these terms in her attempt to render a foreign experience in terms of the actual. However, the utilization of irrelevant imagery, results in a poem that is forced and theoretical.

Here she invents images for the indefinable fusion of matter and spirit:

This Compound Vision-
Light- enabling Light-
The Finite- furnished
With the Infinite
Convex- and Concave Witness
Back- toward Time-
And forward-
Toward the God of Him-

Often she played off the learned word against the simple Saxon for special effects:

Faith is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see-
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency.

And sometimes, her wit is unmistakeably like Donne's as she makes her super-rational search for truth:

It dropped so low in my regard
I heard it hit the ground
And go to pieces on the stones
At bottom of my mind.
Yet blamed the fate that fractured less
Than I reviled myself
For entertaining plated wares
Upon my silver shelf.

Here it is obvious that she is attempting to amalgamate disparate experiences. Thus, the likenesses she perceives emerge remote, rather than familiar; and certainly her results are logical, rather than sensuous.

Thus we have seen that Miss Dickinson, in achieving the colloquial and dramatic qualities of her poems, employs many techniques that are similar to those employed by Donne. She uses homely and idiomatic language; she employs the first person and the imagined audience; she is unconventional in style and rhythms; she uses the dramatic situation, paradox and surprise; and she utilizes eccentric imagery and the conceit.

A noted critic observes that

Like John Donne whom she resembled, Dickinson's understanding of the meaning of words was subtle and complex, her ear for music could assimilate discord as well as concord, and her images were drawn from life and from books with a sure but infinitely various authority. Only the most complex art could be made to include the depths and variety of those things for which she demanded expression. The resources of poetry which had already stretched with images as violent as those of Herbert and Donne, were further opened and deepened by her deceptively simple stanzas. ¹

Certainly, the writer feels that Spiller makes a very apt observation here. For indeed we have observed that Donne and Miss Dickinson shared certain insights and that they likewise employed kindred techniques. But perhaps it is not too unusual that persons with similar

¹ Spiller, op. cit., p. 169.
convictions are as unique and as unconventional in nature as the convictions of these two poets.
SUMMARY

It is the writer's hope that the reader has been able to discern several points with some degree of clarity, consistency and continuity. First, an examination of the origins of John Donne and Emily Dickinson reveals that both poets lived in times of transition, that they both knew deep personal relationships and that each was torn by conflicts between convention and conviction. Second, a look at critical statements and the poems, convinces one that both poets were dedicated to a search for truth and that their keen insights committed them to realism revealed in ways strikingly similar. Both used everyday subjects and disillusioning themes; both employed the factual approach to experience; and both accepted life in its unadorned state. Furthermore, both poets showed a fundamental concern for the life of consciousness, and exhibited compound vision in their recognition of the multiple complexities of experience fused into a final oneness of being. Third, an examination of the poems and critical statements also reveals that both poets were boldly experimental in their art and used similar techniques to achieve colloquial and dramatic qualities in their poems. They employed homely and idiomatic language; first person and dramatic situations; unconventional styles and rhythms; paradox and surprise; eccentric imagery and conceits.

One can conclude, then, that there is a definite relationship that exists between the poetry of John Donne and that of Emily Dickinson, and that this relationship springs from a similarity in insights and techniques. Further, it would seem that their experiments in basic
poetic techniques are closely related to their uniqueness of ideas, as though only the most complex art could be made to include the depths and variety of those things for which these two writers demanded expression.

John Donne and Emily Dickinson depart from tradition and the example of other poets. They are highly original in the execution of their poetical theories. Both were considered eccentric in their times, but their poems dramatize and anticipate many of the developments of modern poetry. Their poetry reflects the creation of a whole new set of values and a new emphasis on honesty and integrity in interpersonal relationships. Their art is a central symbol for the dilemma of the self confronting the cosmos. John Donne and Emily Dickinson caught and forced into expression the skepticism and doubts of the age of science that was to come.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES

Books


Periodicals


