Chapter 2

Emily Dickinson and American Identity

Emily Dickinson seems, and in many ways is, the most private of poets. Her retreat into her father’s house around the age of thirty cut her off from direct social intercourse with her surrounding world. Her texts similarly seem to draw a circle around themselves, in interrupted and apparently inconsistent expression. Even phrases or words are fragmented and isolated by her idiosyncratic dashes, which substitute for the integrating medium of punctuation. All of these almost compel an image of Dickinson’s poetry as a closed and impervious, if also a provisional and fragmentary, world.

But Dickinson’s work reflects and enacts the cultural concerns and challenges of the world in which she lived. Removal from public life is certainly suggested by her severe textual obliqueness, as well as by her riveting refusal either to appear in public or to allow the publication of her work. In another sense, however, Dickinson’s texts are scenes of cultural crossroad, situated within and acting as an arena for the many profound transitions taking place around her. This includes gendered ones. Dickinson brings to a kind of consummation trends and contradictions within women’s evolving social and literary positions. In her, modesty can be said to take on its intensest form; as at once fulfilled and transmuted. Dickinson in her reclusion inhabits the domestic sphere with a vengeance. This is not simply to overturn gendered norms. Yet at the same time she resisted other gender expectations, such as motherhood and marriage (although this was not such an anomaly: Dickinson’s was generally a period of high single womanhood). Arguments for Dickinson’s reclusion as a “strategy” by

S. Wolosky, Poetry and Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America
© Shira Wolosky 2010
which she gained the autonomy to write poetry against gender roles urging marriage and motherhood exaggerate on the side of strength.\footnote{Arguments describing her reclusion as an evasion born of frustration, anxiety, and madness make her into a mere victim and exaggerate on the side of weakness.}\footnote{Dickinson’s self-enclosure gained her some degree of control over her world, yet the very extremity of her withdrawal measures severe conflict with it.} Her reclusion is ultimately a highly contradictory act of explosive compliance: a challenge in the guise of extreme fulfillment of expected female cultural paradigms. It registers to an acute degree both her profound marking by social norms and her equally severe resistance to them.\footnote{But Dickinson’s conflictual relation to her culture extends beyond gender—or rather, extends gender into a wide terrain. Her identity crises may be said to reflect the nation’s; the severe transformations surrounding her take specific formation in her work. This includes not only the political turmoil over slavery and its ultimate eruption in war, but also the radical religious transformations as pluralist denominationalism and secularizing trends challenged traditional authority and theology; and the broad social and cultural trends redefining the position of the self in the face of new economic configurations.}

In Dickinson’s work, these several cultural tensions and the strands of American identity that make them up emerge through characteristic figural systems that are at once mutually interwoven and yet also dissonant, discordant, and mutually contesting. These systems, which each also represent or engage an aspect of Dickinson’s identity, can be distributed as: gender; religious concerns—which, contrary to many twentieth-century readings, remained a potent force from which she never completely divested herself; Dickinson’s identity as a poet concerned with poetry, language, and art; and, perhaps surprisingly but persistently and pervasively, an American identity consisting of economic, political, and cultural images and references. These systems, or dimensions, are Dickinson’s central engagements, defining her own identity and also her culture’s. Her poetry can be seen as a battlefield of their clashing and conflicting impulses and commitments, with each text offering its own configuration and contest among them, as do poems against and with each other in the ongoing project of her work. Some poems focus on one concern, others on another. Dickinson’s most powerful and accomplished texts bring all these dimensions to bear on each other.

But this is not to say that Dickinson offers a vision that creates correlations among these several dimensions of experience. Her poetry recalls, but ultimately diverges from, religious and literary traditions