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Emily Dickinson's Books

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Dorothy Huff Oberhaus (bio)

In a poem dated 1862, Emily Dickinson's "supposed person" reflects, "I measure every Grief I meet / With narrow, probing, Eyes—/ I wonder if It weighs like Mine—/ Or has an Easier size" (P-561). As she ponders the

griefs born by others and wonders how they compare to her own, she does not specify what hers is. But she does present a suggestive list of five possible griefs, which she calls the "fashions—of the Cross." The first grief she names is one's own inevitable "Death"—which she adds, "comes but once—/ And only nails the eyes." The second is "Want"; the third, "Cold"; and the fourth, "Despair." The fifth grief is "Banishment from native Eyes—/ In sight of Native Air." The first, one's own death, is, of course, common to all humankind. So are some amount of want, cold, and despair, if one thinks figuratively as well as literally. But the fifth—"Banishment from native Eyes—/ In sight of Native Air"—is not innately part of the human condition. It therefore seems likely that when she wrote these lines Emily Dickinson may have had in mind her own particular "Cross." Whether or not she did, they describe her position vis-à-vis the nineteenth-century America in which she lived and wrote. By choosing to die to the world—to become "Nobody," as the speaker of an earlier poem declares (P-288)—she did, in effect, banish herself from native eyes, did become in a sense an exile. Yet she was still very much in sight of native air. She was thus part of her culture, but at the same time far more outside her culture than the other major writers of the American literary Renaissance. **[End Page 58]**

Both her life and her art reflect her position as an insider who was at the same time an outsider. She did not directly experience the Civil War, for example, and in 1863 wrote to T. W. Higginson that the "War" felt like "an oblique place" to her (L-280). But she did write four poems about the soldiers who fought and died in the war that reveal its deep impact upon herself. The poem beginning, "It dont sound so terrible—quite—as it did" was almost certainly occasioned by the death of Frazar Stearns, whose "Murder," she also wrote in several letters, had stunned her (P-426, L-255, L-256). The poem beginning, "When I was small, a Woman died" and "Today—her Only Boy / Went up from the Potomac" commemorates the "Braver[y]" either of Stearns or of another fallen Massachusetts soldier (P-596). A poem in the same fascicle, number 24, begins, "It feels a shame to be Alive—/ When Men so brave—are dead" and concludes with a tribute to the "Men who die[d]"—whom she calls "Those unsustained—

Saviors" who "Present Divinity" (P-444). In still another poem, "They"—presumably the dying soldiers—"dropped like Flakes—/ They dropped like Stars . . . They perished in the Seamless Grass . . . But," she reassures herself, "God can summon every face / On his Repealless—List" (P-409).

Emily Dickinson rejected the Congregational Church of her contemporaries and friends, yet she corresponded with clergymen throughout her life—with the Reverends Dwight, Emerson, and Jenkins, who were pastors of the Amherst Congregational Church, as well as with Wadsworth and Higginson, who was himself a former clergyman. Her poems are filled with liturgical and sacramental diction, though her crucifixes, masses, cathedrals, nuns, Madonnas, priests, and her speaker who doesn't stop to cross herself are not from the tradition to which she was born. Her poems are mostly in hymn meter, and she sometimes refers to them as hymns or psalms and to herself as a psalmist (L-307, L-674, P-261, L-515). But she was also metrically experimental. Some of her poems—which she called in one poem her "Experiment / Toward Men"—approach sprung rhythm (P-902). And she wrote several sonnets. The poem beginning, "Tis Sunrise—Little Maid," for example, is a "slant" Miltonic sonnet composed of two quatrains and a sestet (P-908).

Though she no longer...



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