"EXISTENCE WITH A WALL": EMILY DICKINSON'S PRISON IMAGERY

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"— What ho, down there !
My dungeoneers, come fetch us."
— Robert Frost, *A Masque of Mercy*

"I have been studying now how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world."
— Shakespeare, *Richard II*

I

After the customhouse story, *The Scarlet Letter* presents the scene of a prison which, Hawthorne indicates, epitomizes the dark side of Puritan New England. The prison, "the black flower of civilized society" (Chap. I), tragically symbolizes the sad fate of all mankind, looming as evidence of universal human frailty and sin which are lamentably unconquerable even in the town of Puritan saints. In brief, Hawthorne uses the prison to stand for the dark, confined world of the human mind: he discovers that the mind can be a powerful jailor and that it, paradoxically, can be as vast and deep as to contain some almost unfathomable mysteries of the universe; and that it can be a great theater of universal conflicts, such as good and evil, light and darkness, and guilt and redemption. Ultimately, by means of the prison Hawthorne succeeds in disclosing the rigid and nominalized state of Puritan orthodoxy and its social flaw, displaying at the same time truly important universal human values beyond time and religion.

Like Hawthorne and probably more significantly than he, Emily Dickinson uses a prison as the dark center of her poetic world, revealing her down-reaching understanding of the human mind and the universe. Though little acknowledged, Dickinson is a great 'dungeon' poet in

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America, as is shown remarkably by the obsessively recurrent imagery of captivity. There are basically two aspects as to her sense of imprisonment. In a macrocosmic sense, she views the whole earth as a vast prison because she perceives that the earth is fallen from the blissful state of heaven; and in a microcosmic sense she regards the world of her mind as a palpable, shadowy prison as it is made of oppressed emotion and desire. Her prison consists of these huge and concentrated worlds.

Traditionally, prison imagery has been used as a popular literary device in European literature: for example, Plato's prison-cave image in *The Republic;* Jonah's custody in the biblical whale; Shakespeare's incarcerated King Lear and Richard II; Milton's imprisoned Lady by Comus; a pseudo-paradise in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera;* John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, and Oscar Wilde producing 'dungeon' literature in prison; major romantics from Blake to Keats battling against social and imaginative incarceration to defend poetry and humanity; in America, Poe's pit and torture-house ; the prison-ships in Melville's oceanic stories; Eliot's prison of individual's separateness; Faulkner's actual and obsessive prison; in France, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Hugo, Proust, and Camus perceiving the imprisonment of mankind; and in other countries, the prison-homes of Geothe's Faust and Ibsen's Nora. This list could be further extended, but it suffices to show that the prison imagery has thus been popularly used in literary works. What is, then, the secret of the popularity of the prison imagery ? This answer will undoubtedly provide some keys to understanding the fundamental nature of human imagination.

On the whole, feminist critics have especially regarded Dickinson's withdrawal into her house as a typical form of female imprisonment, forced by social imperatives and expected maternal functions, which they insist was not unusual in the nineteenth century. They say that Dickinson was trapped in her house, which could be to her a tomb and a prison, and that she was destined to internalize her wounds and wishes; and that she was, in turn, urged to translate her dire and sometimes ecstatic experience into original poetic expressions. In fact, this formulaic feminist platitude, though it is partially correct, makes the complicated matter of Dickinson's imprisonment too simple. Her confinement actually contains more significant and intrinsic factors which concern the kernel part of her poetic world.

A dark prison can be a symbol of horror; yet, interestingly, it can also serve as an incubator of extraordinary emotion and imagination. Her prison

poems certainly contain the clichés of prison literature, such as walls, cages, bars, spiders, beam, darkness, windows; but, far more than the conventions of such Gothic horrors and sublimes, her prison imagery shows the genuine struggle of consciousness between confinement and liberation, between chaos and order, the conflict which generates the fecund lyrical tension of her poetry. Since her prison poems largely divide into several image groups — body, earth, hell, refuge, and self-consciousness, the following discussion will, therefore, focus on each group and investigate the overall role of her prison imagery.

II

The physical body can be a prison to the spirit: in Dickinson's words, the "spirit incarcerated in the pound."[1] Emerson says in his essay "Fate" that "Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit." On the whole, compared with that of Anne Bradstreet's "The Flesh and the Spirit," for example, Dickinson's body-prison imagery appears not more than conventional; yet her imagery is usually vivid, exact, and penetrating; and her expression of the dualistic strife between body and soul is very intense. Quite often the body imposes a great obstacle on the soul which desires to escape from its physicality:

> A single Screw of Flesh
> Is all that pins the Soul (#263)[2]

> What if I say I shall not wait
> What if I burst the fleshly Gate —
> And pass escaped — to thee !
> What if I file this Mortal — off —
> See where it hurt me — That's enough —
> And wade in Liberty ! (#277)

The imprisoned soul earnestly wishes to be liberated from the body to merge into the spiritual; human corporeality, however, blocks the soul's way

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[1] *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), 82. All citations from Dickinson's letters are to this edition and will be hereafter identified by the letter number with L., in parentheses.

[2] *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979). Dickinson poems are cited from this edition and identified by number in parentheses.

to freedom. On the other hand, in the following poem, the body is so sublimely etherealized that it no longer appears to hinder the escape of the soul:

> With Pinions of Disdain
> The Soul can farther fly
> Than any feather specified
> In Ornithology —
> It wafts this sordid Flesh
> Beyond it's dull — control
> And during it's electric gale —
> The body is a soul —
> instructing by the same —
> How little work it be —
> To put off filaments like this
> for immortality — (#1431)

The dualism between body and soul is thus resolved, and in this spiritualization Dickinson succeeds in traversing the boundary of the world of matter to that of spirit. The soul desires to attain its ethereal and original identity and freedom, and the body is almost converted into a spiritual entity in such a singular way that it may be conveyed by a gale towards the world of eternity. The body grows wings like a bird, becoming a spiritual being, spurns the earthly life, and merges into the domain of immortality. One may be able to detect a romantic echo, particularly, of Shelley in this poem.

The body-soul conflict, however, is often difficult to reconcile. Frequently, the body impedes the soul's acquisition of independence and liberty; and this difficult problem is, strikingly, often expressed in Dickinson's employment of the garment imagery. The corporeal garment is imposed on the soul, and when the soul desires freedom, it only need divest itself of the garment. Dickinson's garment imagery often describes the soul's desire for an escape from the mandate of clay. In her letters, for instance, she writes: "A finite life, little sister, is that peculiar garment that were it optional with us we might decline to wear" (L. 387). Likewise, on hearing of the death of the wife of T. W. Higginson (2 September 1877), she writes to console him:

> Perhaps she does not go so far
> As you who stay — suppose —
> Perhaps comes closer, for the lapse
> Of her corporeal clothes — (L. 517)

Dickinson's body-garment poems are often studded with brilliant diction and images: "Dropped into the Ether Acre — / Wearing the Sod Gown — " (#665); "The Garment cast, / Our Props disclose / So scant, so eminently small" (#1086); "We wear Mortality / As lightly as an Option Gown" (#1462). The garment imagery, though it may be a little conventional, is a very useful device for her to express her idea of the unique relationship between body and soul.

The physical garment can be discarded at the ultimate moment of death or at the ecstatic soaring of the imagination; yet while staying on this earth, she is subject to the condition of clay. In the world of matter the soul must, sadly, reside in the flesh, a corporeal fate which creates a dungeon; Mallarmé says in a similar vein, touching on the doomed human physicality, that "La chair est triste" ("Brise marine"). The body is limited, and the soul is subordinate to it; yet on a sheer occasion the body and the soul can be reconciled: "The body is a soul —" (#1431). The body, however confining it may be, is the home of the soul; and without its material foothold the soul can neither jump into the invisible nor gaze at the constellations of stars.

Also, what should not be forgotten is that the body, because of its interior jail, chastens the soul — "Through the Dark Sod — as Education" (#392) — so that it may attain its glowing sanctity:

> The hallowing of Pain
> Like hallowing of Heaven
> Obtains at a corporeal cost — (#772)

The soul grows by suffering, and only through the physical the spiritual is defined and immortality is achieved.

Related to the body-prison imagery, the earth-prison imagery mostly focuses on this world as a vast prison. The crucial idea on which this imagery relies is that the earth is fallen. Dickinson refers to the earth, for instance, as "this very sinful, and wicked world" (L. 30), "tumbled down world" (L. 30), and "this fallen and perishing world" (L. 97). The fall suggests that the earth has become a mere temporal and spatial domain and that everything in this world is now ephemeral and doomed to decay. Nothing is static and stable, and overall the earth appears as a vast shadow of the perfect world of heaven. In a sense, her idea of a fallen earth comes very close to that of (Neo-) Platonism, and actually she writes that "Love first and last of all

things made / Of which this (our) living world is but the shade" (Prose Fragment 41). Man is condemned to live in the dark shadow of the earth — "in Life's faint, wailing Inn" (#1060), and this vision inevitably yields the image of the earth as a huge dark prison. Faced with such a dreadful vision, Dickinson naturally wishes that she "could pack this little earthly bundle, and bidding the world Goodbye, fly away and away, and never come back again . . . " (L. 62). Of course, the recognition of terrestial imprisonment causes excruciating pain and fear, and she desires to be liberated : "What Liberty ! So Captives deem / Who tight in Dungeons are" (#661); "Wouldn't Dungeons sorer grate / On the Man — free —" (#728). Yet however painful her life may be, she must accept her state as a prisoner as long as she lives on the earth; and, actually, she is resolved to face her tragic condition, saying with firm conviction that "A Prison gets to be a friend —" (#652). Marianne Moore says, in a similar situation, "a life prisoner, but reconciled."

The earth-prison imagery is a hackneyed convention, yet it has been frequently used in a number of literary works, for it importantly suggests a poetic and theological cosmology. In "Intimations Ode," for instance, Wordsworth depicts the cosmic birth of man and his growth on the earth as analogous to a gradual entry into a prison:

> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home:
> Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of he prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy (V. 64–68)

For Wordsworth the earth is a "prison-house," where man since his birth has gradually lost his celestial nature in the process of growth, awakening into his own consciousness and acquiring worldly wisdom. Man is fundamentally doomed, but Wordsworth considers that though shackled by earthly limitations, man will learn to save his soul in an imaginative way: Wordsworth sees hope of salvation in the power of the human imagination and in the communal unison between man and the Divine.

The vision of the earth-prison, however, imposes itself more tragically on others. For example, Vigny states that "Dans cette prison nommée la vie, d'où nous partons les uns après les autres pour aller à la mort."[1] This is

[1] Alfred de Vigny, *Œuvres complètes*, II (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 945.

utterly a dark, despairing vision. Baudelaire also writes in a suffocating way:

En haut, le Ciel ! ce mur de caveau qui l'étouffe.
Plafond illuminé par un opéra bouffe
Où chaque histrion foule un so ensanglanté;
Terreur du libertin, espoir du fol ermite;
Le Ciel! couvercle noir de la grande marmite
Où bout l'imperceptible et vaste Humanité.

("Le couverle," 9–14)

In Baudelaire's vision man is doomed under the "couvercle noir de la grande marmite" and remains in a wretched state. For him the earth looms up as a dark prison where, like Macbeth's "fools," man dances away his brief life on the "way to dusty death." Rimbaud shows a similar idea of the earth-prison but is more hopeful: "Et monter lentment, dans un immense amour, / De la prison terrestre à la beauté du jour" ("Soleil et chair," II).

Likewise, Wallace Stevens's poems reveal the earth-prison imagery. His celebrated "Sunday Morning" examines and portrays the possibility of the earth's paradise, but at its last section the poem presents a trace of ambivalence as to whether the earth can be a paradise or a tragic prison:

We live in an odd chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable. (VIII. 5–8)

In this vision, religious and mystic elements are completely eliminated, and the earth reveals its almost dreadfully crude figure. The earth may be a prison; then, is there no salvation for man ? Stevens ends his poem with ambiguity as to this question, yet his idea of the supremacy of the imagination reverberates in the poem as if it serves as a key for human salvation. Illusions of life must be banished, and the true reality of the earth would be revealed. Then, for the first time, man can realize his situation and establish his position in the sometimes unfriednly universe. For Stevens, aesthetics may help regain man's true position on the undressed earth; yet for Dickinson mere aesthetics is not enough to overcome man's tragic state on the dark earth: the dew of divine grace is needed.

Dickinson's next prison imagery concerns hell. She perceives the actual presence of hell — "Ah ! Pit ! With Heaven over it !" (#1712) — a perception which contributes to creating the extraordinary depth of her poetic

world. Actually, her vision of the human tragedy is profoundly related to this perception, and in this sense she can be comparable to Dante, Hawthorne, and Baudelaire. Like Dante, she tours from hell to heaven; like Hawthorne, she examines the human mind extensively, particularly concentrating on the paradox of the "hallowing" pain (#772) which is close to the theological idea of *felix culpa;* and like Baudelaire, she seeks for the deepest knowledge, love, and beauty, probing dauntlessly into the mysteries of the universe. Her ceaseless search for truth possibly echoes Baudelaire's words that "Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe ? / Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau !*" ("Le voyage," VIII). Dickinson makes an adventure into the unknown in quest of immortality and divine knowledge; and the deeper she dives, the more convinced she is of the presence of hell.

Investigated minutely, Dickinson's hell-related statements reveal her deepening vision of the netherworld and her further involvement in it. For example, she says, "the dark realms of wo, where is the never dying worm and the fire which no water can quench . . . " (L. 10); "the Evil one bid me wake & again return to the world & its pleasure" (L. 11); "I have come from '*to* and *fro*, and walking up, and down' the same place that Satan hailed from . . . " (L. 36) ; "down, down, in the terrestial; no sunset here, no stars; not even a bit of twilight which I may poetize — " (L. 77). She identifies hell with her absolute pain and sorrow and is conscious of a fire in her mind; her mounting despair makes her a demon of pain, as she says, "The seeing pain one cant relieve make a demon of one."[1] Also the statements that "Fathoms are sudden Neighbors" (L. 804) and "I measure by Fathoms" (L. 882) indicate the profundity of her paradoxical vision of hell. She implies that the fathoms of hell can be a measure to estimate the meaning of life and the universe. The height of heaven is equivalent to the fathom of hell. (She does not need "coffee spoons" to measure her life.) In brief, her relationship with hell is succinctly summarized in the following words : "Emerging from an Abyss, and reentering it — that is Life, is it not, Dear ?" (L. 1024). Mallarmé expresses the same view of life in that "je vois le gouffre et je sens que je dois m'y plonger" ('Lettre du 30 janvier,' 1863).

Dickinson's hell-prison imagery clearly suggests how deeply it has affected her vision of life and what tragedy has long been locked up in her

[1] Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson,* II (New Haven : Yale Univ. Press. 1960), 65.

mind. Very often her painful and suppressed emotions take the form of Gothic demons and goblins, which frequent the prison of her mind. She describes her confined life as "Existence with a wall" (#1652), and in order to escape, she attempts to "pry the Walls — " (#532), and like Monte Cristo she sometimes digs a tunnel:

> I had not minded — Walls —
> Were Universe — one Rock —
> And far I heard his silver Call
> The other side the Block —
> I'd tunnel — till my Groove
> Pushed sudden thro' to his —
> Then my face take her Recompense —
> The looking in his Eyes — (#398)

By tunneling Dickinson hopes to reach outside her prison and probably toward God, and her arduous efforts seem rewarded; yet, interestingly, she sometimes feels that she must be careful not to be deceived by easy revelation, for it might happen that "As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun / To Races — nurtured in the Dark — " (#581). In her idea, since man has been long confined and made blind in the cavernous darkness, as in Plato's cave, it might be better not to easily believe in what he sees at light. This idea fundamentally derives from her skeptical mind, and she feels it absolutely necessary to examine first the possible value of darkness: "I seek the Dark / Till I am thorough fit" (#1109). Dickinson's relationship with hell directly concerns the salvation of her soul. Even in hell she never despairs, and all through her life she has striven to transform the abyss into bliss. Her hell is most likely related to Calvinistic predestination and fatalism, yet she discovers that it can yield a redemptory vision. Her suffering in hell compels her to obtain the deepest knowledge of the mind and the universe and ultimately functions to humanize and ennoble her soul; the pain of hell can be the comfort of heaven, and fear can be peace. In her words, "Is Bliss then, such Abyss . . . ?" (#340), and vice versa.

In a mysterious way, Dickinson's prison can also be an asylum, where she can obtain protection and freedom from the entanglements of the outside world. In her real life, it is known that her upstairs room was a sort of prison, as she would rarely leave it; actually, the room was a shelter for her. To her niece Martha, she is reported to have said, pretending to lock the door of her room: "It's just a turn — and freedom, Matty." She could

be a "queen" in her room. Though her room-prison is isolated, it can be a bower of bliss and freedom; and examples of such a prison-shelter can be found in some other literary works: in *King Lear*, for instance, at the penultimate scene where Lear and Cordelia are about to be incarcerated, the king speaks to his despairing daughter:

> No, no, no, no ! Come, let's away to prison;
> We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
> And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh . . .
> (V, iii)

Lear's words brim with joy and happiness, and with the expectation of living with his angelic and beloved daughter he views the prison as a perfect realm of beatitude. The prison is transformed into a shelter of love and comfort against the menacing darkness of the savage world outside and almost assumes the form of a sacred chamber in which Lear would expiate his sin while enfolded in the blessings of the newly-discovered, genuine love of his daughter. The prison is now his true and joyous home. In Corbière's words the prison has changed into the "Cage de la gaite !"[1] Dickinson describes a similar prison-home which is consecrated by love:

> Where Thou art — that — is Home —
> . . . . . .
> Imprisonment — Content —
> And Sentence — Sacrament —
> Just We too — meet — (#725)

Likewise, Nietzsche in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* provides a paradox that a prison can become a shelter of safety and stability. Zarathustra states, viewing 'higher' men gaining comfort in his cave:

> *Solchen Unsteten, wie du, dünkt suletzt auch ein*
> *Gefängnis selig. Sahst du je, wie eingefangne*
> *Verbrecher schlafen ? Sie schlafen ruhig, sie geniessen*
> *ihre neue Sicherheit.*[2]

In the chaos of this world, man may discover "neue Sicherheit" in prison,

[1] Tristan Corbière, "Liberta," *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 788.
[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Baden-Baden: Insel Verlag, 1976), 276.

a shelter which can be his new home. Dickinson has a similar prison-refuge: "A Dungeon but a Kinsman is / Incarceration — Home" (#1334).

An examination of Dickinson's prison-refuge imagery reveals a unique aspect of her sensibility and some important influence upon her from Lord Byron. As a great romantic child of his age, Byron had been dead for only six years before her birth, and she no doubt read his poetry and heard about his gallant life. However small Byron's overall popularity seems in America,[1] his influence upon Dickinson should not be minimized; there is substantial evidence of her Byronic influence : she writes, for instance, "How is your little Byron ? Hope he gains his foot without losing his genius" (L. 227), alluding to her friend the Hollands' baby, Theodore, born in 1859, who "was operated on in 1860 to correct a congenital trouble with the tendons of one foot" (Thomas H. Johhson's note). Also she often mentions the allegorical poem of Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon," whose hero, like Samuel Johnson's Rasselas of the happy valley, regards his prison as an ideal shelter. In her letters Dickinson refers to "Chillon" at least four times, and it is reasonable to infer that the symbolical image and meaning of the prison of Chillon greatly captivated her.[2] Interestingly, the Chillon prisoner, because he has long been incarcerated, views the prison as his home:

> These heavy walls to me had grown
> A hermitage — and all my own !
> And half I felt as they were come
> To tear me from a second home: (XIV. 377–380)

For the prisoner who had "learned to love despair" and who looks on the

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[1] With respect to Byron's influence in America, William E. Leonard states that "Byron's influence on America's greater poets has never been of moment; Whittier, Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, Emerson, Whitman, are in one way or another, indeed, distinctly unbyronic"; and that "Byronism, between 1830 and 1860, is to be traced in writers relatively of less importance to the literature of their time." *Byron and Byronism in America* (New York: Gordian, 1965), 36, 55. I believe that Byron's influence upon Dickinson, particularly his Satanism, is not minimal and perhaps Leonards's view needs some correction.

[2] Dickinson's references to "Chillon" are as follows: "You make me say it over — I fear you laugh — when I do not see — [but] 'Chillon' is not funny" (L. 233); "If I amaze[d] your kindness — My Love is my only apology. To the people of 'Chillon' — this — is enoug[h] I have met—no othe[rs]" (L. 249); "You remember the Prisoner of Chillon did not know Liberty when it came, and asked to go back to Jail" (L. 293); "I think she [Helen Hunt Jackson, dead 12 August 1885] would rather have stayed with us, but perhaps she will learn the Customs of Heaven, as the Prisoner of Chillon of Captivity" (L. 1042).

earth as a "wider prison" the Chillon-dungeon becomes, in a paradoxical way, a safe home.

Dickinson's reference to Byron's Chillon indicates that she identifies her life with that of the prisoner. Her 'Chillon,' though it appears isolated and tragic, is a sole dominion where she can acquire complete freedom and self-fulfillment, free from the imperatives of the world: there are no obligations to society, no life's snares and servitude, no moral and religious constraints. She can concentrate on examining her identity and give full rein to her aesthetic freedom: she is no longer a true prisoner: "No Prisoner be — / Where Liberty — " (#720).

Dickinson's prison-refuge is equivalent to a home, which, however, is sometimes very unstable and dangerous: it tends to create the condition of death-in-life, which kills spiritual and imaginative activities. Furthermore, the refuge is difficult to obtain, for the outside world incessantly imposes itself on her private world and prevents her from having complete freedom:

> I could not find a Privacy
> From Nature's sentinels —
> In Cave if I presumed to hide
> The Walls — begun to tell — (#891)

Similarly, Mallarmé finds his shelter-room menaced by the secular, crude world: "Mais, helas ! Ici-bas est maître: sa hantise / Vient m'écoeurer parfois jusqu'en cet abri sûr" ("Les fenêtres"). At any rate, though Dickinson's prison-shelter may not totally shut out the outside world, it at least provides absolute isolation and freedom so that she may establish her identity and devote herself to poetic creation.

Dickinson's prison imagery further concerns the problem of consciousness. In the ordinary sense, consciousness functions in two ways: one to expand its sphere outwards; the other to centralize it inwards. The poetry of Dickinson indicates the two movements: on the one hand, she affirms the expansive power of consciousness, saying that "The Brain is wider than the Sky —" (#632); and on the other, she perceives the centripetal movement of her consciousness towards the center of her identity, by the way of dropping: "I dropped down, and down —" (#280). Her problem is how to balance the two movements of consciousness, for they are apt to make a split which divides her identity: "Me from Myself — to banish — " (#642).

Dickinson's crucial problem is how to deal with her own self-conscious-

ness; and, in a larger sense, this problem concerns most of her other prison-related imageries. Originally, consciousness should be free and imaginative; yet when it becomes excessive, it becomes egocentric. As Dostoevsky states that "excessive consciousness is a disease — a genuine, absolute disease,"[1] extreme self-consciousness becomes traumatic, chains the mind, and tends to create a self-made prison. Dickinson is conscious of this danger and says, "How Conscious Consciousness — could grow — " (#622). She is careful not to fall into solipsistic egocentrism and attempts to adopt the method of anti-self-consciousness: "How this be / Except by Abdication — / Me — of Me ?" (#642).

Dickinson has known well that man's sense of imprisonment and freedom totally depends upon his own consciousness: "Captivity is Consciousness — / So's Liberty" (#384). Strikingly, a number of her poems are built upon the subtle balance of this consciousness between confinement and freedom, and this balance inevitably generates the delicate and intense tension of her poetic world. A great part of her poetic charm derives from this tension to which the movement of her consciousness to a degree contributes.

Consciousness is at once man's glory and his curse. It may enable him to perceive the mysteries of eternity and the divine, but it sometimes impairs his natural power of imagination, creating a conscious dungeon. This serious problem is also common to modern poets and writers, particularly since the age of the English Romantics; and in this respect Dickinson's poetic sensibility is rightly that of the modern age.

III

Overall, Dickinson's prison imagery reveals the extraordinary profundity and dimensions of her poetic world. Though her prison-world may appear small, it abounds with multiple possibilities: whether a creative world is large or small is a secondary matter; the point is what elements and values it contains. However limited, her prison-cell is infinite with an immense cosmos, functioning as the core of her intellectual and imaginative world interrelated with the vision of the universe. As seen above, her prison imagery divides into several types. The body-prison imagery, which is

9 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (New York: Bantam, 1981), 5.

closely associated with the garment imagery, consists of the conventional dualistic struggle between soul and body; the imagery generates sheer dramas of conflict, producing striking lyrical tension, and she strives to reconcile somehow the dualism. The earth-prison imagery unveils her (Neo-) Platonic view of the earth as a shadowy prison, where she is determined to search for the way of salvation. This imagery greatly contributes to her tragic vision of life and urges her to look for a meaningful life on the fallen earth. The tragic earth is redemptory. Yeats says, "We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy." The hell-prison imagery derives from her perception of abysmal darkness and despair. She often dwells in the deep hell, while seeking an exit, and finally comes to discover that the absolute pain serves to "hallow" her soul. Furthermore, she recognizes that a prison can also be an ideal refuge beyond the cares and contraints of the ordinary world : it becomes a "stay" against chaos and provides complete isolation and freedom for her to concentrate on her selfhood and to investigate the world of eternity; and she sometimes appears almost impatient to be locked up. Finally, the prison imagery extends to the problem of consciousness: when it is excessive, consciousness tends to confine the imagination and make an egocentric prison, a self-made tomb which is analogous to the destructiveness of Emerson's "self-enclosed individualism."

Throughout her life, Dickinson strenuously sought for freedom : therefore, it is not surprising that she says, "Is Heaven then a Prison ?" (#947) and "Immured in Heaven ! / What a Cell !" (#1594). These words imply that even heaven could be equivalent to a prison if there was no commnunication and no freedom. Whatever prevents her freedom, whether home, community, state, or Eden, appears to her as a prison. Thus, for Dickinson, any limitation is confinement, and freedom is the most important value to defend:

> God of the Manacle
> As of the Free —
> Take not my Liberty
> Away from Me — (#728)

Heinrich Heine says, "Die Freiheitsliebe ist eine Kerkerblume."

Dickinson's prison should not be understood simply as a dark haunted chamber of fearful images, such as the Gothic; it is, in reality, the center of her imaginative world which reflects the breadth and profundity of the

universe. Her prison is a condensed metaphor of her *Weltanschauung*, a world view which deals with, in an eschatological sense, man's fate from birth to jail to judgment; and unlike Hawthorne's ironical and 'penal black' flower of society, the prison serves almost as a sort of purgatory. As a womb-like microcosm replete with infinite plenitude, it can be furthermore a cornucopia of enormous possibilities, expanding her emotional and intellectual creativity. Life in prison is not a reduction; it is an enhancement. She says, "From Dungeon's luxuary of Doubt" (#414), precisely indicating that in doubt there are real possibilities. Her skepticism is rich with such possibilities.

Dickinson's discovery that her life is imprisoned is tragic, yet she believes that she can be redeemed, for in her perception life on earth offers magic: "Immured the whole of Life / Within a magic Prison" (#1601). She lives in a magic world, which is metamorphic and illusive, like Prospero's island, where reality and dream, the natural and supernatural, and time and eternity interfuse. In such a condition, boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical no longer exist, and man can be freed from the colossal shackles of earth. The prison-cell dissolves, and finally eternity pours in. "Life is a spell . . . " (L. 389) and "Life is so strong a vision . . . " (L. 860), Dickinson says, and thus her sense of imprisonment is ultimately overcome:

> Himself has but to will
> And easy as a Star
> Abolish his Captivity — (#613)

This abolishment of captivity is a route to the Infinite, a way which endows her with the supreme chance of spiritual rebirth in the communion of eternal life; and the magic, like the pure ablution of perpetually moving oceans, functions mystically and redemptorily on the earth:

> The Magic passive but extant
> That consecrated me — (#1231)

Dickinson's prison is thus transcended, and her enthralled self is liberated into the freedom of eternity. The wall is ultimately penetrated, and she is no longer isolated from the daily, eteranl flux of universal life. At this stage, she comes very close to Whitman, who says:

> At the last, tenderly,
> From the walls of the powerful fortress'd house,

> From the clasp of the knitted locks, from the keep of the well-closed doors,
> Let me be wafted. ("The Last Invocation")

Though Whitman is often more mystical than Dickinson, their visions have much in common here. Paul Claudel also joins them when he says, "Et je vois mes yeux autour de moi ma prison qui coule et qui s'en va !"[1] Finally, Corbière says, "Prison, sûre conquête / Où le poète est roi" in "Liberta." In the case of Dickinson, it may be said that 'Prison, sûre magie / Où le poète est roi.'

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[1] Paul Claudel, *Cinq grandes odes* (Paris : Gallimard, 1966), 186.