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Emily Dickinson and the Sense of Exile

by
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"Take thought:
I have weathered the storm,
I have beaten out my exile."
—Ezra Pound, "The Rest"

I saw the American Flag last Night in the shutting West,
and I felt for every Exile. —Emily Dickinson, summer 1885

In a letter of July 6, 1851, to her brother Austin in Boston, Emily Dickinson wrote about her impression of listening to "Jennie Lind," a Swedish coloratura soprano, whose concert was recently held at the Edwards Church in Northampton. She attended the concert together with her parents and sister. Jenny Lind was very popular in America, and it is most likely that they went to the concert partly because Austin had written twice and urged his sisters to come to Boston to hear her. Austin was then teaching in the boys' section of the Endicott School in the North End of Boston, where quite a few Irish immigrants settled after fleeing particularly the great potato famine of 1847. Jenny Lind, who was called the "Swedish Nightingale," made her American debut at the Castle Garden Theater in New York City on September 11, 1850, and made tours until 1852, when her partnership with P. T. Barnum collapsed. She enthralled the audiences from the start, and she was a kind of heaven-sent child of her age. In addition to her beautiful voice, her style and manners were so natural and modest that they became a fashion not only of just sopranos, or even of women artists, but of women's throughout the 1850s.

In the above letter to Austin, Emily Dickinson not only described the enthusiasm of listeners, but also, strikingly, expressed her peculiar sense of appreciation:

> —how we all loved Jennie Lind, but not accustomed oft to her manner of singing did'nt fancy *that* so well as we did *her*—no doubt it was very fine—but take some notes from her "Echo"—the Bird sounds from the "Bird Song" and some of her curious trills, and I'd rather have a Yankee.
>
> *Herself*, and not her music, was what we seemed to love—she has an air of exile in her blue eyes, and a something sweet and touching in her native accent which charms her many friends—"Give me my thatched cottage" as she sang grew so earnest she seemed half lost in song and for a transient time I fancied she *had* found it and would be seen "na mair," and then her foreign accent made her again a wanderer— (L 46)[1]

Dickinson used the words "exile" and "wanderer" to describe the Swedish singer, who appeared to her almost evaporating in the rapture of singing. Apparently, she felt a sort of ephemeral detachment about Jenny Lind. But what exactly does she mean by these words? If Jenny Lind is an exile, from what is she exiled? In this paper, I would like to argue that Dickinson's sense of exile occupies the fundamental part of her perception of life and that it plays a crucial role in the development of her poetic world. Actually, Dickinson wrote the above letter at the age of twenty, and as she grew older, her sense of exile became more internalized and compelled her to be reclusive, dominating the physical and psychological phases of her life. In fact, examining the meaning of exile, Dickinson chose to be a poetic exile.

In investigating Dickinson's sense of exile, one must see both her life and work in the synchronous time. What was her life like around 1851, when she listened to Jenny Lind? Two years earlier, on February 14, 1849, she wrote to her cousin William Cowper Dickinson to thank for his valentine. She was eighteen, about six months after she had left Mount Holyoke Seminary, and was about to enter adulthood. William Cowper Dickinson, valedictorian of the class of 1848 at Amherst College, was a good friend and relative of Dickinson; and as a student he had, no doubt, occasions to visit the Dickinson household. Actually, her letter connotes their closeness with witty, terse, and imaginary remarks. In fact, the letter is striking in two points. First, though the letter is suggestive of male advantage over femininity, as she compares herself to a little bird facing a big bird like an eagle, she overturns her position by the power of verbose. Second, she displays the image of a prisoner as if to emphasize her stifled and introverted emotions. She reveals that she is captured in a prison, estranged from the local world of Amherst, and cast out like an exile. She writes to her cousin:

> A little condescending, & sarcastic, your Valentine to me, I thought; a little like an Eagle, stooping to salute a Wren, & I concluded once, I dared not answer it, for it seemed to me not quite becoming—in a bird so lowly as myself—to claim admittance to an Eyrie, & conversation with it's King. . . .
>
> I'm a "Fenestrellan captive," if this world *be* "Fenestrella," and within my dungeon yard, up from the silent pavement stones, has come a plant, so frail, & yet so beautiful, I tremble lest it die. Tis the first living thing that has beguiled my solitude, & I take strange delight in it's society. It's a mysterious plant, & sometimes I fancy that it whispers pleasant things to me—of freedom—and the future. Cans't guess it's name? T'is "Picciola"; & to *you* Cousin William, I'm indebted for my wondrous, new, companion.[2] (L 27)

Though exaggerated a little, this use of the captivity image may be unusual, and it is possible to regard it as the expression of Dickinson's oppressed feelings and estrangement. What was going on around her and in her mind at that time? Of course, it is not easy to tell exactly what she went through then, but there are some hints that supposedly influenced her. In 1849, a year after she left Mount Holyoke Seminary, she already felt estranged from her close school friends; and, particularly, her friendship with Abiah Root went wrong and was in difficulties; and she was about to grow from her adolescence to attain the independence of her mind.

Though the imagery of captivity is not a novel literary device to express unfulfilled desires and loneliness, one can see how deeply they affected Dickinson's mind; she regarded herself as a "Fenestrellan captive," and was searching for a way out. Traditionally, the imagery of captivity has been used as a popular and convenient device in European literature; it describes the smothering condition of human captivity. One can easily make a long list of such images

from literary works: for example, a cave in Plato's *The Republic,* a whale-prison in Jonah, the mental and national dungeons in *Hamlet,* a chaos in *Comus,* prisons in John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe, a hell in Byron's "Manfred," imaginary and psychological dungeons in Poe, Charles B. Brown, and Hawthorne, Goethe's doomed prison in *Faust,* and Baudelaire's dungeon of spleen. One could extend this list furthermore, but the point is that the prison imagery has thus been used popularly, and that Dickinson, likewise, used it to mean some kind of her oppressed feeling.

Concerning Dickinson's prison imagery, her relationship with Byron should be noted. Actually, in addition to her reference to Fenestrellan captivity, Dickinson alludes to the imagery of Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon," which appears several times in her letters.[3] Without doubt, there is a deep relationship between the Fenestrellan and Chillon images, and they suggest Dickinson's obsessive sense of restraint and her thirst for freedom. In a letter (L 212), also, she touches on the story of Rasselas (a hero in Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia,* who sought freedom but eventually imprisoned himself in a dungeon), so one can see her sense of captivity is deeply rooted in her mind.

Dickinson's prison imagery is a symbol of her isolation and suppressed emotions, and it is possible to regard it as caused by the paternal and male dominated milieu of her society. However, her prison is not simply a depository of estranged despair, but it should be also understood as a nurturing cell protecting her freedom. Her prison is a sort of incubator of possibilities and a passage to the world of visionary freedom. In her prison she could be free, and this paradoxical overturn helped her to give its unique dynamics to her poetry; indeed, she was "Immured the whole of Life / Within a magic Prison" (Fr 1675).

In any case, one must note that as early as 1849 Dickinson already had a genuine sense of her imprisonment and that it was firmly related with her sense of exile. In 1850, Austin was a senior at Amherst College, and some of his friends and classmates frequented the Dickinson house, and Dickinson seems to have enjoyed associating with them. Lavinia, Dickinson's sister, was then at Wheaton Seminary in Ipswich, where Mary Lyon had taught before she founded Mount Holyoke Seminary. Around that time, Emily Dickinson was spending her life as routinely as any young women in Amherst, and her tendency for later reclusiveness did not seem to exist at all. In her mind, however, a sense of alienation continued to develop. In a letter to her uncle Joel Warren Norcross on January 11, 1850, she wrote about "the misunderstanding of society" and the risk of living "in so stupid a world—" (L 29) and she talked about her strange dream, in which the uncle was suffering from the dreadful damnation of his sin in hell. Of course, it is possible to think that she made up her dream story, but her wording is just extraordinarily peculiar, studded with violent, dramatic, and vivid images. Presenting three heroes, Merchant, Shepherd, and Sailor like Bunyan's allegorical characters of The Pilgrim Progress, Dickinson suggested to her uncle that he was among them suffering in a prison like hell. Her apocalyptic words seem to be without any restraint:

> Some kindled the scorching fire—some opened the earthquake's mouth—the winds strode on to the sea—and serpents hissed fearfully. Oh I was very scared and I called to see who they were—this torment waited or—I listened—and up from the pit *you* spoke! You could'nt get out you said—no help could reach so far—you had brought it upon yourself—I left you alone to die—but they told me the whole of the crime—you had broken a promise on earth—and now t'was too late to redeem it. Do you wonder at my alarm—do you blame me for running to tell you? It was'nt *all* a dream—but I know it will be fulfilled unless you stop sinning now—it

> is not too late to do right. Do you take any hints I wonder—can you guess the meaning of things—not yet aroused to the truth. You villain without a rival—disturber of public peace—"creation's blot and blank"—state's prison filler— (L 29)

Dickinson's tirade of damnation knows no bounds and continues astonishingly for three pages in the Johnson's Harvard edition of her letters. Actually, her intention was only to blame her uncle for his failure in writing back to her; yet, in an ordinary sense, it is unthinkable that one blames another person as this much, even if one admits some allowance for a jocular intention. Actually, her attack is severe and persistent, fully armed with extravagant dictions and fierce images, and one may feel something abnormal in her attack. Of course, this kind of tirade probably comes from her learning of religious matters since childhood, but it is possible to detect some strain of neurosis in her. Actually, her letter is filled with the images of hell, prison, war, and lynch, and she dispatches her uncle into the world of death: "I kill you—hang me if you like—but if I stab you while sleeping the dagger's to blame—it's no business of mine—you have no more right to accuse me of injuring you than anything else I can think of" (L 29). Apparently, Dickinson had something oppressive and explosive in her mind, which obsessed her.

In a January 23, 1850 letter to her friend Jane Humphery, Dickinson laid bare her honest feelings about her despairing circumstances, freely using desolate and lonesome words. She told Jane how lonely she felt: "that I'm very lonely is too plain for me to tell you—I am *alone—all* alone" and "I am already set down as one of those brands almost consumed—and my hardheartedness gets me many prayers" (L 30). Actually, she refused to rejoin a local sawing society, intentionally estranged herself from her friends, and consequently chose to be an outcast. She regarded the ordinary world as a condemned place, expressing it with such phrases as "this very sinful, and wicked world," "this suffering—tumbled down world," "States—prison," and "—spirit incarcerated in the pound" (L 30). Apparently, the vision of imprisonment and outcast was dominant in Dickinson's young mind, and it definitely formed the basis of her vision of the world.

One of the reasons that made Dickinson more isolated is her attitudes toward Christianity. As it is known, Dickinson was obstinate and never "professed" to become a believer in Christianity, though she admitted its value. Even when her friends and her family members turned to have belief in the religion one after another, she continued to refuse and became more isolated. Even when the town of Amherst went through some religious revivals, particularly the one of 1850, Dickinson never confessed belief. Dickinson continued to protect the freedom of her soul as if she decided to have the freedom of her mind and to examine the meaning of life and God. Dickinson's letter on April 13, 1850 reveals, for instance, how she felt in the midst of the religious revival:

> How lonely this world is growing, something so desolate creeps over the spirit and we don't know it's name, and it wont go away, either Heaven is seeming greater, or Earth a great deal more small, or God is more "Our Father," and we feel our need increased. Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless. (L 35)

It is not difficult to imagine that Dickinson felt herself like a forlorn outcast, expelled not only from her relatives but also from God, and this robust sense of isolation and loneliness was

definite and continued to be in her mind. In a letter to Abiah Root written about a month later, Dickinson reveals how she was depressed after refusing to accept the Christian belief. With some regret she says that she is "one of the lingering bad ones" (L 36).

Dickinson's deepening feeling of isolation and outcast continued to influence her, becoming a sort of obsession, and this feeling was reinforced by her repeated experiences of death. In a letter to Austin on October 27, 1850 she wrote that "I will crow in my *grave* if you will, Chanticleer being still, tho' sleeping" (L 37). And, on November 13, 1850 when her friend Leonard Humphrey died, which drove her into depression, Dickinson was forced to examine the meaning of life and death and the certainty of immortality. Through her examination she came to create a vision of grave. In a letter to Abiah Root in late 1850, she revealed her vision of grave thus: "How *precious* the grave, Abiah, when aught that we love is, laid there, and affection would fain go too, if that the lost were lonely!" (L 39). Dickinson actually made a grave in her mind, a prison-like world of death where she was bravely determined to deal with the problem of the meaning of God, immortality, and life.

From late 1850 to mid-1851, Dickinson's obsession of isolation and outcast seemed a little abated, as she found a new friend, Susan Gilbert, whose relationship with Austin later burgeoned and ended up in their engagement by the end of 1853. Around that time, Dickinson was having a routine comfortable life, doing family chores, attending a reading club, and writing letters. Despite the superficial comfort of her life, however, the profound pent-up feeling of isolation and outcast was simmering in her mind, and this became evident in her letters of June and July, 1851, to Austin, who was away from home and teaching at a school in Boston. She described the loneliness of her home: "Austin, to tell the *truth,* it is very still and lonely" (L 45); "We are having a pleasant summer—without one of the fire it is yet a *lonely* one—" (L 48). Though these lonely expressions may not be taken literally, as they may originate from their familial closeness, Dickinson's expression of loneliness is still striking. Besides, in August 1851, a shocking incident broke out that intensified Dickinson's loneliness. Her relationship with Abiah Root finally came to an end. Abiah Root had come to the commencement of Amherst College on August 12, and Dickinson found out to her regret that Abiah had returned home without paying a visit to her. Their friendship had worsened since some time ago, which Dickinson had to admit, yet she felt that the incident was final. On August 19, she wrote to Abiah that their friendship had been ruined:

> —how long my little treasurehouse had furnished an area for it's destroying labors it is not mine to tell—it had an errand there—I trust it fulfilled it's mission; it taught me dear Abiah to have no treasure here, or rather it tried to tell me in it's little mothy way of another enduring treasure, the robber cannot steal which, nor time waste away. (L50)

Written in the biblical way that heavenly treasure should be most sought after, her letter indicates that their relationship finally came to an end. In Dickinson's mind deserted and eternal love is stored, and it should be kept there as long as she would live. In a sense, the treasurehouse in her mind is a psychological casket of cherished memory and a sort of tomb-prison for Dickinson.

Thus, Dickinson's sense of loneliness and exile dominated in her young adulthood about twenty, and the experience of her friends' death, alienation, misunderstanding, and unrequited adolescent love generated a closed world, a sort of prison, in her mind. Within it, living an introspective life, she made an adventurous exploration in the visible and invisible worlds.

One may be able to say that the incident that she perceived a trace of exile about Jenny Lind in 1851 is nothing but the reflection of her own sense of exile.

Then, how is Dickinson's sense of exile expressed in her poetry? Dickinson sense of exile basically comes from her feeling of estrangement, which includes social, religious, and fraternal separation. And for this purpose, some peripheral images like "gypsy," "fugitive," and "outcast" will be also examined with some verbs like "wander" and "banish."

The imagery of exile has been, like the imagery of prison, a popular literary device in terms of expressing a sense of alienation. Actually, many exiled men and women appear in Western literary works, and it is not very difficult to create their pedigrees from ancient times: Cain, Ishmael, Jonah in the Old Testament, Odyssey (an exile was considered to be under the protection of Zeus in the Greek mythological world), Edgar (poor mad Tom) and King Lear, Wandering Jews, Alastor, Childe Harold, and so forth. Even in the modern time, Robert Duncan writes a poem, saying that "Dream disclosed to me, I too am Ishmael" (114). For these people, circumstances are different, yet they are somehow doomed to be exiled, and in most cases they are subjected to pursue their secret goals. Dickinson also says, "My pathetic Crusoe—," indicating man's fate toward death (L 685).

In Dickinson's entire poetry, the word "exile" appears three times, and in the plural form one time. The earliest entry appears in a poem which Thomas H. Johnson dates about 1861 and Ralph W. Franklin about early 1862. The poem basically suggests the condition of people fallen from grace. However different the dates are, the remarkable point is that the word "exile" does appear in her poetry about ten years after Dickinson had a clear sense of it when she was around twenty. This blank is a mystery; yet during that time her vision of exile developed, and as it did so, her understanding of the world and life deepened; and consequently, it prepared her miraculously productive years of her late twenties and early thirties. Here is her poem of exile:

> The lonesome for they know not What-
> The Eastern Exiles-be-
> Who strayed beyond the Amber line
> Some madder Holiday-
>
> And ever since-the purple Moat
> They strive to climb-in vain-
> As Birds-that tumble from the clouds
> Do fumble at the strain-
>
> The Blessed Ether-taught them-
> Some Transatlantic Morn-
> When Heaven-was too common-to miss-
> Too sure-to dote upon! (Fr 326)

"The lonesome" in the first line refers to people who have been banished, and in a biblical sense, "for they know not What" resounds the scene of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on the hill of Golgotha: "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do" (Luke 23: 34). The "Eastern Exiles" refers to human beings, as they were expelled from Eden according to the Old Testament, yet the biblical meaning should not be probably so much emphasized here. In other words, Dickinson reverses the orthodox idea of the biblical

expulsion of men and their consequent separation from Eden, trying to describe the possibility of human transportation to Eden. Men are fallen from the kingly "purple" world and cling to its part so that they can perceive (hear) the certainty of heaven. Dickinson asserts that heaven can be real, as she sees the dramatic turn of the daily arrival of "Transatlantic Morn," so the existence of heaven cannot be doubted. In this poem, with the image of resurrection, the certainty of heaven is vividly and imagistically justified.

The idea that the humans are exiles from Eden and that man suffers from the consciousness of lost paradise constitutes the basis of Dickinson's view of the universe. This view also applies in the next poem, but like what she did in the above poem, she converts the conventional idea of man's fall and instead provides a unique perception:

> Those fair-fictitious People-
> The Women-plucked away
> From our familiar Lifetime-
> The Men of Ivory-
>
> Those Boys and Girls, in Canvas-
> Who stay opon the Wall
> In everlasting Keepsake-
> Can anybody tell?
>
> We trust-in places perfecter-
> Inheriting Delight
> Beyond our faint Conjecture-
> Our dizzy Estimate-
>
> Remembering ourselves, we trust-
> Yet Blesseder-than-we
> Through Knowing-where we only hope-
> Receiving-where we-pray-
>
> Of Expectation-also-
> Anticipating us
> With transport, that would be a pain
> Except for Holiness-
>
> Esteeming us-as Exile-
> Themself-admitted Home-
> Through easy Miracle of Death-
> The Way ourself, must come- (Fr 369)

Johnson dates this poem about 1862, and Franklin about autumn 1862. It was written about a year since the previous exile poem. Overall, its basic theme concerns the state of man's exile on earth and his possible return to heaven, but Dickinson's perception is evidently unique. Dickinson weighs man's trust and disbelief in the matter of eternity and heaven, and the gap between her religious and emotional tendencies generates a serious poetic tension. The certainty of heaven is, of course, a matter of belief, while earthly keepsakes like statues and paintings are so visible and actual that she sees that they can be easily believed. Dickinson, however, states that man has acquired "delight" from his own belief, a process which can be

self-rewarding in itself. Of course, since the existence of heaven is conjectural, it totally depends on "Our dizzy Estimate—" ("dizzy" as a pun of both anticipation and confusion), but it is already redemptive. Dickinson seeks for the certainty of heaven, asserting that "knowing" and "receiving" are far better than "trust," and what she does in the fifth and sixth stanzas is to examine and evaluate the meaning of human expectation toward heaven. "Expectation" for Dickinson suggests nothing but the possibility of what can be inherited or given. Dickinson thinks that it could be "a pain," because it means a fresh recognition of our condition on earth, and because she regards that man is an exile, who is not able to enter heaven except going through the gate of death. In this poem Dickinson's vision of exile plays an important role as the basis of the whole poetic structure.

The vision of man's exile is also described in the following poem, which was made in Dickinson's later years. Both Johnson and Franklin date it about 1879, seven years before Dickinson's death. It apparently shows that Dickinson's concern with the vision of exile has been dominant throughout her life:

> A Counterfeit-a Plated Person-
> I would not be-
> Whatever Strata of Iniquity
> My Nature underlie-
> Truth is a good Health-and Safety, and the Sky-
> How meager, what an Exile-is a Lie,
> And Vocal-when we die- (Fr 1514)

The ordinary impression of this poem may be that it suggests Dickinson's mature and comprehensive view of life: her resolution for fairness and assertion of the value of life on earth. However, this poem can provide a different reading when viewed with a historical background. Concerning the poem, both Johnson and Franklin provides notes, specifying an incident that occurred in Amherst around the late 1870s. Franklin's note explains the incident as follows:

> In 1876 Mary Lothrop, the daughter of Charles D. Lothrop, a minister living in Amherst without a pastorate, accused her father of mistreating her mother and herself. Several townspeople, including Austin Dickinson, attempted to help. When the situation reached the columns of the *Springfield Republican,* Lothrop instituted a libel suit against the newspaper, but the judgment of the Essex County court, given in Salem on 15 April 1879, went against him. The manuscript of the poem, which is unaddressed, was apparently sent to Susan Dickinson, perhaps as late as July, when on Austin's motion the Amherst parish voted to have nothing further to do with the case.
> (1324)

The manuscript of the poem is headed by Dickinson "In petto" (secretly) and signed "Lothrop" by her, so there is no doubt that the poem was occasioned by the incident. Franklin's note is different from Johnson's in one point. Franklin regards the addressee of the poem as Susan Dickinson, while Johnson does as Austin. Which is correct is a matter of conjecture. In any case, viewed with the knowledge of the incident, the poem reveals a slightly different reading. Dickinson's statement that she would not be a hypocrite can be more emphasized and taken as a strong assertion to the reader of the poem. The poem may have been intended to reassure that she still had faith in Susan Dickinson, who was then undergoing a strained life

because of the increased tension between Susan and Dickinson's sister Lavinia. Dickinson probably intended to assert that she would never lose trust in Susan and would be honest to her. In any case, the last two lines, "How meager, what an Exile-is a Lie / And Vocal-when we die," are extraordinary. They suggest a slight gap in meaning from the previous lines, yet when they are understood as meaning the importance of faith and truth, they can be read as expressing the fecundity of life on earth. Interestingly, Mrs. Bianchi omitted the phrase "what an Exile-" in her edition of *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1924), and the poem was signed "Pecksniff," who is a hypocrite character in Charles Dickens' novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44). Apparently, the element of hypocrisy was emphasized in Mrs. Bianchi's intention. Dickinson's emphasis was, however, on the fertility of an exile life.

Dickinson asserts that the common biblical idea of man's exile on earth as meagre is "a Lie," and this idea suggests a possibility to subvert the basic religious concept of her age. Dickinson challenged the Christian idea of the tragedy of man's fall, regarding it as a dogmatic nonsense. In her idea man's fall is already redemptive, enriched by the fecundity of his daily life. Therefore, man's condition as an exile appears to be less tragic, and it can be said even blessed. Dickinson reveals a similar idea in her letters: "I have perfect confidence in God and his promises and yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to do" (L 13); "it is hard for me to give up the world" (L 23); "Oh Matchless Earth—We underrate the chance to dwell in Thee" (Leyda II, 161). Thus, there is no doubt that the idea of exile on earth reveals the reversible paradox of her world, subverting her perception of the ordinary world.

Dickinson's vision of exile also appears in the form of banishment, and as the following poem indicates, it is loaded with forlornness:

> If I'm lost-now
> That I was found-
> Shall still my transport be-
> That once-on me-those Jasper Gates
> Blazed open-suddenly-
>
> That in my awkward-gazing-face-
> The Angels-softly peered-
> And touched me with their fleeces,
> Almost as if they cared-
>
> I'm banished-now-you know it-
> How foreign that can be-
> You'll know-Sir-when the Savior's face
> Turns so-away from you- (Fr 316)

Johnson dates this poem about 1861, while Franklin early 1862. Though there is a slight gap in time, the poem reveals Dickinson's feeling of banishment and chagrin, alienated from a happy heavenly state. It is probable that this poem was sent to her male friend; studded with clear-cut images, the poem vividly reveals her unfulfilled desires.

Dickinson's sense of exile can be furthermore seen in her "gypsy" poems. One example, which was made about 1860, displays Dickinson's proud self-esteem and hope for the continuance of mutual affection:

Tho' my destiny be Fustian-
Her's be damask fine-
Tho' she wear a silver apron-
I, a less divine-

Still, my little Gipsey being
I would far prefer-
Still, my little sunburnt bosom
To her Rosier-

For, when Frosts, their punctual fingers
On her forehead lay,
You and I, and Dr Holland,
Bloom Eternally!

Roses of a steadfast summer
In a steadfast land-
Where no Autumn lifts her pencil-
And no Reapers stand! (Fr 131)

Johnson gives a note to this poem, saying that the poem which "may have accompanied the gift of a rose, evidently was sent to Dr. and Mrs. Holland" (120). Dickinson's relationship with the Hollands was very close, so much so that she called Mrs. Holland as "mine" (L 195) and "my sister" (L 202). Josiah G. Holland was on the editorial staff of the *Springfield Republican* until 1866, and the Hollands were on good terms with the Dickinson family. This poem is intended to keep and crystallize their affectionate relationship, as Dickinson, self-depreciated like a poor gypsy yet proud, solicits their love. In the first two stanzas, Dickinson compares herself with a high-born, divine, and married woman, yet she asserts her preference for a pagan-like life. In the last two stanzas, she also presents herself with a pagan image, desiring the continuance of mutual love in everlasting summer. What does this dominant pagan quality signify? Actually, it is an important poetic element in Dickinson' s world, as it suggests her crude primitive wishes and feelings against established religious and social beliefs and conventions. Her pagan quality is an element that opens up her poetic freedom and possibility and helps her to surpass the conventions of society.

Another poem which uses the image of gypsy concerns love. Both Johnson and Franklin date the following poem about 1862, yet Franklin thinks that it was written in the summer of the year:

He touched me, so I live to know
That such a day, permitted so,
I groped opon his breast-

It was a boundless place to me
And silenced, as the awful Sea
Puts minor streams to rest.

And now, I'm different from before,
As if I breathed superior air-
Or brushed a Royal Gown-
My feet, too that had wandered so-

My Gypsy face-transfigured now-
To tenderer Renown-

Into this Port, if I might come,
Rebecca, to Jerusalem,
Would not so ravished turn-
Nor Persian, baffled at her shrine
Lift such a Crucifixal sign
To her imperial Sun. (Fr 349)

With boundless love, the first and second stanzas reveal a speaker's bold attempt to unite in the frenzy of sexual ecstasy. Then, the third stanza shows the speaker's transformation in the unity of love, and the status of gypsy is finally renounced. The poem consists of the mixture of several images like biblical and pagan, and it emphasizes the rapture of love, which "he," an actual lover or Christ (a pun of the "Sun" as Son) can accept. In a subdued mood as expressed by such words as "silenced," "tenderer," and "baffled," the speaker shows a timid attitude toward the powerful dominance of the opposite sex as if following the nineteenth-century norms of her society. Her vision of gypsy is asserted and is about to be consummated in the fulfillment of love.

The last poem to be examined in terms of Dickinson's sense of exile contains the word "outcast." Both Johnson and Franklin date the following poem about 1865. It is short yet concisely depicts the circumstances of Dickinson's sense of exile:

Air has no Residence, no Neighbor,
No Ear, no Door,
No Apprehension of Another
Oh, Happy Air!

Etherial Guest at e'en an Outcast's Pillow-
Essential Host, in Life's faint, wailing Inn,
Later than Light thy Consciousness accost Me
Till it depart, persuading Mine- (Fr 989)

In the first stanza Dickinson seems to deny the romantic and conventional belief that the air is inhabited with invisible spirits and presents a stark view of the space. The stanza, however, reveals an ironical view against the utilitarian and materialistic understanding of the universe. For Dickinson, the air is a "happy" domain, because it is purely filled with invisible spirits and it is therefore communicable. The second stanza stressed the reality of her communication with the invisible, in which an "etherial guest" is engaged. In Dickinson's vision she may be an exile incarcerated in a probationary state in a "wailing Inn," where an angel or Christ comes at the moment of despair or at the verge of death. The last two lines are significant. "Later than Light" suggests the aftermath of despair and hopelessness, while in such a state "thy Consciousness" probably of a spirit or Christ comes to accost her. Dickinson feels the voice (consciousness) as real. On the whole, the poem is a remarkable example which displays her constant effort to expand her perception toward the limit of her consciousness and to ascertain the possibility of the existence of outer consciousness. Her vision of outcast is expanded and ultimately enables her to investigate the truth of the universe.

In conclusion, as seen above, the meaning of Dickinson's sense of exile is complex, originating not only from her physical and emotional estrangement but also from her social and

religious sense of banishment. In 1851, when she perceived a trace of exile about Jenny Lind, she had actually developed a keen sense of alienation. About two years after she left school, many friends of hers became estranged, and some relatives died. These experiences were internalized in her mind, and she was forced to build a prison-like world in her mind which stored her precious memory and unfulfilled desires. In the internal prison her embracement of pain and solitude inevitably urged her soul to be tempered and develop, and her poetic vision came to attain a profound growth surpassing the premature stage of her romantic yearnings.

As to her religious sense of exile, Dickinson basically uses the orthodox structure of Christian belief. Man is fallen from a happy state and is walking on the way for redemption. Dickinson, however, subverts this idea and tries to liberate herself from the religious and social conventions. In her subverted vision the status of an exile is no longer sterile but provides utterly fecund possibilities. Her vision of exile no doubt indicates a threshold of possibilities, and she continues to keep the vision. A year before her death, she says, "I saw the American Flag last Night in the shutting West, and I felt for every Exile" (L 1004). As an outcast and gypsy, she has successfully recreated her vision and transformed her life into an introspective mission, which is persistently dedicated to reexamining the truth of immortality, love, death, and God.

Notes

1. Dickinson's letters are indicated with the capital L followed by classified number.

2. According to Johnson's note to the letter, "*Picciola* is the title of a romantic tale of Napoleonic times by X. B. Saintine (Joseph Xavier Boniface), published in 1839. In the following decade it went through many European and American editions, the latest of which was a profusely illustrated one with decorated binding, published at Philadelphia in 1849. The story concerns a political prisoner in the stronghold of Fenestrella, whose observation of a plant growing between the stones of his prison courtyard transforms his philosophy and changes his fortunes. The Italian jailer's exclamation, "Povera picciola!" (poor little thing), provides the name which the prisoner gives the unknown flower." (L27)

3. For the detailed study of Dickinson's concern with the "Prisoner of Chillon," see Chapter Five of *A Summer of Hummingbirds* by Christopher Benfey (New York: Penguin Press, 2008). For a study on Dickinson's use of prison imagery, see my essay "'Existence with a wall': Emily Dickinson's Prison Imagery" (*Studies in English Literature*. The English Literary Society of Japan, 1994).

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