Emily Dickinson's Prewar Martial Poems

Junko Kanazawa

During the Civil War, Emily Dickinson wrote poems that were related, directly or indirectly, to the conflict. Much research has been done examining Dickinson's attitude toward the war and its influence upon her.(1) In discussing her usage of martial imagery and diction, Shira Wolosky explains that the Civil War provided Dickinson with the martial vocabulary to describe her own troubled mind, and asserts, "War dramatically confirmed the anguish and confusion that constituted her world" (41). Naturally, most discussions on this topic so far have focused on the poems Dickinson wrote during and after the war.

However, we cannot dismiss the fact that Dickinson wrote a group of war poems during the period of 1858–1860, before the Civil War broke out, which contain a variety of war-related vocabulary. Although these poems do not have a direct relation to the Civil War, they show us that Dickinson had used a martial vocabulary before the war. For an example, one of Dickinson's prewar martial poems, "Bless God, he went as soldiers" (F52, 1859) uses military terminology and evokes a war scene.

Bless God, he went as soldiers,
His musket on his breast–
Grant God, he charge the bravest
Of all the martial blest!

Please God, might I behold him,
In epauletted white–
I should not fear the foe then–
I should not fear the fight! (Underline added)

Seven martial words are scattered throughout this short poem of forty four words. According to Fordyce R. Bennett, it can be considered to be based on Revelation 19:11–21 where the figure called "Faithful and Time" "doth judge and make war" and "the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean" (Rev. 19:11). Dickinson's narrator in this poem prays for the person who has courageously gone to battle, although the narrator lays more stress on the latter part, containing the prayer for him/herself. Benjamin Lease suggests, "Several early Dickinson poems, written a few years before the outbreak, dramatize the idea of spiritual victory through mortal trial" (67). The narrator prays for God's blessing and insists that He give him/her the courage to fight. However, it is not clear whether or not the narrator can in the end obtain "victory." And readers cannot judge whether or not the situation described in the subjunctive mood (might I behold him,/ In epauletted white–) is realized.

Lease also mentions that the figure of the person who "went as soldiers" anticipates Frazer Stearns, whose death in the war in 1862, at the age of 22, shocked the citizens in Amherst, including the Dickinson family. We do not have any information regarding the particulars of the fight in this poem—who "the foe" is, what "the fight" actually means, and where the narrator is and so the readers cannot grasp the whole story, due to this "omitted center," as Jay Leyda puts it, typical of Dickinson's poetry (II 55).

The period of 1858–1860 is regarded as very important for Dickinson's career as it is the exact time when she "became seriously interested in writing poetry" (*Letters*, 332). Furthermore, around January of 1859, Dickinson wrote to her cousin Louise Norcross in regard to the previous October, when they "decided to be distinguished" (L199), and began to bind her poems into fascicles. Eventually, her greatest creativity and output was seen during wartime.

The existence of these antebellum martial poems indicates that Dickinson did not suddenly take up martial vocabulary following the outbreak of war, rather, she had already discovered this manner of describing warfare. What remains unexplored is how these pre-war martial expressions relate to those written during the war, and what this relation means for understanding Dickinson's usage of them.

As for the main factor that motivated Dickinson to adopt this vocabulary, rather than one specific author or event, we can outline the broader social context as her source.(2) One of the biggest influences could have been the pervasive presence of martial imagery in traditional religious beliefs, which we can find in texts including Bible, where challenges to keeping one's faith are often depicted using martial rhetoric. The culture of Dickinson's New England was deeply steeped in this vocabulary. As Martha Winburn England writes, "Bunyan wrote the Puritan epic of the Holy Wars as a spiritual conflict. Milton, after his ideals for England were defeated, wrote his epic about Man, Watts Entire externalized the War, assigning names and dates to the victories of God's people" (136). These works can be regarded as representative of the traditional social and religious context of the time. Additionally, we can find the Bible, as well as these books by Bunyan and Milton, in the Dickinson household.

Re-reading Dickinson's prewar martial poems, we see a pattern in each

final passage, wherein there is uncertainty that any reward will actually granted. In another Dickinson prewar martial poem, "Who never lost, is unprepared" (F136, about early 1860), the narrator calls on angels to provide some reward for those who go through difficulties in battle—"Angels! Mark 'Promoted'/ On this Soldier's brow!"—but we are unsure whether the soldier gets this reward in the end or not.

In the same way, "To fight aloud is very brave–" (F138, about early 1860) also draws our attention to the development of a similar story. The narrator focuses on fighting without the recognition of others.

To fight aloud is very brave–
But *gallanter*, I know
Who charge within the bosom
The Cavalry of Wo–

Who win, and nations do not see–
Who fall–and none observe–
Whose dying eyes, no Country
Regards with patriot love–

We trust, in plumed procession
For such, the Angels go–
Rank after Rank, with even feet–
And Uniforms of snow. (Underline added)

The contrast between the two pronouns "I" (in the first quatrain) and "We" (in the final quatrain) has a strong impact. The expression "I know" shows that the speaker understands the predicament of a person

who fights invisible enemies in his/her own mind. Emphasis on this fact is strengthened by the rhyme "know" and "Wo," enhancing the possibility that the speaker might also have experienced this pain. In contrast, the expression "we trust," in the final part, shows expectation that the faithful should be rewarded for their struggle to follow God's precepts. Interestingly, Dickinson chooses not "we know" but "we *trust*." This word choice conveys the speaker's skepticism toward this expectation, while nothing that could be considered an award is actually described.

On this topic, a set of remarkable examples shows us how two poets living at the same time and under similar circumstance share a martial vocabulary, but differ in their treatment of a shared topic. Put side by side with one another, we can see the development of a similar story in two poems, one by Dickinson and another by her contemporary and friend Helen Hunt Jackson, who was born in Amherst and spent her earliest years there. Jackson's father was a strict Calvinist who went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where he then died. Her mother "cherished certain pious authors," and "urged study of the Bible and moralistic works like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*" according to Jackson's biographer Kate Phillips (58).[3] Thereby, Jackson's background provided her with a traditional religious vocabulary.

In their own way, each poem, one by Jackson, titled "Triumph" and the other by Dickinson "To fight aloud is very brave–" (F138), addresses a war within the heart. Although Jackson's "Triumph" was actually written after the war, she could have been borrowing from the way warfare had been developed in Christian texts, rather than responding to the military vocabulary of the Civil War (although her first husband belonged to the military and was killed in an accident during the war). Our view of the two poems brings out the more keen aspects of Dickinson.

In both poems, two sharply contrasting figures are depicted: one is a brave soldier who heroically fights visible enemies, eventually achieving victory and the admiration of the public; the other is a soldier who fights with invisible enemies in his/her own mind, in which case it is ambiguous whether or not the soldier is actually at war. Interestingly, the development of the narration is remarkably similar in these two poems. Jackson describes a victor first.

> Not he who rides through conquered city's gate,
> At head of blazoned hosts, and to the sound
> Of victors' trumpets, in full pomp and state
> Of war, the utmost pitch has dreamed or found
> To which the thrill of triumph can be wound;

She juxtaposes the inverse situation, of a soldier whose struggle takes place within, and thereby goes unnoticed by others.

> But he who has all single-handed stood
> With foes invisible on every side,
> And, unsuspected of the multitude,
> The force of fate itself has dared, defied,
> And conquered silently.

In the end, Jackson grants victory to the soldier who fights against invisible enemies and concludes the poem with these words: "Ah that soul knows/ In what white heat the blood of triumph glows!" Dickinson also juxtaposes the same contrasting roles. First, she depicts a heroic soldier, then a soldier who fights with invisible enemies within himself/herself,

unnoticed by others.

We might suppose that Jackson imitated Dickinson by following her development of this topic. But there is no evidence that Dickinson sent this poem to anyone else, or that a third person may have conveyed this poem to Jackson (their "mentor," Thomas Wentworth Higginson didn't get this poem from Dickinson). Two-thirds of the lines in Jackson's poem describe the visible victor, while Dickinson uses only the first line. The important thing differentiating Dickinson's poem from Jackson's is that Dickinson focuses on the soldier who might lose and die in a battle.(4) On the other hand, Jackson depicts the solider who fights an invisible enemy being led in the end to victory.

Another poem, "Success is counted sweetest" (F112, about 1859), again deals with two contrasting positions, victory and defeat, and its narration goes on to clearly sympathize with the loser, even though the traditional narrative of war regards the righteous one as a victor.(5) As an example of the traditional religious victory, one of Isaac Watts' psalms goes, "To thine almighty arm we owe/ The triumphs of the day" (79), which ends as follows,

> 'Tis his own arm the vict'ry gives,
> And gives his people rest.
> On kings that reign as David did,
> Secures their honours to their seed,
> And well supports their crown.

Similar to his other psalms, as well as Jackson's poems, Watts positions God as the subject and repeats God's action of "gives" in the active voice. Meanwhile, Dickinson's choice of the passive form in "Success is counted

sweetest," (F112) "forbidden," and "agonized" is reserved for the loser, representing the sympathy of the narrator toward him/her. The reward is out of the reach of the loser in this poem as well. Interestingly, when this poem was published in *A Masque of Poets* in 1878, "agonized" was altered to "agonizing," probably by Jackson or the publisher Thomas Nile in order to be more grammatically correct. This change might suggest a kind of shift in viewpoint.

And he defeated–dying–
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!" (Underline added)

In her study of the religious experiences of American Victorians during the Civil War period, Ann C. Rose contends that people began to interpret the war in religious terms once it began, in an attempt to explain the agony they experienced, and to provide a rationale for fighting the war. Rose asserts, "Public demonstrations of piety and the use of Christian concepts became more pronounced in the course of the Civil War," citing Abraham Lincoln's adaptation of inherited Christian language (61). In his voluminous studies in the literature of the Civil War, Edmund Wilson suggests that Lincoln often quoted scripture in his speeches, although he had remained skeptical of religion (103).

It is true that this phenomenon strengthened after the outbreak of the war.(6) In Amherst, teachers at Amherst College delivered a series of sermons using the same religious terminology to encourage students to enlist. William A. Stearns, the president of the college, used the phrase "we are made the sword of the Lord to execute his justice" in April 1861,

just after the war began (Duc 17). Amherst, where Amherst College was established as "a fortress of orthodoxy," is a town which symbolizes this narrative precisely.

Returning to Dickinson's prewar poems, another poem, "There is a word/ Which bears a sword/ Can pierce an armed man–" (F42, 1858), also contains a development similar to the poems discussed above. Although the metaphor of the sword in this poem signifies God's power might come from St. John's Revelation (Bennett 3), the narrator is on the side opposing God's precepts. Furthermore, what makes this poem different from the other four poems discussed above, is that the narrator is aware of the power of words, regarding it as a violent weapon. According to the narrator, the power of the "word" is sufficient to "pierce an armed man." It is not so much a battle, as an assault by God on unbelievers that is here stressed and its martial nature described, from the standpoint of a person who is positioned to receive a fatal shot. The narrator's stance is especially clear in the last two lines, "Time's sublimest target/ Is a soul 'forgot'!" Here the narrator is described as "forgot" (forgotten) by God (James M. Hughes regards it both as "not saved" and "not yet shot!" 31), which explains both why she/he escaped the fatal shot, and is chased as a "target."

> Behold the keenest marksman–
> The most accomplished shot!
> Time's sublimest target
> Is a soul "forgot"!

This poem also seems to be based on a Biblical martial premise, but again, the narrator does not have any conviction that she/he should be

rewarded, rather, she/he is standing in precisely the opposite position of the one who would be rewarded as an ideal follower of God's precepts. And at the same time, the speaker is clearly conscious of the violent power of words, just as it may also be possible that Dickinson *is* conscious of the power of words, as a poet in the making.

A person who chooses to go to war, a person who fights with invisible enemies within him/herself, a defeated person on the verge of death, and a person conscious of the power of words—those who appear in the pre-war martial poems are those who actually fight, or are at least planning to go to war. While none of them give readers the particular details of their story, Dickinson stresses that the battles take place only within the mind.

As for the "martial poems" which Dickinson wrote during the war, the poem of F629 (about the second half of 1863) is an example, and forms another pair with F138, where a battle with an invisible enemy is described. Both F138 and F629 are written in common meter, and have similar forms.

The Battle fought between the Soul
And No Man-is the One
Of all the Battles prevalent-
By far the Greater One-

No News of it is had abroad-
It's Bodiless Campaign
Establishes, and terminates-
Invisible-Unknown-

Nor History–record it–
As Legions of a Night
The Sunrise scatters–These endure–
Enact–and terminate–

Looking at two poems closely, reflected in the traditional religious aspect is the existence of angels who wear a "Uniform of snow," like the soldiers in F138, while in F629, it is instead reiterated again and again that the war is "invisible" and lonely, unknown to others. Instead of "Angels," only "Legions of a Night" exists. In response to this content, F629 is full of negative elements like "No Man," "No News," "Bodiless," "Invisible," "Unknown" and "Nor History." In the poems written after the war began, for the first time Dickinson might have escaped the traditional religious language into living expressions—as Shira Wolosky suggests that "the bodiless campaign within the poet's soul had an objective counterpart in physical and palpable warfare" (xviii). As for the battle within the self, there is no suggestion of victory or defeat, continuing endlessly, while in F138 words like "win" and "fall" are used.

Dickinson wrote poems based in New England's religious vocabulary of the antebellum period, and although her way of developing of the motif is different from that of traditionalists, this shows that Dickinson employed the same vocabulary as contemporaries, like Julia Ward Howe. Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" was printed on the front page of *Atlantic Monthly's* February issue of 1862, depicting a wrathful, militant God who "hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword." It became propaganda for the cause of the war. This leads us to surmise the possibility that Dickinson herself *might have written* the same kind of

poems during the war when people wrote and published "war poems" in newspapers and periodicals. Dickinson's prewar martial poems show that Dickinson drew from the same vein of expression as did her contemporaries, but her poetry deviates from the stock into her own singular usage, without victory or defeat, and without resolution.

Notes

(1) Faith Barrett summarizes the stream of research on this topic. See her "Public Selves and Private Spheres: Studies of Emily Dickinson and the Civil War, 1987–2007." We also have three additional examples (Barrett, Bergland and Richards) in the *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*. All of them focus primarily on the war's influence on Dickinson and show that the war made her face the new nature of the era, that is, the advances in weapons technology, the new system of media, or the limitations of lyric poems to capture the new way of fighting and its atrocious consequences.

(2) Regarding Dickinson's usage of vocabulary typically reflective of her historical situation, Cristanne Miller focuses on Dickinson's usage of the word "Liberty" during the war and minutely discusses it against the public war rhetoric of the time. In another example, Daniel L. Manheim deals with her religious language. He focuses on her rhetoric of revivalism against the revivalist settings of western Massachusetts in the 1840s and 1850s.

(3) Jackson's father, Nathan Welby Fiske, was an orthodox Calvinist minister who taught at Amherst College, and her mother, Deborah Fiske was also an orthodox Calvinist. Although Helen Hunt Jackson could not accept Calvinism, her parents' precept of doing "good" based on religious belief influenced her works especially. Kate Phillips, in her biography of Jackson writes, "Her diligence would allow her to accomplish much when she began to write professionally, even as her desire to do 'good,' and her deeply ingrained habit of seeking to please her father with her endeavors, would set somewhat restrictive parameters for her work" (56).

(4) As for the interpretation of the battles with invisible enemies, Cheryl Walker explains the "female poetic tradition" in discussing both Dickinson and Jackson. Walker discusses the archetypal motif of "the secret sorrow" among nineteenth century American female poets and asserts that both Jackson and Dickinson followed the tradition. Walker regards the women poets' main motif of "the secret sorrow" as "a literary device and as a way of understanding one's own experience" which "served to structure women's thinking about their lives" (88). Walker discusses examples from Jackson's novels, such as "Esther Wynn's Love Letters" or *Mercy Philbrick's Choice*, and poems like "The Story of Boon" and Dickinson poems such as "To pile like Thunder to its close" or "If she had been the Mistletoe," and also letters like her "Master Letters." She asserts that the motif of "secret sorrow," or the forbidden desire for power under patriarchal society enabled women poets to find their motivation for pursuing writing.

(5) It is an interesting contrast that poems written by Dickinson during the war do not take sides, as Cristanne Miller mentions (56).

(6) See also Robert C. Albrecht "The Theological Response of the Transcendentalists to the Civil War." Albrecht discusses the Transcendentalists' general tendency to enthusiastically embrace the idea that "the war was a remission by blood for the salvation of man and nation," and says that during the Civil War, "most of the Transcendentalists reverted to the religious concepts they had apparently rejected years before. Sin and salvation, the doctrines preached in Congregational and other orthodox churches, became their themes" (21). Albrecht explains examples of James Freeman Clarke, Cyrus A. Bartol, Thomas Starr King, William Henry Channing, Moncure Conway, Samuel Johnson, David A. Wasson and Emerson.

(7) Although the topic of this paper is poems written before the war, in my analysis there are three types of Dickinson's "war poems" written during and after the war. The first type are those poems which have martial vocabulary, although we cannot definitively assert whether or not they directly refer to the Civil War, for example, "Of Tribulation these are

They" (F328) or "He fought like those Who've nought to lose" (F480) or "One anguish—in a Crowd" (F527) or "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" (F764). The second type are those which it is supposed that Dickinson wrote directly inspired by the war. The well-known examples are "It don't sound so terrible—quite it did—" (F384) or "When I was small, a Woman died—" (F518). And the third type are those which can be read in relation to the war, although their surface reading permits us other interpretations. For example, "The name—of it—is Autumn" (F465) or "They dropped like Flakes" (F545), both evoke autumn or winter scenery, but also can be read as the bloody scene after a battle.

Works Cited

The following abbreviations are used to refer to the writings of Emily Dickinson:

F *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. ed. R. W. Franklin. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. Citation by poem number.

L *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958. Citation by letter number.

Aaron, Daniel. *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War*. New York: Knopf, 1973.

Albrecht, Robert C. "The Theological Response of the Transcendentalists to the Civil War." *The New England Quarterly*. March 1965: 21–34.

Barrett, Faith. "Public Selves and Private Spheres: Studies of Emily Dickinson and the Civil War, 1984–2007." *Emily Dickinson Journal*. 16.1 (2007): 92–104.

———,"'Drums off the Phantom Battlements': Dickinson's War Poems in Discursive Context." *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. 107–132.

Bennett, Fordyce R. *A Reference Guide to the Bible in Emily Dickinson's Poetry*. London: Scarecrow Press, 1997.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.

Capps, Jack L. *Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836–1886*. Cambridge, Massachu-

setts: Harvard University Press, 1966.

Bergland, Renée. "The Eagle's Eye: Dickinson's View of Battle." *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. 133–156.

Duc, Thomas Lu. *Piety and Intellect at Amherst College, 1865–1912*. New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969.

Eberwein, Jane Donahue, "'Is Immortality True?': Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals." *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Vivian Pollak. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 67–102.

———, Ed. *Early American Poetry: Selections from Bradstreet, Taylor, Dwight, Freneau & Bryant*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.

England, Martha Winburn. "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts: Puritan Hymnodists." *Hymns unbidden: Donne, Herbert, Blake, Emily Dickinson and Hymnographers*. Ed. Martha Winburn England and John Sparrow. New York: New York Public Library, 1966. 113–147.

Erkkila, Betsy. "Dickinson and the Art of Politics." *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Vivian R. Pollak. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 133–174.

Fahs, Alice. *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South 1861–1875*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Hughes, James M. "Dickinson As 'Times Sublimest Target'." *Dickinson Studies* 34 (2nd Half 1978): 23–37.

Jackson, Helen Hunt. *Poems by Helen Jackson*. Boston: Robert Brothers, 1892.

Leyda, Jay. *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*. 2 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960.

Lease, Benjamin. *Emily Dickinson's Readings of Men and Books*. London: Macmillan, 1990.

Manheim, L. Daniel. "'Have We Not a Hymn?' Dickinson and the Rhetoric of New England Revivalism." *The New England Quarterly*. September (2005): 377–406.

Miller, Cristanne. "Pondering 'Liberty': Emily Dickinson and the Civil War." *American Vistas and Beyond: A Festschrift for Roland Hagencüchle*. Ed Marietta Messmer and Josef Raab Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2002.

30–50.

Philips, Kate. *Helen Hunt Jackson: A Literary Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Richards, Eliza. "'How News Must Feel When Traveling': Dickinson and Civil War Media." *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. 157–180.

Rose, Anne C. *Victorian America and the Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Taylor, Edward. *The Poetical Works of Edward Taylor*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966.

Walker, Cheryl. *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

Wadsworth, Charles. *The Christian Soldier*. Philadelphia: Lindsay & Plakiston. 1861.

Watts, Isaac. *The Poetical Works of Isaac Watts*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1866.

———, *The Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts. D.D.* Ed. Samuel N. Worcester. Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1834.

Wilson, Edmund. *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*. 1962. New York: Norton, 1994.

Webster, Noah. *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: S. Converse, 1828.

Wolosky, Shira. *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.