

## THE APOSTASY

**“A woman should aspire to be never spoken of, one way or the other.”**

**Pericles of Athens**

**“Unless one becomes as a rogue, one will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

**Emily Dickinson**

### I

Honest Emily cried out –  
Ever – against the Veil.  
Naked and unafraid before  
Powers that Prevail –

“Chilled and burned” by her own words –  
She slipped the fist of the Father –  
He who had her mind examined  
For Falsehood – by their rector.

Did her pastor pity the girl—  
Shocked by the Old Man’s wrongs?  
Or did she merrily show to him  
Only her prettiest songs?

Her father never could drive her mad  
With Shame, Remorse, Self-loathing –  
Her joys never those of picking a sore –  
So her Silence gave both something.

### II

Writing fairly as a critic, Updike understood  
how if Wharton’s father and her marriage had survived,  
the dues of social membership, correct-think and good manners,  
would have drained away the ample riches of her mind.

### III

Leonard and Virginia taking tea  
in the Garden of War, as leaves of their ornamentals  
burst, the bullets pinging like heavy rain,  
baby-hating Leonard, proud as ever  
of that indifference which passed with him  
for courage, that self-importance which passed with him

for judgment, and do we believe that man would stay  
to die with his wife once the fumes had stilled her,  
someone like him,, keeping the gas tank full  
because in a day or so the Germans would come,  
so that great soul descended into the river,  
imploding to inner depths where her woman's self  
lay folded, sinking in where the meanings are,  
taking the one choice left to her as a wife,  
to the girl she was, allowed to read only the Bible,  
but living to coolly drop her learned father  
into a footnote and to get her vision  
like Little Lily Briscoe and other personae,  
for whom to live was seeking truth as oneself,  
as others had done "in unknown company,"  
even as the great, who saw that truth  
was beauty, beauty truth, or saw in Irish  
uprising after eight hundred years of oppression,  
"a terrible beauty," to grasp again and again,  
"the power of taking hold of experience,  
of turning it round slowly in the light,"  
like a kaleidoscope, or the moments when  
time, becalmed, will luff against the mast.

#### IV

A living author feared to lose her people,  
should her work betray she minded  
wearing the hand-me-downs of conscious virtue  
to seventh grade in a Southern town;

she gifted her discontents to the unlettered  
daughters of altogether other mountains.