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978-1-107-00617-1 - Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination

Linda Freedman

Excerpt

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Introduction: Dickinson and religion

In 1862 Emily Dickinson was at the peak of her creative power. This was the time when many of her most interesting poems with broadly religious themes emerged, including her famous description in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson of God as an ‘eclipse’ that her family worshipped each morning.¹ Dickinson’s well-known ‘eclipse’ is a small example of her ambivalent feelings about religion and faith. An eclipse has a curious and dominating presence. In the early world, eclipses were worshipped because they inspired fear. Even today, on the rare occasions when an eclipse appears, it draws our curiosity and our wonder. This poet’s eclipse is both sarcastic and appreciative. Her sarcasm no doubt stemmed from a disregard for unquestioning faith. But her disregard was combined with a more equivocal appreciation of religion. That appreciation is the subject of this book.

The animating absence of Dickinson’s ‘eclipse’ gave James McIntosh the subject for his book *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown*. This book is an important precursor to my work in several ways. I am in complete accord with his claim that ‘the unknown is not so much a subject she takes up as a condition of her poetic existence she perpetually comes up against’.² This seems to me to be a wonderful way of expressing the vitality of Dickinson’s poetic texture and the paradox of her epistemic reaching enabled and halted by its own limitations. His emphasis on the variety of Dickinson’s religious tones and the influences of Puritan and liberal thought has also helped my study of her religious imagination. But McIntosh, like many excellent critics before him, returns in the end to the question of whether Dickinson really believed in God.³ Through her poetry he ascribes Dickinson a personal faith which encompasses (and partly relies upon) doubt, concluding that, for her, the unknown was the ground upon which one truly encountered God. So, his study assesses Dickinson’s poetry as an expression of faith.

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This is not another answer to that question, but a departure. I am advancing a way of reading the allusive complexity of Dickinson's work that recognises we do not need to decide whether or not she believed in God to understand the way in which religion fed her imagination and her sense of poetic purpose. I aim to show how Dickinson's Puritan heritage, as it mixed with the liberal Christianity growing up in Boston, and fused with classical mythology, was a source of poetic enrichment and not a barrier to creativity that she simply reacted against.⁴ In a complementary but rather different approach which takes in a number of other writers, Elisa New has argued that the Puritan theology of Jonathan Edwards and Edward Taylor was carried on in poetry in the years after Emerson's 'Divinity School Address' (1838) called for a new age of 'poet-priest[s]'. She suggests that growing up beside the mainstream tradition known as Emersonian was another tradition that was, in effect, anti-Emersonian because it found poetic language structurally resistant to the very idea of transcendence and Ralph Waldo Emerson's tenet of deferral incompatible with the realisation of the poem. For New, Emerson's reinvention of religion as a species of poetry was tested and found wanting by the very poetic innovators to whom he addressed himself.⁶

Like New, I do not think that poetry became Dickinson's secular way of being religious or that poetry replaced religion in Dickinson's thought. I will draw some preliminary distinctions between religion, theology and faith as they are used in this book. Religion, I take to be a more inclusive term, encompassing doctrine and dogma as well as tales, temperament and tone. Theology is the study and rationalisation of God, which relates philosophically to epistemic absence and aesthetically to the representation of a notional absolute or 'slant' truth-telling (Fr1263). Faith is both a matter of disposition and part of an epistemic framework of uncertainty which necessarily includes doubt. Dickinson may be sarcastic, subversive and witty but she also has a deep investment in the poetic thinking through of theological problems and she is fascinated by the structures of faith. The relationship between Dickinson's ironic distance and her philosophical or empathic investment in religion is often difficult to negotiate and the collision is frequently important to the quality of her verse. To provide a generalised explanation risks making Dickinson seem schematic, which she certainly was not. But to assume that the relationship is incidental or simply contradictory misses a lot. It helps to notice that Dickinson's undercutting of religious attitudes is frequently greater than her undercutting of religious objects. It is also important that Dickinson's masterful ironies often relate to poetic as well as religious enthusiasm.

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If Emerson forged a connection between religious and poetic office, Dickinson more commonly explored the relationship between religious and poetic difficulty.

The argument is this: there is a vital relationship between Dickinson's ideas about poetry and her ideas about religion which encourages a critical flexibility between literature and theology. This reciprocally informing relationship has high stakes for both disciplines. Theology lends poetry a rich vocabulary for understanding the difficulties of poetic expression and vocation which so often appeared to Dickinson to be shrouded in the same kind of epistemological darkness as God. In return, Dickinson's poetry allows for a particular structuring of thought which can help us negotiate theological problems. Some of the most pertinent examples of this reciprocity are found in Dickinson's meditations on sacrifice and resurrection where the form of the verse actually helps clarify some of the theological complexities surrounding loss and return even as those complexities inflect Dickinson's understanding of the permanence or impermanence of her own poetic self.

But it is important not to claim Dickinson too absolutely for a long dark night of the soul or to declare an eternal truce between art and religion. Literature and theology have much to lose from this reciprocal relationship if their differences are not preserved. There is anguish in Dickinson's religious imagination, but there is also humour and wit. This is part of the relationship I explore. Poetry makes a place for irreverence in theology and it is also able to challenge it and probe its meanings and doctrines. The province of the two is different, and Dickinson is profoundly interested in province, place and boundary so it would be wrong to think she is not aware of this and even more wrong to think she does not exploit it. The relationship between embodiment and incarnation, representation and revelation in the first chapter is one example of the tension, as well as the debt, that exists between art and religion and such tension illustrates the advantage of addressing theological issues poetically rather than from a position of faith.

Dickinson's poems are able to illuminate religious and theological difficulties even as those difficulties often seem intensely relevant to her own poetic identity and quest and this is because she understood poetics to be engaged in a similar kind of epistemological enterprise as religious modes of thinking.⁷ This is why her poetry is sometimes able to structure theological problems as well as render the many tones and emotions contained within religious narratives and practice. Her best poems test the reach of human experience and knowledge, exposing the uncertainties

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and gaps at the heart of her poetic endeavour through their engagement with religious themes. Religion is more than a context in which to read Dickinson; it gave her the conceptual and emotional vocabulary with which to stage and explore the epistemic problems at the core of her own aesthetic.

IMAGINING THE 'BEYOND'

Dickinson's very specific knowledge of particular Puritan and liberal theologies together with her interest in comparative religion make her religious imagination poetically distinct and intellectually interesting. But it is important to first understand the more basic drive that led her to hold poetry and religion in an imaginative analogous relationship and that lay beneath her intelligent probing of inherited and contemporary ideas. Four poems from 1862 help provide a general introduction to the dynamic exchange Dickinson creates between artistic and religious forms of imagining the 'beyond'. The first, 'I found the words to every thought', suggests that she turned to religion as an artist who understood the animating power of the unspeakable and who felt herself to be simultaneously subject to, and representative of, an overwhelming force. It conceives of the problem of inspiration as Platonic illumination – an apprehension of an absolute which her experiential verse cannot render in comprehensible 'words'.

From the second, 'This World is not Conclusion', we get a sense of Dickinson's ambivalent feelings about faith and her deep preoccupation with different attitudes towards the unknown. The third and fourth poems illustrate the connection between that preoccupation and Dickinson's sense of poetic purpose. 'I dwell in Possibility' has often been regarded as a kind of Dickinsonian manifesto precisely because of the way it portrays openness to the beyond as the necessary condition of poetic endeavour. But there can be little doubt that it shows Dickinson in one of her more optimistic moods which is why I have juxtaposed it with 'From Blank to Blank' which indicates the difficulties she saw in poetic and religious journeying.

Dickinson wrote 'I found the words' in the same year that she commented to Higginson on her family's worship of an 'eclipse' and it is not hard to spot a relationship between her 'eclipse' and the blaze of the noon sun in this poem:

I found the words to every thought
I ever had – but One –

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And that – defies me –
 As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun
 To Races – nurtured in the Dark –
 How would your Own – begin?
 Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal –
 Or Noon – in Mazarin?

(Fr436; J581)

As an archetypal figure of divinity, the sun's value for Dickinson was very similar to its value for early mythology. It strikes her as a principle of absolute light and the speaker's problem is in telling the story of this light – making the compromise necessary to accommodate the absolute in relative terms. Her move from language to picture is an impulse towards understanding the age of the problem – the way in which it preoccupied primitive man. The problem is rooted in the difference between direct and indirect experience; the difference between feeling or intimation and second-hand rendition.

Like the inhabitants of Plato's cave, 'nurtured in the Dark', these 'Races' see flickering shadows of the reality they cannot fully comprehend. To have a thought is equivalent to knowing the sun; to hear about it is only comparable to seeing a rough and primitive drawing, or a flickering shadow thrown upon the cave's wall.⁸ The clumsiness of representation is emphasised by the disembodied 'hand', which seems as detached from its human owner as the sign from its referent; a referent which functions as both the intersection and vanishing point of all meaning. Noticeably, though, this clumsy 'try' is all we know of her thought. Like an eclipse, the subject of this poem is constituted by its seeming absence.

However, seeming absence is a very different thing to absence. The subject fails to appear but that does not mean that it fails to attend. It 'defies' the speaker, choosing to exert an agency and power greater than hers, but remaining shrouded in a mystery which can only be expressed by analogy to the paradoxically life-giving and destructive power of the noon sun. It is no accident that she finds her analogy, here, in the difficulty of narrating divine power or that she refers back to primitive forms of religious narrative (the chalked image of the sun) in order to emphasise that generations have endured the same problem.

'I found the words' begins to map the common ground Dickinson identified between poetic and religious narratives and sources. 'This World is not Conclusion' brings an important qualification to this Platonic theme as it illustrates the antagonism that set her half against the blind credo of

faith and half in favour of the leap she understood by analogy to artistic vision:

This World is not Conclusion –
 A Species stands beyond –
 Invisible, as Music –
 But positive, as Sound –
 It beckons, and it baffles –
 Philosophy, don't know –
 And through a Riddle, at the last –
 Sagacity, must go –
 To guess it, puzzles scholars –
 To gain it, Men have borne
 Contempt of Generations
 And Crucifixion, shown –
 Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
 Blushes, if any see –
 Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
 And asks a Vane, the way –
 Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
 Strong Hallelujahs roll –
 Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
 That nibbles at the soul –

(Fr373; J501)

Initially describing the beyond in the scientific term of a 'species', Dickinson renders the notion of otherworldliness doubtful even as she upholds its existence in her mind. As a creature we would like to categorise in known terms, this 'species' eludes us. A tangible absence, 'Invisible as Music – / But positive as Sound –', and a poetic figure not unlike Dickinson's 'eclipse', it fails to appear but it does not fail to attend the speaker's imagination. The poet's domestication of the 'beyond' through the language of science is partly scathing of the mind that would categorise the unknown in known terms and partly in sympathy with that need. Dickinson's 'species' becomes a comic figure, the beckoning and baffling object of desire that undermines every effort of human reaching with its trickster habits, forcing 'sagacity' to perform a humiliating jump through the hoop of 'riddle'. But if the beyond has a kind of trickster quality in this poem, it is also deeply and movingly beautiful. Dickinson's musical similes bear testimony to the profoundly affecting quality of a tangible otherworldly absence.

Like so many of Dickinson's religious poems, this is as much about how we understand a paradox as the paradox itself. 'Faith', here personified as a young, foolish but quite likeable girl, is a question of response.

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Jovially tripping and steadying herself, embarrassed at her slip and blushing as might any New England eighteen-year-old stumbling at her first ball, she looks to the flimsy support of natural theology's 'Evidence' and asks directions in vain. Dickinson's pun on 'Vane' casts a gently ironic eye on the well-meaning but pointless efforts of the happy faithful. She reserves her greatest sarcasm for the habits of the Revivalist church that, for all its boisterous assertiveness, cannot hide the empty gestures and mechanical movements that underpin its own doctrinal surety.

The triumphant sounding of its own emptiness is the 'Narcotic' of the Revivalist church. But it is powerless, Dickinson suggests, to still the movement of the questing mind or soul. Her musical similes imply that this journey is analogous to her own artistic quest and the motivation is clearly one of internal torture, a desire that reduces the soul as much as stimulates it.⁹ Dickinson's understanding of the beyond in this poem begins from negation, 'This World is not Conclusion', and it ends on a similar note. We are left to wonder how much remains of the soul that is gradually eroded by the gnawing pangs of faith and doubt. Both the poetic and the religious leap end as a hobble, but that is preferable to the misguided skipping of 'Faith' or the foolish stridency of the church.

Dickinson's unsettled poetic questing is reflected, among other things, in the open-endedness of her written forms. Her variants imply a reluctance to make definitive choices about the way in which any poem should be read. She has a tendency, especially towards the end of her life, to break quite suddenly into (what seems to be) consciously lineated verse form in the middle of a prose letter. And she regularly curtails her verbal expressions with a refusal to admit of finite ending. In doing so, she leaves room for optimistic interpretations of poetic possibility in terms of a more welcoming 'beyond'. Such possibility has long been considered part of Dickinson's aesthetic and finds its most well-known expression in the following poem:

I dwell in Possibility –
 A fairer House than Prose –
 More numerous of Windows –
 Superior – for Doors –

 Of Chambers as the Cedars –
 Impregnable of eye –
 And for an everlasting Roof
 The Gambrels of the Sky –

 Of Visitors – the fairest –
 For Occupation – This –

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The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –

(Fr466; J657)

The juxtaposition of ‘Possibility’ with ‘Prose’ has led many critics to see the former as poetry, its attributes grand and exciting and a contrast to the prosaic nature of everyday reality.¹⁰ This interpretation is supported by readings from across Dickinson’s oeuvre. Eleanor Heginbotham’s evaluation of fascicle 21, in which ‘They shut me up in Prose’ is displayed on the opposite page to ‘This was a Poet’, argues that Dickinson’s arrangement is a witty joke in which prose visually confronts poetry – the preferred terrain of the ‘little girl’ closeted in the wardrobe.¹¹ In ‘I dwell in Possibility’, Dickinson defines her ‘Occupation’ through the paradox of a phenomenological poetic that exploits the tension between an impossible space of absolute being and a possible place of relative habitation. The poem carries the conceit of the house right through to the final stanza where it is reconfigured in terms of the speaker’s own body, the ‘narrow Hands’ that are both the enabling condition for poetic agency and the comical limitation to its aims.¹² The speaker dwells in a place that is still in the process of being made and gestures beyond itself to a fuller and freer space.

‘I dwell in Possibility’ is relatively hopeful, making the place of possibility, defined by the conditions and constraints of mortal existence, a partial rendering of poetic ‘Paradise’ and straining towards its greater achievement. ‘From Blank to Blank’ describes a similar thrust into the infinite in far less enthusiastic terms:

From Blank to Blank
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet –
To stop – or perish – or advance –
Alike indifferent –

If end I gained
It ends beyond
Indefinite disclosed –
I shut my eyes – and groped as well
’Twas lighter – to be Blind –

(Fr484; J761)

As Elisa New argues in her reading of this poem, the link between the poetic and spiritual project is forged in the pun on ‘blank’ and ‘mechanic feet’ which refer both to prosodic bewilderment and hard spiritual journey. In New’s reading, the poet carries out an absurd quest as a faithful wanderer. So, the theological or poetic journey towards a God of known

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terms is 'blanked out'.¹³ By the logic of New's argument, Dickinson's irony is directed against the gathering of Paradise. Yet in the midst of the night-journey and the blindness that forms part of the conversion narrative, comes only a semi-ironic moment of divine illumination. Dickinson puns on 'lighter', suggesting both the bliss of blind ignorance in the face of the 'Indefinite' and the blinding light of an encounter with God or the power of Tiresius, the blind seer.

The blindness is somehow enabling. The 'threadless way' of her journey follows no known path, so it has no discernible 'thread'. But Dickinson's vocabulary also suggests the fate of many sewing-machine workers who went blind as they worked the 'mechanic feet' of their factory appliances.¹⁴ Having gone blind, Dickinson's speaker suggests she is better able for the task at hand. The industrial allusion implies that a 'threadless way' is productive. The conditional 'if' that opens the second stanza leaves fulfilment a supposition, its boundaries 'beyond' the compass of consciousness. And that same sense of 'beyond' enters the darkness of the last line in the pun on 'lighter' – a half-acknowledged, half-realised sense of the multiple 'ends' of poetic achievement.

'Indefinite disclosed' mirrors revelation in aesthetic terms. What is 'indefinite' is the verbal rendering of the infinite – that which cannot be fixed, itemised or definitively understood. Dickinson's poetics render the animating principle of their being indefinite – in terms of her variants, dashes, similes and the grammatical constructions of conditional meaning that lend her poems their characteristic opacity. Her refusal to admit of finite ending in her poetry, her frequently displayed desire to push past the end of the poem with a dash and/or an incomplete meaning, is part of this gestural movement which hinges on an experiential chasm between humanity and divinity, time and eternity, the corruptible and incorruptible, this side and the beyond. It is important that Dickinson cannot help making the moment of religious arrival ironic; she struggles to have faith in poetic arrival as well. Instead, it is the negative space that interests her and the interim experiences of possibility and blindness.

These poems give a sense of the variety of tone to be found in the lively discussion that Dickinson encourages between religious and aesthetic forms of imagining. They illuminate the dynamic interplay Dickinson engenders between poetic and religious enterprise as they start to map the common ground in terms of an animating absence of knowledge and sense of non-arrival. But they also show the reserve which her enthusiastic descriptions of 'possibility' cannot belie. She may have used irony to attack the foolish or dogmatic faith that irritated her but she also used it

to defend against the more difficult leap of faith that seemed profoundly relevant to her own poetic quest to negotiate the meaning of the beyond.

THE NARRATIVE

It is not easy to decide which story to follow in this book as there are many narratives to be found in Dickinson's writings. As Sharon Cameron and Eleanor Heginbotham have shown, there are stories to be found among the variants and within the fascicles and sets.¹⁵ Alike Barnstone has recently argued that there is also a story to be told about Dickinson's poetic development that is keenly engaged with the changing cultural and political scene around her.¹⁶ Barnstone, in particular, has issued a challenge to those critics who would see Dickinson's poetry as unchanging and timeless, and confer upon it the mythic status that has often characterised depictions of her life.

I pursue lateral rather than linear interpretations of Dickinson's religious imagination, but this is not to say that there are no empirically traceable changes. Her early education undoubtedly enabled much of her later experiment as she made use of her wide reading and exploited the tensions of natural theology.¹⁷ I remain nervous about making *de facto* judgments about Dickinson's poetic development, partly because the judgments formed in response to Johnson's earlier dating of the poems frequently now seem erroneous or at least dated. However, on the assumption that Franklin's dating is correct, it seems tempting to observe that, while Dickinson was always imaginatively engaged with religion and returned to treat the same themes in comparable ways throughout her life, there was a real flourishing of this interest at the moment when she seemed to be most poetically productive. A great number of her most interesting theological poems emerge in the period of 1861–3, but this study deliberately treats poems from across her oeuvre in order to illustrate the enduring relevance and nuanced interplay of its themes.

This is not intended to reinforce the 'Myth of Amherst'. There are occasions when a particular death or event provokes a peculiarly theological response. Two examples that I discuss in detail are the shooting of Mrs Vanderbilt (explored as part of a resurrection trope in 'To this World she Returned') and the death of Margaret Cowan (which led to a meditation on 1 Cor. 15.35). There are other times when Dickinson's age or the inclusion of a poem, or version of a poem, as part of a letter has a direct effect on the way its religious themes can be read. So while my discussion is thematic rather than chronological, I try to strike a balance between