

■ Emily Dickinson's Idiosyncratic Use of the Bible and Definition of Related Religious Subjects

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson's writing reflects features of religion which had an embedded influence on her contemporary thinking, norms, ideas about gender roles, and language. In Dickinson's cultural, religious, and social milieu framed within the context of the theological system, she was instructed not only to adhere to the gospel principles and fixed interpretations of the Bible but also to yield to established religious authority in the definition and usage of scripture and language. She read Noah Webster's dictionary, which reflects his "encouragement of quietude and deference" in orthodox religion, "as a priest his breviary." She also "couldn't get along very well without" the Bible in her early life. Nevertheless, to Dickinson, who recognized the mighty ability of the brain, the power of words, and the possible confinement of inculcated beliefs, conformity to dull received definitions, interpretations, and usage was unacceptable. This article argues that many of Dickinson's writings reveal her intention not to be "still" in the closet of revealed religion or received notions but to be heir to Puritan constant self-examination, to actively interrogate her religious inheritance, to pass beyond the confines of established definitions, and to explore and search for truths, thereby often demonstrating her unique, inspiring, and multiple perspectives on religious themes and concepts. Poems composed

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(Received 17 February 2019; Accepted 22 November 2019)

by a poet with a “nimble” and unconfined brain that can divine alternative and multifaceted perceptions of religious subjects may initially appear to be exegesis or definition verse in which she tries to expound religious beliefs. In fact, however, they often conclude without an exact or final resolution and present nonconformist thinking that sometimes directly challenges, suspends, and subverts settled definitions, interpretations, or explications. In effect, Dickinson often enacts the role of a midwife, who does not directly present wisdom or instruct truths but invites an examination of received beliefs and offers insight into those explored or defined.

Keywords: skeptical, nonconformist, idiosyncratic, multiple definitions/perceptions, exploration, interrogation

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me “still” –

Still! Could themselves have peeped –
And seen my Brain – go round –
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason – in the Pound –

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Look down upon Captivity –
And laugh – No more have I – (Fr445A)¹

Emily Dickinson's writing reflects features of religion which had an embedded influence on her contemporary thinking, practices, norms, language, and ideas about gender roles. In Dickinson's cultural, religious, and social milieu framed within the context of the theological system, people were instructed not only to adhere to the gospel principles and fixed interpretations of the Bible but also to yield to established religious authority in the definition and usage of scripture and language since early childhood: “As when a little Girl / They put me in the Closet – / Because they liked me ‘still’ –” (Fr445A). This was one condition of “stillness” instilled in Dickinson's contemporaries according to Richard Rabinowitz's research on the religious situation in nineteenth-century New England.² A woman was especially encouraged to be like Mother Mary and to be a Republican wife/mother who could be the handmaid of the Gospel and serve as helpmate, a purifying force in the lives of erring men, devoting her life to taking care of her husband and raising pious and virtuous children (citizens). The dictionary used by most nineteenth-century Americans was edited by Noah Webster,³ who reinforced religious authority: many definitions reflect his “encouragement of quietude and deference” in orthodox religion (Rabinowitz 44) and “unique mixture of Calvinism and

¹ “Fr” refers to R. W. Franklin's edition of Emily Dickinson's poems. Citation by poem number.

² Rabinowitz remarks that ministers and pastors asserted that anything which would weaken faith in God's promises and divine truths in the Bible must be repudiated and “stillness” should rule “in its place” (39). Orthodox Christians then regarded “stillness” as “a strategy for personal salvation” because it would urge them to “accept the factual givenness of their universe,” “to subordinate every fact to the totality of divine providence” (43), to fix their hearts, arrest their attention, and stay their souls only on Jesus Christ, and to happily embrace death, which was “the apotheosis of stillness” (40). As the speaker in “They shut me up in Prose –” (Fr445) depicts, Dickinson was constantly advised to accept received beliefs and be “still” in the closet most of the time.

³ Rabinowitz, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, and Jed Deppman all point this out.

Enlightenment rationalism” by citing scripture and referring to Christian beliefs (Deppman 56). This lexicon was Dickinson’s “only companion” for several years (L261).⁴ According to Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Webster’s dictionary was “no mere reference book” to Emily Dickinson; the poet “read it as a priest his breviary—over and over, page by page, with utter absorption” (80). Nevertheless, to the poet, who looks down upon captivity (Fr445A) and recognizes the mighty ability of the brain, the possible confinement of inculcated beliefs (Fr598), and the power of words (Fr278, Fr1456, and Fr1715),⁵ conformity to dull received beliefs, definitions, and usage is unacceptable. Instead, she tends to explore the meanings and potentialities of language and emphasize the possibility (Fr466) and sublime effect of poetry.⁶ Resisting formal religion and not catering to the advocated qualities of an ideal woman (to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic), Dickinson insistently tries to maintain autonomous dominion over not only her thoughts, attitudes, or deeds, but also interpretations and manipulation of the Bible and language. As declared in her letters: her “business” is “circumference” (L268), “to love,” and “to sing” (L269).

The various waves of twentieth-century Dickinson criticism have not mainly focused on religion, which deeply influenced normative patterns of social organization and language in Dickinson’s era, although an understanding of her religious milieu is essential to our appreciation of her nonconformist poetry. This article argues that many of Dickinson’s writings reveal her intention not to be “still” in the closet of revealed religion, received notions or definitions, but to be heir to Puritan constant self-examination, to actively interrogate her religious inheritance, to pass beyond the confines of established applications or definitions, and to explore and search for truths, thereby often demonstrating her unique, inspiring, and multiple perspectives on religious themes and concepts. Poems composed by a poet with a “nimble” spirit (L750) and an unconfined brain that can divine alternative and multifaceted perceptions of religious subjects without professing complete faith in dominant ideologies may

⁴ “L” refers to Thomas H. Johnson’s edition of Dickinson’s letters. Citation by letter number.

⁵ In a poem on the brain, Dickinson emphasizes its potentiality, comparing it with the sky, the sea, and “the weight of God” (Fr598). She suggests not only its capacity to subsume the universe and incorporate the sea (to understand and absorb everything), but also its possibility of being confined within revealed religion as the last comparison implies that the brain can divine the mind of God, but not go beyond: “The Brain is just like the weight of God – / . . . / And they will differ – if they do – / As Syllable from Sound – ” (Fr598). This comparison connotes not only the root influence of orthodox religion and a question of the transcendental conviction, but also the possible perceptions of a nonconformist divine mind by a brain not stilled by the dominant ideology or assigned role.

⁶ Dickinson told Higginson, “If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me. . . . If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry” (L342a).

initially appear to be exegesis or definition verse in which she tries to expound or define religious beliefs. In fact, however, they often conclude without an exact or final resolution and present nonconformist thinking that sometimes directly challenges, suspends, and subverts settled definitions, interpretations, or explications. In effect, she often enacts the role of a midwife who encourages an examination of received beliefs and offers insight into those explored or defined.

As a nineteenth-century woman poet who was supposed to be a subordinate and acquiescent advocate of mainstream religiosity and gender identity, and to bring something soothing to people thirsting, “Crackling with fever,” or chilled with “frost” lain on their “bosoms,” Dickinson conveys a hope to give some relief with her “unaccustomed” verse: “And so I always bear the cup / If haply, mine may be the drop / Some pilgrim thirst to slake –” (Fr126). She also hopes to have a capacity to offer advice (be a life mentor) and to allay suffering:

If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin
Unto hid Nest again
I shall not live in vain. (Fr982)

In “The Poets light but Lamps –,” Dickinson proposes that poets enlighten a man beyond their life and stimulate the “Wicks” (life force and insight) if poets’ “vital Light” inheres “as do the Suns” (Fr930). On the surface, poets, offering a lens that examines each age and “Disseminating their / Circumference –” (Fr930), sound didactic. Nevertheless, the poem suggests that a poet may merely express his/her perceptions on things which people of all ages may encounter, providing each age and its people an angle or direction to inspect or to develop their own interpretations and insights. Despite her suggestion that poets seem to “comprehend the Whole –” (Fr533), Dickinson, neither trying to dominate others’ thinking nor subordinating differences, does not mean to tell people what to believe or do as evidenced in her response to Helen Hunt Jackson’s request.⁷

⁷ Comparatively, Jackson presents more conventional religious teachings as illustrated in “Habeus Corpus” (*Poems* 261-63), in which the speaker expects that the coming of death will free her of the decaying body, and in “The Parable of St. Christopher,” which exalts St. Christopher (*Bits of Talk* 7). In her poems on domestic or religious subjects in *Bits of Talk*, Jackson employs such natural creatures as robins and their mother in a poorly-built nest where “a true-hearted mother broods always, / And makes the whole year a summer day” in “The Nest” (97); Colorado Snow-Birds which “have no barns” but trust God so much as to “journey, nothing doubting / Down to the barren plains,” where “harvests

Dickinson's disinclination to be confined in the traditional role of a woman poet or to yield to established religious authority in language is particularly illustrated by her unusual manipulation of the Bible, which was one of the main sources of her lexicon and which was so "handy" to her that she sometimes "couldn't get along very well without it" in her early life (L8).

Treating the Bible as one of her favorite companions and citing it frequently, Dickinson often personifies it:

Science will not trust us with another World.
 Guess I and the Bible will move to some old fashioned spot where we'll feel at
 Home. (L395)

Would it be prudent to subject an apparitional interview to a grosser test? The Bible
 portentously says "that which is Spirit is Spirit." (L558)

. . . one must clad demurely to please the scripture's taste, a very plain Old Gentle-
 man, with few Expenses out – (L685)

Thinking of you with fresher love, as the Bible boyishly says, "New every morning
 and fresh every evening." (L889)

Dickinson anthropomorphically refers to the Bible as a testimony to the existence of another world (L395), to John 3.6 in her reply to Mrs. Tuckerman's request to see her (L558), to Matthew 11.29 in her comments on Christmas gifts (L685), and to Lamentations 3.22-23 when talking about her steadfast love for Maria Whitney (L889). While most women poets worked on their exegeses of the Bible and utilized biblical allusions with reference to their prophetic value or assertion of revealed beliefs, Dickinson often avoided the limited usage of biblical stories and language though occasionally presenting a conventional application of scriptural materials.⁸ For instance, in "Remember me' implored the Thief!"

are all over," and to "find [their] garnered grains" in "Colorado Snow-birds" (112); and a mare that bravely and earnestly takes her responsibility and performs her duties being loyal to her master in "Lizzy of La Bourget" (211). Invited to write for "what is right," the proper subject for a woman poet, Dickinson solicited T. W. Higginson's help to reject Jackson: "Are you willing to tell me what is right? Mrs. Jackson – of Colorado . . . wished me to write for this – I told her I was unwilling, And she asked me why? – I said I was incapable . . . if you would be willing to give me a note saying you disapproved it, and thought me unfit, she would believe . . ." (L476).

⁸ For example, the salvation granted by Christ to the thief on Calvary is depicted as a deed of courtly chivalry towards those defeated, an act which makes people hope to deserve it and "commend" themselves to the "Paragon of Chivalry" (Fr1306). Christ is also portrayed as eager for the highest crown of thorns which "no one seeks" and his sacrifice is described as "isolation coveted" and "stigma deified" while Pontius Pilate authorizing Christ's crucifixion has to be afflicted with that memory and lives in "whatsoever hell" (Fr1759). In addition, Dickinson refers to Adam's excesses leading to human loss of paradise as a warning to one's indulgence in pleasure in "Paradise is that old mansion" (Fr1144).

(Fr1208A), Christ's "guaranty" to the imploring thief is cited as the "mightiest case" of "compensated trust" which allows people to hope for heaven. This case is used to demonstrate that anyone believing in the Son can have eternal life:

Of all we are allowed to hope
But Affidavit stands
That this was due where most we fear
Be unexpected Friends. (Fr1208)

Nevertheless, the penultimate line reveals people's uncertainty ("fear") of the promised afterlife in paradise. The last line is also ambiguous; connoting unexpected believers, it makes one wonder why the thief would be an unexpected friend in heaven if Christ's promise would be definitely realized. This poem illustrates that Dickinson does not stay "still" or submit herself to established religious authority. Instead, she suspects and suspends it, revealing her question about the contradictory or controversial.

With a skeptical attitude toward orthodox definition of the Bible as a unique holy book and a guide to everyday life, Dickinson argues the "Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference" (L950), questioning the orthodoxy-centered view of it. Defining the Scripture as "an antique Volume" written "by faded Men" (Fr1577C) and refusing the authoritative demand to ratify her every experience, thought, or feeling by the infallible standard of the Bible, Dickinson satirically expresses negative opinions of the orthodox interpretation or application of it. For example, in the poem composed to appease the uneasiness of her nephew, Edward, who was absent from religious services (L753) because of his sickness, she insinuates most boys would rather be "captivated" by "Orpheus' Sermon," which delights them much more sensuously through touching music, than be condemned and intimidated by decrees or didactic teachings, which were frequently witnessed at the religious congregation (Fr1577C). Declaring "'Seen of Angels' scarcely" her "responsibility" as it "is difficult not to be fictitious in so fair a place" (L330),⁹ Dickinson offers alternative and multiple understanding and employment of the Bible.

For instance, when most woman poets expounded the Bible, Dickinson presented criticism of the biblical stories, especially those in the Old Testament as demonstrated in such lines as "Moses was'nt fairly used – / Ananias was'nt –" (Fr1271). In another poem, God's act to let "Old Moses" "see – the Canaan / Without the entering –" is defined as wrong (Fr521A). Thinking "God's adroi-

⁹ "Seen of Angels" is a quotation from 1 Timothy 3.16. All the biblical lines quoted are from the King James Bible.

ter will” on Moses “seemed to fasten” with “tantalizing Play” to “show supremacy” (“prove ability”) as “Boy – should deal with lesser Boy,” the poet-persona deems Moses to be mistreated and bullied, exclaiming, “My justice bleeds – for Thee!” (Fr521A). Here Dickinson insinuates that God arbitrarily tests Moses just to affirm His superiority to Moses. In addition, an ironic presentation of God’s tyranny to “distinctly” demand Abraham to kill Isaac is written as follows:

Not a hesitation –
 Abraham complied –
 Flattered by Obeisance
 Tyranny demurred – (Fr1332)

At the end, Dickinson expresses that Isaac survived to “tell the tale” “with a Mastiff” so that “Obeisance” and obedience to God’s decree could prevail hereafter, implying God’s despotism and human’s consequent awe.

Along with her criticism of biblical stories, some of Dickinson’s poems initially seem like exegetical exercises but abruptly end with an implication contrary to conventional interpretations. In this way, her employment of the biblical allusion often turns to question, not to confirm, the traditional belief. An inquiry about the statement “And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him” (Gen. 5.24) is a typical illustration:

“Was not” – was all the statement –
 The Unpretension stuns –
 Perhaps – the Comprehension –
 They wore no Lexicons –

But lest our Speculation
 In inanition die
 Because “God took him” mention –
 That was Philology – (Fr1277B)

Instead of expounding the statement, Dickinson speculates about it, exhibiting her doubt about the validity of the philology in the Bible. In addition, an experience opposite to the biblical statement “And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive” (Matt. 21.22) is described in “I meant to have but modest needs –” (Fr711). The speaker conveys a wish to have a modest life (“And Life and I – keep even –”) where “Content” and “Heaven” could lie within the speaker’s “income.” Since Heaven would include both and “Grace would grant the pair” according to orthodox beliefs, the speaker prays “upon this wise,” saying, “Great Spirit – Give to me / A Heaven not so large as Your’s, / But large enough – for me –.” However, noticing that a “Smile suffused Jehovah’s face,” the “Cherubim withdrew,” grave “Saints stole

out to look at” him/her and “showed their dimples,” the speaker chooses to leave “the place with all” her/his might, throws away the prayer, and questions why the thing experienced is different from what it is taught: “It take the Tale for true – / ‘Whatsoever you shall ask – / Itself be given you’ –.” Eventually the speaker becomes “shrewder” and scans the skies with “a suspicious Air,” rejecting thoughtless faith and unquestioning demand to the believer: “As Children, swindled for the first, / All Swindlers be, infer” (Fr711A). These poems show that Dickinson presents biblical lines not to confirm the revealed belief but to express something ambiguous or even challenging, as further illustrated in a poem which uses Christ’s great suffering and experience of betrayal from Peter to justify and appease human pains.

In the poem, Dickinson portrays a person who is trying to convince himself/herself of the greatness of Christ and heaven, the reason for human hardship in the world, and the necessity to “cease to wonder why” there is suffering: “Christ will explain each separate anguish / In the air schoolroom of the sky – // He will tell me what ‘Peter’ promised –” (Fr215). Nevertheless, the reiteration of “that scalds me now” exposes the incredibility of the speaker’s announcement to “forget the drop of Anguish” (Fr215). Again, the poem begins with an application of biblical story to human life but concludes with a skeptical, suspending, and subversive ending as it is “Peter’s denial” that provokes the speaker to wonder.¹⁰ Similarly, anguish and resurrection pain are depicted as “grander than Delight” since death is believed to transport the dead to the afterlife in Heaven:

‘Tis Transport wild as thrills the Graves
When Cerements let go
And Creatures clad in Miracle
Go up by Two and Two – (Fr192B)

However, Dickinson displays skepticism about resurrection in terms of Nicodemus’s question about rebirth, marveling how a man could be born again when he is old and doubting whether he could truly return to his mother’s womb to be born:

But how shall finished Creatures
A function fresh obtain?
Old Nicodemus’ Phantom
Confronting us again! (Fr1218)

¹⁰ Roseanne Hoefel argues, “Peter was Christ’s chosen foundation. . . . Peter, the founding patriarch of Christianity and first pope, created a gap in hierarchically institutionalized Christianity by denying the Word – indeed the Son – of God” (2).

Rather than appealing to scriptural allusions just as a confirmation or proof of received beliefs, Dickinson enlarges the advantage of the rich imagery and resonance of the Bible and enriches its application instead of circumscribing it within theological tradition. The best representative is Dickinson's manipulation of Jacob's story. Reinterpreting and even reversing the biblical story, Dickinson has a humorous illustration of Jacob's struggle with angels (Fr145). In her description, Jacob appears so insistent and strong-willed in the wrestle that the "Angel begged permission / To Breakfast – to return –" and finally agreed to his request for a blessing (Fr145). In Dickinson's presentation of Jacob's wrestle, which can be interpreted as one over/with divine existence, truth, and grace, he does not easily give up or passively submit to divine providence but actively "wrestle[s] long and hard" (Fr145), insisting on a face-to-face contact with God, which is opposite to the orthodox version of conversion or unconditional faith in the invisible. In her letters, where the biblical episode is repeatedly cited, Dickinson even reverses the scriptural lines: "I will not let thee go, except I bless thee" (L1035). She inverts the roles of Jacob and the angel, remarking, "Audacity of Bliss, said Jacob to the Angel 'I will not let thee go except I bless thee' – Pugilist and Poet, Jacob was correct –" (L1042). In this statement, Dickinson seems to advocate insistence on actively constant examination or investigation, even that of a mystery unable to be realized and reasoned, and on self-expression. Shawn Alfrey especially regards Dickinson's "inversion of the story" as the "necessary trope" to "gain authority as a female poet" since "the blessing of Jacob by the Angel is one of the founding moments of patriarchal genealogy" (53). Indeed, through this reversal, Dickinson can thus "dehierarchize sublime 'bliss' and spiritual conversion" (Alfrey 53). On the other hand, Jacob's contention can be taken as a poet's struggle with words as Dickinson often experimented with various candidates of dictions for her poetic expressions.

In addition, Dickinson's idiosyncratic application of the Bible can be found in her revision of it, as Wolff and Diane Gabrielson Scholl argue, in radically individual ways as to turn "the Biblical text against itself" (Wolff 103) and permit "its implied private meaning to overshadow scriptural context" or religious connotations (Scholl 4). Illustratively, talking about her domestic duty in a letter to Abiah Root, Dickinson sarcastically compares her own deficiency in housekeeping skills to "faith without works":

I think I could keep house very comfortably if I knew how to cook. But as long as I don't, my knowledge of housekeeping is about of as much use as faith without works, which you know we are told is dead. Excuse my quoting from the Scripture, dear Abiah, for it was so handy in this case I couldn't get along very well without it. (L8)

Additionally, complaining about her responsibility to attend on her father and brother, Dickinson mentions,

Would'nt [sic] you love to see me in these bonds of great despair, looking round my kitchen, and praying for kind deliverance, and declaring by "Omar's bread" I never was in such plight. *My* kitchen I think I called it, God forbid that it was, or shall be my own – God keep me from what they call households, except that bright one of "faith"! (L36)

In this letter, grumbling about her busy house-keeping work, Dickinson especially describes herself as "a martyr" feeding her father and brother who clamor for food and as rebellious Satan, hoping to be relieved from service (L36), instead of a traditionally accepting Job or an obedient domestic angel in the house, the image of an ideal woman then. In addition, in "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection!" (Fr267), instead of a focus on Christ's significance, Dickinson's manipulation of Christ's Calvary allows the speaker, who bears such a burden as seven years of "troth" with a prospect for a final triumph, to have her personal story, as Scholl argues, "consume its scriptural reference" (5):

Love that never leaped its socket –
Trust entrenched in narrow pain –
Constancy thro' fire – awarded –
Anguished – bare of anodyne!

Burden – borne so far triumphant –
None suspect me of the crown,
For I wear the "Thorns" till Sunset –
Then – my Diadem put on (Fr267)

The poem and letters demonstrate that Dickinson makes the biblical passages and allusions, in Scholl's words, "secularized, rendered playful and almost parodic" (9).

Moreover, Dickinson's release from the limited and fixed employment or interpretation of the Bible is also embodied in her unorthodox definitions or exegeses of such religious subjects as the forbidden fruit, devil, God, prayer, immortality, heaven, and faith. As a nonconformist poet, whose business is "Circumference"—to have expanded perceptions, broader views, and authentic understanding of life, the world (either visible or invisible), and her self—Dickinson, "the only Kangaroo among the Beauty" (L268), constantly leaps outside the orthodox closet to scrutinize established creeds from diverse angles, to get her own comprehension, and to perceive exact dimensions of life and irrefutable aspects of reality and existence. Her multifaceted, suspending, or subversive characterizations and definitions, which are creative, inspiring,

and sometimes fragmentary or discontinuous resulting from her personal, temporary, constant, and meticulous exploration and examination, demonstrate a soul refusing to subordinate her individual thinking and observations to established religious authority. Noteworthy, some of her definitions, which appear multifarious, paradoxical, sarcastic, suspending, or subversive without any definite unity and resolution, are composed through her reverse thinking of old conventions. Neither staying still on any axiom nor traveling on the path constructed by orthodox Calvinists or Congregationalists,¹¹ Dickinson in her definition poems often does not directly present wisdom or instruct truths and tenets. She merely encourages readers to inspect if received ideas are false phantoms or instinct with life and truth, thereby possibly inspiring their insight into those defined/explored subjects by themselves.

For example, Dickinson presents a comparison of forbidden fruit that has a flavor “lawful Orchards mocks” to the luscious “Pea that Duty locks” in the pod (Fr1482). Here “Duty” connotes both commitment and covering. With this pun, Dickinson insinuates it is the constituted obligation that forbids one to taste a delicious fruit and thereby the fruit’s lusciousness will not be found (Fr1482). Additionally, in a poem on the devil traditionally portrayed as perfidious, Dickinson describes that the devil would “be the best friend” if he had “fidelity” and were “thoroughly divine” without question if he would “resign” his “virtue”—treachery (Fr1510). Dickinson suggests the devil has the ability to be good and divine but just “cannot mend,” hinting that the devil may not be so absolutely wicked if not judged by strict moral or theological standards.

In Dickinson’s conservative milieu, people were considered sane when they conformed to received beliefs; contrarily, their dissent was viewed “straightway dangerous” (Fr620A). Under the circumstances, Dickinson’s intent to express her nonconformist thoughts would be deemed risky and necessary to be “handled with a Chain” (Fr620A). However, in “Much Madness is divinest Sense —,” Dickinson insinuates that to “a discerning eye,” much madness is the “divinest Sense” while much sense is “the starkest madness” (Fr620A), suggesting the possible perception of divine truth by a nonconformist mind. Accordingly, she constantly presents observations opposite to prevailing ideas or practices, hoping “belief is not wicked” and “human nature has truth in it” (L35) and insisting on searching for truth, especially that of the indeterminate and indefinable, on her own.¹² Although recognizing the difficulties of detecting the unknown, inde-

¹¹ Dickinson was brought up in a Calvinist household and used to attend religious services with her family at Amherst’s First Congregational Church before 1868.

¹² In a religious climate which disallowed questions but required “stillness” of pious Christians,

finable, conjectured, or indeterminate, Dickinson reveals irresistible aspirations for them. “How Human Nature dotes / On what it can’t detect –” (Fr1440A), she wonders and further remarks,

Prospective is the friend
Reserved for us to know
When Constancy is clarified
Of Curiosity –

Of subjects that resist
Redoubtablest is this
Where go we –

Go we anywhere
Creation after this? (Fr1440A)

In an attempt to comprehend the indefinite and indeterminate, Dickinson, entering a program of constant exploration, further offers such multiple, alternative, inspiring, or liberating explanations/definitions of God, Christ, prayer, immortality, heaven, and faith that often encourage diverse perspectives.

God

As illustrated in “He was my host – he was my guest,” Dickinson, with an unconfined brain, finds the relationship between God and humans so complicated that one could not tell who is the host and guest or who is the inviter and invitee (Fr1754). Additionally, as the intercourse is so infinite and intimate, related analysis seems a “capsule” containing a seed, which could intimately and infinitely sprout and develop (Fr1754A). Hence, in her writing, Dickinson, who manifests her preference for the love and tenderness of God to His angry, mighty, indifferent, and irresistible aspects, presents various perceptions of the Lord. For instance, in a letter to Perez Cowan at his marriage, Dickinson describes that “Home is the definition of God” (L355). Besides, Dickinson expresses to Mrs. J. G. Holland that “I am glad if you love your clergyman, though the error to our love’s has cost us severely. God seems much

Dickinson, not keeping still or silent, was deemed a pagan. Her nonconformist expressions were defined as heretic or insane deviations by orthodox Congregationalists and led to her exclusion. In her letter to Jane Humphrey, she sarcastically remarks, “I hope belief is not wicked, and assurance, and perfect trust—and a kind of twilight feeling before the moon is seen – I hope human nature has truth in it – Oh I pray it may not deceive – confide – cherish, have a great faith in – do you dream from all this what I mean?” (L35).

more friendly through a hearty Lens” (L492). Directly Dickinson remarks that love impels her to know and be close to God: “It may surprise you I speak of God – but I know him a little, but Cupid taught Jehovah to many an untutored Mind – Witchcraft is wiser than we –” (L562). Another similar depiction is shown when God is portrayed as not always arbitrary but logical:

There is a verse in the Bible that says there are those who shall not see death. I suppose them to be the faithful. Love will not expire. There was never the instant when it was lifeless in the world, though the quicker deceit lies, the better for the truth, who is indeed our dear friend. . . .

God made no act without a cause –
nor heart without an aim – (L357)

In other letters to Mrs. Holland, Dickinson even refers to the “‘Throne’ of Tenderness – the only God I know” (L689) and declares that “*That* God must be a friend – *that* was a different God – and I almost felt warmer myself, in the midst of a tie so sunshiny” (L731). In addition, Dickinson uses the story of John Alden courting Priscilla Mullins on behalf of Miles Standish in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *The Courtship of Miles Standish* to describe Christ’s role as the envoy of God (“a distant – stately Lover”) in His relationship with men (Fr615). She particularly depicts how God woos men by His son in “a Vicarious Courtship” and vouches “with hyperbolic archness”; unlike Miles and John, God and His Son are “Synonym” “lest the Soul,” “like fair ‘Priscilla,’” choose the envoy but “spurn the Groom” (Fr615A).

Moreover, according to Dickinson’s observation, God would be everywhere (L551). He could be in nature, which would not reject a person because of his/her paganism; the natural “Sacrament of Summer days,” “Last communion in the Haze,” permits a child to join, to partake in the “sacred emblems,” and to take not only the “consecrated bread” but also the “immortal wine” (Fr122A). Dickinson suggests that in nature, a church which is “thrown open to [her]” (L458) and where God, “a noted clergyman” whose “sermon is never long,” preaches (Fr236A), one could participate in the “Sacrament” and “keep the Sabbath” (Fr236A). In addition, recalling her sweet and gleeful feeling at finding an Indian pipe in her childhood, Dickinson exalts the “supernatural power” of God:

I still cherish the clutch with which I bore it from the ground when a wondering Child, an unearthly booty, and maturity only enhances mystery, never decreases it. To duplicate the Vision is almost more amazing, for God’s unique capacity is too surprising to surprise. (L769)

Along with God’s lovely and positive traits, Dickinson displays other

aspects of the Lord. Citing Exodus 20.5, she emphasizes God's intolerance of disloyalty:

God is indeed a jealous God –
He cannot bear to see
That we had rather not with Him
But with each other play. (Fr1752)

Namely, the Lord demands wholeheartedly devoted believers. Sometimes, God seems the one of whom people often “ask one favor” that they “may be forgiven –” (L976). Nevertheless, Dickinson also portrays “a disappointing God,” who says “Disciple, call again” when “the long interceding lips” perceive “their prayer is vain” (Fr1768). Writing to Mary Whitney who failed to keep her “appointment with the apple-blossoms,” Dickinson insinuates God's negation, silence, and indifference: “You are like God. We pray to Him, and He answers ‘No.’ Then we pray to Him to rescind the ‘no,’ and He doesn't answer at all, yet ‘Seek and ye shall find’ is the boon of faith” (L830). Similarly, in “Two swimmers wrestled on the spar,” instead of God's grace, Dickinson depicts His indifference to human miserable fate: one of the swimmers wrestling on the spar “turned smiling to the land,” while the other was found leaving a face with “eyes in death – begging raised” and “hands – beseeching – thrown” (Fr227B). Along with the jealousy and apathy of God, His intimate relation with death is reiterated.

According to Dickinson's observation, God would be everywhere but invisible and hidden: “They say that God is everywhere, and yet we always think of Him as somewhat of a recluse” (L551); nonetheless, death usually manifests God's presence. In letter 311, Dickinson declares, “The redoubtable God! I notice where Death has been introduced, he frequently calls, making it desirable to forestall his advances” when talking about the death of a newborn baby (of Susan's sister). It is suggested that by the intrusion of not only love but death, “God is known” (L575). In “I know that He exists,” Dickinson conveys that the existence of God is kept concealed (“He has hid his rare life / From our gross eyes”) in the earthly world and thus makes one feel uncertain. Noticing that His existence can be confirmed only when one goes to heaven after death (“'Tis an instant's play, / 'Tis a fond Ambush, / Just to make bliss / Earn her own surprise!”), the poet-persona impeaches the high cost:

Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest –
Have crawled too far! (Fr365A)

Moreover, bereavements and vicissitudes in life drive Dickinson, who was taught to “subordinate every fact to the totality of divine providence” (Rabinowitz 43), to sarcastically remark, “I trust the new Home may remain untouched – Is God Love’s Adversary?” (L792). Likewise, in the verse written in her letter to Samuel Bowles (L257), she wonders how “sweet it would have tasted, / Just a drop” of victory, asking, “Was God so economical?” In the poem, the poet-persona argues that God’s “Table’s spread” is “too high for us” unless “we dine on tip-toe” and expresses that small creatures need only crumbs instead of the “Eagle’s Golden Breakfast” that “strangles Them” (Fr195B). At the end, the poet-persona sounds uncertain if God is economical or generous, stating, “God keeps His Oath to Sparrows / Who of little love – know how to starve –” without a full stop (Fr195B). Additionally, in a poem concerning an inner struggle for religious faith, Dickinson represents God as a torturer who comes to wring with anguish and stab the “little ‘John’” when he sued “His sweet forgiveness” so that he, originally having strong trust in God, finds not only his faith strained but also his belief racked with suspense, and then becomes confused and helpless in the face of so much inexplicable cruel treatment (Fr366A). Furthermore, Dickinson alludes to a failed attempt to seek Christ, whose chamber is unknown but who sets “Earthquake in the South” and “Maelstrom in the Sea,” ending the poem with a question: “Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth – / Hast thou no arm for me?” (Fr337A). In these poems, Dickinson depicts hardship in life, Christ’s mighty power, and God’s cruelty or apathy to human imploration/prayer. On the indeterminate, arbitrary, and incomprehensible nature of God, Dickinson does not present a fixed image but offers multiple perceptions, followed by unconventional observations on other related religious subjects.

Prayer

In the orthodox view, even after conversion, pious Christians must constantly examine themselves, pray to God, and wait passively and patiently for God’s redemption. Dickinson was taught to pray and practiced it since her childhood though she once said, “Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray” (L278). Her writing demonstrates that she, having the “greatest pleasure to commune alone with the great God” in her prayers and “taking lessons in prayer, so as to coax God to keep” her family and friends safe (L266), has various perceptions, either emotional or rational. For instance, Dickinson defines prayer as “the little implement” through which men reach where “Presence is – denied them –” (Fr623A), insinuating that people appeal to prayer because face-

to-face communication with God is impossible. In prayer, people's speech and God's ear are the components ("Apparatus"); hoping for God's blessing, people "fling their speech" (Fr623A). However, according to her depiction, prayer may become merely a superficial or hypocritical act for a person who is unable to sincerely accept the established dogmas or to fix his/her soul only on Christ and the divine world as manifested in her letters to Root:

I seemed to lose my interest in heavenly things by degrees. Prayer in which I had taken such delight became a task & the small circle who met for prayer missed me from their number. (L11)

I will try not to say any more—my rebellious thoughts are many and the friend I love and trust in has much now to forgive – I wish I were somebody else – I would pray the prayer of the "Pharisee," but I am a poor little "Publican"; "Son of David" look down on me! (L39)

In addition to the possible superficial formalism, Dickinson reveals that those "long interceding lips" may find their prayer vain (Fr1768A) so that the frustrated person exclaims, "Of Course – I prayed – / And did God Care?" (Fr581). Emphasizing the essentiality of prayer, preachers and theologians often refer to Matthew 7.7-8: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." Nevertheless, Dickinson, finding prayer possibly an act of desperation, reverses the reference, saying, "If prayers had any answers to them, you were all here tonight, but I seek and I don't find, and knock and it is not opened. Wonder if God is just – presume he is, however, and 'twas only a blunder of Matthew's" (L132). On the futility of prayer, Dickinson gives a consoling interpretation in an early letter: "If every prayer was answered, there would be nothing left to pray for – we must 'suffer – and be strong'" (L30). However, she sarcastically accentuates its vanity and her nonconformity in her later letters:

. . . so many Notes since receiving one, it seems like writing a Note to the Sky – yearning and replyless – but Prayer has not an answer and yet how many pray! While others go to Church, I go to mine, for are not you my Church, and have we not a Hymn that no one knows but us? (L790)

That no Flake of it fall on you or them – is a wish that would almost be a Prayer, were Emily not a Pagan. (L566)

Obviously, while most people around her who thought of "the perfect happiness" which they experienced when conceiving themselves heirs of heaven (L11) constantly prayed, particularly for salvation and immortality, Dickinson usually

hesitated to do so. Instead, she would “ponder, ponder, and pause” (L36), being skeptical of and investigating the traditionally defined beliefs, especially intricate and indefinable concepts like eternity or heaven, and offering her idiosyncratic perceptions.

Immortality

According to Dickinson’s descriptions, as the “reticent volcano keeps” his “never slumbering plan” confiding “his projects pink” to “no precarious man” and as “nature will not tell the tale” “Jehovah told to her,” the “only secret neighbors keep” is immortality (Fr1776A). Neither ambition nor affection can unravel the mystery of immortality, yet it might be “undistinguished” yesterday but “Eminent Today” (Fr115B). In Dickinson’s writings, immortality is depicted not only as mysterious, unexpected, and imminent but also as a source of both consolation and oppression. She remarks that immortality is naturally desired for at the end of life:

We thirst at first – ’tis Nature’s Act –
And later – when we die –
A little Water supplicate –
Of fingers going by –

It intimates the finer want –
Whose adequate supply
Is that Great Water in the West –
Termed Immortality – (Fr750A)

Accordingly, after her father died, she proclaims, “Take all away – / The only thing worth larceny / Is left – the Immortality –” (L457; Fr1390) though she actually does not welcome immortality, stating, “Immortality as a guest is sacred, but when it becomes as with you and with us, a member of the family, the tie is more vivid” (L644). Talking about the deaths of Bowles, William Cullen Bryant, T. W. Higginson’s wife and daughter, she repeatedly defines it as a sudden intimacy with immortality:

That he has received so often Immortality who conferred it, invests it with a more sudden charm. (L537)

That immortality have those with whom we talked about it, it makes no more mighty – but perhaps more sudden – (L553).

We thought you cherished Bryant, and spoke of you immediately when we heard his

fate – if Immortality be Fate. (L555)

These sudden intimacies with Immortality, are expanse – not Peace – as Lightning at our feet, instills a foreign Landscape. (L641)

In her letter to Cowan after his daughter's death, death is described as a chance to illustrate immortality: "It may have been she came to show you Immortality – Her startling little flight would imply she did –" (L671). Though distrusting the orthodox version of immortality, Dickinson proposes that it "is an honorable Thought" that "We've immortal Place" when "Pyramids decay" and "Kingdoms, like the Orchard" flit "Russetly away" (Fr1115A). Understanding well people's need and craving for eternity, Dickinson defines immortality as follows:

Immortal is an ample word
 When what one we need is by
 But when it leaves us for a time
 'Tis a necessity. (Fr1223A)

Here Dickinson suggests that notwithstanding its mystery, uncertainty, and unpredictability, immortality is necessary since it can solace the bereaved. Repeatedly preached but inscrutable as eternity is, Dickinson's writing reflects her diverse observations resulting from a constant exploration instead of resorting to the conventional definition.

For example, in "Conscious am I in my Chamber –," immortality is portrayed as a shapeless friend perceived in the chamber only by instinct. Such a friend does not "attest by Posture –" nor "confirm – by Word"; the poet-persona further states,

Neither Place – need to present Him
 Fitter Courtesy
 Hospitable intuition
 Of His Company –

Presence – is His furthest license –
 Neither He to Me
 Nor Myself to Him – by Accent –
 Forfeit Probity – (Fr773B)

Manifesting not only the impossibility of presenting a concrete immortality or to know if "He visit[s] Other" or truly dwells but also the quaintness to weary of it ("Weariness of Him, were quainter / Than Monotony"), the poet-persona concludes, "But Instinct esteem[s] Him / Immortality –" (Fr773B). However, this could be a result of internalization in a climate obsessed with immortality.

Dickinson's writing offers the reason for this obsession; immortality can assuage people's anxiety in the uncertain temporary terrestrial world and the unknown condition after death even though immortality is invisible and "is a slow solace" (L597). In a letter to Louise and Frances Norcross, Dickinson remarks that "Footlights cannot improve the grave, only immortality" (L610), insinuating that the idea of eternity appeases human fear of death and provokes an expectation of eternal life. In such a scenario, eternity turns to be the incentive for action, for a pursuit of a better and blessed life after death: "Eternity enables the endeavoring" (Fr724B). In "Each life converges to some Centre –" (Fr724B), Dickinson suggests that every life converges to some centers and a goal exists in "every Human Nature" even though it may be rarely embodied to itself and the achievement of immortality is too fair to be credible ("Too fair / For Credibility's presumption / To mar –"). Although the goal seems so "high" and unobtainable by the "Saints' slow diligence" or "a Life's low Venture," it is "persevered toward – surer – for the Distance." So fragile and "hopeless" to reach or touch, it is worshiped cautiously ("Adored with caution – as a Brittle Heaven – / To reach / Were hopeless, as the Rainbow's Raiment / To touch –"), impelling people to hope and to pursue.

Nevertheless, Dickinson also reveals that immortality, expected as the destination of human life, is likely to be a source of oppression or a means of doctrinal control from the church over people, who are instructed to obey the laws and ordinances of the Gospel in order to be saved and achieve immortality without truly investigating and contemplating the religious concept by themselves. Accordingly, Dickinson asks, "Is immortality a bane / That men are so oppressed?" (Fr1757) and concludes, "The Risks of Immortality are perhaps [its] charm" (L353). Unchaining immortality from the religious definition, Dickinson, who explains to Martha Dickinson that immortality is "only inferential" (L942), provides alternative versions.

First, she suggests that a more possible and practical way of achieving immortality is through love, not God's grace. Observing that "with love all things are possible" (L370), Dickinson in her poems concludes that "Love is immortality" and the loved are "unable to die" (Fr951A) because a person who loves them can "own the key" when they are locked "in the Grave" (Fr431A). In other words, they would live in a person's mind and memory and achieve immortality, an idea articulated in the poet's letter to Susan Gilbert Dickinson: "Show me Eternity, and I will show you Memory – / Both in one package lain" (L912).¹³

¹³ In letter 330 to Higginson, Dickinson mentions, "A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend."

In another letter to Higginson, Emily Dickinson even proposes, “Do not try to be saved – but let Redemption find you – as it certainly will – Love is its own rescue, for we – at our supremest, are but it’s [its] trembling Emblems –” (L522). In “Because that you are going” (Fr1314), a poem attached to letter 405, Dickinson especially proposes love will drive one not only to struggle between affectional wish and rational understanding but also to suspend a suspicion of conventionally defined immortality. In the poem, despite exposing a reluctant tone and reason for the abdication, the poet-persona expresses an intention to abandon doubts about immortality when bereavement evokes a desire to redeem the deprived life and life track in the world. It is suggested that the life track and memory which signify the existence of the beloved will not be annihilated by God but be detected and retained by the person who loves the dead: “Significance, that each has lived / The other to detect – / Discovery, not God himself / Could now annihilate –” (Fr1314B). To the poet-persona, the meaning of immortality or heaven depends on love, so she remarks the terrestrial life, “Life that is,” will not be authentic but as fictitious as paradise until the realm of the beloved appears. By contrast, the life in heaven, “Life that is to be,” is a “Residence too plain” unless the beloved’s face can be recognized in the “Redeemer’s Face.” Revealing regrets for not cherishing the beloved until his/her life ends, the poet-persona conveys not only a renunciation of doubts about immortality and of the right to reprehend heaven and hell, but also a hope for redemption and an afterlife for the bereaved. The poet-persona especially cites the biblical depictions of God: “God is love” (1 John 4.8) and “‘All is possible’ with him” (Matt. 19.26) in a hope that God “will refund us finally / Our confiscated Gods” (the deprived friends or family) and that death (the instant) will be “suspended” “Above Mortality” to signify the beginning of immortality not the end of everything (Fr1314B).

Second, in addition to spiritual and memorial immortality, Dickinson highlights the eternity of great writers whose works would be read beyond their years. For instance, in a letter to Samuel Bowles the younger about his father, Dickinson mentions, “I congratulate you upon his immortality, which is a constant stimulus to my Household – and upon your noble perpetuation of his cherished ‘Republican’” (L651). Sending him a “priceless flower” of a tree his father gave her, she composes a verse to honor Bowles’s immortality:

Who abdicated Ambush
And went the way of Dusk,
And now against his subtle name
There stands an Asterisk

As confident of him as we –
 Impregnable we are –
 The whole of Immortality
 Secreted in a Star – (L935; Fr1571)

In addition, viewing Ralph Waldo Emerson's poetry as "a beautiful copy" (L30), Dickinson comments that "Emerson's intimacy with his 'Bee'" (in "The Humble-Bee") "immortalized him" (L823) and interprets "Emerson's 'Squirrel'" in "Fable" as "deathless" (L794). Moreover, after Elizabeth Barrett Browning died, Dickinson repeatedly exalts Barrett Browning's immortal poetry:

To Tomes of solid Witchcraft –
 Magicians be asleep –
 But Magic – hath an element
 Like Deity – to keep – (Fr627)

Dickinson especially remarks that no other poetess "on Record" is ever "so divine" and praises Barrett Browning's poems for being more beautiful than songs in nature (Fr600B), exclaiming, "Or rap – at Paradise – unheard of – / I'd *harass God* – / Until He let you in!" (Fr275A). In Dickinson's view, these writers become immortal through their significant literary works. Not fixing her mind only on eternity in God's kingdom, Dickinson presents multiple perceptions of immortality in this world. So does she in her definition of heaven.

Heaven

As expressed in "I felt my life with my hands," Dickinson was repeatedly instilled with the importance of faith in paradise and learned to like heaven despite her skepticism shown in the lines—"I held my spirit to the Glass / To prove it possibler –":

I judged my features – jarred my hair –
 I pushed my dimples by, and waited –
 If they – twinkled back –
 Conviction might, of me –

I told myself, "Take Courage, Friend –
 That – was a former time –
 But we might learn to like the Heaven,
 As well as our Old Home! (Fr357A)

Echoing one of Webster's definitions of heaven, "the part of space in which the omnipresent Jehovah is supposed to afford more sensible manifestations of his glory . . . the habitation of God, and is represented as the residence of angels

and blessed spirits,”¹⁴ Dickinson portrays Heaven as “Kingdoms” in “perfect – pauseless Monarchy” with a prince who is “Son of none,” is “His Dateless Dynasty,” and “diversif[ies]” himself in “Duplicate divine” (Fr743A). Additionally, she depicts heaven as mansions which “must be warm,” “exclude the storm,” and “can not let the tears in” (Fr139A).¹⁵ Like immortality, the function of heaven as a means of comfort to the bereaved is also represented, especially in those poems revealing a wish that the dead beloved would be elected and live in God’s habitation where a reunion with them is expected:

Few, yet enough,
 Enough is one –
 To that ethereal throng
 Have not each one of us the right
 To stealthily belong? (Fr1639A)¹⁶

In addition, Dickinson suggests that one’s search for perfection or wholeness makes one be interested in or accept the legendary “fair Ideal” Heaven when one finds “fracture,” “splintered Crown,” “the Gods – a lie,” and “Doubtless – ‘Adam’” “scowled at Eden” for “*his* perjury” (Fr386A). In other words, as such search is found futile in this world, the preached amendment or purification of human sin and salvation in heaven are treasured and hoped for:

Cherishing – our poor Ideal –
 Till in purer dress –
 We behold her – glorified –
 Comfort – search – like this –
 Till the broken creatures –
 We adored – for whole –
 Stains – all washed –
 Transfigured – mended –
 Meet us – with a smile – (Fr386A)

Although Dickinson is skeptical of theologically defined heaven, describing such a heaven as “unexpected” to “Lives that thought the Worshipping” a “too presumptuous Psalm” (Fr361A) or those who do not live up by many a required

¹⁴ All Webster’s definitions quoted are from Noah Webster’s 1844 *American Dictionary of the English Language* in *Emily Dickinson Lexicon*.

¹⁵ In this poem, the poet-persona especially wonders if children could find the way to the mansions where there is no coldness, sorrow, and tempests and suggests some “would even trudge tonight” (Fr139A), which insinuates child mortality rate was high then.

¹⁶ The verse was written at the deaths of Gilbert Dickinson and Otis Lord. Additionally, both Mr. Bowles and Otis Lord are depicted as Asterisks in heaven after they died: “Go thy great way! / The Stars thou meetst / Are even as thyself –” (Fr1673A).

“discipline,”¹⁷ she expresses the contradictory and complicated inner struggle and affliction resulting from a fear of losing God’s grace and heaven:

Except the Heaven had like so near –
 So seemed to choose My Door –
 The Distance would not haunt me so –
 I had not hoped – before –

But just to hear the Grace depart –
 I never thought to see –
 Afflicts me with a Double loss –
 ‘Tis lost – and lost to me – (Fr702A)

Constantly exposed to the sermons on God’s Heaven for the immortal soul, Dickinson is propelled to scrutinize the preached belief and to contemplate what it actually is:

We pray – to Heaven –
 We prate – of Heaven –
 Relate – when Neighbor die –
 At what o’clock to Heaven – they fled –
 Who saw them – Wherefore fly?

Is Heaven a Place – a Sky – a Tree?
 Location’s narrow way is for Ourselves –
 Unto the Dead
 There’s no Geography –

But State – Endowal – Focus
 Where – Omnipresence – fly? (Fr476A).

Through her own exploration and experience, Dickinson presents some perceptions clarifying what others described. For example, pondering and dissecting others’ descriptions of heaven, the poet introduces counter arguments:

Is Heaven a Physician?
 They say that He can heal –
 But Medicine Posthumous
 Is unavailable –
 Is Heaven an Exchequer?
 They speak of what we owe –
 But that negotiation
 I’m not a Party to – (Fr1260A)

¹⁷ In a letter, Dickinson remarks, “there is many a discipline before we obtain Heaven” (L547), implying that people must conform to established creeds to be qualified to reach Heaven.

On the presumed capacity of Heaven as “Physician” or “Exchequer,” the poet-persona argues that medicine posthumous is not obtainable and she does not get involved in the “negotiation” or redemption (Fr1260A). Although the argument between what the poet-persona is inculcated with and understands personally ends without a resolution,¹⁸ at least the questionable attributes of legendary Heaven are highlighted.

In addition, on the meaning of heaven, Dickinson suggests that an unfulfilled desire will enhance one’s thirst and anxiety, remarking, “Heaven beguiles the tired,” and concludes skeptically:

As that same watcher, when the East
Opens the lid of Amethyst
And lets the morning go –
That Beggar, when an honored Guest,
Those thirsty lips to flagons pressed,
Heaven to us, if true. (Fr120A)

A similar ending appears in another poem, in which eternity in paradise is questioned: “Eternity is ample,/And quick enough, if true” (Fr352B). Moreover, Dickinson depicts heaven as “a different thing” in comparison with life, death, breath, bliss, or defeat really experienced and witnessed in the world because its reality might be extinguishing: “Conjectured, and waked sudden in – / And might extinguish me!” (Fr170A). In reality, one’s ascent to the conjectured place requires physical death. In a letter to Higginson, whose daughter just passed away, Dickinson writes, “Heaven must be a lone exchange for such a parentage –,” suggesting that the little girl’s entrance of heaven is achieved by breaking “costly Hearts” and removing her father’s “parentage” (L641). According to Dickinson’s presentation, paradise’s existence is an uncertain certainty, whose “vicinity” is inferred by its “Bisecting Messenger,” death (Fr1421). In “The hallowing of Pain,” Dickinson directly conveys that the sanctity and summit of heaven will only be reached at “a corporeal cost” (Fr871). In a sense, the physical sacrifice and pain would be sanctified and compensated by heaven (Fr871 and Fr739). However, such a heaven could be cruel as it forces good friends to separate and break their contract to “cherish, and to write”:

We parted with a contract
To cherish, and to write
But Heaven made both, impossible
Before another night. (Fr392A)

¹⁸ Such an argument may proceed either outwardly or inwardly.

Dickinson cannot help expressing skepticism that the dead live “in any other world”: “My faith cannot reply / Before it was imperative / Twas all distinct to me –” (Fr1587A).

On the other hand, Dickinson reveals that people assume the existence of heaven since it must be a place to “enclose the Saints / To Affidavit given” (Fr1240A). Her description of the missionary who pleads location (“Location doubtless he would plead”) when explaining heaven to the mole, which is almost blind and cannot see beyond its underground world, highlights a failure to prove the existence of paradise. At the end of the poem, the poet-persona sarcastically states, “what excuse have I?” and “Too much of Proof affronts Belief” (Fr1240A). Moreover, Dickinson describes the presumption that the dead have gone to heaven as “oblique Belief”; she suggests people cling to a faith, a conjecture which makes people stubbornly try to possess the sublime mystery, equip the corpse/grave with immortality, and accept the grave as part of their life: “Grapples with a Theme stubborn as sublime / Able as the Dust to equip it’s feature / Adequate as Drums to enlist the Tomb” (Fr1210A). Thinking of the religiously defined heaven, the poet-persona cannot help scanning the sky suspiciously and relinquishing thoughtless faith and rational understanding (Fr711A):

The Heaven, in which we hoped to pause
 When discipline was done –
 Untenable to Logic
 But possibly the one – (Fr1279C; L459)

In these poems, heaven is intimated to exist in the human imagination and theological world.

Accordingly, Dickinson defines paradise as merely one of the options available to people, not compulsory, revealing an intent to escape the oppression and brainwashing spell from the constant religious preaching concerning the essential value of heaven and salvation:

Paradise is of the Option.
 Whosoever will
 Dwell in Eden notwithstanding
 Adam and Repeal – (Fr1125A)

Additionally, Dickinson suggests that there may be no peaceful or unregretful immortality in heaven but only frost and death which will dishevel “every prime” (Fr1264A). Likewise, the gift of Heaven may not compensate for the loss of vitality in life as one has dropped one’s brain and the “Soul is numb” (Fr1088A). Mentioning that the vitality which used to animate the body is carved and cool now and the veins as well as nerves lie “palsied” in “marble” (the grave), the

poet-persona wonders if, in reality, the endowed Heaven can truly recompense for the deprivation of life (Fr1088A). Accordingly, the supposed Heaven is stated sarcastically as an “abhorred abode” and God, the “Maker’s cordial visage,” which is conventionally deemed “good to see,” is admitted to be “shunned” like “an adversity” (Fr1542B). To the restricted eternal paradise, the struggling life in the world may be preferable:

Of tolling bell I ask the cause?
“A soul has gone to heaven,”
I’m answered in a lonesome tone.
Is heaven then a prison? (Fr933A)

Noticing abstraction, coldness, cruelty, insecurity, or confinement in the “House of Supposition” (Fr725A), which is opposite to the preached Heaven delineated in “Houses’ – so the Wise men tell me –” (Fr139), Dickinson exclaims in her letters, “all that Heaven only will disappoint me” (L248), “Cruel Paradise” (L362),¹⁹ and introduces alternative renditions of heaven in this world, nature, and the human mind.

For instance, Dickinson defines God’s paradise as “superfluous” and conveys that the Earth could be Heaven if there were no death or winter (L185). Mockingly talking about the traditionally depicted Heaven, Dickinson manifests the possible perception of paradise in the earthly world:

Of Heaven above the firmest proof
We fundamental know,
Except for its marauding Hand,
It had been Heaven below – (Fr1223A)

In other words, but for mortality, the visible Heaven is found below. She even articulates that the “Charms of the Heaven in the bush [unseen] are superceded” “by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally” (L193). Dickinson further proposes that compared with the Heaven above, which requires “many a discipline” (L547), that on earth is more accessible, credible, and enjoyable. She even claims, “I have never believed the latter [Paradise] to be a superhuman site” (L391) and exalts Heaven below: “Earth is Heaven” (Fr1435) and “Nature is Heaven” (Fr721). Consequently, a proposition to cherish Heaven on earth instead of that with “that old Codicil of Doubt” is uttered:

Which is best? Heaven –

¹⁹ In letter 234, she describes, “If angels have the heart beneath their silver jackets, I think such things could make them weep, but Heaven is so cold! It will never look kind to me that God, who causes all, denies such little wishes.”

Or only Heaven to come
 With that old Codicil of Doubt?
 I cannot help esteem

The "Bird within the Hand"
 Superior to the one
 The "Bush" may yield me
 Or may not –
 Too late to choose again. (Fr1021A)

Conceiving heaven in nature as precious and essential, Dickinson declares, "Who has not found the Heaven – below – / Will fail of it above –" (L845).

Dickinson's adoration of nature or discovery of Heaven on earth is greatly attributed to her passion for the terrestrial life and her beloved, the sources of her happiness and unsurpassable felicity despite vicissitudes, threat of death, and imperfection on earth. Instead of thinking of the imperfection as a weakness, Dickinson concludes, "I think Heaven will not [sic] as good as earth, unless it brings with it that sweet power to remember, which is the Staple of Heaven – here. How can we thank each other, when omnipotent?" (L623). Similarly, Dickinson explains, "To be remembered is next to being loved, and to be loved is Heaven" (L361). In addition, she proposes that being with the beloved is like being in Heaven, which won't "be sequestered,"²⁰ deeming her family and friends heaven to her and expressing "Each of us gives or takes heaven in corporeal person" (L388). More directly does she convey this in a letter to Mrs. Bowles: "Love makes us 'heavenly' without our trying in the least. 'Tis easier than a Savior – it does not stay on high and call us to its distance, its low 'Come unto me' begins in every place" (L536). Such a secularized definition of heaven focuses on the state of the mind, not a place. That an individual not confined in the theological disciplines and paradise can possibly create and possess a heaven is thus proposed:

Heaven is so far the Mind
 That were the Mind dissolved –
 The Site – of it – by Architect
 Could not again be proved – (Fr413A)

Here the poet suggests Heaven may be as vast as human capacity or as fair as human ideas, but is no further beyond the mortal life (Fr413A). In other words, heaven is a construction of the mind; its significance, pleasure, or beauty

²⁰ In a letter to an unknown "Master," Dickinson suggests a walk with the master and her dog, Carlo, "in the meadows an hour" would feel like being in heaven (L233).

is a human perception and creation. Heaven will exist in one's mind and heart as long as one believes in its existence.

Faith

As discussed above, Dickinson's writing reveals that the poet, with a "nimble" spirit (L750), often interrogates or/and suspends the defined notions, leaving her definition poems incomplete and ambiguous without allowing stillness to rule her thinking or professing complete faith in revealed religion. Of the twelve definitions of faith in Webster's dictionary, there are six referring to the religious belief: "the assent of the mind" to the being and perfections of God; to the truth of God; the Scriptures (divine revelation); Christ; a system of revealed truth; and Gospel truth. In her definitions, Dickinson expounds the indispensability of faith to sustain a person through vicissitudes and uncertainties:

Faith – is the Pierless Bridge
Supporting what We see
Unto the Scene that We do not –
Too slender for the eye

It bears the Soul as bold
As it were racked in Steel
With Arms of Steel at either side –
It joins – behind the Vail

To what, could We presume
The Bridge would cease to be
To Our far, vascillating Feet
A first Necessity. (Fr978A)

Here she manifests how faith empowers the soul and gives one confidence in the visible and invisible world, but simultaneously reveals the unsteadiness of faith (Fr978A). In "To lose One's faith – surpass," when describing the preciousness of faith, the poet-persona also spotlights its unreplenishable trait:

To lose one's faith surpasses
The loss of an Estate –
Because Estates can be
Replenished, – faith cannot –

Inherited with Life –
Belief – but once – can be –
Annihilate a single clause –

And Being's – Beggary – (Fr632A)

Valuable and special as faith is, Dickinson implies its structure is fragile, for a single clause of reasoning possibly annihilates it (Fr632A). Similarly, in another poem, Dickinson begins with an affirmative statement, “My Faith is larger than the Hills –,” suggesting such faith is so great as to help and guide one in darkness: “So when the Hills decay – / My Faith must take the Purple Wheel / To show the Sun the way –” (Fr489A). However, at the end, Dickinson exhibits a question and intent to loosen the chain (restraint) of the unconditional religious faith that “so vast depends” on but that may confine the mind, which is afraid of losing God’s grace and heaven:

How dare I, therefore, stint a faith
 On which so vast depends –
 Lest Firmament should fail for me –
 The Rivet in the Bands (Fr489A)

Moreover, she defines faith as “a fine invention” when “Gentlemen can see,” but ends the definition in a challenging and skeptical tone: “But *Microscopes* are prudent / In an Emergency” (Fr202A), intimating the possible incredibility and inauthenticity of faith after a cautious inspection. Furthermore, in a letter to Higginson after Bowles died, Dickinson, feeling there was no world but darkness,²¹ composes a poem describing the brittleness of unconditional faith, which is believed by “such a Crowd” and said to be built by God, and whose “Plank” was tested and “pronounced” to be firm by Christ (L533; Fr1459B). Obviously, Dickinson’s definitions of religious faith turn out to suspend or undermine its conventionally-assigned significance and offer alternative perspectives and lenses to view the inherited and instilled notion. In this way, stereotyped explanations are de-authorized and clarified, which may lead to “nimble” thinking as declared in her letter: “we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble” (L750). Such nonconformist definitions which destabilize and interrupt the allusion to or assertion of the theological law encourage readers’ contemplation.

On the whole, Dickinson’s idiosyncratic use of the Bible and definitions of religious subjects disrupts the purpose of poetry to illustrate divinity or a woman’s role as the handmaid of the Gospel. Not focusing her soul/thinking only on revealed religion or afterlife, Dickinson demonstrates her Puritan heritage as

²¹ To Dickinson, every friend is a world, especially “a listening world” (L751) to her. When Bowles died, she writes, “When you have lost a friend, Master, you remember you could not begin again, because there was no World. I have thought of you often since the Darkness – though we can not assist another’s Night –” (L553).

well as her emphasis on spiritual mutability, an unconfined brain, and sublime effect in poetry,²² presenting her inconsistent but inspiring perceptions resulting from her constant exploration of the meanings of religious themes in this world and life. Her individual employment of the Bible and her ambiguous and multiple definitions exemplify not only a soul thinking outside the assigned closet and transcending established religious authority, but also her power of forming and analyzing conceptions. Neither directly telling what is right or what to believe nor being a subservient preacher of theology, Dickinson, a nimble and active seeker of religious truth, invites readers to examine received ideas and thereby inspires an insight into those defined and explored subjects.

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²² In a letter, Dickinson remarks, "The spirit never twice alike, but every time another – that other more divine" (L750).

艾蜜莉·狄堇蓀跳脫傳統宗教框架 的聖經引用與相關教旨定義

摘要

艾蜜莉·狄堇蓀 (Emily Dickinson) 的作品反映了對她所處年代的思想、行為、社會規範、性別角色和語言都有著深遠影響的宗教特徵。在神學體系構築的文化、宗教和社會環境中，她自幼就被教導需謹守公認的福音書教義與遵從宗教權威規範的聖經引用，以及宗教概念的定義。聖經和諾亞·韋伯斯特 (Noah Webster) 引用聖經釋義的辭典，就像牧師的每日祈禱書般，是狄堇蓀孩童時期生活中不可或缺的。然而，狄堇蓀難以接受被動地遵循呆板的定義，解釋和用法。本文探討狄堇蓀承襲清教徒不斷研讀、思考、主動察驗神的話語之傳統，不輕率接受反覆宣揚的教義和想法，拒絕將心靈執著靜置在念想來世的美好與永恆。狄堇蓀不試圖支配他人的思想，也不輕視或排除差異看法，她並不想要告訴人們應該相信什麼。取而代之的是，她經常跳脫傳統宗教框架，從不同的角度審視查驗既定的信條，探索宗教思想的真理（特別是在實際生活層面的意義），於現世與現實生活方面去剖析宗教的意義。她的定義詩經常一開始似乎是意於闡明宗教觀念，但往往沒有給予最終的定（結）論就結束，有時甚至直接挑戰、暫緩和顛覆既定的詮（解）釋。在相關的宗教概念定義詩作中，狄堇蓀經常扮演著助產士的角色：不直接表達智慧知識或傳授真理，而是鼓勵讀者審視接收到的教義與看法是否富含真理。

關鍵字：懷疑、不順從公認信念、獨特、多樣的定義、多方面的探索與審視