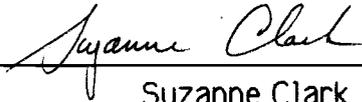


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Wendy L. Johnson for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in the codepartments of English, English, and Philosophy presented on June 28, 1990.

Title: Emily Dickinson: Sensibility Against Rational Religion

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Emily Dickinson's religious poetry of the nineteenth century reveals a sensibility that resists traditional, orthodox Christianity. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate Dickinson's two-fold critique of rational religion. The poet does not merely oppose the existing pattern of interpretation with another; she questions the whole process of construing meaning. Dickinson's complaint against Christianity questions not faith itself, but the rational grounds for making meaning which religion has assumed from the Western philosophical tradition. Her sensibility asserts gender, material concerns, emotion, and imagination against reason's exclusive claim to express faith.

Contemporary reviewers, like her critics a hundred years ago, place Dickinson either within traditional Christianity or outside, marshalling against it her own system of meaning. Now as then, a few observe that while her religious impulse clearly challenges orthodoxy, the poet's sensibility also disrupts construction of an opposing system.

Emily Dickinson:  
Sensibility Against Rational Religion

by

Wendy L. Johnson

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## EMILY DICKINSON: SENSIBILITY AGAINST RATIONAL RELIGION

### Introduction: Sensibility Against Orthodoxy and Opposition

Sensibility's challenge to rational religion appears to be a central concern of Emily Dickinson's religious poetry. Culture gives us traditional systems which support established interpretations of human life, and one way to make meaning is to accept orthodoxy as it stands. Stop fretting, and the dominant theology will interpret life for you. Dickinson would mouth no such commonplace. Another approach would be to oppose the dominant system and point for point to design an order that competes with the old version of truth. Sects or holy wars begin from disputes of this sort. But Dickinson's way is not debate. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate Emily Dickinson's two-fold critique of rational Christianity. The poet does not merely oppose the existing pattern of meaning with another; she questions the whole process of construing meaning.

Dickinson's criticism of the Christian sign system thus carries on a kind of semiotic critique of "science"; it is not a new system of knowing. Dickinson's nineteenth century works can be characterized in the language of postmodern semiotics since her religious poetry conducts what Julia Kristeva calls "an open form of research. . . that turns back on itself and offers its own auto-critique"(77). Dickinson challenges Christianity in exactly the two ways Kristeva in "Semiotics: A Critical Science and/or a Critique of Science" says to go about semiotic research: "Either we

isolate a measurable and consequently representable aspect of the signifying system under study against the background of an unmeasurable concept. . . ; or else we try to construct a new scientific problematic" (84). Dickinson's poetry challenges the adequacy of rational Christian faith to express human significance; at the same time, her critique denies closure to any other signifying system.

Review of Works Consulted: Orthodoxy, Opposition, and Uncertainty

From the first, critics want to situate Emily Dickinson's religious impulse in one of the two places she refuses to go: either inside orthodoxy or in opposition to it. In Dickinson's 1886 obituary, her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson, an ardent believer, pleads the poet's ignorance:

To her, life was rich and all aglow with God and immortality. With no creed, no formulated faith, hardly knowing the names of dogmas, she walked this life with the gentleness and reverence of old saints, with the firm step of martyrs who sing as they suffer.

Susan Gilbert Dickinson 552

Judge lightly if she does not sound quite as we expect, the poet's friend urges. Against possible charges of heresy, she reminds Amherst that this lady was gentle, reverent, suffering; she was one of us.

Glossing Dickinson's religious eccentricity was a common tack for early, baffled critics. "She sounds the depths of poetic insight into the philosophy of things"; in these terms her very first reviewer, Alexander Young, promotes the appearance of Dickinson's collected verse(3).

Enraptured Louise Chandler Moulton titles her review of this volume, "A Very Remarkable Book," and Moulton finds that "with every page I turn and return I grow more and more in love, . . . so unique and so adorable" are Dickinson's poems(33). Kinsley Twining and William Hayes Ward attempt to reconcile the poet to orthodoxy: they call "this lady of Amherst. . . a Puritan maiden [who] weave[s] her bower in such silence and solitude" (52). One anonymous reviewer knows the book to be innocent by its cover:

the first collection published before Christmas 1890 "is daintily bound and beautifully printed, making a handsome gift"(26).

Most early critics who do not include Dickinson within orthodoxy, however, see her opposed to Amherst's Trinitarian Congregational faith. "Early in life she revolted from the orthodox creed," Grace Musser asserts(477). "Weird enough for William Blake," her friend Thomas Higginson says apologetically of the poet's religious imagery: "wayward and unconventional in the last degree; defiant of form, measure, rhyme, and even grammar." Higginson's promotional article tries to prepare readers for appearance of that first volume of Dickinson's verse he edited with Mabel Loomis Todd(6). And Richard Henry Stoddard believes that since Dickinson is outside the fold, she ought to fit the opposition her readers are familiar with: "If we must have transcendental verse, we prefer it at first hand, as Emerson wrote it. . . and not as Miss Dickinson tried to write it, without rhyme and without reason"(424). For or against orthodoxy--Emily Dickinson should be in one of the two camps, her 1890's readers generally agree.

But sweet defense of Dickinson's religious "orthodoxy" and edgy apology or criticism of her "opposition" to Christianity suggest the poor fit of either characterization. If she is opposed to traditional faith, then the poet is "weird enough for Blake" as Higginson said--and then she lacks reason; if she expresses reverence, her worship is ignorant or uncanny. An anonymous reviewer acknowledges the difficulty of situating Dickinson's "subtleties of meaning, vividness of description and flashes which half reveal and half obscure the thought"(50). Consequently, a few reviewers like Charles Goodrich Whiting set this misfit off by herself: "a

sole and individual voice, . . . having her own standard of rhythm, or perhaps we should say of music, and her own choice of words"(16). If she does not belong in either camp, her first readers isolate Emily Dickinson as an anomaly.

One hundred years later, reviewers are much more hesitant than early critics to address religious implications of Dickinson's poetry, but when they do, critics continue to disagree on whether to situate her inside or outside of traditional religion. Very few will hazard including her within Christian orthodoxy, yet Lorrie Smith suggests that some of the poet's last poems give evidence of a mystical "rapprochement between the Christian doctrines she renounced as a young woman and the quest for sublime vision she enacted in her writing"(301). Jane Eberwein speculates that the poet praises a homily by preacher Edwards Amasa Park, a "pillar of New England Congregational orthodoxy," when Dickinson in the early 1870's recalls "the loveliest sermon I ever heard"(311). And Anna-Marie Brumm credits "the compass of Puritanism" for preventing the drifting Dickinson "canoe from being lost in the misty and beguiling fog of Romanticism"(21). By mysticism, speculation, or compass, it is hard work to confine this poet within orthodoxy, however elastically one draws its boundaries.

The more common construction sets Dickinson in opposition to orthodox Christianity, with some system of her own. Frederick L. Morey in four articles over three years in Dickinson Studies (which he edits) draws elaborate comparisons between the poet's spirituality and Immanuel Kant's idealism. Morey wants to attribute to Dickinson "a positive order in the long run": this critic supposes that Kant's compass,

not the Puritans', corrects her drifting canoe. "She usually resolves her skepticism in an overall faith," he asserts; he believes the poet's "Kantian affirmation informs her greatest poems"(1986 16-17). In Morey's view, a sort of gentle Kantian sect replaces Dickinson's old theology.

Feminist critics see Dickinson opposed to Christian orthodoxy in a more combative stance. Biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff titles her chapter on the poet's struggle with the patriarchal deity "The Wrestle for Dominion," and earlier in the book Wolff declares the woman poet's holy war:

Dickinson's hero-poet confronted two dilemmas: to seek out the hidden God so that an attack might be mounted; and to find some weapon adequate to pitch against the mighty force of the Godhead. As solution to both of these, Dickinson returned to the power of the Word. 158

Wolff assumes the assertive position on Dickinson that Susanne Juhasz outlines in Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson: "that gender informs the nature of art, the nature of biography, and the relation between them," and that "female gender, in particular, is a positive instead of a negative factor" in this synthesis. Juhasz elaborates, "In Dickinson's case, this means assuming her own knowledge of, and responsibility for what she did"(1, 2). In Women Writers and Poetic Identity Margaret Homans likewise asserts that Dickinson's issues and style result from her conscious awareness of being female; this consciousness means her isolation from others was chosen, and she "embraced the limitations" of singleness and isolation in order to be free to write(17). Juhasz and other feminist readers fault earlier twentieth critics who celebrated

Dickinson's poetic form for its modern look, but separated gender from her poetics--or who labelled her feminine perspective a failure. The feminist critic will have contemporary readers "recognize the power that Dickinson derived from creating a world in which she could be herself, from creating a self with which she could accomplish her best"(Juhasz 2). In this feminist battle, Dickinson's retreat becomes a woman's offensive of the Word; the poet becomes a nineteenth century radical separatist.

Her Word against God's. This characterization of the poet's spiritual struggle seems to ground feminist criticism that (with the exception of Wolff) curiously hedges mention of religious issues in Dickinson's poetry. In "Emily Dickinson and the Women's Movement" where three significant critical texts are anonymously reviewed, religious subjects are obliquely referred to as "Milton and other patriarchal poetry"; a somewhat more direct reference to religion in the article speaks of an "Emersonian" chapter "which concerns the abyss or pit of hell, partly as seen by Jonathan Edwards." "Feminist poetics," in contrast, are more prominently detailed(13, 15). (Ironically, this contemporary interest in feminist poetics may derive from earlier modernist interest in pure form--which feminism rejects.) In like manner, Juhasz's collection of feminist works on Dickinson includes only one title with a religious allusion, Sandra M. Gilbert's "The Wayward Nun beneath the Hill," which discusses religious imagery in exactly four of its eighteen pages of text(22-44). What hinders discussion among feminist critics of religion in Dickinson's poetry--work that is steeped in spirituality?

A questionable solution to the mystery of Emily Dickinson's missing religion recently emerges from Margaret Dickie's otherwise helpful rhetorical analysis. Against "those American Transcendentalists with whom she is usually aligned," Dickie's argument specifically advances Dickinson's "despiritualizing of the Word. . . , the word that can be touched, exchanged, lost, and recovered"(402). Rather than situate Dickinson with Transcendentalists who posit a reality beyond material existence, Dickie would set her in "the native pragmatic tradition that was to emerge. . . at the end of the nineteenth century"(407). Dickie is one of many feminist critics seeking a contextualized, material Emily Dickinson who will interpret human existence in a down to earth manner --without religion.

By limiting talk about this poet's spirituality, most feminist criticism tacitly places her outside Christian orthodoxy. And by foregrounding Dickinson's poetics (and by "reperiodizing" her against Transcendentalist alignment), feminists reinforce Wolff's assertion of language as the system Dickinson arrays in martial opposition to religion.

A few now, as ever, find it difficult to situate Emily Dickinson's religious sentiments either inside or outside traditional faith. Levi St. Armand suggests that if her theology is at all familiar, it belongs in his chapter on the "American Grotesque"; for he imagines the bird-loving poet's deity is "an aloof cat-god" who cruelly traps us in "that engine of contrived torture that was the New England theology strictly applied"(166). St. Armand faces this chapter in Emily Dickinson and Her Culture with an 1840 painting, "The Cat," in which a huge disembodied feline head clamps one bird in its grin--and eyes two more in nearby

branches(153). More seriously, Elisa New urges "Circumference" as the site of Dickinson's spirituality. "The Bible dealt with the Center," New quotes the poet's letters; "my Business is Circumference"(2). New watches the eccentric poet spin away from the axis of orthodoxy, and this critic does not see language offering any alternate center of gravity. "Her paradoxical, contradictory syntax. . . confounds binary opposition," New observes: thus, on the very edge of orthodoxy and with no opposing system, Dickinson's "most mature theological. . ." expression is doubt(20, 24). New follows Dickinson's doubt through existential dread and negation, and thereby complements the present study which tracks the poet's doubting sensibility as it challenges the exclusivity of rationality.

### The Gendered Discussion of Rational Religion

The poet's doubt can be traced through evidence of her struggle with rational statements--doctrines that Western culture has supposed embrace all truth. Her resistance is gendered since orthodox Christianity has allied itself with traditions in Western philosophy which malign the feminine, life in the body, emotions, and the imagination. In her religious poetry, Dickinson contrasts tenets of traditional Christian faith--measurable, representable elements of the Christian sign system--to aspects of life in each of the four restricted areas. Her sensibility works as a kind of ineffable standard which measures and judges isolable doctrines of orthodox Christianity, and the poet's doubtful challenge to traditional faith finds statements of doctrine inadequate, for Dickinson finds that life presses past boundaries of dogma.

In the act of questioning traditional meaning, nonetheless, Dickinson indicates that perhaps no system, not even a system of language, will replace doctrine to express human significance. Rather than discover a new orthodoxy, her investigation of spirituality raises questions about how certain we can be about knowing anything at all. The poet's very words become what Kristeva terms "scientific problematics." The language seems to "rebel. . . against representation even as [it] uses. . . representative models" (85). Dickinson's poetry disrupts any established system of meaning.

One apparently established meaning she investigates is doctrine on the authority of Scripture. And significantly, the poet questions not faith itself, but traditional rational grounds for making meaning. The Bible is

the inerrant Word of God, according to orthodox Christianity: sacred truth is revealed in each stroke of the pen that composed the original documents because the Holy Ghost, third person of the Trinity, inspired the minds of godly men with every thought and word. Other doctrines of the Church require that this Book stand firm since all doctrinal truth depends on the Bible's verity. If authority of this Word of the patriarchs topples, other pronouncements of Christianity also teeter.

"The Bible is an antique Volume--" Emily Dickinson asserts, "Written by faded Men / At the suggestion of Holy Spectres--" (1545). Scripture is not a revered, eternal authority to this woman; for her, the Bible is quaintly out-of-date, "antique." Its writers were not inspired prophets who transcribed the mind of God, but "faded Men," mere mortal males past their prime. These patriarchs were moved not by undeniable impulse of the Holy Spirit, but by, she says, the "suggestion" of rather bizarre "Holy Spectres." The term's ghastly connotation undercuts the purity of its adjective "Holy." Dickinson challenges the authority of a single, sacred, universal Word, and sees this book as only one "Volume" among perhaps many other scriptures. She will not submit to the Bible as the ground for expressing truth.

The poet's complaint against the doctrine of Scripture undercuts traditional rational grounds for making meaning. A sensibility which includes spirituality, she insists, disrupts the claim of writing to exhaustively capture what we know. As a nineteenth century woman who questions written truth, Emily Dickinson enters into a gendered philosophical discussion that has moved to separate sensibility from

reason in Western culture--to identify feeling and the body with the feminine, and to associate impersonal reason with the masculine.

By Emily Dickinson's day, Western philosophy takes seriously Rene Descartes' seventeenth century assumptions about reason and sense:

This 'I'--that is, the soul by which I am what I am--  
is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier  
to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever  
it is, even if the body did not exist.                    36

The real self and real knowledge are mental and abstract, Descartes believed, separate from the body and the senses. "I think; therefore I am," Descartes asserted; sensory impressions trick us, emotions change(36). What man can know for certain is that he thinks. Men must trust only written statements to be true, and only those that describe logical relationships, mathematically precise statements that are "clearer and more certain than the demonstrations of the geometers"(40). The Western philosophical tradition insists that truth is rational and reducible to script--Descartes found that "often what seemed true to me when I first conceived it has looked false when I tried to put it on paper"; he was only certain of an idea which he could write down in a clear and distinct manner(49). General acceptance in Western culture of the concept of truth as reasonable, rational, reducible to writing, and centered in a consciousness of the self which can produce or read that writing--derives from Descartes' premise that man is essentially a "thinking thing," separate from the body(87).

Descartes did not automatically identify the realm of rational truth as masculine. His Discourse on the Method in fact appeared in the

French vernacular rather than in academic Latin, so that "even women" might embark on the Cartesian quest for rational truth. Nonetheless, the discovery of knowledge and the making of meaning in this philosopher's century were for the most part reserved for men. Feminist philosopher, Genevieve Lloyd, in The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy explains:

Descartes thought his account of the mind opened the way to a newly egalitarian pursuit of knowledge. But the channels through which those basically equal resources of Reason had to flow remained more convoluted, even for noble women, than for men. 48

Few seventeenth century women could read and write since girls rarely attended school, nor were they subsequently tutored to learn Descartes' method of inquiry. Furthermore, few adult women who were literate had opportunity to withdraw from domestic, material duties in order to take up intellectual pursuits. Lloyd quotes Princess Elizabeth's response to Descartes' encouragement that she undertake his method of thought:

The life I am constrained to lead does not allow me enough free time to acquire a habit of meditation in accordance with your rules. Sometimes the interests of my household, which I must not neglect, sometimes conversations and civilities I cannot eschew, so thoroughly deject this weak mind with annoyances or boredom that it remains, for a long time afterward, useless for anything else. 48-49

Women's material circumstances in the 1600's demanded that their significance remain grounded in physical, domestic responsibilities. The domain of autonomous, individual reasoning remained male.

In Immanuel Kant's philosophy, written during the eighteenth century, sensuous and rational categories settle into overtly gendered associations. Lloyd cites the philosopher's comment that "laborious learning" and "painful pondering" are inappropriate to the "beautiful understanding" intrinsic to a female. While denying self-conscious thought to the female, Kant does leave "taste, sensibility, practical sense, feeling" in the woman's domain(75-76).

Such gender distinctions attached to different mental categories take on a pejorative cast by what another feminist, Janet Todd, calls Kant's "rigorous divorcing of emotions from morality"(140). In other words, the public realm of masculinity is rational and moral. The domestic realm of the feminine is emotional and amoral. The "morally mature," Kant asserts, will move away from juvenile discourse concerned with the personal and the domestic, and into "public use of one's reason in all matters"(quoted by Lloyd 67). From one perspective, this statement charts out a course for educating the young. But by this prescription, the philosopher also circumscribes and effectively separates the private, personal, and material world from the public domain of rational men. Women then inhabit a sensuous, domestic realm of the nonrational in which, according to Kant, without public discourse they remain forever immature. And since for Kant mature reason directs morality, women's observations and judgements remain suspect.

In the context, therefore, of a prevailing rationalist tradition, Dickinson's struggle with Christian doctrine is gendered. She resists rational statements of faith in light of perceptions and emotions--and thus, she also seems to resist banishing sensibility into a separate,

private existence. The construction of faith that reduces spiritual truth to pronouncements of dogma might work if the religious discourse of creeds, apologetics, sermons, and treatises were merely public. These public statements, however, are supposed to affect private life: preachers intend to influence how their listeners live. But some of the most fundamental Christian doctrines do not account for Dickinson's religious impulse. Her observations challenge the exhaustive claims of accepted public doctrine, and she urges the public significance of what has been described as women's merely domestic sensibility. In a poem that revels in the glory of a lilac sunset, Dickinson warns, "Let not Revelation / By theses be detained--"(1241). She tells us those faded men wrote Scripture and asserted doctrine as sole arbiter of spirituality without considering universal aspects of nonrational existence. This poet's observations question the exhaustive authority of patriarchal Christianity's most holy writ.

She challenges the doctrine of Scripture's inspiration and authority with those first three lines of the poem beginning, "The Bible is an antique volume--," and thus she weakens the impact of the "Subjects" this book will describe. To Dickinson these are not inviolable doctrine. All five topics she directs us to consider are subsumed under the heading, "Sin--a distinguished Precipice / Others must resist--." The Bible makes sin sound honorable, the poet slyly hints. The first two Biblical topics she chooses to emphasize are glorious sites where the end and the beginning of sin are played out. "Bethlehem" where the Savior arrives is significant as the place where humanity's lost virtue is divinely restored: Dickinson may here refer to doctrines asserting the incarnation of Christ

and the virgin birth. A sinless Savior, the God-man Jesus, came to earth in his nativity at Bethlehem. Dickinson's second topic, "Eden--the ancient Homestead--" was lost when at the start of time Adam and Eve ate forbidden fruit, a reference to the doctrine of original sin. The volume's third, fourth, and fifth biblical subjects examined by this poem are Satan, Judas, and David who all won notorious titles through transgression; each broke a commandment--against idolatry, false witness, and adultery respectively. The first, "the Brigadier," led an angel army against the Heavenly host; Judas, "the Great Defaulter," betrayed the trust Jesus invested in him; "David--the Troubadour" beguiled his follower's wife, Bathsheba, but got his name in print anyway. These titles seem admiring, but Dickinson appears amazed that these figures' deeds stand so great in the biblical scheme of things.

She seems to argue with God, or with his old prophets: why did these men get famous by their faults when "Others must resist" sin? The poet's question is implicit in the pathos of her next line, "Boys that 'believe' are very lonesome--" Dickinson reckons there are not many who are able to keep the faith and resist sin; these few don't have much company. "Other Boys are 'lost'--" and their number is evidently greater than the count of virtuous believers. Dickinson's skepticism about any received nomenclature, apparent before in her capitalization of the great figures' titles, shows here in her quotation marks that distinguish 'saved' and 'lost' youngsters. Great and small, boys and men, villains and heroes, the lost and the believers, doctrines we must observe or transgress--who decides on these designations?

Emily Dickinson is not ready to take the Bible's word for who is worthy or excluded. And yet, it is not spirituality, but its orthodox Christian representation she resists:

Had but the Tale a warbling Teller--  
 All the boys would come--  
 Orpheus' Sermon captivated--  
 It did not condemn--                    1545

Orpheus, the Greek god responsible for worship of Dionysius with song and poetry, would intoxicate his listeners, not berate them. Dickinson seems to propose to God that if he had made a bird (and not those preachy prophets and disciples) the Bible's evangelist, its magical wordless notes would draw everyone. She protests that patriarchal writers of the Bible seem to include shrewd old sinners and to exclude innocent children who cannot grasp its complex doctrines. Doctrines draw distinctions between the chosen and the lost; birdsong touches all. Dickinson suggests that everyone would sense religious truth, could enter into full-bodied spiritual expression, except that traditional, rational characterizations of good and evil by the Bible's faded men arbitrarily include--and inexplicably exclude--so many.

Jesus' message to disciples who would exclude little ones echoes behind this poem's aversion to the way the Bible generally tells its story: "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me" (Matthew 19:14). The patriarchal Christian tradition not only hinders full participation in spiritual life, Dickinson says, but also violates one of the faith's own most profoundly compassionate themes: be gentle with children; let them come to God. Her more maternal view of spirituality

implicitly questions whether God the Father really loves those little children, who at the same time he sends away condemned by doctrine. Dickinson resists accepting traditional dogma as exhaustive truth when she observes that Christianity's doctrines not only contradict each other, but also effectively exclude nonrational aspects of life. Moreover, the poet challenges and confounds the whole notion of "system" by the birdsong of spirituality which she offers instead of accepted statements of faith.

The poet elsewhere even more intimately attaches women's and children's nonrational concerns to her complaint against impersonal Christian rationality. "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House," she says, and observes the family's numb process of grieving. Perhaps Dickinson wrote this poem as her own expression of comfort to the bereaved family, she so sympathetically depicts their scene: "Neighbors rustle in and out--" no doubt bringing food and condolence to the bereaved; a window pops open, and "Somebody flings a Mattress out--" to air. "The Children hurry by-- / They wonder if it died--on that--"; Dickinson remembers that she as a youngster saw bedding similarly set out, and she remembers her worry then about whether the moment of death occurred there. Such activities represent the business of a nineteenth century household's preparing the corpse for burial, and (in any century) of readying the home for coming family and friends--cooking, comforting, wondering, fearing. When there is a death in a family, these jobs are often mainly the concerns of women and children.

Then in the middle of all this homely bustle,

The Minister--goes stiffly in--  
As if the House were His--  
And He owned all the Mourners--now--  
And little Boys--besides-- 389

It is not as if the minister is completely unwelcome; Dickinson expects him as part of the sequence of events in a family's grieving. But the man walks into this domestic space as if he owns the place, as if he alone can interpret what has happened, and as if he alone can answer questions of the household, neighborly mourners, and the boys. The poet resists the preacher as sole arbiter of the significance of death. She implies that women and children preoccupied with feminine concerns of the body, material existence, and emotions also make profound significance out of death's circumstances--even without words.

### A Material Test of Doctrinal Planks

Dickinson continually employs the body and physical existence as touchstones of authenticity, and she presses these concerns against doctrines she senses are rickety--by which Christianity has traditionally assumed it supports religious truth. In a number of poems, "Plank" is a metaphor by which Dickinson represents old and unstable constructions of human meaning(280). In one instance, she seems to successfully navigate such teetery beams: "I stepped from Plank to Plank / A slow and cautious way." At any moment, however, she fears her next move might land her on a concept that will not hold. And so, to avoid collapse into a void of meaning, she tests each plank with "that precarious Gait / Some call Experience" (875). "Experience," here suggests nonrational aspects of life those planks are supposed to explain, but might not support. She trusts perceptions and feeling over accepted maxims; for her, understanding born of nonrational sensibility gauges the success of dogma.

The life of Jesus tests the adequacy of patriarchal planks. Dickinson raises questions about the trustworthiness of Christian precepts to support either the figurative or the literal body of Christ.

How brittle are the Piers  
On which our Faith doth tread--  
No Bridge below doth totter so--  
Yet none hath such a Crowd.

It is as old as God--  
Indeed--'twas built by him--  
He sent his Son to test the Plank,

And he pronounced it firm.

1433

God has put up a bridge to span the gulf between humanity and himself, but the poet emphasizes the fragility of "brittle" concepts in the foundation of this architecture. "Our Faith" may be read as the whole Christian conceptual system which rests on those frail Piers, but "Faith" might also be an individual's belief. Or Faith (as a term parallel to "Crowd") may be a metaphor for the multitude of people in the universal Body of Christ. In any case with the pronoun "our," Dickinson apparently directs this poem to the audience of "us" out on this bridge--to the entire Christian church--and she seems to warn in the first stanza that doctrines of orthodoxy might not support the figurative Body of Christ.

The poem's second stanza presents a typical Dickinson ending whose language a reader may take in at least two ways. Most may read the poem to end in an assertion of faith over doubt. That the bridge is "as old as God, . . . built by him" could promote the structure's venerable history, endorse its solid place in the human landscape. Similarly, the last two lines may usually be read as the successful examination of a building inspector; we can trust that since the Father sent the Son out on the Plank, the rest of us should venture confidently across God's architecture of reconciliation. In traditional Christianity, Jesus is a merging of spirit and flesh; according to Christian doctrine, Jesus lived a perfect spiritual life--in the body. As God incarnate, the Son repairs the break between sinful flesh and holy divinity, and thus he represents the bridge by which if we have faith, mortal beings may enter real spiritual life(John 1:14). Despite her initial doubts about the old construction,

perhaps the poet does arrive at some assurance of faith. Since the Son has been out to "test the Plank" of this Bridge between heaven and earth, maybe the boards are all right.

Faith might, nonetheless, slip between the cracks of this assertion. Dickinson's language also allows for a reading of the second stanza which suggests that the Bridge of reconciliation might be condemned. In light of its "brittle. . . Piers" that "totter" in the first stanza, a declaration of old age in stanza two may be construed as something less than an approval of this architecture. Such words recall the "antique" Bible written by "faded Men" (\*1545) where antiquity of Scripture suggested its inadequacy. A reader might be wary that, in Dickinson's terms, God (speaking of the bridge) "pronounced it firm." Most pious pronouncements are suspect for Emily Dickinson. Look at what happened to Jesus: he walked the Plank and fell off the end. The Father "sent his Son" out onto those shaky doctrines of the Christian religion, and perhaps these piers could not support the weight of the Son's literal body--Jesus died; the plank he stepped on went down in spite of the fact that God said it was solid. Doubt may darken the poet's very words of faith. And if religious doctrines cannot support the perfect, embodied Christ--how can doctrine support that infinitely more fallible flesh the "Crowd" inhabits?

Dickinson protests statements of orthodoxy which cannot fully address the sphere in which we live--human, bodily life. A purely rational faith may be an oxymoron: it is impossible for a religion of dogma to fulfill its promises in human, nonrational, bodily life. In the same way that she champions boys over the Bible's faded men, and just as she sympathizes with the bereaved about a minister's arrogance at a

house in mourning--likewise in this poem Dickinson may be distressed with God and may be warning the church about what the deity did to his own son. She worries in her religious poetry about implications of separating the rationality of doctrine from the rest of human sensibility.

Descartes long before her saw those implications and allied himself--and God--with the impersonal intellect:

I had already recognized very clearly from my own case that the intellectual nature is distinct from the corporeal, and as I observed that all composition is evidence of dependence and that dependence is manifestly a defect, I concluded that it could not be a perfection in God to be composed of these two natures, and consequently that he was not composed of them. 37-38

If a rational line of thought insists on the independence of the mind from its human body, and perfection requires such independence, then God (who is perfect) is mind only and dissociated from the body.

A perfectly rational religion, Emily Dickinson complains, cannot have a human Jesus who joins God to man, body to intellect and spirit; if patriarchal Christian orthodoxy proceeds by rational syllogism, it consequently excludes the whole feminine realm of feeling and of the material, of human relationships and the body. In a rational religion, we might have what philosophers call Descartes' "God of physics," but we will not have a faith that is humane. Orthodoxy may preach the doctrine of atonement which should bring God and humanity together--God may "pronounce it firm"--but Dickinson seems to wonder, in the context of rational religion, whether the plank of atonement is fundamentally sound. She challenges the Church (and God, too, perhaps) to consider that

doctrine may assert the planks of one position, one party platform, but words alone cannot support the full significance of human spirituality. The poet doubts whether impersonal reason can build a sturdy, living faith.

Dickinson may be describing the collapse of her own traditional faith in the poem which begins, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain." It is, however, a strangely public reverie she narrates here; though she uses personal pronouns, her language is not necessarily specific to a particular instance. She may describe a representative encounter where human sensibility surrounds and overwhelms rationality. Emily Dickinson wraps at least six sensory images into her elegy; a couple of them seem to actually touch her, but she hears most of them. These keep "treading--treading" and "beating--beating" "till it seemed / That Sense was breaking through" and "My Mind was going numb." The mourner has evidently been pondering some profound question during the service; possibly she is following the clergyman's typical funeral homily on the significance of life and death.

But the lamenter's thoughts are interrupted by the funereal rhythms of pallbearers' feet and a tolling bell. Any coherent line of reasoning would eliminate sensory impressions that might sidetrack the mourner's train of thought: the orthodox answer to questions of life and death is that because Jesus died and rose again, those who believe in him "shall not perish, but have eternal life"(John 3:16). There is life in heaven after death, doctrine tells the congregant at a funeral. Nonetheless, the incessant tread and beat of sound upon her brain crescendos until intellect is surrounded by racket: "As all the Heavens were a Bell, / And

Being, but an Ear." Toward the end of the funeral, all heaven and earth reverberate with sound. It is as if God himself is a bell, and all creation were an ear made only to hear him; the image is not exactly one of God's incarnation; nevertheless, it is certainly a joining of body and spirit. This poem presents not Descartes' abstract God of physics who would offer doctrinal syllogisms to the bereaved; it instead suggests the mourner's encounter with an immanent deity that produces clanging waves of sense impression beating against the poet's brain.

For a time she holds out against the sound. "I, and Silence" stand apart, "strange. . . solitary, here," away from that noisy union of heaven and earth over there. But she begins to come to her senses when "a Plank in Reason, broke"(280). Perhaps at this moment in the poem, it dawns on the mourner that doctrines of a rational faith not only shut out sensuous human nature, but shut out God as well. Not even God may be able to break into the cold sanctuary of a thoroughly rational religion. Emily Dickinson speaks not only of a personal catharsis here, but also to and for anyone whose mind clings to rational truth at all costs--such folk may find themselves alienated by doctrine from both the body and the spirit.

When "a Plank in Reason" breaks, however, it is not as if Dickinson and her readers may now join the wedding party of sense and spirit. Her alternative to propositional truth may not be life, but death. The poem's topic is a funeral, after all. When certainty crumbles, a kind of death or funeral indeed occurs in the brain. Failure of the dominant paradigm affects everything one has known. A number of patriarchal Christianity's doctrines may have collapsed under pressure from this woman, but will the planks of sense and spirit prove any more solid? She drops "down, and

down--" past "a World, at every plunge." Not one, but many worlds may fall away at the collapse of reason.

Ambiguity in this poem's last line more urgently than ever raises the question of how to construe human meaning. When the mourner's rational worlds fall apart, is she "Finished knowing"? Is all knowing at an end? Descartes would say so--since for him "there is only one truth concerning any matter," and that will be a rational truth conceived "very clearly and very distinctly"(30, 36). For him, to know is solely to grasp with the reason: if rationality has collapsed, the dominant philosophy would assert that Dickinson can know nothing. But perhaps her final line also suggests that when the fall of rational worlds is complete, or "Finished," the poet may paradoxically only then be "knowing." Without the facade of rational exclusivity, Dickinson can at last admit nonrational influence into her understanding--and she can admit that nonrational factors affect significance. She can now more fully interpret her world.

Neither the rational nor the nonrational reading of this poem allows for a happy ending. In either case, there has been a funeral for the old vision, the old view of self. If patriarchal religion did hold exclusive sway over truth, the mourner is left desolate at its demise--the cosmos has no meaning. If after a long siege body and spirit have finally crashed in upon the mind, the poet or any who contemplate the significance of life and death must now pick up the pieces if we would reconstruct meaning.

An Anguished Challenge to Omnipresence

Considerations of gender, the body, and its senses in Dickinson's poetry expose the narrowness of doctrinal boundaries. The poet furthermore sets the doctrine of divine omnipresence against the feeling of loneliness, and she finds emotional anguish particularly disrupts reduction of significance into a doctrinal statement.

"Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world," Jesus promises his followers in Matthew 28:20. The gospels Mark and Luke end with Christ's bodily ascension into heaven after similar words, and in the John 16 account, Jesus assures disciples his Holy Spirit will abide after the body of Christ is gone. Though God incarnate is gone, his ascension into heaven is a fortunate loss--the tradition tells us--because God the Spirit now is present everywhere. If it is true, the poet seems to ask, that God is present every place at all times, why then does she feel so painfully isolated?

I shall know why--when Time is over--  
And I have ceased to wonder why--  
Christ will explain each separate anguish  
In the fair schoolroom of the sky--

He will tell me what "Peter" promised--  
And I--for wonder at his woe--  
I shall forget the drop of Anguish  
That scalds me now--that scalds me now! 193

When time ceases at her death or at that "end of the world" in the Matthew passage, Christ will teach Dickinson the reason for each earthly pang. Reason explains that anguish does not come arbitrarily. Some pain

we receive as punishment because of guilt; some may build strength of character; some might be small loss relative to a larger benevolent scheme. The significance of anguish will be revealed by and by in heaven after death. The poet's ironic characterization of the "schoolroom of the sky" as "fair" might suggest a cloudless blue of Heaven's skies--and in an obvious reading would suggest that heavenly knowledge after death will fairly justify mortal pain. It is a dull pedagogue, though, who lectures on questions pupils "have ceased to wonder" about. Once she is in Heaven with God, Dickinson's anguish over mortal separation from the deity will no longer bother her. A second reading asks, is it fair for God to withhold the answer until a question is moot?

"What 'Peter' promised" is the topic of that heavenly lecture. When public pressure on Jesus and his disciples intensified before the Savior was crucified, the Biblical narrative says that Peter promised his master, "Even if all fall away, I will not." But Peter did abandon the Christ, denied him three times in fact (Mark 14). A straightforward reading of the stanza's second and third lines would show the compliant poet (a future student in heaven) responding as expected, astonished "at his woe"--that is, at the pain Jesus must have felt when Peter's professed loyalty came to nothing. Whatever her profound mortal pain, it will fall away in heaven as Dickinson understands that Jesus once felt the anguish she has experienced. The standard line asserts there will be no mortal sorrow in heaven. The rational approach would direct the student to deduce from Jesus' ascension and from his promise that God is present though unseen--or perhaps present by the Spirit because he is unseen; by extension, she should know that she is not alone; her feeling of

alienation is unfounded. That rational assertion, however, does not reassure this poet.

An indefinite antecedent of "his woe" (belonging to 'Peter' rather than the Christ?) and the hesitant repetition of "I . . . I shall" suggest a more subversive reading of these lines. Peter's promise to Christ is the same promise Christ made to Peter and all believers: I will never leave you or forsake you. Maybe the schoolteacher "will tell me" what he promised Peter, that God is omnipresent, and then the poet shall stand amazed not at Jesus' anguish but at Peter's pain when Jesus ascends, abandoning the earth and Peter for Heaven. The broken line, "I . . . I shall forget" then sounds more like a question rather than an assertion about erasure of her mortal woe. In a second reading, the line could be interpreted, "Shall I ever get over this sense of separation from God?" Now the poet seems to question whether some promised afterlife really compensates for the general mortal sense of alienation from God. Nobody seems to be able to keep that "with you always" promise, not even God.

Dickinson brings us back from future time in the heavenly schoolroom to her present moment with that "drop of Anguish / That scalds me now--that scalds me now!" Agony from a burn persists. She exclaims over it twice in the last line, and a reader finds this scalding a persistent image. Twice reading "now" draws the eye back to an earlier unexpected feature of language in line one where "Time" is capitalized. The movement of the poem is circular; we are back to where we started--time has not ended with the end of the poem. The poet's "Anguish" at her suspected separation from God will remain as long as time endures, she intimates. Perhaps no heaven exists where everything will be better,

where the writer or the reader shall escape the problem of this poem; perhaps this moment of anguish is infinite, looping continually back from the last line to the poem's initial question.

The language of this poem is under stress: repetitions, unexpected capitals, dashes, exclamation points, double meanings, and hiatuses. Janet Todd associates "disturbed typography" like this poem's with a "sensibility" that is "reactive and unstable." Todd claims that a strategy whereby a "work meanders rather than moves logically. . . forces the literary nature of the work onto the reader by indicating the inadequacy of the medium--language" to convey the experience (6). Though her book, Sensibility: An Introduction, focuses on eighteenth century British sentimental fiction, Todd is also describing the moves of Dickinson's nineteenth century American poetic language. Todd shows us such language may indicate the incoherence of restless, unmeasurable, difficult sensibility--and that sensibility is in fact beyond words. Words may, then, suggest the difficulty of construing meaning, but Dickinson avoids the supposition that language exhaustively expresses the significance of life.

Through irruptions in her language, but without a question mark, Emily Dickinson's sensibility challenges orthodox religious statement. In this poem she sets the cool doctrine of the Christian God's omnipresence against hot physical and emotional imagery that dramatizes her own aching loneliness. If God is present as he promised, the reality of it escapes her. The Christian sign system fails her. It cannot rationalize away her problem. The poet's profound feeling of abandonment overwhelms any statement to the contrary. Partly by using neither the

punctuation nor the syntax we expect--nor the sanctioned term, "omnipresent," in its critique of Christian doctrine --this poem "accentuate[s] the upheaval of (exact) scientific terminology"(parentheses Kristeva's 85). Explications of poetry here demonstrate the poet's resistance to several doctrines; likewise, in the poem, "'Heavenly Father'--take to thee," Dickinson questions the doctrine of sin(1461); in "Of course--I prayed--" she takes issue with the efficacy of prayer(376). On a number of fronts, Emily Dickinson challenges the presumption Christianity has practiced its many centuries, presenting orthodox vocabulary as exhaustive truth.

In effect, language provides no haven of certainty. The project of Dickinson's religious poetry seems to be to demonstrate the inadequacy of language to express or impose significance. Dickinson's poetic language struggles against the certainty of doctrinal statements, but neither language nor the nonrational aspects of life by which the poet challenges statements of truth provide a system which replaces rational religion.

It is evident by now that the poem, "I shall know why--when Time is over--," like other religious verse by this author, functions as much more than art for art's sake; Dickinson's poetic language is not some artifact of high culture merely to be admired for its form and style. This poem also acts as more than an utterance of a particular poet; Dickinson's work is private, but it is also radically representative of the human condition. Rather than either high culture or personal catharsis, therefore, this poetry is literature in the sense that Kristeva suggests: it is text which in many ways emphasizes "the problematics of the production of meaning" (85). By this evocative sensibility which resists

containment by rationality, Dickinson draws readers into a dramatic reenactment of the struggle to construe human significance.

Not resolution, but recurring spiritual conflict characterizes Dickinson's religious poetry. Some speculate that the poet resolves her own struggle, that she moves from the distress of her funeral poem, #280 (thought to have been written in 1861) to a happier view of herself and the significance of life (Smith, Brumm). But the "Brittle Piers" image occurs in a late piece, #1433 written in 1878. And #1545, "The Bible is an antique Volume--," is dated 1882, four years before Dickinson dies (Wolff 159). Other pieces considered in this study track her struggle against rationalism throughout the poet's work. The sense of Dickinson's religious impulse is one not of progress toward resolution, but perhaps one of resolute resistance to the prevailing system.

As Dickinson challenges patriarchal Christianity with her own experience, she may gain insight into both herself and into that system. She must accept the force of her own emotional anguish and must face the inadequacy of doctrine to erase that pain. Her investigation of gender, material, and emotional issues against the weight of cultural disapproval is a move of great courage. Once she acknowledges the force of her sensibility, it propels her to a continuous challenge of conventional interpretation. We do not know that she ever trusted herself, exactly, but the poet could no longer ignore nonrational influences in her life.

An Imaginative Equivocation on Afterlife

What she loses in certainty, Emily Dickinson may gain in possibility. In a moment of confidence she could assert:

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

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The dominant Western tradition would say that knowing is expressed solely by prose such as doctrine. If so, then Emily Dickinson's religious poetry challenging received truth is not a site where she uncovers certainty, but a "place where the sciences die"(Kristeva 78). Kristeva's characterization of semiotics recalls that funeral of rational religion in Dickinson's brain. The poet may no longer be assured of one clear, exhaustive truth; nevertheless, she is now free to examine any number of other perspectives. Her painful loss of certainty may be a triumph for imagination.

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,  
 One clover and a bee,  
 And revery.  
 The revery alone will do,  
 If bees are few.

1755

Dickinson's meditation on the relationship of sensibility to doctrine makes evident their mismatch. Her reveries on language, itself, reveal instability, its metonymy. Meditation--alone or coupled with sensibility -- does not resolve into a single truth, but broadens out into a prairie-- full of possible meanings.

One may view the "prairies" of Dickinson's poetry from several perspectives. This play of interpretation demonstrates the ingenuity of her imagination and the intensity of her quest for understanding. But more importantly--if more somberly--these alternate readings emphasize the tentative nature of any interpretation. "This World is not Conclusion," she begins one enigmatic piece, and a reader's conventional mindset begins to gather evidence for Dickinson's view of heaven. The line sounds like an affirmation of life after death. Something, surely, "stands beyond," but then she says, "It beckons and it baffles--" A reader begins to realize that the poet is not certain at all; what at first looked like an assertion about life after death, falls against words like "riddle," "puzzle," "contempt." Those baffles between her and eternity deflect all conventional wisdom. When the poet confronts death, "Philosophy--don't know--" and "Sagacity, must go--"(501). Philosophical inquiry and mortals' best guesses, for her, do not make sense of death.

The attempt to comprehend death has cost plenty: it cost Jesus "Crucifixion," the poet observes. But in the very gesture of presenting the expected interpretation of death, the poem's unconventional language undercuts itself. "And Crucifixion, shown-- / Faith slips--and laughs, and rallies-- / Blushes, if any see--" The comma before "shown" and dash afterward, the line break after the dash, and an indefinite sense of whose faith is in process here, allows a different scansion of the lines: when Dickinson contemplates the doctrine that should quiet her doubts, it only raises more questions for her. Other folks are satisfied with the standard explanation; she is embarrassed to be contrary, but cannot stop

her speculation. "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul--"(501). Doubt gnaws away at her.

Notice how the end of this poem also gnaws away at the most obvious interpretation of its beginning. "This World is not Conclusion," can now be read as an assertion of doubt, not of faith. We have always figured the world works a certain way, but that is not the only way to look at it. Think about it a little, the poet seems to urge, and the meaning of death and afterlife is not at all self-evident.

Kristeva says literature stages the continual search for human meaning; thus, her description of the literary appropriately characterizes the end of this poem. It "does not rejoin its 'beginning', but, on the contrary, rejects and rocks it, opening up the way to another discourse, that is another subject and another method"(78). Over and over in her religious poetry, Dickinson throws open to suggestion the doors and windows of language, and in this poem her imagination literally overwhelms a prosaic statement of dogma in the display of language and the poem's possible readings. But imagination is by nature volatile, unpredictable; along with its exhilarating possibilities come profound risks. Imagination carries Dickinson away from certain, orthodox Christianity.

Descartes suspected imagination might do just that, and he feared imagination's distraction would disrupt his intellectual system based on a rational God. He wrote that if imagination, identified with "the images of things perceived by the senses, did not besiege my thought on every side, I would certainly acknowledge him [God] sooner and more easily"(109). And committed to a rational view of truth and of himself,

Descartes will consequently "eliminate from my thoughts all images of bodily things, or rather, since this is hardly possible, I will regard all such images as vacuous, false and worthless. I will converse with myself"(87). The philosopher resolutely eliminates from his mind distractions of the senses, of the imagination, and any other interruption which would upset his methodical search for clear and distinct truth. These nonrational influences would intimate to Descartes that intellectual discourse does not account for everything. In contrast, because she does not exclude it, imagination unsettles Dickinson's world.

Unlike Descartes' method of rational inquiry whose assumptions ground orthodox doctrine, Dickinson's search for meaning is rigorously inclusive, not exclusive. An inclusive sensibility drives her to investigate spiritual implications of particular feelings and situations and human relationships. Such a sensibility forces her to struggle incessantly against the prevailing system of meaning. While the poet clearly resists rational Christianity, she nonetheless does not muster an opposing system. The nonrational, by its very nature, provides no alternate sign system for her. Painful hesitation and disruptions of her language indicate that poetry also offers no stable system of interpretation which replaces the certainty of traditional religion.

The poet's resistance indicates that rational Christianity does not suffice to express human meaning, but neither would some system of opposition. This woman's religious poetry represents the human struggle for significance: the search is not definitive--but continuous and equivocal. Emily Dickinson's sensibility broadens and complicates the grounds of our inquiry.

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