

'And God / Is Revelation's limit': Emily Dickinson's Poetic 'Cup of Anguish' Concerning the Religious

Mousumi Guha Banerjee

Associate Professor and Head, Department of English Literature, The English and Foreign Languages University, Shillong Campus, Shillong – 793022, Meghalaya, India.

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Emily Dickinson's epistemological doubt and her resulting poetic indeterminacy do not happen to her retroactively as a result of current critical conformist practices, rather they bear testimony to her personal doubts concerning religious faith and the gradually augmenting uncertainty, indefiniteness and restlessness of the age she composed her poetry in. doubt and desire impelled Dickinson's epistemological and poetic pursuit rather than inhibiting and discouraging it and she wishes her song to be continued to be heard. An early poem sets the theme of suffering and anguish she experiences on earth, which she visualizes from heaven. She delineates her experience of the Cross and her sense of its meaning in her 193rd poetic rendition of about 1860:

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!¹

She looks at the sufferings and agonies on earth from an exalted and elevated pedestal of heaven and her conception of Christ barely has eschatological dimensions. Characteristically, her image of Christ is strikingly, if not mundanely, human. She approved of and was interested in the sermon about the disappointment of Jesus in Judas, since it was 'told like a mortal story of intimate young men'. In a late poem,

The Saviour must have been
A docile Gentleman –
To come so far so cold a Day
For little Fellowmen –²

and in the elegy on Charles Wadsworth, a charismatic Presbyterian reverend whom Dickinson admired deeply,

'Twas Christ's own personal Expanse
That bore him from the Tomb –³

Christ's 'personal Expanse' signified for her his being triumphant over suffering and it is particularly in this way that Dickinson tries to identify her artistic consternation and dilemma and the pain it entails with that of the 'Saviour'. On the other hand, the Risen Christ, or the Christ, the Consoler or Redeemer does barely rouse her concern, since it is not the apotheosizing that she condones, but it is Christ, the human sufferer that she acquiesces comfortably. The mood of admonition and remonstrance is conspicuous and clearly discernible in the opening lines of an undated poem:

One crown that no one seeks
And yet the highest head
Its isolation coveted
Its stigma deified

While Pontius Pilate lives

¹ Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1951. All Dickinson poems quoted subsequently are taken from this book.

² Poem 1487, about 1880.

³ Poem, 1543, about 1882.

In whatsoever hell
That coronation pierces him
He recollects it well.⁴

It was the truth in a 'look of Agony' and 'the fashions - of the Cross -' that pierced her. According to her greatest crucifixion poem, the quotidian experience she narrates appears in the following manner:

One Crucifixion is recorded - only -
How many be
Is not affirmed of Mathematics
Or History -

One Calvary - exhibited to Stranger -
As many be
As Persons - or Peninsulas -
Gethsemane -

Is but a Province - in the Being's Centre -
Judea -
For Journey - or Crusade's Achieving -
Too near -

Our Lord - indeed - made Compound Witness -
And yet -
There's newer - nearer Crucifixion
Than That -⁵

Whenever she thought of abstemiousness, asceticism, pertinacity, fortitude, endurance or renunciation - that 'piercing Virtue' - or of the 'Thorns' she will assume 'till Sunset', or of 'the strong cup of anguish brewed for the Nazarene', she retrograded, not so much to the Gospels as to the 'Imitation' with its authoritative accent on the renunciation of the world, shouldering the encumbrance, bearing the Cross - that is, the unpretentious, austere, obdurate life of the committed and dedicated religious:

To put this World down, like a Bundle -
And walk steady, away,
Requires Energy - possible Agony -
'Tis the scarlet way

Trodden with straight renunciation
By the Son of God -
Later, his faint Confederates
Justify the Road -⁶

Dickinson's faith of the religious becomes pronouncingly felt when she speaks of reading 'with straight renunciation/ By the Son of God -'. She identifies, we are convinced to feel, herself with the 'faint Confederates', renouncing the World 'like a Bundle' and 'walk steady away' the path wrought with artistic pain and agony. She followed the tormenting path of the woman author to its bitter end through 'straight renunciation' of the 'Scarlet way' that prohibits woman's creation thereby finding solace in the fullest commitment to the religious: 'Even in Our Lord's "that they be with me where I am"', she wrote, 'I taste interrogation'.

There is another poem which is often perceived as a description of her dreary and grim childhood. Following is an instance of her despondency and dejection in her failure to obtain maternal love:

A loss of something ever felt I -
The first that I could recollect
Bereft I was - of what I knew not
Too young that any should suspect

⁴ Poem 1735.

⁵ Poem 553, about 1862.

⁶ Poem 527, about 1862.

A Mourner walked among the children
 I notwithstanding went about
 As one bemoaning a Dominion
 Itself the only Prince cast out –

Elder, Today, a session wiser
 And fainter, too, as Wiseness is –
 I find myself still softly searching
 For my delinquent Palaces –
 And a Suspicion, like a Finger
 Touches my Forehead now and then
 That I am looking oppositely
 For the site of the Kingdom of Heaven –⁷

She underwent an acute sense of suffering which is caused by a disavowal of the parental line of descent and is compelled by this 'loss of something' to bemoan 'a Dominion' of lost, if not forgotten, childhood. But, more often than not, a stroke of 'Suspicion' causes interruption to her search for 'Delinquent Palaces' that she feels gravitating towards the 'site of the Kingdom of Heaven'. The poem can also be understood to possess a little different, in other words, supplementary referral. Her religious anxieties came early as reflected by the above poem and it affected her profoundly. Girded by some devout and pious friends, she feels herself to be 'cast out', being 'the only Prince' and a 'Mourner' 'among the children'. She was perhaps afflicted by some strange spiritual lack which impels her to conceive of Christ rather as a humane figure than as a transcendental and divine being. Contrarily again, 'Suspicion' intervenes and she begins her search 'for the site of the Kingdom of Heaven'. Retrospection and the nostalgic memory of childhood are fraught with danger and plight if associated with the solution to the anxieties and discomforts of the present.

This disavowal of the matrilineal heritage of tradition affects Aurora Leigh as well when we find her orphaned of her mother during her early infancy. This perhaps can be understood in terms of an acutely felt absence of a lack of the sense of mother from her poetry.

Dickinson enters into the conventional reality of Christian devotion, writes Oberhaus, supplementing, 'The Bible pervades her mind of art, as it does the mind and art of all Christian devotional poets and writers. And the Bible was not, as many have supposed, merely a source of imagery for her. Rather, the Bible is essential to her structure and meaning, the very sum and substance of her art.'⁸ The 'singularly cryptic' poems of fascicle 40, says Oberhaus, require the reader to 'enact the role of sleuth'. This done, she sees 'F – 40 as an architectural tour de force, a three-part meditation, a letter addressed to the reader, a garland of praise, and a conversion narrative, as well as the triumphant conclusion of the protagonist's account of her poetic and spiritual pilgrimage from renunciation to illumination to union and finally, after many conflicts, to contentment with this union.'⁹

This all the more amplifies the fact that the Christian metaphysical tradition unmistakably and ineluctably finds expression in her poetics, and operates interminably. Dickinson seldom completely dispossesses herself from the Christian, and particularly Calvinist, milieu she was brought up in Amherst, attaching to it often contumaciously and contentiously. The ceaseless metaphysical exigencies in her poetry are felt from the specific mode of juxtaposition of discernible religious dislocation or dissension and poems of palpable religious fervour and complaisance. This argument, of course, does not identify Dickinson as a 'religious poet' nor does her quintessential and all-encompassing poetic configuration derived from her artistic convertibility from her sense of dispossession to a transcendental existence. 'She is, instead', says Jane Donahue Eberwein, 'a poet of religious engagement, whose very criticism of religion reflects her deep involvement in it'.¹⁰

⁷ Poem 959, about 1864.

⁸ Oberhaus, Dorothy H. *Emily Dickinson's Fascicles: Method and Meaning*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, p. 185.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁰ Eberwein, Jane Donahue. *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985, p. 40.

Dickinson revelled in formulating a human image of God which sometimes dissuades us from her religious inclinations, if not her religious affiliation. Poem 251, being apparently simplistic, has implicit metaphysical intonations.

Over the fence –
Strawberries – grows –
Over the fence –
I could climb – if I tried, I know –
Berries are nice!

But – if I stained my Apron –
God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear, - I guess if He were a Boy –
He'd – climb – if He could!

What seems strikingly noticeable in Dickinson's religious thought is the concept of God being either a male or a 'female' representation. The expressions 'if He were a Boy' and '... if I stained my Apron – / God would certainly scold!' consecutively portray one of male and the other of female images, but in both cases, very mundanely human. Correspondingly, in a later poem, the abode of such a 'human' God is conceived as having an anthropomorphic existence. The poet raises some fundamental existential issues, but does not quite seem to navigate into them at length to extricate any comprehensible or so-called 'human' solution to them. She subscribes to a description which is distant from a glorified or chivalric idealization of the concept of 'Heaven', since she did not experience it hitherto. The poet, hence, asks:

We pray – to Heaven –
We prate – of Heaven –
Relate – when Neighbors 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?¹¹

(# 489)

Perhaps the most revealing of her experiences of heaven, receiving a mature pronunciation, appears in one of her letters to Mrs. J. G. Holland during early August, 1856: 'My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have seen in June, and in it are my friends – all of them – every one of them – those who are with me now, and those who were "parted" as we walked, and "snatched up to Heaven".' She goes on to describe 'God' as an 'Old Neighbor' with much convenience and ease:

How excellent the Heaven –
When Earth – cannot be had –
How hospitable – then – the face
Of our Old Neighbor – God –¹²

All these human depictions can possibly be extrapolated as the poet's desire to be in propinquity with God, a hominid presence, who is more able to provide her with solace and reassurance she is desperately in requirement of. The 'Old Neighbor' can share and participate in her times of woe, despair, dejection and anguish much more conveniently than a distant, transcendental Omnipresence.

Dickinson deploys variegated themes and sees God in multiple and myriad conceptualizations. At one time, she rouses with an impregnated realization:

God is a distant – stately Lover –
Woos, as He states us – by His Son –
Verily, a Vicarious Courtship –
"Miles", and "Priscilla", were such an One –¹³

¹¹ Poem 489.

¹² Poem 623.

At another place, God is 'Revelation's limit' in the following manner:

Embarrassment of one another
 And God
 Is Revelation's limit,
 Aloud
 Is nothing that is chief,
 But still,
 Divinity dwells under a seal.¹⁴

Through these varied and diverse portrayals of the divine, Dickinson implicitly and tacitly concedes to the fact of the eternity, immortality, infinitude, truth and omnipresence of the divine existence.

The Only News I know
 Is Bulletins all Day
 From Immortality
 The Only Shows I see –
 Tomorrow and Today –
 Perchance Eternity –
 The Only One I meet
 Is God – The Only Street –
 Existence – This traversed
 If Other News there be –
 Or Admirable Show –
 I'll tell it You –¹⁵

The vastness and immeasurability of the Infinite is expressed with a kind of delineation contrary to God as a human image. The irreconcilable and antithetical conceptions become strikingly vivid when she says elsewhere,

They leave us with the Infinite.
 But He – is not a man –
 His fingers are the size of fists –
 His fists, the size of men –

And whom he foundeth, with his Arm
 As Himmaleh, shall stand –
 Gibraltar's Everlasting Shoe
 Poised lightly on his Hand,

So trust him, Comrade –
 You for you, and I, for you and me
 Eternity is ample,
 And quick enough, if true.¹⁶

The image of God as an epitomization of truth is also nonetheless expressively telling in the following poem:

Truth – is as old as God –
 His Twin identity
 And will endure as long as He
 A Co-Eternity –

And perish on the Day
 Himself is borne away
 From Mansion of the Universe
 A lifeless Deity.¹⁷

The above instances from Dickinson's poems may leave us with the consciousness that she acknowledged the predominance of a male divine figure with the reverberative 'He' or 'His' to designate such an image. But

¹³ Poem 357.

¹⁴ Poem 662.

¹⁵ Poem 827.

¹⁶ Poem 350.

¹⁷ Poem 836.

this dichotomous and incompatible angst as a woman writer pulls Dickinson apart and she does not, in any sense, miscarry her expression and this is how she asserts with vehemence and resilience:

To be alive – is Power –
 Existence – in itself –
 Without a further function –
 Omnipotence – Enough –
 To be alive – and Will!
 'Tis able as a God –
 The Maker – of Ourselves – be what –
 Such being Finitude!¹⁸

The woman poet endeavours and struggles for creative expression – an artistic phenomenon that has, with equal vigour and constraint, perturbed and agitated the minds of all conscientious female authors. Dickinson apprehensively expresses her disquietude and malaise by disclosing that,

My Worthiness is all my Doubt –
 His Merit – all my fear –
 Contrasting which, my quality
 Do lowlier – appear –

Lest I should insufficient prove
 For His beloved Need –
 The Chiefest Apprehension
 Upon my thronging Mind –¹⁹

She ventilates her ire firmly enough by loudly asserting that religiosity is presupposed to be inclusive of the idea of femininity which can scarcely be proscribed and banished from the tyrannically defined 'angelic', in other words, male definition of religious participation. She debates with rancour and wrath:

Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven?
 Did I sing – too loud?
 But – I can say a little "Minor"
 Timid as a Bird!

Wouldn't the Angels try me –
 Just – once – more –
 Just – see – if I troubled them –
 But don't – shut the door!

She does not forget to emphasize female magnanimity by saying that,

Oh, if I – were the Gentleman
 In the "White Robe" –
 And they – were the little Hand – that knocked –
 Could – I – forbid?²⁰

'Protomodernist, proto-*vers librist*, protoprojectivist, profeminist'²¹ Dickinson solicits these retrogressive taxonomical structures by barely postulating any dogmatic propositions, underlying convictions, philosophical ideas and pedagogical views. Such predilections and proclivities actually gainsay the quintessence of Dickinson's nature. Some critics have expostulated that Dickinson's early religious recalcitrance in reality paved the path for her subsequent contemplative and meditative certitude but in spite of such innate metamorphosis, she never asseverated a principle or a precept of any kind whatsoever. She reveals in a letter of February 13, 1859, to Mary Emerson Haven that, 'Mr. S. preached in our church last Sabbath upon "predestination", but I do not respect "doctrines", and did not listen to him, so I can neither

¹⁸ Poem 677.

¹⁹ Poem 751.

²⁰ Poem 248.

²¹ Cushman, Stephen. *Fictions of Form in American Poetry*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993, p.50.

praise, nor blame.²² If we are to ascertain a specific compatibility with an unmistakable tinge of religious, aesthetic and an ontological consideration in her poetry, she did opt liberally to 'dwell in Possibility' (Poem 657, c. 1862), which is largely poetically indicative of an inexhaustible repertory of 'possibilities' of connotation, rhetoricity and ellipsis, which are, in their turn, likely to foment an interminable repository of significations and explanations.

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²² Johnson, Thomas & Ward, Theodora (ed.). *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1958, 2: 408.