DICKINSON'S KINETIC RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

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Several months after Emily Dickinson first corresponded with Thomas Wentworth Higginson and enclosed a few poems in her first letters to him, he asked her to send a "portrait" of herself.[1] She politely but firmly refused, offering him instead a teasingly poetic self-description. "Could you believe me—without? I...am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur—and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves–Would this do just as well?" Then she explained, offering a clue to a key feature of her sensibility: "I noticed the Quick wore off those things, in a few days, and forestall the dishonor" (*L* 268). What counts for her, here and elsewhere, is the "Quick" of things and persons, the life as it unpredictably moves and changes. To be fixated in a daguerreotype is to lose this liveliness and is dishonorable to human nature. For Higginson's benefit she has just given quickness to her verbal self-portrait–a wren moves, a chestnut burr grows, the eyes are the ever changing mirror of the soul. The changeability and volatility of human perception and experience were enabling conditions for the life of her mind, and thus basic features of her language and her writing. She prefers the dynamic to the static, fragmentary inspiration to settled form. Part of her project as a poet is to nourish and develop a language of "quickness" in order to convey her spiritual and religious experience.

Inevitably, her language stemmed from her Calvinist upbringing. As a child and young adult, Dickinson had a thorough indoctrination in the tenets and values of nineteenth-century Connecticut Valley Calvinism. Her chief figures of early influence come out of this cultural matrix: her mother and father, her minister, and her teachers at Amherst Academy and Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary. The young Dickinson read what was expected at home and at school, learned the Bible and the New England Primer more or less by heart, and heard sermons every Sunday. Thus in her maturity the doctrines and language of nineteenth-century Calvinism were utterly familiar and available to her as a poet, whatever stance she chose to adopt toward her ancestral religion in particular poems and letters. The persons of the Trinity have an imaginative reality for her: God the inscrutable Father, Jesus the courageous sufferer, the Holy Spirit pervading creation and human nature. Likewise, Old Testament figures such as Jacob and Moses have dramatic reality even while she regards them as fictions. As a poet, she employs the

language of Christian doctrine effectively and unselfconsciously. As Jane Donahue Eberwein shows, Dickinson brought new life to great words from her tradition such as "Glory," "Grace," and "Omnipresence," so that later readers attracted to her might be nurtured by them.[2]

Yet in her writing Dickinson's Calvinist inheritance is filtered through her volatile sensibility. She adopted for her poetic self elements of Calvinist teaching that suited her. For example, from childhood on she had a preference for "the Power" over "the Kingdom" and "the Glory." Late in life she wrote her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, "Cherish Power—dear—Remember that stands in the Bible between the Kingdom and the Glory because it is wilder than either of them" (*L* 583). "Power" implies movement, "Kingdom" stability. She also uses the language of Calvinism to display her own understanding of how the spirit manifests itself in art and nature, whether she writes in conformity with a Christian perspective or in rebellion against it. When rebellious, she sometimes connected spiritual enlightenment with the experience of poetry and art. In one heretical poem she presents her own version of "Irresistible Grace" as a way to convey her sense of her calling as a poet. In Calvinist doctrine, the believer experiences conversion as a dynamic, transformative illumination that cannot be rationally explained. Similarly, the poem recalls the extraordinary illumination Dickinson felt on reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Dickinson's speaker remembers how the "Lunacy of Light" she experienced transformed and quickened her perceptions and led to "Conversion of the Mind," a "change" she could neither "tell" nor "define" nor "explain" (*Fr* 627). Yet though this conversion may be "Like Sanctifying in the Soul," it happened because the speaker read a "Foreign Lady," author of "Tomes of Solid Witchcraft," not because she listened to a sermon on man's sin and God's saving grace. The speaker is eager to share her experience of transformation, to display how poetry can dazzle the mind and set it in motion but also how poetry abides as a permanent life-giving resource for its readers.

Dickinson wrote of her religious concerns because she had to; she made no claim to be original as a religious thinker. Yet her kinetic imagination, her appreciation of and appetite for transience, propelled her into originality. For example, she is theologically prescient in her attempt to include doubt in the experience of faith. Dickinson was acutely sensitive to changes in her own mind, well aware, for example, that the experience of faith was not continuous but happened to her in the passage of time. With rhetorical exaggeration, she wrote her lover Otis Lord, "On subjects of which we know nothing...we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble" (*L* 750). Given this propensity for temporary loss of belief, she worked to reconcile doubt with faith. As Roger Lundin puts

it, "she…searched for a way of encompassing the experience of unbelief within that of belief."[3] In Dickinson's post-Darwinian mental universe (Darwin seems to have affected her profoundly in the 1860s) she found a way to be true to her own mind and still express her cultural inheritance. She thus anticipates the twentieth-century's struggles with questions of belief and unbelief.

Another feature of Dickinson's speculative writing generally, including her speculations about religion, is what I have called her "nimble abstractions."[4] For her, words such as "exhilaration," "possibility," and "awe" are imbued with a sense of passage, as if invented to stimulate a reader to enter her stream of thought. She uses them dramatically to convey the Quick of her spiritual life. One poem begins, "Exhiliration is the Breeze / That lifts us from the Ground" (*Fr* 1157). Then this breeze leaves us elsewhere, "Enchanted," before we come back to earth "a little newer." "Exhilaration" takes on dramatic life as a breeze (a breath of spirit) that modestly but mysteriously transforms us. This definition poem is one of many in which Dickinson teaches the reader to share the motions of her spiritual life. A more complex, familiar example is "I dwell in Possibility" (*Fr* 466), where Possibility is a labile metonym for poetry, imagined as a curious house with an "everlasting Roof" in which the speaker's "Occupation" is "to gather Paradise." Dwelling in Possibility fosters the speaker's openness to the Everlasting. "Possibility," a neutral abstraction in itself, takes on liveliness and unmistakable spiritual import in Dickinson's dramatic handling.

"Awe" is a third abstraction that Dickinson endows with movement and life in dramas touching on religious concerns. From early in her career, she personifies awe to suggest one's dread or, alternatively, one's capacity for reverence before the awesome unknown. By projection, "awe" can become a metonym for God. She identifies divinity with the feeling of dread she has for it. In a poem of the mid-1870s, "No man saw awe" (*Fr* 1342), "awe" implicitly signifies the face of God. When "human nature" passes "by his awful residence," the human survives, stunned but "breathing." Yet the experience is also implicitly life-enhancing. "Old Moses," here a representative human spiritual adventurer, asserts that he is "not consumed" by awe, "Yet saw him face to face." Dickinson grounds her appreciation of the overpowering yet life-enhancing danger of spiritual enlightenment not only by dramatizing "awe" but also by reverently re-conceiving a story from the Bible.

Another instance of Dickinson's kinetic religious imagination at work in her writings is her use of "spirit," or "Spirit." With its root meaning of "breath," "spirit" implies motion. Like the wind, the spirit "bloweth where it listeth" (John 3:8). Whether or not she used this word of belief in an explicitly religious context, she associated it with the quickness of life, a

living presence in human beings. From her upbringing, Dickinson assumes the existence of the spirit in her own life and in the life of her friends. She rarely refers to "God the Spirit" explicitly; indeed in one late letter she scoffs at the idea that "'Holy Men moved by the Holy Ghost'" made the Bible (*L* 794). Still, the reality of the spirit was self-evident to her throughout her career. Its role in her day-to-day existence seems to have been a challenge for her. She wrestled repeatedly with the question of the relationship between spirit and body. As she wrote Maria Whitney in a late letter, "I am constantly more astonished that the Body contains the Spirit—Except for overmastering work it could not be borne—" (*L* 643). Yet according to her thinking the spirit made her work possible.

In early poems and letters Dickinson is more apt to write of "my spirit," the living power of one's inner being. There are many poems in which an individual spirit responds to an epiphany full of movement, for example the "Bronze—and Blaze" of the Northern Lights that "Infects my simple spirit / With Taints of Majesty" (*Fr* 319). In an early poem celebrating God's creation, "My spirit cannot see" the God "Who laid the Rainbow's piers...Whose fingers string the stalactite—" and who "shut the windows down so close" of the speaker's embodied self that she must wait until her resurrection to understand such mysteries (*Fr* 140). Another speaker readying herself for marriage asks to "Fashion My Spirit quaint—white— / Quick—like a Liquor— / Gay—like Light—" (*Fr* 705). In these examples a speaker's spirit, "quick" in itself, responds to the liveliness of creation or the challenge of imagined romance.

By mid-career, Dickinson seems to have developed a conception of a special relationship between poetry and the spirit, with an implicit memory of the Holy Spirit. One poem Franklin dates 1865 begins:

> This is a Blossom of the Brain—
> A small—italic Seed
> Lodged by Design or Happening
> The Spirit fructified—
>
> Shy as the Wind of his Chambers
> Swift as a Freshet's Tongue
> So of the Flower of the Soul
> It's process is unknown— (*Fr* 1112)

An "italic Seed," wherever it comes from, is "fructified" by "the Spirit," and mysteriously grows into "the Flower of the Soul." "Italic" suggests writing; Dickinson may well mean to opaquely suggest the unknown process by which a poem or work of art comes into being. Tellingly, this spiritual process is full

of movement. It is "Shy as the Wind," private but also volatile, and "Swift as a Freshet's Tongue," inducing a reader to see and personify a spring freshet in motion as one imagines the workings of the Spirit.

Toward the end of her life, Dickinson grew increasingly preoccupied with the survival of the Spirit after death. (In late texts the word is nearly always capitalized, as if to suggest the human spirit, not just her own.) In this life, she asserted, the Spirit is always with us. She consoled her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson after her son Gilbert's death, "Hopelessness...has not leave to last—That would close the Spirit, and no intercession could do that—" (*L* 871). She could only speculate, however, concerning what might happen after the Spirit left the Body. A late poem enclosed in a letter to Charles H. Clark begins:

> The Spirit lasts—but in what mode—Below, the Body speaks, But as the Spirit furnishes— (*L* 872)

The poem expatiates on the quandary but does not resolve it. Yet at the same time, the poem graphically demonstrates how Spirit acts and endures in this life. When Body and Spirit work together, they can generate art, in this case music. "The Music in the Violin" emerges "Arm in Arm with Touch, yet Touch / Alone—is not a Tune—." Even as Dickinson contemplates death, she reasserts her belief in art as spiritual and remembers the physical movement that makes music possible. Then she eloquently expresses her conception of the living Spirit in another figure. "The Spirit lurks within the Flesh / Like Tides within the Sea." The sea is always with us, and the tides move perpetually within it. The simile conveys a mental image of permanence, however impermanent the body. It recalls Genesis 1:2, "the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters," perhaps also Milton's Spirit "brooding on the vast abyss" and making it pregnant.[5] Thus in a poem that begins (and ends) with a doubt, Dickinson reenacts her faith in Spirit.

In all these examples Dickinson's imagination is kinetic; secure in her room, she prefers adventure to stability. The poet who imagined herself as a little girl shut up in a "Closet" of "Prose" found freedom simply by letting her "Brain—go round" and exulting like a bird in flight (*Fr* 445). She kept to this conception of freedom throughout her career, even as she drew profoundly and thankfully on the language of faith she learned as a child.

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NOTES

1. Emily Dickinson's poems and letters will be cited parenthetically. For the poems, the citation will include an abbreviation for the edition used—*Fr* for Franklin and *J* for Johnson—followed by the poem number in that edition; for the letters, the abbreviation (*L*) will be followed by the number assigned to the letter in the Johnson and Ward edition.
2. Eberwein, "'Where—Omnipresence—fly?'," 13.
3. Lundin, "Nimble Believing," 84.
4. McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 18-20.
5. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I:21-2.

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THE TENDER PIONEER IN THE PRAIRIES OF THE AIR: DICKINSON AND THE DIFFERENCES OF GOD

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Emily Dickinson once called heaven a "Species" that "stands beyond" our world, "Invisible, as Music— / But positive, as Sound—."[1] From somewhere out there, far beyond our reach and gaze, "It beckons, and it baffles" us at every moment and every turn. But when it comes to determining just what, or who, it is that calls to us from that "Species" in the beyond, we have to concede that "Philosophy, dont know," and to this day, "To guess it, puzzles scholars—" (*Fr* 373).

The same might be said of several generations of scholars who have struggled to puzzle out the meaning of the countless beguiling and be-