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A
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to Emily Dickinson



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“Is Immortality True?”

Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals

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For those considering Emily Dickinson's reaction to changes in New England's religious culture in the middle and late decades of the nineteenth century, one grotesquely memorable poem becomes the almost inevitable proof-text:

Those - dying then,
Knew where they went -
They went to God's Right Hand -
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found -

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small -
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all - (Fr 1581)¹

Editors Thomas Johnson and R. W. Franklin date this poem to 1882, though it calls to mind Dickinson images from the mid-1860s envisaging “The Funeral of God” (Fr 1112) when he would be “borne away / From Mansion of the Universe / A lifeless Deity” (Fr 795). “The death of God” may seem a modern concept, but it is one Emily Dickinson anticipated and to which she

responded with concern over losing the omnipotent arm "Who laid the Rainbow's piers" (Fr 140).

Biographers read "Those - dying then" as her response to losses Dickinson shared with others of her time. James McIntosh situates the poem in the context of "the undoing of Amherst orthodoxy," while Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that "the drift away from God was generational, the phenomenon of an increasingly secular America." Roger Lundin extends this perspective to embrace thinkers and creative artists generally, linking Dickinson with Melville, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche among "the first to trace the trajectory of God's decline" throughout the Western world.²

Yet few belief systems could have seemed more stable than Calvinist Christianity in the Connecticut Valley of Dickinson's youth. At her birth in 1830, Congregationalism was still legally established in Massachusetts and all four Amherst churches traced their roots in that tradition to the Puritans who settled New England two centuries before. The Second Great Awakening spurred wave after wave of revivals that aroused America's cities and frontier campgrounds along with decorous New England parishes like Amherst's First Church, which Dickinsons had helped to found and which her family attended. The American Bible Society had launched its first two-year campaign to put a Bible in every American home. When she was two, Noah Webster, the great lexicographer and her family's Amherst neighbor for several years, published his Americanized translation of the Bible. The three children of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson grew up with constant reinforcement of church teachings at home, in school, and in peer relationships. Emily Dickinson knew from childhood that she was expected to emulate the sainted neighbor who "relyed wholly upon the arm of God & he did not forsake her" (L 11).³

Who or what, then, lopped that saving arm? Dickinson's phrase "is amputated now" ignores issues of agency. Culprits usually arraigned include romanticism in both its Transcendental and sentimental manifestations, a scientific revolution spurred by Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, and theological rethinking unleashed by the European biblical scholarship known as the

Higher Criticism. Another crisis unsettling belief was the Civil War. Even America's growing diversity and the mobility of its native-born and immigrant populations came to undermine the sense of religious uniformity that would have been taken for granted by a child growing up in Emily Dickinson's Connecticut Valley milieu. In her childhood, belief seemed all but inevitable; by the time she died in 1886, agnosticism and even atheism had become easier positions to justify intellectually. If Dickinson were to cling to faith, it had to be in a wounded God.

Dickinson shared this dilemma with other artists and thinkers. Like Herman Melville, she coped with a disposition that "could neither believe, nor be comfortable in . . . unbelief." Yet she had certainly not "made up [her] mind to be annihilated."⁴ At times, her attitude toward uncertainty could even be buoyantly playful, as when she wrote in an 1882 letter to Otis Phillips Lord that "on subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say *Beings* . . . we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble" (L 750). Yet the playfulness sometimes collapsed into desperation, as in "I know that He exists" (Fr 365), an 1862 poem that treats the soul's relationship with God as an increasingly worrisome game of hide-and-seek. In the poem following this in Fascicle 18, "He strained my faith" (Fr 366), the speaker recounts an anguishing experience of being tormented by Jesus yet avows a bewildered, indestructible devotion. Verbs relating to Christ ("strained," "Shook," "Hurled," "Wrung," and "Stabbed") remind us that God's arm could be a dreadful force as well as a saving one.

Dickinson's writing, then, brilliantly expresses tensions between doubt and faith in the nineteenth-century Western world, as evangelical Protestant orthodoxy shook when subjected to unsettling intellectual and cultural pressures. Yet she was a lyric poet rather than a systematic philosopher and a letter-writer rather than an essayist. Her poems articulate dramatically varying and ephemeral moods. Often, as in "He strained my faith," they employ personae to distance speaker from author. Or she grouped them in fascicles with companion poems that modify their impact. Her letters, though self-revealing, are always subtly attuned to audience. The comment she made to Judge Lord

about the nimbleness of belief came from a love letter that wittily blended belief, doubt, and hope about both her lover and the Lord above; she never would have written about faith in such a tone to one of her pious correspondents. One can make whatever case one wants about Dickinson's beliefs or disbelief by selecting individual poems, letters, or even lines, but the way to reach insight is to look for long-term patterns in her religious references. Despite variations in tone and imagery, religion remained a centering concern for Dickinson from her first valentine with its comic references to Eden (Fr 1) to her last letter: "Little Cousins, / Called back. / Emily" (L 1046). Love, death, nature, and the many themes suffusing her work all relate to what she called her "Flood subject" of immortality (L 319). The question she probed throughout life was the one raised in an 1882 letter to the Reverend Washington Gladden: "Is immortality true?" (L 752a).

Religious in What Ways?

Before assuming that "Those - dying then" reflects the poet's own trajectory from youthful trust in God's promises to skeptical maturity—nicely synchronized with America's transition from the pietistic fervor of the Second Great Awakening to post-Darwinian skepticism—we should recall that Emily Dickinson was not "dying then" but *living* then and living in ways that sometimes deviated from stereotypes of religiosity. If we judge by her letters before 1858, the year when she began systematically recording her poems, this young woman was already distancing herself from certain aspects of religion while intensifying her focus on others.

For many people, regular church-going serves as a prime indicator of religious practice, and their assumptions certainly reflect those of the community that was Dickinson's extended home. With Sabbath-keeping still very much the norm in New England and workaday tasks set aside for a day of quiet devotion, her family typically participated in both morning and afternoon meetings of the First Church, then occupying the Meeting

House that was later assimilated into the Amherst College campus. That building had opened for worship in time for the 1829 college commencement the year before her birth. There they heard Bible-based sermons preached by their pastor, Aaron Colton, heard visiting clergymen, witnessed rituals, and—after 1839, when a double bass viol was introduced as the church's first musical instrument—sang hymns that long resonated in their memories. Her brother, Austin, recalled years later how "the tones [Josiah Ayres] drew from its lower chords in his accompaniment to the singing of some of Watts' Favorite Hymns, haunt me even now."⁵ Obviously, images and cadences of hymns, sermons, and biblical texts found their way into Emily Dickinson's poems. Her early letters, especially those to Austin and to Susan Gilbert whom he later married, were generally written on Sundays and often featured reports on Colton's "enlivening preaching" (L 46) or the efforts of other preachers, including Colton's successor, Edward Dwight, of whom she wrote "I never heard a minister I loved half so well" (L 123).

Yet this is the woman who opened one of her poems with the declaration "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church - / I keep it, staying at Home" (Fr 236), and her letters document gradual withdrawal from Sunday meetings. In that poem, her alternative to church worship was informal communion with God and nature in her garden. Letters show her welcoming minor indispositions and threatening weather as excuses to stay home and write. "They will all go but me," she wrote to Susan in 1852, "to the usual meetinghouse, to hear the usual sermon; the inclemency of the storm so kindly detaining me" (L 77). Her reasons for staying home certainly included desire to snatch time for correspondence and boredom with rituals she once summed up to Austin as "a couple of Baptisms, three admissions to church, a Supper of the Lord, and some other minor transactions time fails me to record" (L 46). It is well to remember, though, that she had earlier turned down the opportunity to join most of her Mount Holyoke classmates in an excursion to see a traveling menagerie, and that several years later she continued to visit her minister and his wife regularly, even after she ceased attending church. Avoiding crowded situations may not have signaled infidelity.

There is evidence in several letters, especially one to Sue in January 1854, that she grew frightened of appearing alone at meeting and alarmed by the social encounters inevitable at church (L 154). Another factor in withdrawal from church might be awareness that neighbors watching her were speculating on the state of her soul. Although she was expected to go to Sunday meetings, only church members could join in the Lord's Supper. For admission to the church, a candidate must satisfy the minister and deacons of her or his "experimental acquaintance with the grace of God"—at least in the poet's youth.⁶ By the time the Reverend Jonathan Jenkins conferred with her in the early 1870s at her anxious father's request, she could have been admitted to the First Church readily at the minister's finding her "sound."⁷

In church and elsewhere, Dickinson was methodically introduced to Congregational doctrines. Letters and poems refer to dogmas held by virtually all Christians, such as creation, the fall, and Jesus' saving role, and she displayed awareness of characteristically Protestant stresses on scriptural revelation and salvation by faith. Although she claimed once that "I do not respect 'doctrines'" and therefore ignored a sermon on predestination (L 200), her work bespeaks intimate familiarity with church teachings. With regard to doctrines emphasized within her Calvinist culture, she seems to have strained out most of the alarming beliefs in total depravity, limited atonement, and predestination, so far as it ensured damnation of those not among the elect. In a letter to Elizabeth and Josiah Holland, whose kinder Christianity afforded her welcome relief from severity, she recounted a troubling incident in which "the minister to-day, not our own minister, preached about death and judgment, and what would become of those, meaning Austin and me, who behaved improperly." She admitted that "somehow the sermon scared me," especially as family members already in full communion "looked very solemn as if the whole was true" (L 175). In sifting out fearsome aspects of Calvinism, however, she retained and distinctively reapplied two happier dogmas celebrating God's glory and transforming grace.

Fundamental to Protestantism is the conviction that sinful humans are saved by God's grace alone, and Calvin stressed that

Christ's atonement applied exclusively to those granted the gift of faith. No action performed in a person's natural state of depravity contributed toward salvation. Yet good works had been recognized even by New England's Puritan founders as likely signs of the sanctification effected by grace among the elect. Although nobody could earn God's favor by doing good, authentic conversion would bear fruit in selfless acts. As fourteen-year-old Emily wrote to Abiah Root, "my knowledge of housekeeping is about of as much use as faith without works, which you know we are told is dead" (L 8). Her comment reflects the emphasis of her religious culture on all sorts of charities and institutional good works, especially those that were socially useful. Her grandfather, conflating his town's prosperity with the advancement of Christ's kingdom, had bankrupted himself through business ventures intended to launch Amherst College as a center for orthodox education of young men from New England farms. Her father, similarly Whiggish in his piety though more prudent in his choices, labored for the college, the First Church, and moral reforms. Mary Lyon at Mount Holyoke challenged students to lives of active service, preferably in the missions. Emily's friend Abby Wood Bliss joined her husband in founding the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut. Around the United States, the reformist impulse expressed itself in efforts for abolition of slavery, for reform of criminals, for women's rights, and for establishment of utopian communities. Nonetheless, Dickinson recoiled from community pressure for an unmarried young lady to devote herself to charity. "The Sewing Society has commenced again," she reported to Jane Humphrey soon after returning from college, "now all the poor will be helped—the cold warmed—the warm cooled—the hungry fed—the thirsty attended to—the ragged clothed—and this suffering—tumbled down world will be helped to it's feet again—which will be quite pleasant to all. I dont attend—notwithstanding my high approbation—which must puzzle the public exceedingly" (L 30). Reference to "the public" suggests a parallel with fear of exposure keeping her home from church. At home, by writing notes and dispatching gifts to neighbors and friends, Dickinson reached out lovingly to comfort those contending with trouble. She was

probably on target, though, in guessing her neighbors' judgment of her odd behavior: "I am already set down as one of those brands almost consumed—and my hardheartedness gets me many prayers" (L 30).

Prayers suggest personal piety. In this, as in matters of church-going, doctrine, and good works, Dickinson proved selective. Clearly, however, she inhabited a social environment heavily suffused with everyday pious habits. At home, her father led the family in morning prayer. At school, even spelling books and dictionaries reinforced dogma and encouraged moral formation.⁸ When young Emily joked to her cousin about how they would improve themselves through conversation, she declared "we will talk over what we have learned in our geographies, and listened to from the pulpit, the press and the Sabbath School" (L 34). Like their friends, the Dickinson girls explored the popular literature being widely produced to adapt Christian instruction to the tastes of young ladies sentimentally attuned to stories of self-sacrifice in the name of loving service. Apparently, Emily found such reading less gratifying than others did. When Sue was teaching in Baltimore, Emily wrote that "I have just read three little books, not great, not thrilling—but sweet and true . . . I know you would love them all—yet they dont bewitch me any" (L 85).

Bewitchment, of course, set a standard of literary effectiveness not easily reached, the kind of "Conversion of the Mind" she celebrated in a poem on her joyous response to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems (Fr 627). The book that most stimulated her imagination, however, was the Bible, to which she alluded constantly. At a time when virtually every American Protestant had a copy of the King James Version, the Bible linked her to friends as well as to God, who revealed himself in its stories and poems.⁹ Also linking Dickinson to God was prayer, though sometimes she felt she was addressing an absentee. "If prayers had any answers to them," she confided to the Hollands, "you were all here to-night, 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 t'was only a blunder of Matthew's" (L 133). Superior to prayers, but rarer, were those epiphanies of direct encounter

with the infinite that occasionally inspired poems like "Better - than Music! / For I - who heard it" (Fr 378), which ebulliently concluded the fascicle mentioned earlier, in which she had paired "I know that He exists" (Fr 365) with "He strained my faith" (Fr 366).

Although offering no definitive proof of her spiritual condition, such ecstatic experiences support conjecture that Dickinson herself experienced the transition from fallen humanity's state of natural depravity to a state of grace; but she never formally declared conversion nor applied for church membership. Conversion, in the sense of experimental, tangible transformation remained the life-defining and essential experience of evangelical Christians. If Calvin was right in denying any merit to man or woman in the state of nature, then the soul must be justified, renewed, and empowered to move along the path of sanctification that would culminate in heavenly glory. It was only by Christ's atonement on the cross that those predestined as the elect could be saved; the vast majority of the human race faced damnation. Although Arminian and romantic developments, to be considered later in this essay, softened some of the harshness of Calvin's doctrine, nineteenth-century evangelical Christians of many denominations and throughout the country experienced intense religious excitement, as revivals ushered in seasons of awakening in which multitudes testified to the joyous relief they found in liberation from burdens of sin while they professed their love for Jesus and gratitude for his mercy. In southern and western states, the Second Great Awakening reached people through boisterously emotional camp meetings. In the cities, evangelists like Charles Grandison Finney reached uprooted and restless urban populations and even quickened evangelical fervor among Unitarians and other liberal Protestants.

The Connecticut Valley had long been a center of Congregational revivalism, though revivals there tended to be orderly, solemn events. Emily Dickinson lived through the greatest period of such excitement in Amherst. The First Church recorded revivals in 1831 (when Emily Norcross Dickinson experienced conversion and had her children baptized), 1834, 1841, 1845, 1850 (when her father, sister, and several close friends entered the

church), 1857, 1858, 1869, and 1870.¹⁰ There were even more seasons of awakening at Amherst College and Mount Holyoke, and the proliferation of religious periodicals throughout the country ensured that local readers learned about successful revivals everywhere else in America. Why, then, did Emily Dickinson fail to respond to such occasions of grace? Her holding back seems to have been as much a mystery to her as to the friends who prayed for her conversion.

Her letters testify to a fascination with "the all important subject" (L 13), and she acknowledged her wish to share in the transformation virtually every force in her environment pressured her to expect. At fifteen, she related a bit of personal history while congratulating a converted friend: "I have had the same feelings myself Dear A. I was almost persuaded to be a christian. I thought I never again could be thoughtless and worldly—and I can say that I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior" (L 10). But that "short time" was soon followed by backsliding. Two years later, she reported "there is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety. I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject" (L 20). Yet she was candid about holding back, confessing that—instead of being encouraged by her earlier near-conversion, she had been frightened to discover her susceptibility to the pressure she felt at church and in conversations with saved friends, who exhorted her to yield "to the claims of He who is greater than I" (L 10).

She had avoided attending any of the 1845 revival meetings, just as at Mount Holyoke she resisted pressures for conversion. When teachers there divided students into groups of those who (like her cousin-roommate Emily Norcross) had already been saved, those who had "hope" of conversion (meaning direct experience of what might be the stirring of grace), and those still without hope, Dickinson was in the third group and remained a no-hoper even after most classmates had responded to the earnest ministrations of Mary Lyon, their evangelically zealous college foundress.¹¹ On her return to Amherst, she encountered another season of grace in the 1850 revival that drew her father,

sister, and Sue into the church. Austin joined after his engagement to Sue, apparently because his conversion mattered greatly to her. Yet in Emily's harshest letter to the friend who would become her sister-in-law, written about 1854, she slammed the door against such interference: "Sue—I have lived by this. It is the lingering emblem of the Heaven I once dreamed, and though if this is taken, I shall remain alone, and though in that last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me—there is a darker spirit will not disown it's child" (L 173).

Despite the attractions of conversion, some combination of things held her back. The reason she gave Abiah seems especially ironic in light of her eventual choice of a nearly conventual hidden life: "it is hard for me to give up the world" (L 23). Evidently, while conscious of the way others were observing and judging her, Dickinson drew her own conclusions about them. Early letters refer often to the transformations friends experienced under the influence of grace. "Those on whom *change* has passed," she observed, "seem so very tranquil, and their voices are kind, and gentle, and the tears fill their eyes so often, I really think I envy them" (L 35). Of Abby Wood she reported "she makes a sweet, girl christian" (L 36). Perhaps Dickinson intuited the connection between submissive behavior fostered by religion and the docility that would soon be expected of these young women as wives in patriarchally ordered Christian homes.¹² If so, her resistance presaged a parallel withdrawal from realistic prospects of marriage. She reserved her erotic passion for unattainable lovers and her spiritual passion for a savior who might or might not ever reciprocate her love. Vigilant, too, against false hopes, she must have witnessed relapses into worldliness among the self-proclaimed elect that reinforced her awareness that "Our Best Moment" seldom lasts (Fr 560). Neither did her interest in friends' conversion experiences; letters from the late 1850s on ignore this topic that had been so absorbing to her early in that decade.

Basing their case on close reading of groups of poems, several Dickinson scholars have made strong arguments for the likelihood that she did, indeed, experience the kind of conversion her culture primed her to expect.¹³ Others are content to rest in un-

certainty. What we know, however, is that she underwent a transforming experience of artistic empowerment in the 1850s that paralleled the religious experiences of her companions. Two letters written in 1850, the year of her first valentine and perhaps of her tentative identification of herself as a poet, contrast the direction her life was taking with her friends' choices. "You are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom," she observed to Abiah before venturing into metaphors of braving a storm at sea (L 39). To Jane, she confessed "I have dared to do strange things—bold things, and have asked no advice from any—I have heeded beautiful tempters, yet do not think I am wrong" (L 35). Perhaps it was no coincidence that the year she began arranging her poems in fascicles was 1858, the last great revival year across the United States before the Civil War. As with other aspects of religiosity, Dickinson dispensed with the life-defining ritual of conversion in any way her neighbors would recognize, yet she somehow distilled from cultural convention a visionary and life-renewing creative energy.

One reason why Emily Dickinson proved resistant to conversion pressures was that, aside from picking up pulpit rhetoric (often for comic effect), her writings reveal little consciousness of sin; she seems never to have accepted the fundamental premise of the fall. When she reproached herself for misbehavior, it was usually to lament failures to "improve the opportunity" of free time, and her typical way of improving such opportunity was to write (L 1). A dominant theme from her earliest letter to last poems was the evanescence of time and all the fragile human ties that are vulnerable to loss through death. What drew her to religion, therefore, was hope for immortality rather than for forgiveness. As a teenager, she displayed some anxiety about the hellfire threatened for sinners, commenting to Abiah with regard to their circle of Amherst Academy girlfriends "how sad would it be for one of our number to go to the dark realms of wo, where is the never dying worm and the fire which no water can quench, and how happy if we may be one unbroken company in heaven" (L 10). Apprehensions of the inferno soon disappeared from her letters, though not the goal of preserving earthly friendship. A letter to the Reverend Edward Everett Hale after Benjamin New-

ton's death beseeches, "I should love so much to know certainly, that he was today in Heaven" (L 153). She enjoyed fantasizing about the delights of an afterlife, in which "the people singing songs were those who in their *lifetimes* were parted and separated, and their joy was because they should never be so any more" (L 62). Heaven, as she figured it to the Hollands, was "a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the *biggest* I have seen in June, and in it are my friends—all of them" (L 185), or, as she suggested to Samuel Bowles, it "must be like Sue's Drawing Room, when we are talking and laughing there" (L 189). Fittingly, her favorite biblical book was Revelation with its symbolic vision of the mysteries on the other side of death, which (to borrow Dickinson's own symbol) sets the circumference of earthly life, the boundary between all she prized in this life but could not hold (loves, nature, consciousness, moments of ecstasy) and all that the Bible promised beyond (God, awe, perpetual empowerment, love unthreatened by loss).¹⁴ If she could trust those promises. The alternative beyond death was annihilation. For Emily Dickinson, then, the essence of religious experience remained in that haunting question, "Is immortality true?" (L 752a).

Descent from the Puritans

When asking how someone born in the pietistic environment of the Connecticut Valley during the Second Great Awakening could have come to imagine the grotesquely mutilated God of "Those - dying then," anyone familiar with the writings of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritans in New England must wonder what happened to the mighty arm that "in this Bowling Alley bowld the Sun," sifted a whole nation for choice grain to quicken the new world's desert, shook sinners like spiders over the pit of hell, and from his celestial eminence overturned "Heav'ns whelm'd-down Chrystall meelee Bowle" to flood his elect with grace.¹⁵ Yet if the memory Dickinson recalled in an 1877 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson can be trusted, we learn that her anxieties about faith preceded awareness of romantic and scientific challenges to faith, that the metaphors

by which devout people around her depicted God ironically prompted fears. "When a few years old," she reported, "I was taken to a Funeral which I now know was of peculiar distress, and the Clergyman asked 'Is the Arm of the Lord shortened that it cannot save?' // He italicized the 'cannot.' I mistook the accent for a doubt of Immortality and not daring to ask, it besets me still" (L 503). A girl small in everything but a tendency to grasp imaginatively at language had fastened her mind on what she mistook to be a nonrhetorical question. The answer the preacher assumed was surely a decisive "No!" He was alluding quite explicitly to Isaiah 59:1, which reads "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save." It was a passage to which her pastor alluded elsewhere as evidence of divine mercy in rescuing sinners and one that abolitionist writers liked to cite in prophesying how God's arm would reach out to save the oppressed.¹⁶ Little Emily, sitting in the rigid pew, would not have been thinking about slaves or even of the soul's rescue from its naturally depraved condition; this was a funeral, and the minister's rhetoric raised an awful pair of questions: Had, indeed, God's arm been shortened so that he could not save anybody, or could he have rescued the deceased from death but withheld his hand?¹⁷ Perhaps the comment Dickinson later made about George Eliot reflected her own sense of deprivation also: "As childhood is earth's confiding time, perhaps having no childhood, she lost her way to the early trust, and no later came. Amazing human heart, a syllable can make to quake like jostled tree, what infinite for thee?" (L 710). The ironic possibility that Dickinson's fears may have been implanted in her home and church and her doubts ignited by words directly quoted from the Good Book prompts me to take seriously James Turner's thesis that "religion caused unbelief. . . . If anyone is to be arraigned for decide, it is not Charles Darwin but his adversary Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, not the godless Robert Ingersoll but the godly Beecher family."¹⁸

In considering this indictment, we must remember that the teaching of Lyman Beecher and Aaron Colton was not exactly the faith once delivered to the saints in the early days of New England. Although the poet's father echoed William Stoughton's 1668 election sermon cited above to declare "We should render

devout thanks to Almighty God . . . that the kingdoms of the Old World were sifted to procure the seed to plant this continent; that the purest of that seed was sown in this beautiful valley; that the blood of the Puritans flows in our veins," he belonged to a later time and strongly believed in progress. Austin Dickinson identified their parent as "of the sixth generation born within sound of the old meeting-house bell, all earnest, God-fearing men, doing their part in their day toward the evolution of the Amherst we live in."¹⁹ That Amherst, they assumed, had evolved in intellectual and moral ways as well as materially. When they sought parallels with Puritan founders, it was to honor a tradition of rectitude and public service rather than fidelity to doctrines that had come to seem embarrassing by the nineteenth century. When the Dickinson family descended upon the Edwards Church in neighboring Northampton, named in honor of the Connecticut Valley's most redoubtable Puritan theologian, it was to attend a Jenny Lind concert.

The Great Awakening of the 1740s, led by George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, had lasted about four years and stirred revivals up and down the Atlantic seaboard. The Second, which continued for decades, is generally traced to the 1801 Great Revival at Yale, initiated by Edwards's grandson Timothy Dwight as part of his crusade to marshal Calvinist spiritual and intellectual forces against the threat posed by deism to the new republic. Among the evangelists Dwight inspired were Lyman Beecher and Amherst College's Heman Humphrey. The poet's father graduated from Yale during Dwight's influential presidency, though he had to wait several decades before experiencing the conversion that qualified him for full sacramental membership in the church to which he had long contributed legal and fiscal leadership. Such support proved especially needful after 1833, when Massachusetts became the last state to disestablish the churches that, since colonial times, had enjoyed privileged status in terms of public support. Congregational churches now had to rely on voluntary contributions, which made the influx of converts recruited through revivals all the more needful. The period of dynamic church growth that followed disestablishment seemed to confirm the lasting vigor of the religious culture nineteenth-

century Yankees inherited from Puritan ancestors, but their version of that culture differed in key ways: more democratic, more pragmatic, less orthodox. Even as the National Council of the Congregationalist churches gathered at Plymouth Rock in 1865 to signify continuity of faith, it deleted the word "Calvinism" from its revised statement of doctrinal beliefs.²⁰ Emily Dickinson's mocking rebuke to her brother on his liaison with Sue in a Boston hotel at the time of their engagement could have had broader application than she thought: "Am glad our Pilgrim Fathers got safely out of the way, before such shocking times!" (L 110).

One effect of the Great Awakening had been division of churches within most Protestant denominations. Old Light Christians tended to be antirevivalist, focused on morality rather than conversion, and liberal in their views. In New England, Unitarians came to prominence in the seaboard cities and at Harvard Divinity School. New Light Christians took their name, not from the novelty of their beliefs (more traditionally Calvinistic than those of their liberal rivals), but from their loyalty to the conviction that sinners could be saved only through the new light of grace by which the Holy Spirit guided those saved by Jesus. In New England, most New Light Christians in Emily Dickinson's early years were Congregationalists. Their clergymen, who prepared at Yale or Andover, followed in an Edwardsean theological tradition. Trinitarian rather than Unitarian, they stressed the need for conversion and encouraged revivals, even as they gradually modified stern Calvinistic doctrine to accommodate nineteenth-century romantic sensibilities and emerging scientific perspectives.

This tradition, rooted in Puritanism but already evolved into a more progressive religion, derived authority from the general assent of the community (a formidable force in a democratic nation) and from two kinds of revelation: that of scripture and that of nature. Emily Dickinson's education stressed both, even as her questioning mind intuited some weaknesses in the church's intellectual armament that would become evident in coming decades.

Protestant piety relies on Bible-reading, and the nineteenth

century was a time of unprecedented printing and distribution of scriptural texts in editions that often featured illustrations, maps, glossaries, and other apparatus to assist the reader. Although sermons and religious tracts remained popular reading, lay people were encouraged to respond to the Bible on their own despite inevitably conflicting interpretations. Dickinson, fond as she was of the Bible, nonetheless recognized that it was being read increasingly as a literary work in competition with novels and that this "antique Volume - / Written by faded Men / At the suggestion of Holy Spectres" (Fr 1577) needed artful retelling to attract restless readers of her nephew's generation. That she could imagine fresh renderings and even reached the point of referring to Bible narratives as myth not only reflected the tendencies of her time, no doubt, but also the approach to scripture taken at Amherst College, where the Bible was honored as the authoritative word of God but not assumed to be literally true.

Nature, the second source of revelation, manifested the Creator's glory in ways that bridged Enlightenment with romantic modes of understanding. A foundational text in Connecticut Valley colleges was William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), which demonstrated how knowledge of nature promotes reverence for the power who manifests himself in creation.²¹ Assumptions that natural revelation reinforced scripture came into question in Dickinson's earliest years, however, when Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) demolished biblical chronologies by proving from evidence of the earth itself that this planet must be millions of years old rather than six thousand. Except for fundamentalists, most Christian thinkers of the time came to accept the Genesis account as metaphorically true, in that it established God as the originating force in creation, even if one learned to think of that process as occurring over millennia of evolution rather than seven miraculous days. Connecticut Valley believers found particular assurance in taking this approach because the Reverend Edward Hitchcock, president of Amherst College from 1845-1854, demonstrated in his *Elementary Geology* (1840), *The Religion of Geology* (1851), and frequent lectures how sciences reinforce the Bible. The butterfly emerging from its cocoon in the lithographed frontispiece to Hitchcock's *Religious Lectures on*

Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons (1850) served as an emblem of resurrection that stimulated Dickinson's excitement over metaphor—especially when figurative language pointed toward triumph over death. Right in her home area, dinosaur tracks and fossils offered clues into the geological and zoological past that could be paralleled with botanical cycles in her own garden to sustain the poet's hopes:

A science - so the Savans say,
 "Comparative Anatomy" -
 By which a single bone -
 Is made a secret to unfold
 Of some rare tenant of the mold -
 Else perished in the stone -

So to the eye prospective led,
 This meekest flower of the mead
 Upon a winter's day,
 Stands representative in gold
 Of Rose and Lily, manifold,
 And countless Butterfly! (Fr 147)

Although not itself a source of revelation, history (or the eye retrospective) was another area of knowledge descendants of the Puritans interpreted in scriptural terms. The Bible provides an ordered assemblage of readings that begin chronologically with the Genesis account of creation and end with prophecies of the 'last days and heavenly kingdom. Jonathan Edwards's *A History of the Work of Redemption* (1808), a posthumous arrangement of sermons, taught collegians like Dickinson to read world history as carrying on God's saving work in preparation for the millennium.²² Missionaries and other travelers who visited the Holy Land confirmed the historical reality of places they had read about in Holy Writ. When Helen Hunt Jackson died a few months before Emily Dickinson, her Amherst friend remembered how Jackson's father had died on such a pilgrimage in a way understood to validate hopes for immortality: "'From Mount Zion below to Mount Zion above'!, said President Humphrey of

her Father" (L 1042). Many of her contemporaries (notably Shakers, Millerites, and Adventists) awaited imminent fulfillment of revelation with Christ's second coming. Even more Americans applied Puritan typology to interpret their country's history as fulfilling God's covenant with Israel. Given the progressive flavor of nineteenth-century America, it was tempting to anticipate a perfected world of a sort Dickinson parodied in the mock-millennial rhetoric of her exhortation to George Gould: "We'll build Alms-houses, and transcendental State prisons, and scaffolds—we will blow out the sun, and the moon, and encourage invention. Alpha shall kiss Omega—we will ride up the hill of glory—Hallelujah, all hail!" (L 34).

One area in which evangelical Protestants of her time supposed themselves to have progressed beyond both the Puritans and the neo-Edwardsean Calvinists, who came to prominence in New England divinity around the time of the Revolution, was theology. In the name of progress, they cast off the harshest Calvinist doctrines that repelled sensitivities of a more humane generation. Aaron Colton, who served Amherst's First Church from Dickinson's childhood into early adulthood, stoutly denied ever hearing any New England divine preach those terrifying doctrines, often cited as alienating kindly people from a God who used arbitrary yet invincible power in ways that alarmed nineteenth-century Christians: "men of the present *punished* for Adam's sin; glorified saints in ecstasies over the suffering of the lost; willingness to be a castaway a prime evidence of piety."²³ Colton characterized the doctrines actively taught as gospel teaching that confronted sinners with their depravity while holding out hope for redemption. It was a conversion-oriented theology but one that rejected Calvinist orthodoxy as the Puritans understood it: the belief that grace is Christ's freely given but wholly unmerited gift to the relatively few elect, a transformation that no person in the state of nature could do anything to initiate.

In fact, what was being taught in the Congregational strongholds of Dickinson's day was the heresy of Arminianism (named for the Renaissance Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius) against which the Pilgrims' pastor, John Robinson, had argued at Leyden

before the *Mayflower* sailed for Plymouth and against which Jonathan Edwards dedicated his whole ministry as he battled the smug confidence of the Valley's prosperous "river gods." After disestablishment, however, well-to-do laymen like Edward Dickinson exercised tremendous influence over the churches; like most Americans, they held to democratic, progressive, optimistic views of religion. Denominations like the Congregational, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian that had long enjoyed government-mandated support now competed with rapidly growing Methodist and Baptist churches and a proliferation of new sects. Those winning the most converts were the Arminianized evangelical churches that maintained the need for conversion but exhorted aspirants to contribute to their salvation through exercise of free will. The New Haven theology of Yale's Nathaniel Taylor replaced the doctrine of total human depravity with the ideas that "sin is in the sinning" rather than inherent in human nature after the fall, and that sanctification is a cooperative process involving both man and God.²⁴ Lyman Beecher, Charles Grandison Finney, and Amherst-area ministers promoted this belief, which opened the possibility for everyone to obey the call to conversion.

It was largely because conversion had become a matter of individual choice that Dickinson felt pressures to accept Christ and not simply prepare herself for an experience of grace that might never come. Sometimes her writing echoes Arminian views, especially when imitating rhetoric familiar to pious correspondents. Otherwise, however, she wondered "How strange is this sanctification, that works such a marvellous change, that sows in such corruption, and rises in golden glory, that brings Christ down, and shews him, and lets him select his friends!" (L 35). Lets *him* select. As with human love and marriage, she apprehended that her role was to wait and perhaps be passed over: even while trying to attract this celestial lover's attention, still deferring to his choice or failure to choose. One of the characteristic features of Dickinson's love poems, in fact, is the frequent ambiguity that leaves the reader perplexed as to whether she writes about a human or divine lover. "He touched me, so I live to know" (Fr 349), for instance, celebrates a life-changing, ennobling experi-

ence that could well be conversion, and "Mine - by the Right of the White Election!" (Fr 411) leaves us to speculate on who has elected the rapturous speaker. While many Christians of her day looked for the fruits of conversion in public morality and benevolence, Dickinson still probed for inward transformation. One of the ways in which her Puritan heritage reinforced the romantic sensibility of her time was emphasis on one's inner life and personal response to occasions of supernatural or natural grace.²⁵

Imperiled Faith

Evangelicalism, which linked Amherst Congregationalism with vibrant religious movements throughout the country, has been identified as "a religious expression of romantic sensibility" because of its reliance on emotion and intuition.²⁶ Yet romanticism also challenged the system of belief espoused by the churches, sometimes directly (as in Emerson's "Divinity School Address") but more often indirectly, and Dickinson responded with characteristically alert sensitivity to ways in which romantic "heart religion" sustained or threatened hopes for immortality.

"I had a letter—and Ralph Emerson's Poems—a beautiful copy—from Newton the other day. I should love to read you them both—they are very pleasant to me" (L 30). Dickinson wrote this to Jane Humphrey at the start of 1850, the revival year that would leave her isolated in her "no-hope" condition when most of those she loved best chose Christ. But the gift of Emerson's poems, linked as it was to friendship, helped to shore her up through the ordeal ahead. Emerson and other Transcendentalists like Theodore Parker and Henry David Thoreau offered an alternative perspective derived from Samuel Taylor Coleridge and German philosophy. Calling for self-reliant trust in a person's intuitive response to nature and in the creative energy he named the Oversoul, Emerson defied orthodoxies that prevented people from seeing nature freshly and tapping into the universal spiritual force he preferred not to identify with any personal deity. Dickinson's poems bear witness to the stimulus she found in this

philosopher-poet; yet there is no evidence that she attended any of Emerson's lectures on his visits to town in 1857 or 1865 or ventured next door to meet him when he was Sue's and Austin's guest. She subjected Transcendental promises to the same tests she applied to church ones, sometimes finding the visionary empowerment Emerson taught her to expect from nature but often encountering an unbridgeable divide between it and her consciousness:

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost. (Fr 1433)

Although her circumference symbol derives in good measure from Emerson's dynamic circle imagery, Dickinson applied this geometric metaphor to the limiting boundary of death and the mysteries beyond that. She would not have found in him support for her dreams of personal immortality with God; yet when he died, Dickinson trusted that "the Ralph Waldo Emerson—whose name my Father's Law Student taught me, has touched the secret Spring" (L 750). Emerson's challenge to the churches was leveled directly at rationalistic Unitarianism, but he also threatened Congregational churches that traced their heritage to the same Puritan roots. Transcendentalism, for them, was the latest eruption of the Antinomian heresy identified with Anne Hutchinson and the Quakers: belief in inner light, private revelation, and a spirituality relatively independent of churches. Yet evangelical preachers tapped into Emersonian rhetoric and assimilated many of his ideas in ways that helped young people from backgrounds like hers detach themselves from their parents' religious practices.

When that young person was a woman, however, it was the sentimental side of romanticism that she could most readily share with others. Whereas there was an element of rebellion in Dickinson's aligning herself with Emerson, there was a quality of submissive acceptance to her engagement in the sisterly culture of mutual affective support that linked her to female

friends. Emphasis placed on the heart, on tender sympathies, on self-sacrificing love, and on the home as the center of human values sustained a social structure that restricted women's sphere to the domestic arena and to aspects of religion other than ordained ministry. Women enjoyed increased influence in churches, however, if only because their numbers dominated. About two-thirds of those converted during the Second Great Awakening were women, as were almost 70 percent of Congregational communicants.²⁷ Preachers adapted their approaches to the sensitivities of this influential majority, easing harsh Calvinist doctrines like predestination or simply neglecting to mention them. When women demurred against God's apparent cruelty toward his children, as Dickinson did in complaining that "God is rather stern with his 'little ones.' 'A cup of cold water in my name' is a shivering legacy February mornings" (L 670), clergymen shifted focus to Jesus as a suffering brother. One of the qualities that drew the Dickinson sisters to Elizabeth and Josiah Holland was their experience of domestic worship while visiting the Hollands' Springfield home. Instead of hearing their father's emphatic "I say unto you" (L 432), they appreciated "the Doctor's prayer . . . so simple, so believing. *That* God must be a friend—*that* was a different God" (L 731). Still, the poet tested sentimental notions of religion also, often adopting the persona of a naive child for the ironic critique of religion we find in "What is - 'Paradise'," with its bitter conclusion that "Maybe - 'Eden' a'nt so lonesome / As New England used to be!" (Fr 241). Her refuge became her home, "a holy thing . . . a bit of Eden which not the sin of *any* can utterly destroy" (L 59), and there she pursued the art that romanticism opened to her as an instrument of religious probing. With ministers drawing connections between art and faith,²⁸ women of her time found writing an opportunity for evangelical service that ranged from Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, through Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*, all tremendously popular books.²⁹ The nineteenth century was also a great age of hymnody, again substantially produced by women, and it seems fitting that Dickinson adapted hymn tunes to create strikingly less orthodox poems.³⁰

Although the moderating impact of romanticism on American religion was gradual and often felt to be beneficial, the Civil War struck with immediate destructive force. Given the typological linkage widely drawn between the United States and the biblical Israel, Americans tended to read scripture as reinforcing patriotism. In the North, especially, the revival of 1858 raised hopes that history was advancing rapidly toward perfection. Timothy Smith describes that awakening as a national movement engaging many Protestant denominations "to precipitate a national Pentecost which they hoped would baptize America in the Holy Spirit and in some mystic manner destroy the evils of slavery, poverty, and greed."³¹ When war erupted, it was greeted as a holy cause. But there was nothing "mystic" about the four years of slaughter that brought a rescued union and emancipation at great cost, actually fostering greed and flinging families north and south into worse poverty through loss of breadwinners even as it massively escalated the number of economically desperate former slaves. Millennial hopes perished with the war as did the redemptive view of history that had connected religion to progress. War's horrors fostered doubts about divine mercy; deaths of unconverted sons, lovers, husbands, and brothers evoked crises of faith that prompted widespread rejection of Calvinist beliefs. For Dickinson and her neighbors, the first great trial came with the death of Frazar Stearns, the son of Amherst College's president, her brother's dear friend, and a spiritual searcher who apparently never reached assurance.³²

Just two years before that fighting began, Charles Darwin initiated a different war with *The Origin of Species* (1859), which undermined the natural theology underlying Hitchcock's claims for mutual supportive revelations from science and scripture. The English biologist's theory of evolution through natural selection explained the origin of animal species without reference to God or the time-hallowed argument from design. Later, in *The Descent of Man* (1871), he raised the probability that, instead of being personally formed by God as the capstone of creation, man had evolved from apes or some shared bestial ancestor. This line of thinking, applied by social and natural scientists, threatened even metaphorical readings of Genesis. If species were inexorably

evolving through survival of the fittest, then what became of the doctrine of Christ's atonement once science cast Adam out of the picture as the capstone of creation and all mankind's sinful ancestor? Fundamentalist scripture readers held their ground by denying Darwin's premise, but more intellectually venturesome religious thinkers like those at Amherst College, Andover, and Yale, having always assumed congruence between the two revelations, generally tried to assimilate these unsettling theories and found themselves mightily puzzled to find any way of harmonizing Darwin with the Bible.³³ Defending the faith meant diminishing it.

One of Dickinson's responses to this crisis was to adopt her ironic little-girl voice in a tone of complaint about scientific terminology and systems of classification. At first, "Arcturus' is his other name" (Fr 117) reads like her version of one of Poe's laments about scientific encroachments on romantic fancy, but then Dickinson characteristically shifts focus to her centering interest in immortality: "What once was 'Heaven' / Is 'Zenith' now! / Where I proposed to go / . . . Perhaps the 'kingdom of Heaven's' changed." Yet she ends with hope that "the Father in the skies / Will lift his little girl - / 'Old fashioned'! naughty! everything! / Over the stile of 'pearl'!" Another response was a kind of droll bemusement, as she commented that "we thought Darwin had thrown 'the Redeemer' away" (L 750). Striving to maintain a hope that was not childishly naive in its repudiation of intellectual developments, the poet located the weakness of sciences in the questions they made no effort to resolve: "Why the Thief ingredient accompanies all Sweetness Darwin does not tell us" (L 359). Whatever it might discover about the origins of man, science revealed nothing about his destiny.

Christian hopes rely on God's biblical promises. When Dickinson asked Washington Gladden "Is immortality true," she evidently demanded reasons she could use to convince a doubting friend. Gladden responded: "I believe in the life everlasting, because Jesus Christ taught it. Say what you will about him, no one can deny that he knew the human soul, its nature, its laws, its destinies, better than any other being who ever trod this earth; and he testifies, and his testimony is more clear, more definite,

more positive on this than on any other subject, that there is life beyond the grave" (L 752a). What made this declaration less reassuring than it would have been a few decades before was the impact of the Higher Criticism, European scholarship that employed evidence from linguistics, stylistics, history, and comparative religion to represent the Bible as something very much different and less sacred than divine inspiration. It was, instead, a product of human authorship with multiple anonymous writers and amenders. This research discredited the notion of Moses's authorship of the Pentateuch, as David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-1836; translated into English by Mary Ann Evans/George Eliot, 1846) and Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (1863) linked Christian mysteries to pagan fertility myths while even questioning the historical existence of Jesus. Dickinson accustomed herself to losses, admitting that "No Moses there can be" (Fr 521) and "Ararat's a Legend - now - / And no one credits Noah" (Fr 532).

Even without pursuing the study of comparative religions that turned out to be one of the offshoots of the nineteenth century's linkage of missionary work to colonization, Dickinson found herself in a much more diverse world of belief than she would have guessed as the child of a Congregationalist household in the Connecticut Valley. The New England rupture between Old Light and New Light factions within churches that resulted in separation of Unitarian and Congregational denominations touched her own family when her cousins, Louisa and Frances Norcross, became Unitarians. Among her closest friends, Samuel Bowles, the Hollands, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson also opted for liberal Christianity.³⁴ Episcopal and Baptist churches formed in Amherst, and people close to the poet dabbled with Christian Spiritualism.³⁵ New sects kept emerging in her America (Mormon, African-American Episcopal, and Christian Science churches among the largest), while the Holiness Movement linked worshippers in disparate conservative churches. The culture of revivalism, like that of sentimentalism, foregrounded a shared evangelical style while disregarding doctrinal disputes among sects so that cooperation was encouraged in benevolent societies, temperance efforts, and Bible distribution.

Movement between denominations became easier. Austin's friend Frederic Dan Huntington began his ministry as a Congregationalist, became an evangelically oriented Unitarian on the Harvard faculty, and ended his career as an Episcopal bishop. Dickinson's letters accommodate their tone to the sensitivities of friends at various points along the continuum from belief to disbelief; with death more steadily in her mind with every passing year, she respected whatever beliefs sustained others as they confronted the challenges facing finite, suffering, yet hopeful creatures living in the shadow of death.

One cause that united American Protestants of Dickinson's time, especially before the Civil War, was a strident anti-Catholicism rooted in the Reformation and exacerbated by the arrival of multitudinous impoverished immigrants. In 1834, a mob of Yankee workmen burned down the Ursuline convent-school in Charlestown, Massachusetts. Other riots resulted from conflicts over King James or Douay Bibles in public schools, job access, and the Civil War draft.³⁶ Such hate was part of the poet's milieu. She commented wryly in an 1852 letter about the minister's "announcing several facts which were usually startling" about "the Roman Catholic system" (L 96), as though the topic were commonplace; and she gleefully encouraged her brother to thrash the Irish boys he taught in a Boston public school, joking that "Vinnie and I say masses for poor Irish boys souls" (L 43). In attacking Catholics, Protestants saw themselves championing an American way of life that promoted morality and public order. By the 1860 census, however, Roman Catholicism had established itself as the most populous American church. When a parish formed in Amherst, Edward Dickinson contributed to the building campaign. Irish Catholic domestic workers became essential members of the Dickinson household. Meanwhile, American Protestants who traveled in Catholic Europe brought back surprisingly appreciative reports about liturgical rites and arts. The poet, always sensitive to absences, seems to have felt some attraction to the way Catholics turned to Mary as mediatrix between sinners and Jesus and occasionally referred to a kind of prayer quite out of keeping with her Congregational formation: "Mine to supplicate Madonna - / If Madonna be / Could behold so far a

Creature - / Christ - omitted - Me" (Fr 762). The breakdown of syntax here betrays her discomfort, yet the lines convey a vulnerable sense of loss for which her own tradition offered no recompense.

What Happened to God's Arm?

It is easy enough to discern in hindsight the crushing weight of intellectual and societal pressures that overwhelmed the structure of belief that had given confident energy to America's evangelical Protestants before the Civil War and to identify tendencies within the churches as well as outside them that prompted Dickinson to imagine God with his arm lopped off. But people survive amputations, and so may Deity—especially since God's bodily features are purely metonymic.

Several details of our proof-text poem merit attention in light of this discussion. First is that anthropomorphic image of God, based on Isaiah and other biblical passages, admittedly, yet still an image graven with pen and subject to Puritan critiques of such idolatry. That a god limited to human imagination is subject to mutilation proves nothing about the immortal, immutable, unknowable lord of creation as envisaged by Calvin. Second, if we think of this poem as a response to the implosion of the traditional argument for God's existence based on orderly design evident throughout the universe, is its surprising degree of metrical regularity. There are variants in its iambic beat, of course: trochaic feet at the start of several lines and an opening spondee, all of which could be interpreted as reinforcing the assurance that existed back "then." The iambic smoothness of "They went to God's Right Hand" accords with tone, but equal regularity in the two most devastating lines ("That Hand is amputated now / And God cannot be found") hints that the poet senses more order in the universe than the poem directly acknowledges.

The third textual feature I find striking is the poem's assertively Latinate diction in key words ("amputated," "abdication," "illumine," and, most obviously, "ignis fatuus"). This Latin phrase refers to the eerie light sometimes seen over grassy

marshlands at night. It gives a false illumination if mistaken for sun or moon yet has its own authenticity and might serve as a somewhat unreliable guide in darkness. Science can only guess its origin, and popular observations of this will-o'-the-wisp have given rise to many superstitions. Linking the idea of superstition to the Latin language turns thoughts toward the Church of Rome and the possibility that the time frame of this poem may be more extensive than is generally understood. Perhaps it refers, not simply to the contrast between those dying in Dickinson's youth and those facing mortality in her later years, but to a starker contrast between the doubts of post-Civil War America and an age of faith before the Reformation.

The last textual element that calls for attention is the word "Behavior" in "The abdication of Belief / Makes the Behavior small." It accords with her father's piety that valued faith as an impetus to those virtues that promoted personal prosperity while advancing Christ's kingdom. For Emily Dickinson, however, morality (often confused then, as now, with social convention) had never been the essence of religious experience, and she clearly resented the tendency of pious folk to judge their neighbors. Heroic sanctity might be less likely in America's postbellum religious culture when even so prominent a minister as Henry Ward Beecher (an Amherst College graduate) could be implicated in a messy sex scandal. Still, if behavior grows smaller in time of doubt, might not something else, specifically, hope for immortality, loom larger?

In part because Dickinson focused her imaginative energy on that "Flood subject" (L 319) rather than dogmas or practices directly challenged by these cultural upheavals, she managed to cope and even to take some pleasure in the nimble balancing act she sustained between belief and doubt. Churches coped also. Although wounded by romanticism, Darwin, the Higher Criticism, and the Civil War, they enjoyed a period of renewed vigor with considerably increased membership.³⁷ In the Gilded Age, Dwight L. Moody picked up the mantle dropped by Finney and Beecher to become the country's most successful revivalist. Henry Ward Beecher, Lyman Beecher's son and the novelist's brother, claimed to reconcile Christian truth with Darwin's

findings. Washington Gladden, the Congregational minister to whom Dickinson directed her question about immortality, emerged as a leader of the Social Gospel movement, by which liberal Protestants applied Christian principles to political and economic advocacy for the working poor. Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur* (1880), a sensational work of historical fiction set in Palestine in the early years of the Roman Empire and somewhat misleadingly subtitled "A Tale of the Christ," became the century's best-selling novel in America.³⁸ In Amherst, Austin Dickinson spearheaded the building campaign for the handsome First Church structure that went up within sight of The Homestead.

Even while questioning, Emily Dickinson continued to hope for immortality, especially as death's depredations struck closer and closer. Though she could not know for sure where the dead went, she still trusted in their journey. When her mother died in 1882, she wrote, "I believe we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker—that the One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power still farther to surprise that which He has caused. Beyond that all is silence" (L 785). Like amputation, abdication requires an agent. One must set aside whatever is being abdicated by an effort of will, and Dickinson never abdicated hope. She even laughed at the folly of those who did: "The Fop - the Carp - the Atheist," ephemeral creatures who cling to each passing moment even as, by God's sublime joke, "their commuted Feet / The Torrents of Eternity / Do all but inundate" (Fr 1420). It is as though "Heav'n's whelm'd-down Chrystall meelee Bowle," punningly imaged by the Puritan Edward Taylor, was drenching fashionable doubters of the declining nineteenth century with the wholly unexpected gift of endless life.³⁹ Even if the right arm Christians had earlier relied on for salvation had been amputated, the left one somehow pulled the sluice to release the flow of grace that sustained Emily Dickinson in "the Balm of that Religion / That doubts - as fervently as it believes" (Fr 1449).

NOTES

1. Quotations from Dickinson's poems in this essay refer to *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Reading Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cam-

bridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999); they will be identified parenthetically within the text with numbers preceded by (Fr). Citations from Letters (L) refer to *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958). I have also consulted Franklin's 1998 Variorum Edition of *The Poems*.

2. James McIntosh, *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 3; Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 451; Roger Lundin, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 4.

3. Books useful for establishing historical background for this period in American religious culture include Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972); Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Charles H. Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994); Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds. *Women and Religion in America*, vol. 1, *The Nineteenth Century* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957); Donald C. Swift, *Religion and the American Experience* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); and Peter W. Williams, ed., *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

4. Melville's depressed state of mind while visiting England at the start of his journey to the Middle East is known to us through Nathaniel Hawthorne's account, perhaps ironically exaggerated, in *The English Notebooks*, ed. Randall Stewart (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 432-33.

5. W. A. Dickinson, "Address," *An Historical Review: One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the First Church of Christ in Amherst, Massachusetts* (Amherst, 1890), 56-57.

6. First Church, *The Articles of Faith and Government* (Amherst, 1834), 7.

7. MacGregor Jenkins, *Emily Dickinson: Friend and Neighbor* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1930), 80-82. Another account of this inter-

view appears in Martha Dickinson Bianchi's introduction to *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929).

8. Rowena Revis Jones, "The Preparation of a Poet: Puritan Directions in Emily Dickinson's Education," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1982): 285-324.

9. See Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), and Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

10. A chapter detailing revival activity in the parish appears in Sister Regina Siegfried, A.S.C., "Conspicuous by Her Absence: Amherst's Religious Tradition and Emily Dickinson's Own Growth in Faith" (Ph.D. diss., St. Louis University, 1982), 85.

11. Lyon is one of the evangelical leaders featured in Joseph A. Conforti's *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, & American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), chapter 4.

12. Martha Tomhave Blauvelt writes in "Women and Revivalism" that "the marital home was indeed a cloister, and conversion helped women take their vows," in *Women and Religion*, ed. Ruether and Keller, 4.

13. William R. Sherwood, strongly influenced by Thomas Johnson's chronology for the poems, locates that conversion in 1862, the year Johnson thought to be the poet's most productive. "In 1862," he argues, "Emily Dickinson did not have a crack-up . . . but a conversion, and . . . it was precisely the variety of conversion that both her inclinations and her traditions had prepared her for and against which she had fought so vigorously at Mary Lyon's Seminary in Mount Holyoke in 1848": *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 138. Dorothy Huff Oberhaus reads Fascicle 40 (dated 1864) as "a three-part meditation" that reveals itself as "a simple conversion narrative" confirming the poet's developing relationship with Jesus: *Emily Dickinson's Fascicles: Method and Meaning* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 4, 14. Although Cynthia Griffin Wolff organizes her critical biography around the motif of Dickinson as a Jacob figure wrestling with God, she finds evidence of midlife experience validating early flickers of hope. "By the mid-1860s or early 1870s," Wolff declares, "well before

Father's death, a new poetry of faith had emerged": *Emily Dickinson*, 504.

14. I have elaborated more fully on this interpretation of Dickinson's "Circumference" in *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), chapters 7-10.

15. Edward Taylor is my source for the bowling alley and punch-bowl references, taken from "The Preface" to *Gods Determinations Touching His Elect* and *Preparatory Meditations: First Series*, number 8. It was William Stoughton who introduced the grain-sifting metaphor in "New England's True Interest," and Jonathan Edwards is famous or infamous for the spider image in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

16. William Lloyd Garrison, in his "Preface" to Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, warned that "He who can peruse it . . . without trembling for the fate of this country in the hands of a righteous God, who is ever on the side of the oppressed, and whose arm is not shortened that it cannot save,—must have a flinty heart, and be qualified to act the part of a trafficker 'in slaves and the souls of men.'" *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), 38.

17. Alfred Habegger, noting 1844 as the year in which the future poet first experienced a wave of bereavements, speculates that this letter may refer to the funeral of Martha Dwight Strong, who committed suicide. If so, she (not uncharacteristically) misrepresented herself to Higginson as having been much younger at the time than was really the case: *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House, 2001), 173-74.

18. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), xiii.

19. In *The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 99, Karl Keller quotes this passage from Edward Dickinson's contribution to *Celebration of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Settlement of Hadley, Massachusetts* (Northampton, 1859), 77. Amherst traced its origins to Hadley. His son's statement comes from a similar commemorative work, *An Historical Review*, 58.

20. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 151.

21. Carlton Lowenberg, *Emily Dickinson's Textbooks* (Lafayette, Calif.: Lowenberg, 1986).
22. Although Edwards is known today chiefly for the oft-anthologized revival sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," general readers of Dickinson's generation were more likely to know him through this book and the account he wrote of David Brainerd's missionary work among the Indians. In seminaries, scholars wrestled with the theological and philosophical challenges of his treatises on *Freedom of the Will and Original Sin*. See Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards*.
23. Colton, *The Old Meeting House and Vacation Papers, Humorous and Other* (New York: 1890), 69-70. Such notably "hard doctrines" had, indeed, been preached earlier in New England Congregational churches. The doctrine of Original Sin as cause of human depravity was widely held before the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Michael Wigglesworth's dismayingly popular poem, "The Day of Doom" (1662), represented saints in heaven celebrating God's justice despite the horrendous fate of those condemned to hell. The idea that "willingness to be damned" (acceptance of God's ineffable will as right, even if it meant one's own eternal condemnation) was itself evidence of a converted mind emerged in the late eighteenth century among neo-Edwardsean theologians. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* (1859) critiques such thinking from a sentimental fictional perspective solidly grounded in knowledge of the New England Calvinist tradition.
24. Taylor—one of Timothy Dwight's protégés, minister of New Haven's First Church, and a professor at Yale Divinity School—was the principal exponent of the New Haven Theology. Sydney Ahlstrom summarizes his positions: "Taylor's fundamental insistence was that no man becomes depraved but by his own act, for the sinfulness of the human race does not pertain to human nature as such. 'Sin is in the sinning,' and hence 'original' only in the sense that it is universal. Though inevitable, it is not—as with Edwards—causally necessary. Man always had, in Taylor's famous phrase, 'power to the contrary.' As a free, rational, moral, creative cause, man is not part of the system of nature, at least not a passive or determined part": *A Religious History of the American People*, 420.
25. According to Turner, "For all the social ritual surrounding revivalism, the end of the exercise was to put the individual alone and

- face-to-face with his God": *Without God*, 209. See also Amanda Porterfield, "The Puritan Legacy in American Religion and Culture," in *Perspectives*, ed. Williams, 82-83.
26. Turner, *Without God*, 105.
27. Swift, *Religion and the American Experience*, 106. See also Douglas, *The Feminization*.
28. Habegger identifies Edwards Amasa Park, whom we know Dickinson admired as a preacher, along with Horace Bushnell as nationally prominent Congregational ministers of the 1850s whose aestheticized "religion of the heart" may have "helped make feasible Dickinson's work as a poet" (*My Wars*, 310).
29. David S. Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), chapters 3-4.
30. According to Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture*, "There are several points to be noted about the hymns which proliferated and were welcomed in American homes and churches during this period: first, their relative novelty as an important part of American Protestant worship; second, their largely non-evangelical and feminine authorship; and last, their liberalized theology, poeticized form, and growing obsession with heavenly life" (217). See also two articles by Mary DeJong: "'Theirs the Sweetest Songs': Women Hymn Writers in the Nineteenth-Century United States," in *A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism*, ed. Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 141-67; "'With My Burden I Begin': The (Im)Personal 'I' of Nineteenth-Century Hymnody," *Studies in Puritan American Spirituality* 4 (1993): 185-223.
31. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 62.
32. Valuable perspective on how the Civil War challenged religious faith appears in Shira Wolosky's book, *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), and in Barton Levi St. Armand's *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), chapters 3 and 4. See also Wolosky's essay in this book.
33. Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), chapter 3; Turner, *Without God*, chapter 6.
34. Helpful perspective on Dickinson's contact with liberal

Christian influences and the effect of such thinking on her relationship with Christ appears in Rowena Revis Jones's article, "A Taste for 'Poison': Dickinson's Departure from Orthodoxy," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 2, no. 1 (1993): 47-64.

35. Benjamin Lease, *Emily Dickinson's Readings of Men and Books: Sacred Soundings* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), chapter 4.

36. Lippy, *Being Religious*, 85-86; Handy, *A Christian America*, 58-59; Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 113-18.

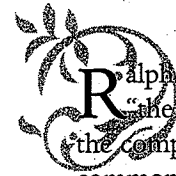
37. In "Religion and Modernity, 1865-1914," Stow Persons indicates that church membership grew markedly in post-Civil War America. Whereas the 1860 census showed only 23% of the U.S. population as belonging to churches, in 1910, the figure had risen to 43%: *The Shaping of American Religion*, ed. James Ward Smith and A. Lealand Jamison (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 372. Easier standards for admission probably influenced these figures, as did growth in churches not existing or only slightly represented in census data from the start of the nineteenth century.

38. Paul Gutjahr attributes the tremendous popularity of *Ben-Hur* among Christians to the effect of historical accuracy that Wallace achieved as a result of extensive research and to the novel's validation of feeling over reason in matters of faith. Harper and Brothers was still selling millions of copies into the 1920s; like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Ben-Hur* also inspired a long-running dramatic adaptation that toured the country for decades. Situating this publishing phenomenon within the context of responses to Darwin and Comte, Gutjahr argues that "Wallace's painstaking historical research resonated with religious readers who saw in the book a means of answering the call for scientific validation for the existence and authority of Christ and his teachings": *An American Bible*, 169.

39. A possible interpretation of variant words in the manuscript version of this poem ("the dog," "the tramp") is that Dickinson experimented with shifting perspective away from people who neglect faith by affecting fashionable doubts to those often scorned by church members and assumed to have forfeited God's grace by their degraded lives.

Public and Private in Dickinson's War Poetry

Shira Wolosky



Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay "The Poet," declared that "the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and appries us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth."¹ Within the norms of the nineteenth century, this would seem to relegate women poets to the status of "partial men." In the much accepted division of life into separate spheres, women were barred access to the "common wealth" as public space. Instead, women remained officially restricted to the domestic sphere—what Tocqueville describes as "the narrow circle of domestic interests and duties"—while men found their places in the "public" world.² Women thus could seemingly never achieve Emerson's representative stance—neither in its often overlooked sense (but the one most fully realized by Whitman) of the poet as public figure, nor in the more familiar sense of a rich and powerful autonomous subjectivity, which, however, finds and asserts itself in speaking for and to the wider community. In contrast, women seem at most to reflect in their work their own domestic imprisonment and its costs. In this circumscribed state, the woman poet seems cut off from history, more or less idle and more or less impotent with regard to the public course of events. She thus seems unable to address herself, as poets should, to a surrounding community, representing its true