Georgia State University
Digital Archive @ GSU

English Theses | Department of English

5-2-2012

# Dismantling the Spatiality of Heaven in the Prayer Poems of Emily Dickinson

Scott A. Pett
scott.a.pett@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/english_theses

Recommended Citation
Pett, Scott A., "Dismantling the Spatiality of Heaven in the Prayer Poems of Emily Dickinson" (2012). *English Theses.* Paper 126.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Digital Archive @ GSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Archive @ GSU. For more information, please contact digitalarchive@gsu.edu.

# DISMANTLING THE SPATIALITY OF HEAVEN IN THE PRAYER POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON

by

SCOTT PETT

Under the Direction of Mark Noble

ABSTRACT

I identify three significant components of Heaven's spatiality that determine the boundaries of and conditions for "legitimate" spiritual experience, all of which are embodied in what Dickinson calls "the apparatus" of prayer (Fr 632). First, the locations of Heaven and Earth are determinable, absolute, and inflexible, thus marking the distance that separates human from God as static and constant; second, in order to engage God, the supplicant must turn towards Heaven (and away from Earth); and third, specific spatial and emotional protocol are established by assigning God socially constructed roles such as King or Father. Dickinson dismantles the spatiality of Heaven in her poems and letters by undoing these three components; yet even in the act of disassembling, she embraces and recycles their respective ideologies as a way of claiming sole ownership of her religiosity.

INDEX WORDS: Emily Dickinson, Spatiality, Heaven, Prayer poems, George Herbert, Isaac Watts.

# DISMANTLING THE SPATIALITY OF HEAVEN IN THE PRAYER POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON

by

SCOTT PETT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

Copyright by
Scott Allen Pett
2012

# DISMANTLING THE SPATIALITY OF HEAVEN IN THE PRAYER POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON

by

SCOTT PETT

Committee Chair: Mark Noble

Committee: Paul Schmidt

Edward Christie

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2012

## Dedication

To Darcey, for everything you've done to help me reach this point as my partner in life. This small paper will have to suffice until I write something more worthy of the debt I owe you. To Mom and Dad, for your infinite love, encouragement, and support. To my beautiful Adelaide Grace, for the joy you bring me every single day.

## Acknowledgments

I could not have written this paper without the help and patience of my thesis committee: Mark Noble, Paul Schmidt, and Edward Christie. The genesis of this project sprouted unexpectedly during Dr. Noble's Whitman/Dickinson seminar. He has witnessed the slow germination and evolution of this work, and been integral to its development. Dr. Christie helped me tremendously in the formulation of my proposal and the initial articulation of my argument. Dr. Schmidt, one of my favorite course instructors at Georgia State, provided an early crucial encouragement of my academic endeavors. I thank each of them sincerely.

Others have contributed in seemingly small, but valuable ways. I presented a version of this paper at the 2011 SAMLA Conference, where I received some helpful feedback from those in attendance, including the suggestion that I look through Jane Donahue Eberwein's book *Strategies of Limitation*, which turned out to be an instrumental resource. Drs. Stephen Dobranski of Georgia State University and Martha Nell Smith of the University of Maryland – College Park offered assistance on how to properly cite Dickinson's digitized family Bible. Two very good friends of mine, Amanda Erdmann and Sam Cannon, read early drafts of what has become this work, and provided critical insights that shaped its progress. Finally, I want to thank the poet herself, Emily Dickinson, whom I've gotten to know over the last year, and who has bettered my life in every possible way.

This project has made me an exponentially better researcher and writer, and galvanized my ambition of eventually earning a PhD in the hopes of joining the haggard ranks of serious literary scholars. In other words, this is the beginning of the end.

## Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** ..... v

**Introduction** ..... 1

**Chapter 1: The Spatiality of Heaven According to Watts and Herbert** ..... 11

**Chapter 2: The Spatiality of Heaven According to Dickinson (Location and Movement)** ... 21

**Chapter 3: The Spatiality of Heaven According to Dickinson, cont. (God's Roles)** ..... 33

**Conclusion: The Apparatus of Prayer** ..... 40

**Works Cited** ..... 50

**Introduction**

*The terms she had been handed by society – Calvinist Protestantism, Romanticism, the nineteenth-century corseting of women's bodies, choices, and sexuality – could spell insanity to a woman genius. What this one had to do was retranslate her own unorthodox, subversive, sometimes volcanic propensities into a dialect called metaphor: her native language. "Tell all the Truth – but tell it Slant –."It is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment – that explodes in poetry.*

-Adrienne Rich, *Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson*, 161

Because Emily Dickinson was "one of the most brilliantly enigmatic religious thinkers this country has ever known" (Lundin 6), scholars have justifiably focused much of their scrutiny on the poetic and biographical surfaces of her nuanced religious attitudes. The complicated nature of Dickinson's religiosity requires that the responsible critic approach the subject with extreme caution, avoiding the temptation to oversimplify her views or attribute conclusive motives. As one scholar admonishes readers, regarding any theme of hers, "Don't point; don't pry; don't settle for one truth… because assigning the poem to one aspect of experience will rob it of its vital versatility" (Grabher 197-200). Concerning her religious poetics in particular, Dorothy Huff Oberhaus contends that while Dickinson may have rejected certain points of doctrine (L 36; L 175; L 200),[1] "That does not mean she rejected God or the basic tenets of Christianity. Rather, as her poems on prayer demonstrate, she addresses God in a wide variety of attitudes" (169). Patrick Keane supplies a partial list of those various attitudes, characterizing Dickinson's God as "a God she alternately believed in, questioned, quarreled with, rebelled against, caricatured, even condemned, but never ceased to engage" (36). For any study on the religious facets of Dickinson's life and art to be taken seriously then, it must consider the varying shades of her discourse with God. Jane Donahue Eberwein describes what she sees as the best

[1] Dickinson's letters are quoted from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, 3 vols. Subsequent references are cited as (L) in the text. Dickinson's poems are quoted from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Reading Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin. Subsequent references are cited as (Fr) in the text.

approach: “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” (“Immortality” 70). My argument supports the consensus among Dickinson scholars that regards her religious views as vibrant, colorful, nuanced, visionary, and deeply contemplative. Though it cannot be assumed the positions expressed in her poems always and absolutely represent the views of the poet herself (an impossibility since many of them contradict one another), the admission of acclaimed poet Richard Wilbur that “the subjects to which a poet returns are those which vex him” gives scholars some license to treat the poems as evidence of a personal struggle over certain religious principles and conventions. I supplement those personalized readings where I can with excerpts from her letters that confirm the questions she asks and the charges she makes in her poetry as biographically pertinent.

Where she displays a cynical viewpoint, I attempt to demonstrate ways in which her disparagement achieves a complexity equal to that of her devotion. Because her devotional temperament and skeptical predisposition factor equally in the shape of her poetic and spiritual consciousness, they are each deserving of serious critical study as independently significant as well as interdependently influential. For example, many of the poems that use religious words and images refuse faith-promoting and subversive readings both, making it impossible for the poem to be about any one thing: “It was the limit of my Dream – / The focus of my Prayer – / A perfect – paralyzing Bliss – / Contented as Despair –” (Fr 767). Part of what makes Dickinson’s attentiveness to religious subjects so fascinating is that nothing can be taken for granted. Bliss can be paralyzing, or paralysis blissful. Despair can be content with itself, or contentment a form of despair.

Even if Dickinson's personal views on the spatiality of Heaven cannot be categorically determined, the ubiquity of the subject in her work suggests it was at the very least a preoccupation. There are numerous moments, such as in the poem quoted above, where she notes the scriptural distinctness of Earth and Heaven as separate spheres, and undercuts in some way that authority of that arrangement: "The Heaven below the Heaven above – / Obscured with ruddier Blue –" These simple lines disrupt the tradition of "Heaven above" as the only space that qualifies for that religious superlative. Dickinson maintains the separateness of their locations, but by characterizing "The Heaven below" as having skies of a ruddier Blue than those of the one above (the implication being she does not care enough to even look for whatever lies beyond them), she undermines the authority of Heaven's traditional spatiality to control the shape and rhythms of her religious experience and identity. She does not discount the possibility of a celestial place that is literally located above Earth, as her Calvinist context describes, but because the sublimity of her mortal experience exceeds the promises made by that cosmic venue, the configuration itself loses all meaning and substance. The spatiality of Heaven, especially where she describes it as a mechanism of control, has little bearing on the development of her ideas or influence on the choices she makes, except to prevent her from authentic congress with God. The speakers of other poems are not so demure as to grant "Heaven above" the legitimacy it demands: "Adored with caution – as a Brittle Heaven – / To reach / Were hopeless, as the Rainbow's Raiment / To touch –" (Fr 724). Again, she devalues the spatial distinctness of Heaven from Earth by using a comparison to natural phenomena. Reaching for Heaven is as pointless a venture as attempting to contain a Rainbow's Raiment. Better to appreciate the diaphanous beauty she finds in her surroundings than waste energy pining for a place where a lack of such splendor makes it "Brittle."

There are three significant components of Heaven's spatiality that determine the boundaries of and conditions for "legitimate" spiritual experience, all of which are embodied in what Dickinson calls "the apparatus" of prayer (Fr 632). First, the locations of Heaven and Earth are determinable, absolute, and inflexible, thus marking the distance that separates human from God as static and constant; second, in order to engage God, the supplicant must turn towards Heaven (and away from Earth); and third, specific spatial and emotional protocol are established by assigning God socially constructed roles such as King or Father. Regarding the correlation between God and the space he occupies, Eberwein argues, "One reason for Dickinson's problem with envisaging heaven is that it was known to her as God's home, and her attitude toward God was a confused and troubling one" (*Strategies* 240). If Dickinson sought to clarify her relationship to God, it was with the intention to achieve autonomy – free of structures, boundaries, and systematic rituals. And "Since Heaven and He are One" (Fr 797), her inability to "reach" Heaven can represent in some ways the ultimate inaccessibility of God himself: "I never spoke with God / Nor visited in Heaven – / Yet certain am I of the spot / As if the Checks were given –" (Fr 800). For the purposes of my argument I treat Heaven as God's home, and therefore hold God, as I believe Dickinson does, to the same spatial laws as the place he inhabits. To confront one, in Dickinson's poems, is to confront the other in many respects. To seek one is to seek the other. The exclusivity and inflexibility of Heaven is a direct reflection on God's character, which gives some idea of why she might not cherish the idea of communicating with him through prayer, which one poem in particular describes as the mechanical product of spiritual-spatial rigidity (Fr 623). Even if prayer was an effective apparatus, which she determines it is not, at least not consistently, the formula that defines it precludes the possibility of an authentic and unmediated relationship with God, the only kind of relationship that interests

her. Even in her pursuit for religious sovereignty, we see an insatiable craving for candid contact and honest dialogue with God, despite his obvious character flaws.

Dickinson dismantles the spatiality of Heaven in her poems and letters by undoing the three components I described earlier (whether intentionally or not); yet even in the act of disassembling, she embraces and recycles their respective ideologies as a way of claiming sole ownership of her religiosity. First, she divorces the religious meaning of Heaven from its materiality, or its fixed and stable location. There might be a real place called Heaven, with real spatial parameters, but that does not make it a religious place or in any way synonymous with paradise. She chafes, in many of her poems, at the teaching that Heaven can only be found in a "specific Spot" (Fr 1435), which, as tradition dictates, exists above Earth, and that only by looking upward can one progress spiritually. That Heaven can be located does not mean it can be accessed – and even if accessed, the experience will surely fall short of the perfection it promises. Several of Dickinson's poetic narrators approach Heaven's door – either in prayer or as a result of death – only to find it locked or altogether vacant (Fr 525; Fr 268; Fr 39). 'Heaven' then, is a misnomer for the space above Earth, as it neither offers religious fulfillment nor imparts further light and knowledge. The hollowness of such encounters does not preclude a conviction in the hallow-ness of Heaven as a religious concept or the eventuality of an afterlife, but rather emphasizes the frailty of the structure that defines, and thereby limits, an understanding of and appreciation for both Deity and eternity. In those poems where Dickinson juxtaposes "Heaven above" with "Heaven on Earth," she points to the meaninglessness of the spatial fixtures in the one: "Who has not found the Heaven – below – / Will fail of it above" (Fr 1609). The true test for Dickinson is not to find Heaven *above*, since it has already been found, but to find it on Earth, which is a much more difficult task since it has no spatial casing. Clearly,

Dickinson wishes to redefine, rather than reduce or diminish, the concept of Heaven in religious discourse. While the location of Heaven loses all force and influence over her religious poetics, the Heaven of her progressive understanding does, somewhat paradoxically, have spatial properties. Though she asserts that Heaven, by definition, cannot be contained, she observes the ever-changing landscape of its face, and remarks on the evolving distance that separates her from it. By redefining Heaven in terms of space, distance, and position, Dickinson provides further possibilities for encountering God, for whom Heaven is home, both on Earth and in the "Circumference" beyond (Fr 633; Fr 858).

Second, by refusing the spatiality of Heaven any influence over the shape and development of her religious character, Dickinson is free to find Heaven in her surroundings, rather than exclusively in that place above her. The individual who accepts the authority of Heaven above must consequently separate 'natural' experiences from 'spiritual,' much in the way that Heaven and Earth are separate and distinct spheres. Whereas, for that individual, the source of all religious experience is that space above Earth, Dickinson is able to discern divinity and derive religious worship wherever she finds peace (Fr 224). She interrogates the mentality that insists all religious fulfillments come by *reaching* for God, for example through prayer, based on the presumption of one day *arriving* at Heaven. Why, the poet wonders, must prayer be its own unique gesture, disconnected from nature and love of one's family? In other words, rather than strive towards one day arriving at Heaven "at last," Dickinson finds Heaven "going, all along" (Fr 236). Rather than reach for Heaven above, she finds Heaven in the beauty that surrounds her. She reimagines traditional ways of approaching God, meaning she encounters the sacred in "the magical extents" that are "Contained in this short Life" (Fr 1175). Instead of dismissing entirely the role of movement in the achievement of spiritual progress, she

incorporates the symbolic "reach" into the fabric of her daily life. By investing energy into what she finds poetically and spiritually magnificent about Earth instead of hoping to one day inhabit that disappointing space above, she finds Heaven *on* Earth.

Third, Dickinson destabilizes the custom of assigning God selective roles of societal proximity, as done by religious texts and culture. Though not an explicitly spatial concern, the practice of calling God "Father," for example, has spatial implications that threaten the poet's spiritual development. When God is given a role, so are those individuals who self-identify as his devotees. God as Father is the exclusive source of all sustenance and knowledge for his "children," who are then expected to stay physically and emotionally close to him at all times. Though again, it cannot be argued that Dickinson definitively suffered from spiritual claustrophobia as a result of this custom, she unquestionably considered its consequences. How does one approach a fatherly or royal God? What are the terms of their communion? What recourse is there for the daughter or subject who finds fault with his methods and messages? What opportunities are there for independent thought and action? By assigning God innovative roles of societal proximity such as "Neighbor," "Friend," "Physician," and even "Swindler," Dickinson undoes the restrictions placed on her (as well as on God) by the selective parts given each of them. While she adopts the custom of casting God in socially constructed roles of societal significance, she makes clear he is not locatable in one single space at all times or containable within a single role, but rather moves across space and roles.

What critical attention has been given to Dickinson's engagement with heavenly spatiality has focused primarily on the poet's "effort to make connections between 'this side' and the other, the finite and the infinite, time and eternity" (Eberwein, *Strategies* 225). Eberwein and Elisa New, for example, devote chapters to the examination of Dickinsonian "Circumference" ("I

fear me this Circumference / Engross my Finity –" Fr 858; "Went out opon Circumference / Beyond the Dip of Bell –" Fr 633). New articulates the essence of Dickinson's religious struggle as "an almost mathematical venturesomeness… or faith, that must, forsaking imitation, make its own postulates, its own map, but which makes that map wholly aware that it radically differs from God's, that the terrain sketched is certain to be terrain crisscrossed with sin" (177). According to Eberwein in her reading of poems like "It troubled me as once I was" (Fr 516) and "I think just how my shape will rise" (Fr 252), "[Dickinson] had been both confused and terrified by a spatial presentation of the cosmos in which heaven figured on a plane above the earth while the infernal regions presumably blazed below… [T]he spatial concept of heaven [has] been imposed on her… the burden she hopes to escape may well be this fantasized heaven with its eternal suppression of independent thought and moral self-esteem" (*Strategies* 236-7). She asserts that throughout Dickinson's life, "the idea of heaven continued to beguile and entice her – continued also to intimidate her at times" (*Strategies* 239). The burden Eberwein describes might be one impetus for Dickinson's project of dismantling those spatial dogmas that would prevent her from cultivating an independent religious persona. Eberwein, New, and others rightly insist that Dickinson's poetic vision converges with her spiritual combativeness against the structural integrity of God's prescriptive recipe for spiritual fortitude, yet inadequately address the specifics of her dissent from spatial directives – the form it takes, or the ways she both subverts and preserves the concept of traditional metaphysical spatiality.

I have organized the paper into four sections following this introduction. In the first I establish the influences that scripture, hymnody, and poetry (specifically that of George Herbert) might have had on the shape of Dickinson's ideological rebellion, if it can be called that, against the traditional view of heavenly spatiality. In section two, I detail Dickinson's interrogation of

the first two components of the spatial arrangement, location and movement, which are closely related. Section three deals with the third element, God's roles, which, as I mentioned before, is less explicitly spatial in nature. In the concluding section I examine Dickinson's treatment of prayer's apparatus, specifically her disdain for its inefficacy as well as the ways it embodies all three rudiments of the spatiality of Heaven. Though Dickinson's distrust of prayer stems in part from personal experience with God's indifference, her poems are equally, if more subtly, preoccupied by the mechanics of its "implement" (another descriptor of hers), which she views with despondency and suspicion. Prayer gives a tangible example of Dickinson's presumed alienation from Heaven and gives a window into one of its causes, the consequential restrictions of a rigid spatial configuration, which invokes images of "Bondage" and "Prison": "Immured in Heaven! / What a Cell! / Let every Bondage be, / Thou sweetest of the Universe, / Like that which ravished thee!" (Fr 1628); "Of Tolling Bell I ask the cause? / 'A Soul has gone to Heaven' / I'm answered in a lonesome tone – / Is Heaven then a Prison?" (Fr 933); "God of the Mancle / As of the Free – / Take not my Liberty / Away from Me –" (Fr 754). Despite her dislike towards the consideration of Heaven as a place of absolute wonder, and her doubt in prayer's ability to effectively connect her with God, she professes a deep personal belief in the majesty of Heaven as an idea (free of structures and boundaries) and in the power of prayer's substance, which grants the apparatus its authority.

Because I pay the closest attention to her poems and letters (which I treat as an extension of her artistic oeuvre), this study falls dually, perhaps, under the umbrellas of what Fred White regards in Dickinson Studies as "work-centered" and "life-centered" (the third being "culture-centered") (67). The majority of the poems I have chosen to investigate can be loosely defined as prayer poems, either because they refer to the act of prayer, engage God directly or indirectly in

a prayerful manner, or offer some kind of emotional response to religious hopes and frustrations. I focus specifically on the religious poetics of her art, or the methods by which she accomplishes particular effects – specifically the dismantling of what I am calling the spatiality of Heaven. Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate several ways in which Dickinson's religious poetry transmits progressive deviations from "the human-divine asymmetry endorsed by Calvinist teaching" (Zapedowska 394).

## Chapter 1: The Spatiality of Heaven According to Isaac Watts and George Herbert

*She inherited a great and overbearing vocabulary which, had she used it submissively, would have forced her to express an established theology and psychology. But she would not let that vocabulary write her poems for her. There lies the real difference between a poet like Emily Dickinson and a fine versifier like Isaac Watts. To be sure, Emily Dickinson also wrote in the metres of hymnody, and paraphrased the Bible, and made her poems turn on great words like Immortality and Salvation and Election. But in her poems those great words are not merely being themselves; they have been adopted, for expressive purposes; they have been taken personally, and therefore redefined.*

-Richard Wilbur, *Sumptuous Destitution*, 53.

Without question, the King James Version of the Bible was the book that "most stimulated [Dickinson's] imagination," and because it acted as a social, as well as a spiritual, connector, "link[ing] her to friends as well as to God," the scriptures maintained a strong presence throughout her life (Eberwein, "Immortality" 74). The weight of its impact, especially during the formative years of her upbringing, cannot be understated. There were as many as nineteen Bibles in the Dickinson household. According to Richard Sewall, "In Emily Dickinson's community, the Bible was not only read always and at length from the pulpit and in family prayers… it was the duty of the pious to keep a copy always at hand in case of spiritual need… [Dickinson] was saturated with it and could apparently summon it to her aid at will" (694). In a letter to Joseph Lyman she admits admiring the book for "how infinitely wise & how merry it is" and marveling at "the surpassing splendor and force of its speech." Ultimately, she confesses, "I know those to whom those words are very near & necessary, I wish they were more so to me, for I see them shedding a serenity quite wonderful and blessed" (Sewall 695-6). The antiquity and irrelevance of the text to her immediate perspective prevented her from embracing it totally: "The Bible is an antique Volume – / Written by faded Men" (Fr 1577). Although the biblical vocabulary of sin is present in Dickinson's earliest letters, she excludes words such as *sin*, *evil*, and *guilt* from her poems, using them only as weapons of satire (Barnstone 146). Like

everything else that contributed to the religious zeitgeist of nineteenth-century Amherst, Mass., Dickinson cherished those things she found valuable in scripture, and discarded or – as with the rigidity of the traditional Heaven-Earth spatial configuration – repurposed those that detracted from the ecumenical essence of her poetic vision.

The KJV clearly defines the metaphysical arrangement that binds Heaven to Earth in terms of a fixed, distinct orientation, using binary descriptors such as *above*/*below, up*/*down, high*/*low, here*/*there, under*/*over,* and *ascend*/*descend* (Job 3:4; Psalms 8:1, 5-6; Mark 16:19; John 1:51; Acts 10:11; 1 Thess. 4:16,17; Rev. 22:17). According to John 3:31, "He that cometh *from above* is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from *heaven is above all*" (italics added).[2] James 1:17 describes how "Every good gift and every perfect gift is *from above*, and cometh *down* from the Father…" The concreteness of this structural configuration, in which the spatial reality of Heaven exists *above* "this Barefoot Estate!" (Fr 183), is one of the basic assumptions of many doctrines and religious conventions, including prayer. It gave members of Dickinson's community a core uniting ambition and purpose – to earn the promised celestial bliss of an afterlife – as well as the perspective that earthly trials are but the price of admission. In response to one of Dickinson's most fundamental questions, "Is immortality true?" the Reverend Washington Gladden writes her: "I believe that it is true – the only reality – almost; a thousand times truer than mortality, which is but a semblance after all" (L 752a). The promise of Heaven as the gathering place of the deceased was one teaching Dickinson never refuted, but could not help questioning. After Benjamin Franklin Newton (one of her earliest friends) passed away, she wrote to his minister Edward Everett Hale:

---

[2] All scripture verses are quoted verbatim from Dickinson's personal copy of the KJV Bible, which the Houghton Library at Harvard University has made digitally available: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL.Hough:4906292

"Please Sir, to tell me if he was willing to die, and if you think him at Home, I should love so much to know certainly, that he was today in Heaven" (L 153).

Because of its centrality to Dickinson's dissenting concept of "Heaven on Earth," the traditional view that an individual can only physically occupy one place at a time cannot be overlooked. The KJV offers little to no leeway on the subject of Heaven's separateness and distinctness from Earth, as its descriptions of movement from one place to the next demonstrate. Perhaps the example that surpasses all others in significance is Christ's ascension to Heaven after his resurrection: "And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was *parted from them*, and *carried up into heaven*." (Luke 24:51, italics added). This concept of there being a physical transition from Earth to Heaven (the biblical term for which is 'translation' [Heb. 11:5; Col. 1:13]) inspires one of the most unique aspects of Dickinson's dissent from the spatial facets of belief.[3] Because Heaven and Earth are theologically connected, but physically independent, the religious enthusiast is forced to separate his or her actions and thoughts into categories of 'spiritual' and 'natural,' or 'religious' and 'secular.' Spiritual matters are apart from earthly issues. Dickinson, who perceives some divine property even within "The Thoughtfulness of Thirst" (Fr 816), breaks away from this point, refusing to marginalize the spiritual from the natural. Prayer exemplifies this paradigm of shifting from one state to the other. The scriptures describe prayer as a physical gesture symbolic of turning towards God, and away from earthly affairs. Hezekiah, in 2 Kings 20:2, "*turned his face to the wall*, and prayed unto the Lord..." God commands his people in 2 Chronicles 7:14 to "humble themselves and pray, and *seek my face*, and *turn from their wicked ways*; then will I hear from heaven…" Because the spatial dichotomy

[3] Heb. 11:5 – "By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God."
Col. 1:13 – "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated *us* into the kingdom of his dear Son:"

of Heaven and Earth, as portrayed in scripture, determines and therefore limits the shape and possibilities for spiritual development, Dickinson rejects the authority of its structural configuration over her religious identity. She detaches religious feeling from doctrines and dogmas, which in this case means undermining the rigidity of Heaven's location and the unchanging specificity of the consequential movements it requires of believers. Her poetry merges the best of what both spheres offer into the tapestry of mortal experience.

In addition to the Bible, Dickinson draws inspiration from other religious and cultural influences that uphold the traditional concept of static heavenly space, such as 17th-century metaphysical poet George Herbert and 18th-century father of original English hymnody, Isaac Watts. These and other religious poets have contemplated the tradition of Heaven's spatiality extensively, setting the stage for an ideological rebellion like Dickinson's. While Watts's influence on Dickinson's poetic form is arguably his most significant contribution to her legacy (she adopted his hymnal meters for many of her poems), he also inspired the content of her work, including perhaps an intense focus on the spatiality of Heaven. His declarations on the subject are so absolutely unambiguous that the contrast between their respective theological points of view is stark. Herbert, on the other hand, shows how heavenly space can be navigated according to personal circumstances and in accordance with personal ideals. Because Hebert and Watts both contemplate, with affirmative conviction, the traditional spatiality of Heaven and its influence on the shape of an individual's spiritual development, they fundamentally differ from Dickinson on the issue. But whereas Watts portrays the lateral divide between God and mortal as literal rather than emblematic, universal rather than personal, and rigid rather than elastic, thus supplementing the biblical material Dickinson draws from to reveal her distaste for such a design, Herbert approaches the subject as a key to deciphering the will and grace of God, or a

map through which mankind may orient himself in relation to Heaven, rather than as a recipe, that if followed precisely, will guarantee eternal life.

The nature of Dickinson's kinship to Watts as a fellow hymnist has been extensively studied and long debated (Morgan; Cooley). While David Porter argues that Watts served as a constant source of parody for the poet (55), Shira Wolosky insists that "[t]he hymnal frame of so much Dickinson verse asserts a genuine and profound effort to accept doctrines that she cannot, however, help but question…" (215). Although Dickinson rejected Watts's dogmatism, she professed a profound attachment to the hymnody of her Calvinist upbringing, even adopting the meters of its form and referring to her poems as "hymns" (L 674; L 307). Some Sunday mornings Dickinson would sit "out in the new grass" of the Homestead lawn just so she could "listen to the anthems" being sung from the First Congregational Church across the street (L 184). Her brother Austin shared this predilection for religious songs, recalling how "the tones [Josiah Ayres] drew from its lower chords in his accompaniment to the singing of some of Watts' Favorite Hymns, haunt me ever now" (Eberwein, "Immortality" 71). Because she felt such an affinity for religious music, and because it was so culturally pervasive, it seems natural that Dickinson would engage the doctrines of its expressions, especially those she struggled to accept. Also, the fact that she adopted Watts's hymnal meter for many of her poems, even those that are not thematically religious, proves she has a paradoxical respect for the form, even as she subverts the coherence of those teachings that the form is best known for.[4]

---

[4] "By positioning a selected group of Dickinson's poems near the hymns whose meters match the poems, it is possible to see the metrical skill she employed to tailor her poems to fit the strict musical meters of the hymns…. The blending of Dickinson's poems with these selected hymns should indicate the magnitude of the influence of hymn meter on Dickinson's poetry. The blending of poem to hymn is sometimes so startlingly beautiful it would seem that Dickinson surely must have had this particular hymn in her mind when she composed the poem" (Cooley 84).

Watts's hymnody goes further even than the KJV to accentuate the fixed alignment between Heaven and Earth and the inflexible sequences of mankind's contact with God. The following hymn, which incorporates all three components of Heaven's spatiality (rigidity of location, specificity of religious movements from one sphere to the other, socially constructed roles assigned to God), might have inspired certain of Dickinson's poems that dismantle the concept of rigid spiritual space:

1 *Descend from heaven*, immortal Dove,
Stoop *down*, and take us on thy wings, –
And mount, and bear us far *above*
*The reach* of these inferior things;
2 Beyond, beyond this *lower* sky,
*Up* where eternal ages roll, –
Where solid pleasures never die,
And fruits immortal feast the soul.
3 O for a sight, a pleasant sight –
Of our Almighty *Father's* throne!
*There* sits our Saviour, crowned with light,
Clothed in a body like our own.
4 Adoring saints *around* him stand,
And thrones and powers *before* him fall;
The God shines gracious through the man,
And sheds sweet glories on them all
5 O, what amazing joys they feel,

While to their golden harps they sing!

And sit on every *heavenly hill*,

And spread the triumphs of their *King*!

6 When shall the day, dear Lord, appear,

That I shall mount to dwell *above*;

And stand and bow amongst them *there*,

And view thy face, and sing thy love? (2:23, italics added)[5]

The narrative of this hymn is framed as a direct petition to God, a prayer that divulges the meditations of a devout patron. It explicitly divides Heaven from Earth using spatially aware verbs and adjectives that describe direction, thereby implying the movements required to traverse the gap between both spheres: "Stoop down," "bear us far above," "beyond this lower sky," "Up where eternal ages roll." The speaker also acknowledges God as morally and intellectually superior to the supplicant by assigning him roles that demand that conclusion: "Almighty Father's throne" and "triumphs of their King." That God is *locatable* in a space above this "lower sky," which is home to "inferior things," gives the speaker hope and meaning. He pines for the eventuality of arriving at Heaven's gate to inhabit the idyllic domain where great promises of "solid pleasures" and "fruits immortal" await. The contrast between Heaven and Earth in terms of location – and subsequently the divergent depictions of their conditions – is the fundamental principle of this and other popular hymns by Watts (1:85; 2:16; 2:122; 3:6).

According to the speaker of Watts's hymns, the prospect of one day leaving Earth behind in favor of Heaven validates the hardships of mortal existence, and gives legitimacy to the apparatuses of religion such as prayer, which are used to that end: "Yet the dear path to thine

[5] Hymns are cited according to book number and hymn number.

abode / Lies through this horrid land: / Lord! We would keep the heavenly road, / And run at thy command" (2:53). The irony that Dickinson based so many of her (ir)religious poems on the hymnal meters of Watts speaks to the paradox of repurposing the structural rigidity and fixed spatiality of Heaven in favor of a broader, more inclusive, more approachable God. By portraying Heaven not only as entirely separate from Earth, but also as entirely wonderful, Watts bears some responsibility for Dickinson's aversion to the rigidity of the spatial alignment. For Dickinson, Heaven is neither ideal in comparison to Earth, nor separate from it:

> The Fact that Earth is Heaven –
>
> Whether Heaven is Heaven or not
>
> Is not an Affidavit
>
> Of that specific Spot
>
> Not only must confirm us
>
> That it is not for us
>
> But that it would affront us
>
> To dwell in such a place – (Fr 1435)

Here she undermines the importance of Heaven's spatial distinctness from Earth by challenging the value of the experience it offers. The "specific Spot" above her may actually be called Heaven by name, but it can actually only deserve the religious weight given it by her culture if it somehow is able to match or surpass the majesty she finds in Earth's creations (and perhaps also the opportunity to poetically subvert declarations of absolute truth such as 'Heaven and Earth are separate'). She describes her vision of Heaven in a letter to Mrs. Holland as "a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the *biggest* I have seen in June… If roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need

of other Heaven than the one below – and if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that *I* have seen – I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous" (L 185).

George Herbert's treatment of heavenly spatiality, while perhaps equally traditional as that of Watts, is less an affront to Dickinson's religious sensibilities. Comparisons to the seventeenth-century Metaphysicals are justified by "[h]er love of colloquialism and wit; her feeling for precision and her tendency toward the analytic; [and] her habitual economy of form" (Sewall 708). She definitely read Herbert, though she never mentions him in her letters, and was most certainly influenced by him in certain respects,[6] including, I argue, his poetic treatment of the human-God spatial arrangement. In "The Pearl," Herbert closes with a prayer for God to "teach me, how… / To climb to thee." These lines echo the benediction of another poem, "Matins":

> Teach me thy love to know;
>
> That this new light, which now I see,
>
> May both the work and workman show:
>
> Then by a sunbeam I will climb to thee.[7]

Herbert avoids the dualistic expressions that demarcate Heaven from Earth so prevalent in the hymns of Watts, and only by the word "climb" establishes that any spatial divide between the speaker and God exists. To "climb" is an action ambiguous enough to suggest an upward movement without categorically defining it as such. The dedicated and worshipful consciousness

---

[6] I highly recommend the following sources for further reading on the formal and thematic commonalities between Dickinson and Herbert: Daniel Doerksen – "George Herbert, Calvinism, and Reading 'Mattens'"; Diane Gabrielsen Scholl – "From Aaron 'Drest' to Dickinson's 'Queen': Protestant Typology in Herbert and Dickinson"; Judith Banzer – "Compound Manner: Emily Dickinson and the Metaphysical Poets"; and Gene Edward Veith's book *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert*.

[7] Oberhaus notes that the second and third stanzas of "Matins" were found among Dickinson's papers after her death. "To judge from the handwriting, she copied the lines rather late in her life, transcribing them into her own idiom of dashes and irregular capitals…. That she altered the original text… suggests the lines… were written from memory" (154).

of the movement is supplemented by Herbert's plea for God to "teach me, how." God, in the role of teacher, performs a cooperative function, placing himself alongside Herbert in a collaborative effort to achieve growth and eventually reach Heaven, *wherever that might be*. Whereas Watts's hymn describes in detail the distance between Heaven and Earth and the distinctness of their positions in relation to one another, Herbert's poem attempts to bridge a personal, rather than universal, spiritual gap. While the speaker of Watts's hymn passively waits for the day when he will, in a single motion, "mount to dwell above," and whose God "sheds sweet glories" upon his adoring saints, the supplicant of Herbert's work humbly requests God's involvement in his ascent to Heaven – that he assist in narrowing the distance that separates them – and prays for the trust and intimacy that develop between a student and his teacher. Sewall finds that comparisons between Herbert and Dickinson hold "up to but not beyond a certain point. Her more precarious stance, her more self-conscious, detailed, and poignant exploration of the dark interior, her distant and often paradoxical God, set her apart" (708). Even though Dickinson disagrees with Herbert on the efficacy of prayer, for example, she draws from the personal tone of his poetry regarding religious experience. The God of Herbert's poems is reminiscent of such a one that she hoped for: "I shall never forget [Doctor Holland's] prayer, my first morning with you -," she writes to Mrs. Holland. "[S]o simple, so believing. *That* God must be a friend - *that* was a different God" (L 731).

**Chapter 2: The Spatiality of Heaven According to Dickinson (Location and Movement)**

*"Heaven" has different Signs – to me –*
*Sometimes, I think that Noon*
*Is but a symbol of the Place –*
*And when again, at Dawn,*

*A mighty look runs round the World*
*And settles in the Hills –*
*An Awe if it should be like that*
*Opon the Ignorance steals –* (Fr 544)

Those poems that explore the spatiality of Heaven are, due to Dickinson's characteristically paradoxical style, an unproductive source for determining whether she possessed a belief in its literalness: "Of Paradise' existence / All we know / Is the uncertain certainty –" (Fr 1421). Even within the three quatrains of "So much of Heaven has gone from Earth" (Fr 1240), Dickinson represents both surety and doubt regarding the subject, insisting on one hand "That there must be a Heaven / If only to enclose the Saints," and asserting by the end that "Too much of Proof affronts Belief." Though she does not clarify what "Proof" she has against the existence of Heaven, we know the destructive force of the Civil War devastated her,[8] and Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) had been published little more than a decade before this particular poem was written, situating Dickinson in "a much more diverse world of belief than she would have guessed as the child of a Congregationalist household in the

[8] In two letters to the editors of *The New York Review of Books* ("Dickinson's Civil War," Aug 10, 2000), Benjamin Lease and Dorothy Huff Oberhaus refute the off-hand observation made by Joyce Carol Oates ("'The Perfect Lady'," May 11, 2000) and Claudia Roth Pierpoint ("Passionate Mind," May 25, 2000) that Dickinson "failed to write specifically of the Civil War," both citing "It feels a shame to be Alive –" (Fr 524) as one of her most passionate expressions on the subject. Shira Wolosky's article "Public and Private in Dickinson's War Poetry" and Cristanne Miller's "Pondering 'Liberty': Emily Dickinson and the Civil War" are excellent resources on this topic. Oates later replied to Lease and Oberhaus: "Dickinson never wrote specifically and 'realistically' about the Civil War; her poetic strategy is always elliptical, and timeless. My original point was that it does not matter in the slightest whether Dickinson did, or did not, write about the Civil War or about any recognizable social or political subject; her genius transcends such expectations." http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/aug/10/dickinsons-civil-war/?pagination=false

Connecticut Valley" (Eberwein, "Immortality" 92). What Dickinson's art does reveal is the intensity of her interest in all aspects of Heaven as a religious concept, perhaps especially regarding the details of its spatial parameters and the consequences they have on the beliefs and behaviors of those individuals who yearn to qualify for entry therein.

Heaven takes one of two forms in Dickinson's poems and letters, though she often uses the same word to describe each: Heaven as place and Heaven as idea or experience. The most evident distinction between them pertains to their respective senses of location. While both forms of Heaven are locatable, "the Heaven of God" (Fr 533) has specific spatial properties, which allow its location to be rendered in exact terms, usually in relation to the human perspective: *up*, *above*, *high*, *over*, etc. Dickinson's vision of a Heaven without boundaries, on the other hand, can be characterized by an array of natural images and metaphors that give the speaker freedom to encounter paradise in her immediate surroundings. She makes the distinction explicit in the first two stanzas of "'Heaven' – is what I cannot reach!" (Fr 310).

> "Heaven" – is what I cannot reach!
> The Apple on the Tree
> Provided it do hopeless – hang –
> That – "Heaven" is – to Me!
>
> The Color, on the cruising cloud –
> The interdicted Land –
> Behind the Hill – the House behind –
> There – Paradise – is found!

The link between "Heaven" (in quotations) and Paradise (without quotations) is the ability of the speaker to locate them – the difference being her ability to experience only one of them. The first

requires the speaker to "reach" beyond her grasp, meaning the Heaven of religious institutions, being unattainable, is no Heaven at all. It is interesting to note the difference in the materiality of the metaphors she employs to describe each kind of Heaven. While both "The Apple" she compares to Heaven above and "The Color" she witnesses "on the cruising cloud" are natural phenomena, the first is a tangible object that any one could (if they could reach it) hold and taste. The experience of holding and tasting an apple is universal and easy to imagine, meaning it is something every member of Dickinson's audience can relate to and internalize. The apple offers no mystery, no peek into the sublime substance of either the finite or infinite realms. Presumably it is the opportunity to taste this common fruit of some biblical significance that motivates the act of reaching, yet there is not much room for the experience of tasting an apple to develop or change in any significant way. The Color she finds so beautiful, on the other hand, is intangible, subtle, transient and divine. It does not impose conditions or announce itself as the ultimate goal of mortal existence – it *is* mortal existence, and it cannot be experienced by more than one person in quite the same exact way. She cannot hold or taste this metaphor for Paradise, but for different reasons than those that keep her from accessing Heaven above. She can appreciate it without reaching, and internalize it without tasting. The speaker can see "Heaven" hanging above her in the tree, but she actually experiences, on her own terms, the Paradise before her. The apple cannot compete. Her poignant encounter with nature's indescribable beauty is a comment on both the locatability *and* accessibility of true Paradise. The poet sees potential in mortal experience for participating in a divine discourse equal or even superior to that of the biblical promise of Heaven as a final reward: "Peruse how infinite I am / To no one that You – know – / And sigh for lack of Heaven – but not / The Heaven God bestow –" (Fr 700).

Dickinson was open about her divergent understandings of Heaven with family and friends, very often comparing one directly with the other. True to her capricious nature, she occasionally sketches the Heaven of Calvinism in a favorable light. To Susan Gilbert she wrote, "Bless God that we catch faint glimpses of his brighter Paradise from *occasional* Heavens *here*!" (L 107). She was not always so sympathetic in her assessment of God's estate as the "brighter Paradise." Her criticisms tend to emphasize those things she finds lacking that would disqualify it as a place of absolute wonder: "In Heaven they neither woo nor are given in wooing – what an imperfect place!" (L 750); "The Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superceded I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally… To the 'natural man,' Bumblebees would seem an improvement, and a spicing of Birds, but far be it from me, to impugn such majestic tastes" (L 193). As the criticisms of these letters make clear, Dickinson feels less than thrilled at the prospect of experiencing God's Heaven first-hand. She describes the 'place' with a sense of unbridgeable distance, not only of body, but also of mind. She refers to herself as a "natural man," a double entendre, both calling attention to her love of nature, and also to the scriptural term found in verses such as 1 Corinthians 2:14-15, which claim that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things…" Again, in a single phrase, Dickinson points to the cavity between the spiritual and the natural in religious discourse. The two conditions are at odds with one another – a view that informs the tradition of God (spiritual) residing *above* Earth (natural). Dickinson emphatically refutes the belief that an individual must choose between the natural and the spiritual: "'Nature' is what We see – / The Hill – the Afternoon – / Squirrel – Eclipse – the Bumble bee – / Nay – Nature is Heaven –" (Fr 721).

Dickinson also expresses her disillusionment with Heaven as God's eternal headquarters. The first two stanzas of "My Period had come for Prayer," in which the speaker embarks on a quest to petition God directly, articulate the spatial distinctness of Heaven from Earth, and take for granted the idea that he will be there waiting for her. When she arrives at the place he supposedly occupies in stanzas three and four, however, she discovers a celestial barrenness, effectively disabling her from praying to an *absent* God, and thereby inducing in the speaker a state of worship for the *absence* of God in stanza five. She learns, in the end, that prayer is unnecessary for spiritual experience:

> My period had come for Prayer –
> No other Art – would do –
> My Tactics missed a rudiment –
> Creator – Was it you?
>
> God grows above – so those who pray
> Horizons – must ascend –
> And so I stepped opon the North
> To see this Curious Friend –
>
> His House was not – no sign had he –
> By Chimney – nor by Door –
> Could I infer his Residence –
> Vast Prairies of Air
>
> Unbroken by a Settler –
> Were all that I could see –

Infinitude – Had'st Thou no Face

That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended –

Creation stopped – for me –

But awed beyond my errand –

I worshipped – did not "pray" –

Before embarking, the speaker reiterates the concept of heavenly space by recognizing that because "God grows *above*… those who pray / Horizons must *ascend*." And so she "stepped opon the *North* / To see this Curious Friend –." What does she find upon arrival? "Vast Prairies of Air / Unbroken by a Settler – / Were all that I could see –." She enters the definable space of Heaven to find that God has deserted his post. Rather than disappointment or hopelessness, the sight of Heaven's vacancy inspires awe and sublime self-awareness in the speaker: "The Silence condescended – / Creation stopped – for me – / But awed beyond my errand – / I worshipped – did not 'pray' –." Worship supersedes prayer as the decisive link to the spiritual realm. Whereas prayer is an "Art" or an "errand" that requires "Tactics" and "rudiment[s]," the experience of worship occurs organically, without intermediaries, conditions, or formalities. Worship does not require the existence of a locatable space like Heaven, but neither does it preclude the possibility of there being such a place. The speaker is not required to "ascend" or travel to the "North" or any specific direction at all, though again, she may if she wishes. While direct extrapolations of the poem's narrative fail to adequately package the magnificence of the final moment, the poem teaches another, and perhaps more significant, lesson, which is that unsuccessful communication with God cannot be equated with failed religious identity, nor can successful communication be equated with a thriving one.

The fact that God is physically absent in the poem can easily be mistaken for a sign that he, like prayer, is superfluous to the poet's religious experience. While Dickinson recognized, and plainly resisted, the rigid spatial properties of Heaven that place God above her, that would force her to leave her natural environment to engage him on a separate plane, and that limit her perceptions of him as a morally superior being, she expresses no desire to emancipate herself as his charge. In fact, the second of two petitions the speaker directs at God during her quest – "Infinitude – Had'st Thou no Face / That I might look on Thee?" – comes immediately after she realizes he is gone.[9] Her belief in and devotion to him was never contingent on the concept of spiritual-spatial absolutes, though she professes a sort of spiritual vertigo at times: "I know not which thy chamber is – / I'm knocking – everywhere – " (Fr 377). Despite his absence, God's existence is not in question, but rather the rules that she had been taught govern his behavior, and by extension hers. The supplicant "ascends" in order to position herself for prayer, but the revelation that God is not bound by the confines of a celestial setting demonstrates that the move was a prayer in itself. God's freedom implies her own – that he can be anywhere means she can find him anywhere, in Heaven as well as on Earth. She is free to find him in the places where he is not, which in this moment is ironically the place where he is supposed to be, and engage him on her terms.

Not only does Dickinson remove God from Heaven, she encounters him in unexpected places and times. He sanctions her worshipful hypnosis of the setting sun that arrests her like "A Witchcraft," and perhaps even physically stands guard over her: "If anybody sneer, / Take care – for God is near –" (Fr 217). In another poem she partakes of the "sacrament of summer days, / Oh Last Communion in the Haze –" in the time "when skies resume / The old – old sophistries of

[9] These lines echo a hymnal adaptation of Psalms 10:1 composed by Isaac Watts: "Why does the Lord stand off so far! / And why conceal his face…?"

June –" (Fr 122). Even when nature is at its most deceptive, she finds something like "sacred emblems to partake." Whether she repurposes the religious weight of words like "sacrament," "Communion," "sacred emblems," and "consecrated bread" to emphasize her reverence for her surroundings or adopts them satirically as rhetoric to undermine the authority of their original context (which I do not believe is the case here), God's presence is indisputable. By employing the vocabulary of his religious establishment to describe a private moment, Dickinson invites God to bear witness to, if not exactly preside over or approve, the sacramental euphoria she experiences outside his jurisdiction. Even in her most vitriolic attacks against God, she cannot help but locate him among the foliage of her religious landscape. The entirety of Dickinson's religious poetics, as complex as they are, depends on God's locatability, whether or not she is actually able to locate him. The inverse of the tradition that God inhabits a single "specific Spot" would be as disturbingly restrictive to her religious autonomy as the spatial dogma she attempts to subvert. Even those times she states explicitly that "God cannot be found" (Fr 1581), she protects the possibility that "Perhaps the 'kingdom of Heaven's' changed" (Fr 117). Maybe he is not where he should be (even according to her independent sensibilities), but the fact that he is *somewhere* means the rules that dictate their relationship are fluid and organic, allowing her to confront him as well as confide in him, reproach him as well as recruit him.

Her objective is not to obliterate the concept of a Heaven with spatial properties, but to undermine the authority of such an image as comprehensive and unchangeable.[10] She embraces the premise that God can be found, but rejects the inflexible boundaries of Heaven according to her Calvinistic context: "Is Heaven a Place – a Sky – a Tree? / Location's narrow way is for

[10] Dickinson even challenges a rigid reading of Earth's spatial realities when she "recall[s] the Psalmist's sonnet to God": "I have no Life but this – /… / Nor tie to *Earths to come*, / Nor Action new / Except through this Extent / The love of you" (L 515; Fr 1432, italics added).

Ourselves – / Unto the Dead / There's no Geography –" (Fr 476). The spatial constraints of Heaven, which necessitate specific movements to enter therein, have no bearing on her ability to experience heavenly communion. As "My Period had come for Prayer" and other poems demonstrate, Dickinson discerns the presence and influence of God in the effort she makes to find him, rather than expecting it to be the product of an otherwise meaningless process. Instead of glancing *upward* to look for Heaven where it is supposed to be, Dickinson finds "Heaven in a Gaze - / A Heaven of Heavens – the Privilege / Of One another's Eyes" (Fr 691). By re-envisioning the spatial relationship between God and mortal, Dickinson enhances the intimacy of communion, as well as the pains of dismissal, that epitomize all religious drama as she sees it. She articulates the existence of a coherent, albeit structure-less, connection between supplicant and God, seeking to expand and amplify the experience of Heaven to include the sublimity of mortal experience, rather than split the substance of each from one another.

The concept of moving, or turning, towards Heaven, and by extension away from Earth, is a key biblical metaphor, both in terms of the post-mortal transfer from Earth to Heaven, as well as the continuous efforts of the righteous during mortality to abandon secular concerns in favor of the spiritual. The KJV takes for granted the separation of spiritual concerns from natural, and makes no qualms about which of the two takes precedence: "And ye shall *seek me, and find me*, when ye shall *search for me* with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13, italics added); "Jesus saith unto him, I am *the way*, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). The scriptures frame the act of "coming unto" God in terms of movement *away* from the shortsighted mirage of earthly contentment in an effort to gain the approval of one's spiritual arbiters, thereby moving *toward* Heaven. In fact, the most fundamental ambition of religious devotion – of entering through Heaven's gate – is contingent on the ability of an

individual to turn away from natural matters toward the brighter light of the spiritual. Watts describes that goal as a hopeful eventuality that, in the mean time, must be constantly recalled as a way of focusing on what matters most. Earthly experience is but a temporary test of one's religious resolve: "Till we arrive at heaven our home" (1:3); "May I but safely reach my home, / My God, my heaven, my all" (2:65). The idea of going to Heaven in the literal sense might have disturbed Dickinson on one hand: "Going to Heaven! / How dim it sounds / … / I'd like to look a little more / At such a curious Earth!" (Fr 128), though the speaker of another poem admits "I went to Heaven – / 'Twas a small Town – / … / Almost – contented – / I – could be – / 'Mong such unique / Society –" (Fr 577).

While Dickinson's prayer poems embrace the idea of movement, of searching for communion with God, as the basis of religious fulfillment, her poetics run fundamentally counter to this idea of separating the spiritual from the natural. Dickinson repurposes the scriptural term 'translation,' for example, to describe a transition she makes from a state of ordinariness to one of profundity, all without physically moving from her place on Earth:

> Better – than Music!
> For I – who heard it –
> I was used – to the Birds – before –
> This – was different – 'Twas Translation –
> Of all tunes I knew – and more – (Fr 378)

She rejects religious conventions such as prayer and church attendance as emblems of a choice to abandon earthly affairs. The speaker of "My Period had come for Prayer," for example, departs from her terrestrial state in order to find God ("And so I stepped opon the North"), but finds that the move from one environment to the other was unnecessary. Rather, she depicts her own

religious experience in terms of movement from the determinacy of spiritual seclusion (where God is the source of all spiritual experience) to the indeterminacy of communion (where divine encounters become possible outside the presence of God). Whereas Heaven as a final destination requires the righteous to turn mentally and physically *away* from Earth, Dickinson identifies the potential for human experience to encounter Heaven *on* Earth. The most lucid example of this concept appears in "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" (Fr 236):

> Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
> I keep it, staying at Home –
> With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
> And an Orchard, for a Dome –
>
> Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –
> I, just wear my Wings –
> And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
> Our little Sexton – sings.
>
> God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
> And the sermon is never long,
> So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
> I'm going, all along.

The last two lines of the poem are essential to understanding Dickinson's religious character. The scriptures describe Heaven as an experience the righteous will enjoy "at last": "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up *at the last day*… Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life: and I will raise him up *at*

*the last day*" (John 6:44, 54, italics added). The distinction between "getting to Heaven, at last" and "going, all along" forms perhaps the core of Dickinson's poetic project, which is to incorporate the experience of Heaven into the fabric of her daily life. The poet may have ceased communal church attendance at age 30, but as this poem indicates, she continued attending church "With a Bobolink for a Chorister – / And an Orchard for a Dome –," constructing what Betsy Erkkila calls "a counterreligion of nature" (153). She may have disavowed the apparatus of prayer for its embodiment as a metaphorical step or turn towards Heaven and away from Earth, but her poems are clearly prayerful in tone and even in form in their adoption of hymnal meter, thus evincing an ability and desire to perceive divinity in her natural environment. Every earthly experience has the makings of an encounter with Paradise. Heaven might be transient and diaphanous as "Some bashful Summer's Day –" in one poem (Fr 717), and tangibly visceral in another, such as the "punctual music" of the bird whose "place is in the Human Heart / And in the Heavenly Grace –" (Fr 1556).

**Chapter 3: The Spatiality of Heaven According to Dickinson, cont. (God's Roles)**

*Is Heaven a Physician?*
*They say that He can heal –*
*But Medicine Posthumous*
*Is unavailable –*
*Is Heaven an Exchequer?*
*They speak of what we owe –*
*But that negotiation*
*I'm not a Party to* – (Fr 1260)

While the authorities of Dickinson's religious culture such as the KJV Bible and hymnody of Isaac Watts describe in explicit detail the spatial conditions of Heaven and Earth, and clarify the movements required of mankind to obtain the promise of eternal life, they less overtly manufacture the spatiality of Heaven in a third way: by characterizing God in terms of socially constructed roles such as King and Father. The relationship between God and human can arguably *define* the spaces they inhabit in the same way it is *defined by* those spaces. From this angle, Dickinson explores the spatiality of Heaven through the lens of an often-dysfunctional bond with the resident who runs it, rather than as a determining factor in the limits that are set on that relationship. This gesture of giving God trustworthy and morally commendable personae not only emphasizes the positives of his personality and the holiness of his position, it helps individuals internalize their own role in his plan, and establishes the hierarchy of religious authority. Since "God" as a name and role bears no influence outside a religious context, it would be difficult to construct a correlated set of protocol deserving of interactions with such a marvelous figure. Perhaps from the very beginning of time, God has been given roles that make his presence felt in the minutiae of existence. The psalmist invoked the image of God as King repeatedly: "The Lord is *King*, for ever and ever: the heathen are perished out of his land" (Ps.

10:16, italics added).[11] Matthew 6, a chapter dedicated solely to the instruction of how to pray properly, refers to God as Father no less than twelve times in 34 verses: "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy *Father* which is in secret; and thy *Father* which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly… After this manner therefore pray ye: Our *Father* which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name…" (Matt. 6:6-9, italics added). Calling God Father and King gives individuals and communities the social context necessary to establish proper from improper etiquette for interacting with him, and the tools for placing one's self appropriately along a hierarchical spectrum. When portrayed as a King and Father, God is automatically and universally deemed worthy of respectful subservience. Certainly, Dickinson would have viewed this arrangement as constricting and unreflective of her reality. Aliki Barnstone argues that "Dickinson found the hierarchical relationship with the divinity, wherein the abject soul is unequal, suspect and even intolerable…. [S]he never granted him mastery by accepting a humble and condemned state" (145).

As she does in ways previously described, Dickinson manages to disrupt the consequences of this custom without discarding the custom itself. More damage is arguably done to God's ego by assigning him certain pejorative roles than by ascribing him unsavory personality traits (which Dickinson also does, calling him at various points "economical" [Fr 195], "jealous" [Fr 1752], and secretive [Fr 213]). On the other hand, by breaking from the short list of biblically approved roles, God and poet both are given freedom to explore various other permutations of their association. From Dickinson's point of view, God's designation of King relegates her to the position of subject, thereby determining certain inflexible terms of their intercourse. A subject can approach a King only under certain conditions and pertaining to

[11] See also Ps. 10:16; 24:10; 29:10; 45:11; 95:3; 149:2.

particular circumstances. Even if the King refuses the subject an audience, he maintains the unmitigated power and dignity accorded his title. Likewise, by calling him Father, the supplicant inherits the role of child as well as the rules that manage the bond between them. Because the social etiquette of such relationships is well entrenched and easy to disseminate, the ethics of interaction with God become fixed and universal. Individuals and communities are held to a social standard, whereby certain behaviors can be identified as incorrect, even "sacrilegious." To treat God as an equal, much less as a subordinate, would be wildly inappropriate in the way it would be for a powerless peasant or naïve child to do so to an omnipotent King or experienced Father. Because these rules apply to everyone, there is no space or opportunity for customizing one's relationship to God in any remarkable way. Due to the problems Dickinson expresses with portrayals of God as all knowing and all loving, if for no other reason than his track record as an unreliable steward, it is no wonder she fundamentally resists the rigidity of these guidelines that govern her religious conduct. Even the implicitly intimate terms that substantiate the bond between parent and daughter are limiting in their representation, as the complications of the poet's relationship with her own father illustrate.

According to Eberwein, Dickinson's disdain for a heavenly Father that fails in his paternalistic duties to protect and provide for his children stems partly from complications in her relationship with Edward Dickinson: "Her notions of God exaggerated the austere, grave, inexpressive qualities of Edward Dickinson's parental behavior…. [H]er feelings toward God as father were inextricably intertwined with her complex emotional and volitional response to Edward Dickinson and all the other master figures with whom she populated her world" (242-45). She is cited as crediting him with "quite a hand to give medicine, especially if it is not desirable to the patient" (Sewall 63). She describes another example of his parental fickleness:

"He buys me many Books – but begs me not to read them – because he fears they joggle the Mind" (L 261). The perceived dualities of Edward Dickinson's personality might have contributed to the poet's fixation with God's capriciousness: "How many barefoot shiver I trust their Father knows who saw not fit to give them shoes" (L 207). The idea that a Father can be fully aware of his children's needs and withhold aid haunts her work, especially where she acknowledges God's paternity. She addresses God as Father in many poems, often with a heavy sense of irony that perhaps stems in part from the relative erraticism of both her father-daughter relationships.

> "Heavenly Father" – take to thee
> The supreme iniquity
> Fashioned by thy candid Hand
> In a moment contraband –
> Though to trust us – seem to us
> More respectful – "We are Dust" –
> We apologize to thee
> For thy own Duplicity – (Fr 1500)

In a letter to Higginson a month after Edward's death (which, Sewall notes, was devastating to the poet, and changed the way she saw his life [69]), she describes how his poem "Decoration," which had appeared in the June 1874 issue of *Scribner's Monthly*, helped her cope: "Your beautiful Hymn, was it not prophetic? It has assisted that Pause of Space which I call 'Father'–" (L 418). The concept of spiritual fatherhood is one she explores thoroughly in her poetry, but Dickinson refuses to limit her understanding of and relationship with God to that single role, despite its perceivable complexities.

Dickinson both adopts and subverts the biblical tradition of casting God in socially constructed roles in order to repossess ownership of her religious character. Because all relationships are bound by the limitations of spatial consideration, both physical and emotional, Dickinson engages God in a variety of social contexts in order to undo the authority of any one in particular. By assigning him roles other than Father and King, she makes innovative remarks on his character, thereby answering questions such as: What function does God perform in relation to the speaker? How close are they in terms of emotional intimacy? And how close are they in terms of physical proximity? Whereas a father-daughter relationship naturally invokes images of close physical and emotional exchange, and a hope of there being a shared unconditional love, a physician-patient relationship, for example, implies a kind of sporadic, albeit vital, acquaintance and an implicit, exclusionary trust in matters regarding health (both physical and spiritual, in this case). In another example, the speaker of "It was too late for Man" (Fr 689) calls God her "Neighbor," which Nancy Mayer reminds us is "a being identified only by his proximity to others" (274):

> How excellent the heaven –
>
> When Earth – cannot be had –
>
> How hospitable – then – the face
>
> Of Our Old Neighbor – God –

The issues of emotional intimacy and physical proximity, while distinctive, are intertwined in this and other poems. The word "Old" in line 8 requires some clarification in order to answer questions regarding any emotional connection. It either comments on God's longevity, or modifies "Neighbor" to describe someone with whom the speaker is comfortable and familiar. Although the two readings are not mutually exclusive, it is important to consider both when

coming to a conclusion on the nature of the speaker's relationship to God. In addition to the comment "Old" could make on God's character, "Neighbor" implies propinquity, the occupation of a space near the speaker, which, again depending on use of the word "Old," he has possibly inhabited for a long time. While not all of the roles played by God in Dickinson's poems are as inherently spatial in nature as "Neighbor," they all imply varying degrees of intimacy, and by extension physical proximity.

Dickinson's problems with God's character naturally dovetail with the distinctive, often criminal, roles she assigns him. She depicts him as a sneering shopkeeper who refuses an offer of economic exchange in "I asked no other thing" (Fr 687) and labels him a "Conjuror" in "'Heaven' – is what I cannot reach!" (Fr 310). In a religious reading of "What Inn is this" (Fr 100), God would be the identified "Necromancer! Landlord!" She calls him a "Swindler" in "I meant to have but modest needs" (Fr 711) and "Burglar! Banker – Father!" in "I never lost as much but twice" (Fr 39). Despite their disparaging connotations, such expressions of resentment exude an emotional and proximal intimacy that supersedes the level she achieves when offering God more affirmative roles such as "Curious Friend" (Fr 525) and "distant – stately Lover" (Fr 615). "Swindler," which the *OED* defines as "one who practices fraud… for purposes of gain," implies a broken or misplaced trust from the standpoint of the victim. Such faith in another relies on the establishment of an emotional and physical closeness, the betrayal of which separates victim from rogue forever, while galvanizing an unbreakable bond of polarized physical and emotional space. Similar to the aftermath of an adulterous act, what the victim perceives as a friendly relationship of equals becomes transformed by the action or inaction of the other, pushing both parties to separate ends of a socially constructed scale: swindler and swindled, adulterer and cuckold. They are eternally suspended in a space of social seclusion that cannot be

altered or repaired, simultaneously detached from and connected to one another by an act of betrayal. The progression of "Burglar! Banker – Father!" can be read in one of two ways. Dickinson either casts God in three separate and distinct roles, or she re-describes the three into one single role that transforms the meanings of the three as independent. As she moves on from "Burglar," the amount of contact between speaker and God extends and magnifies in significance. As his role(s) gain(s) substance, so does his relationship with the speaker, diminishing the spatial gap between them. She begins with "Burglar," someone with whom the speaker would have abrupt and detrimental, albeit very limited, contact. God as Burglar circumscribes the speaker's identity to that of a victim, placing her on the opposite end of a polarized space, similar to the displacing effect of "Swindler" without the predicate of an implied trust. While God as Burglar robs the speaker of value, causing pain and suffering, God as Banker makes formal exchanges with the speaker as client, generating room for them to communicate civilly and potentially to mutual advantage. The space between God and poet shrinks as their relationship gains legitimacy. By ultimately calling God "Father," Dickinson closes the distance between speaker and Heaven, elevating the speaker to the role of child. In a single-role interpretation, however, the first two characterizations of God ultimately modify "Father" ironically as one undeserving of the love and trust inherent to the title. Whether the progression from Burglar to Banker to Father colors the reading of each role or not, as it would in a single-role interpretation, Dickinson takes control of the spiritual-spatial divide that separates her from God by defining their relationship in terms of social connections covering diverse physical and emotional proximities and qualities.

**Conclusion: The Apparatus of Prayer**

*If one discounts the apparatus of prayer and looks instead to its substance, one finds prayerful utterance throughout Emily Dickinson's poems – especially her thankful celebrations of life, consciousness, and beauty, her reflections on evanescence and eternity, her probings at circumference to communicate with the force beyond it.*

-Jane Donahue Eberwein, *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*, 259

In one of her earliest expressions of religious self-awareness Dickinson calls herself "one of the lingering bad ones" that had yet to convert, and asks her friend to "Remember, and care for me sometimes… by lingering longer in prayer, that the Father may bless one more!" (L 36). Even at an early age, she struggled to reconcile her cravings for authentic spiritual experience with her distrust of conversion as a product, rather than a process. Many years later, in a letter to Higginson, she elaborates on what it meant to be "one of the lingering bad ones" in the context of her family's piety, though this time without apology or hope for change: "They are religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whom they call their 'Father'" (L 261). Dickinson's short satiric description of what seems like, from her perspective, a stale ritual, shows how prayer embodies the three elements of Heaven's spatiality that so distressed her religious ideals.

1. The individual finds God by looking in a single, given direction, in this case towards the East, but which in other poems Dickinson describes as "up," "above," or to "the North."

2. By "address[ing]" God "every morning," the supplicant turns away from, or abandons, their physical surroundings and concerns in favor of a religious focus, thereby dividing the secular from the spiritual and the natural from the heavenly.

3. Prayer limits the position of God to that of a Father (or any one role in particular), thereby assigning (and reducing) the supplicant to the role of dependent child.

In Eberwein's estimation, "Prayer suggests personal piety. In this, as in matters of church-going, doctrine, and good works, Dickinson proved selective" ("Immortality" 74). Her dismissal of family prayer shows, among other things, a conviction that its potential is limited severely by an emphasis on form over substance, of routine over introspection. The poems themselves manifest this ideal, often beseeching God even as they deride the apparatus of prayer, and articulating the exquisiteness of heavenly grace even as they consider the pains of human experience.

Many of her poems and letters underscore the stark contrast between the supposed function of prayer as a direct link to God and the blatant lack of its outcomes. Occasionally she regards prayer as a constructive exercise, especially in the way it connects her to friends and family: "[I]f you are so happy, I kneel and thank God for it, before I go to sleep" (L 170). More often, however, she denounces it with lighthearted irony as the most ready source of disappointment, as in an 1853 letter to the Hollands: "If prayers had any answers to them, 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" (recall the chapter in Matthew dedicated solely to the instruction of a proper prayer) (L 133). In another letter written 30 years later, Dickinson chides Maria Whitney: "Dear Friend, You are like God. We pray to him, and he answers 'No.' Then we pray to him to rescind the 'no,' and he don't answer at all, yet 'Seek and ye shall find' is the boon of faith" (L 830). To Otis Philip Lord, she writes: "I have written you, Dear, so many Notes since receiving one, it seems like writing a Note to the Sky – yearning and replyless – but Prayer has not an answer and yet how many pray!" (L 790). Dickinson's hunger for both human and divine connections accentuates her disdain for prayer as a reliable utensil. Her epistolary critiques reiterate the thematic thrust of poems that specifically

deride the nominal purpose of prayer as a direct connection to God, such as "There comes an hour when begging stops" (Fr 1768):

> There comes an hour when begging stops,
>
> When the long interceding lips
>
> Perceive their prayer is vain.
>
> "Thou shalt not" is a kinder sword
>
> Than from a disappointing God
>
> "Disciple, call again."

Eventually the speaker of this poem recognizes the pointless one-sidedness of prayer, which, as God's mandated medium of communication, reflects on the disappointing character of God himself. Dickinson repeatedly cites scripture to support her soft-spoken scoffs, as she does in the letters to Maria Whitney and the Hollands, evidence that she "bespeaks intimate familiarity with church teachings" (Eberwein, "Immortality" 72). Light-hearted though she may be at times, such ironic joviality cuts to the heart of a complicated relationship to God, due in part to the unfulfilled potential of prayer as a means of "reaching" him.

Very often, however, Dickinson's wariness stems from circumstances far more serious and upsetting than basic unresponsiveness. Her many encounters with the sicknesses and deaths of loved ones, which she portrays as moments of defining spiritual introspection, galvanized her position on prayer as defectively flaccid. In a famous 1863 letter to her recently orphaned "Little Cousins," Louise and Frances Norcross, Dickinson (according to her life-long custom of including poems in her letters) introduces "It is not dying hurts us so" with the intimacy and

somber finality of this statement: "Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray" (L 278).[12] The calm, yet plainly grief-stricken tenderness she expresses for her cousins does not reveal itself to be the source of the poet's inability, or perhaps refusal, to pray, but it assuredly played some part. As Sewall notes, "Emily had an all but obsessive concern for every member of her family," a concern that was never more manifest than during times of illness and death (198). She describes the effect that the ailments of family members had on her: "Vinnie is sick to-night, which gives the world a russet tinge, usually so red. It is only a headache, but when the head aches next to you, it becomes important. When she is well, time leaps. When she is ill, he lags, or stops entirely. Sisters are brittle things. God was penurious with me, which makes me shrewd with Him" (L 207).

Perhaps Dickinson's most significant confrontation with death – in fact one of the most momentous events of her life – occurred in 1883 when her eight-year old nephew Gilbert died. Her grief is apparent even two years later (a year before her own death), when she writes, "October is a mighty Month, for in it Little Gilbert died… Where makes my Lark his Nest?" (L 1020). While the heartache of such trials no doubt contributed to the bitterness that colors almost every poetic expression of her disillusionment with God and her aversion to rote religiosity, they also inform and enhance the depth of her spiritual character:

> Unable are the Loved – to die –
>
> For Love is immortality –
>
> Nay – it is Deity –
>
> Unable they that love – to die

[12] Louise and Frances Norcross were also the recipients of Dickinson's last known letter, sent just weeks before she died, the entire contents of which say: "Little Cousins, / Called back. / Emily" (L 1046).

For Love reforms Vitality

Into Divinity. (Fr 951)

As this poem shows, love plays an important part in Dickinson's religious poetics. She does not equate love with God, but rather with "Deity" and "Divinity." The distinction is significant, perhaps even intentional. Love does not fail her in the way God continues to, whose absence is never more obvious or abrasive than when a loved one dies. Love, on the other hand, quite possibly grows stronger in the wake of death. Dickinson recognizes the intense *divine* value in her relationships and in the enduring love she feels for the deceased. Her ability to perceive Deity in the face of death allows the poet to distinguish the form of prayer from its substance, or the meaning and symbolism that give the apparatus its appeal and authority, and discriminate between them. Even in her complaints about the "parts of his far plan / That baffled me" (Fr 546), we witness the prayerful intent behind an unquenchable thirst for communion with the Creator: "Oh God / Why give if Thou must take away / The Loved?" (Fr 1114). Dickinson recognizes the potential of prayer to satiate spiritual confusion and solitude, but the recognition of unfulfilled potential in the orthodox model is what makes its worthlessness so devastating. By engaging God through poetry, a medium entirely her own, Dickinson redefines the terms of their intercourse, allowing her to simultaneously worship and curse, cajole and despise, approach and reject a figure who is both present and absent from her life. She can confront him on any subject and in any circumstance, and thereby approach something closer to prayer than the apparatus she disavows.

Perhaps the poem that distills the clash between substance and apparatus more clearly and simply than any other is this one:

In the name of the Bee –

And of the Butterfly –

And of the Breeze – Amen! (Fr 23)

As Helen Vendler points out, Dickinson "parodies the Trinitarian formula of baptism…. It is her own imaginative effort that Dickinson is 'baptizing' here, calling on the authority of Nature, not of God" (27-8).[13] Vendler's reading of the poem as both a parody on form and a genuine invocation of Nature's power gives a window into the colorful shades of Dickinson's religiosity. It displays the fundamental paradox of subverting the sanctimony of religious apparatuses while revealing the intensity of her devotional temperament; yet, in the same gesture, lends the apparatus the legitimacy Dickinson finds lacking in the context of institutional creeds. By adopting and recycling the form of the baptismal prayer, the poet elucidates the disparity between the responsiveness and potency of Nature versus God, the two entities that Dickinson calls elsewhere the "Executors / Of My identity" (Fr 803). In the context of the poem above, the pronunciation of "Executor" is a vital detail, splitting Nature and God into separate and diametrically opposed roles. While Nature carries out the will and desires of the speaker on her behalf (ex-EC-u-tor), God terminates the vocabularies of her spiritual existence by imposing on her a defective apparatus (EX-e-cu-tor).

In "Prayer is the little implement" (Fr 632), which Dorothy Huff Oberhaus claims is "pivotal in understanding her other poems on prayer" (155), we see the emergence of the second of Dickinson's two-pronged suspicion towards prayer – the frailty of the device's mechanics, the apparatus itself, which both produces and is produced by the spatial foundations of Heaven:

Prayer is the little implement

Through which Men reach

[13] Matt. 28:19 – "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

Where Presence – is denied them –

They fling their Speech

By means of it – in God's Ear –

If then he hear –

This sums the Apparatus

Comprised in Prayer –

These lines capture the essence of Dickinson's pervasive and varying frustrations with God and his methods. She opens the poem by determining that prayer is necessary only because God does not permit face-to-face consultations ("Where Presence – is denied them –"), and closes with an implication of prayer's intrinsic fallibility ("If then he hear –"). The diminutive "little" in line 1 and pointless gesture encased in the word "fling" of line 4 indicate a disparaging, embittered tone, suggestive of a history of personal disappointments. If we consider the poem reflective of Dickinson's personal views, we are given some hints at the role prayer plays in her dissent from institutional religion. Because prayer is conventionally considered the tool that brings Heaven and Earth, God and supplicant, into direct proximity (2 Chron. 6:19),[14] it appropriately seems to be a cornerstone of the poet's religious misgivings: "Of Course – I prayed – / And did God Care?" (Fr 581); "I left the Place – with all my might – / I threw my Prayer away –" (Fr 711). The line "If then he hear" can be read as a sarcastic jab at the inefficacy of prayer; however, the poem's message goes deeper than the surface of its unreliability. It also condescendingly describes the mechanism itself by using words like "implement," "means," and of course "Apparatus."

[14] "Have respect therefore to the prayer of thy servant, and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to hearken unto the cry and the prayer which thy servant prayeth before thee."

The poem, which is essentially a definition of prayer, displays all the spatial rudiments of the Earth-Heaven, human-God arrangement. As the poetic definition demonstrates, prayer is the tool whereby the supplicant may *bridge the gap*, or *traverse the space*, that divides her from God ("Where Presence – is denied them"). Prayer requires the supplicant to mentally and physically shift towards the "mansions in the skies" (Watts, 2:65) and away from "this inferior clod" because "There's nothing here deserves my joys / There's nothing like my God" (Watts, 2:95). The arrangement that seats them on opposite ends of a spiritual-spatial spectrum is inflexible, forcing any who wish to commune with God to "reach" and "fling their Speech." This of course would not satisfy the poet's deep yearning for an authentic rapport with God. Dickinson identifies the confinements prayer places on her spiritual growth as she reflects on the conventional interpretation of its utility. (James Montgomery, another hymnist in the tradition of Watts, defines prayer, for example, as "[t]he *upward glancing* of an eye… / Prayer, the sublimest strains that *reach* / The Majesty on *high*… / Prayer is the Christina's vital breath… / He *enters heaven* with prayer" [Watts, Select:424, italics added].) By stressing the role of "God's Ear" in the process, she also reduces the Almighty to the function of a receptacle as opposed to a loving Father who would presumably make himself physically available and emotionally responsive.

By dismantling the spatiality of Heaven and dissecting the mechanics of prayer's apparatus, Emily Dickinson reveals the false promises of definitively affirmative doctrines and images in religious discourse. The spiritual cartography of her poetic project articulates a relationship to God that resists binaries such as true/false and faith/disbelief, and challenges conventional understandings of communion, Heaven, and "Divinity" (Fr 951). As "Prayer is the little implement" intimates, *where* God is matters as much to the poet as *what* He is. What God *does* is relevant to *where*, in relation to the poet, He does it. By engaging the issue of God's

orientation to self (and by extension that of self to others), Dickinson refuses permission for traditional spatial configurations to regulate the purpose and magnitude of her vigorous faith. Where she challenges religious conventions and conventional conceptions of religious devotion, the spatial parameters of Heaven lose all functionality as referees of legitimate spiritual experience.

In order to unveil the implications of Dickinson's possible disaffection, the serious reader must push against her mechanical deconstruction of prayer's apparatus: What about prayer does Dickinson find objectionable, and what about it, if anything, appeals to her? What, apart from the spatial dynamics, distinguishes the apparatus of prayer from its substance, and how do such distinctions inform her religious identity? The variations of Dickinson's sentiments towards God and her reformation of traditional religious spatiality intimates that her poetic project is, to some degree, an extended attempt to commune with an incommunicable God. Despite her numerous overt criticisms of prayer and other religious implements, most scholars, such as Oberhaus and Roger Lundin, uphold Dickinson's status as a "devotional poet." Lundin, for instance, even attempts to mitigate this poem's anxiety about prayer by situating it in a devotional context:

> In the history of the church, of course, prayer has long served as an image of the most intimate relationship possible with God. For most devotional poets, prayer reveals the presence of God; in Dickinson's poems, it often discloses his absence…. The suspicion of ['Prayer is the little implement']… is that prayer is a form of self-expression and not an occasion of divine communication. (Lundin 148)

Dickinson's eligibility for the brand "devotional poet" hinges on the balance of her misgivings regarding religious conventions with an equally explicit, if more soft-spoken, reverence for the consequences of religion's deeper meanings. Because Dickinson weaves the traditional aspects

of devotion into the fabric of her poetically reframed relationship to God, she leans on the spatiality of Heaven even as she dismantles it. Though the sentiment that one might be religious without being at all interested in institutional religion has since become commonplace, as Richard Rabinowitz and others have described (173), Dickinson's progressive discernment between the substance and apparatuses of religion permits the seemingly paradoxical observation that, despite discontinuing her church attendance at age 30, the poet was "perhaps the most religious person in town" (Sewall 26). "The dominant point to acknowledge in considering this poet's religious attitudes," Eberwein writes, "is that God was the most important person in Emily Dickinson's life. Her relationship with him excelled all others in endurance and intensity…. This was a complex God whom the poet worshiped, then, one to whom her responses were divided. It was the Father who captivated her imagination most as he presided over the realms beyond circumference and radiated an aura of power" (*Strategies* 244, 247).

**Works Cited**

Barnstone, Aliki. "Mastering the Master: Emily Dickinson's Appropriation of Crisis Conversion." *The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era*. Eds. Aliki Barnstone, Michael Tomasek Manson, and Carol J. Singley. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1997. Print.

Banzer, Judith. "Compound Manner: Emily Dickinson and the Metaphysical Poets." *American Literature*. 32 (1961): 417-433. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 13 Apr. 2012.

Cooley, Carolyn Lindley. *The Music of Emily Dickinson's Poems and Letters*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003. Print.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005. Print.

---. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, ed. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1958. Print.

Doerksen, Daniel W. "George Herbert, Calvinism, and Reading 'Mattens'." *Christianity and Literature*. 59.3 (2010): 437-451. *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 10 Jan. 2012.

Eberwein, Jane Donahue. *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1985. Print.

---. "'Is Immortality True?': Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals." *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Vivian R. Pollak. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.

Erkkila, Betsy. "Dickinson and the Art of Politics." *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Vivian R. Pollak. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.

*The Holy Bible*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1843. Authorized King James Vers. *Harvard University Library*. Web. 05 Feb. 2012.

Keane, Patrick J. *Emily Dickinson's Approving God*. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 2008. Print.

Lundin, Roger. *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004. Print.

Mayer, Nancy. "God's Place in Dickinson's Ecology." *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*. Eds. Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008. Print.

McIntosh, James. *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown*. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2004. Print.

Miller, Cristanne. "Pondering 'Liberty': Emily Dickinson and the Civil War." *American Vistas and Beyond: A Festschrift for Roland Habenbüchle*. Ed. Marietta Messmer and Josef Raab. Trier, Germany: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2002. Print.

Morgan, Victoria N. *Emiliy Dickinson and Hymn Culture: Tradition and Experience*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010. Print.

New, Elisa. *The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1993. Print.

Oberhaus, Dorothy Huff. "'Engine against th' Almightie': Emily Dickinson and Prayer." *ESQ*. 32 (1986): 152-172. Print.

Porter, David. *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966. Print.

Rabinowitz, Richard. *The Spiritual Self in Everyday Life: The Transformation of Personal Religious Experience in Nineteenth-Century New England*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1989. Print.

Rich, Adrienne. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. New York: Norton, 1979. Print.

Scholl, Diane Gabrielsen. "From Aaron 'Drest' to Dickinson's 'Queen': Protestant Typology in Herbert and Dickinson." *Emily Dickinson Journal*. 3.1 (1994): 1-23. *Project Muse*. Web. 17 Mar. 2012.

Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1974. Print.

"Swindler." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Web. 19 Feb. 2012.

Vendler, Helen. *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2010. Print.

Veith, Gene Edward. *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1985. Print.

Watts, Isaac and Simon Worcester, ed. *The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts: To Which Are Added Select Hymns, from Other Authors; and Directions for Musical Expression*. Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1849. Print.

Weisbuch, Robert. "Prisming Dickinson; or, Gathering Paradise by Letting Go." *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*. Eds. Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle and Cristanne Miller. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998. Print.

White, Fred. "Major Trends in Dickinson Criticism." *Critical Insights: Emily Dickinson*. Ed. J. Brooks Bouson. Pasadena, CA: Salem, 2010. 51-72. *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.

Wilbur, Richard. "Sumptuous Destitution." *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Judith Farr. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996. Print.

Wolosky, Shira. "Rhetoric or Not: Hymnal Tropes in Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts." *The New England Quarterly*. 61.2 (1988): 214-232. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 Feb. 2012.

---. “Public and Private in Dickinson’s War Poetry.” *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Vivian R. Pollak. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print

Zapedowska, Magdalena. “Wrestling with Silence: Emily Dickinson’s Calvinist God.” *ATQ*. 20.1 (2006): 379-98. Print.