

Anxiety and Anticipation:  
Multiplicity and the Unknown in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

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*For my family*

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## Abstract

This thesis is a discussion of the topics of multiplicity and the unknown as muse in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Contemplations of the unknown include topics such as death, immortality and the afterlife. Dickinson dedicated a considerable amount of her poetic energies to imagining and anticipating the unknown because it was *the* riddle that fascinated and frustrated her throughout her life.

In this thesis, I will argue that the multiplicity and ambiguity of Dickinson's thematic and formal characteristics are intimately related to her personal preoccupations with the unknown. It is my belief that the formal eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of Dickinson's poetry are a reflection and manifestation of the deeper thematic content underlying the surface. One of the chief sources of the fragmentation, elliptical syntactic structure, ambiguity of meaning, compression and brevity in Dickinson's poetry is located in her preoccupation with the unknown. Because she is interested in retaining all of the potential possibilities in considering her muse, she inscribes this formal multiplicity and ambiguity into her poetry. By doing so, Dickinson creates the same sense of anxiety and anticipation for her readers that she feels towards her muse, as her readers feel compelled to draw various meanings and interpretations from her poems while profoundly aware of the fact that her poetry does not lend itself to singular and conclusive interpretation.

Finally, I will investigate the effects of Dickinson's biographical and religious history on her preoccupation with the unknown, and the ways in which her refusal to convert to Puritan Calvinism made these contemplations of the unknown that much more pressing and significant for the poet. The ultimate inability to solve the riddle of the unknown proves to be both a source of great wonder and inspiration for the poet as well as a source of profound terror. In the end, Dickinson is left with only a perpetual sense of suspension when it comes to discovering the truth behind her muse, but is able to transcend this suspension through poetry, which gives her a different kind of immortality that she perhaps has not anticipated.

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*The Riddle we can guess / We speedily despise –*



## Introduction The Multiplicity of Emily Dickinson

*Regardless of how many times you read her best poems, and how many times you persuade others that you know what they "mean," you feel the tickle of unsolved mystery in the poem; you do not convince yourself that you have gotten to the bottom of it; the poem, like the poet herself, is never quite your own.*

- Cristanne Miller

After over a century of Dickinson scholarship and criticism, rather than becoming more "our own," Emily Dickinson and the motivations and meanings behind her poetry have become increasingly manifold and have been given <sup>?</sup>to a multitude of compatible as well as contradictory possibilities. For years, scholars have tried to discover the coherent poetic project that binds the corpus of Dickinson's work and illuminates the common logic underlying her poetry. But in doing so, they have managed to stray down endless pathways and open new doors that have multiplied and made it more difficult to gain a firm grasp on the poet and her poetry. The attempts to unravel her poetic knots have resulted in a greater confusion of jumbled understandings and interpretive tangles, with only local clarifications and conclusions, mere moments of perfect, but passing, sense and meaning. As frustrating as this multiplicity may seem, it is my belief that Dickinson's critical volatility would have pleased the poet <sup>placement in sentence?</sup> immensely the lover of riddles and dweller in possibilities. ✓

Dickinson's biographical history offers much helpful insight into the body of her work, but there still exist many unanswered questions concerning her life and poetry as she continues to remain an enigmatical figure. Dickinson writes in poem 303, "The Soul selects her own Society – / Then – shuts the door –." Although Dickinson "shut the door" on her physical society relatively early in life, she corresponded extensively with friends and family through letters, and her letters are one central source of writing that

scholars rely on to gather insight into Dickinson's poetry. Unfortunately, it has been estimated that only a tenth of the letters that Dickinson has<sup>d</sup> written in her lifetime survive, ✓ and <sup>fewer</sup> ~~less~~ than a thousandth of the letters ~~that have been~~ written to her (Sewall, 400). ✓

Furthermore, Dickinson's letters often resemble her poetry, sometimes are poems themselves, and can be equally difficult to decipher.

The only other source of direct insight into the life and works of the poet would be her poetry itself. However, Dickinson's poems are enigmatical puzzles that present their own set of mysteries. Ambiguously elliptical compression, brevity, dashes, arbitrary capitalization, experimental diction, and pervasive disjunction all contribute to the difficulty of maintaining a firm critical grasp on Dickinson's poetry. The cryptic ambiguity of her poetry invites a multitude of readings, and the poems, at times, simultaneously support each varying interpretation, suggesting intention behind the many possible interpretations. In fact, it seems to have been one of Dickinson's specific intentions for her poetry to maintain that tickling sense of unsolved mystery and to be riddles that are not "speedily guessed." Her most often quoted lines of poetry include: "I dwell in possibility (657)," "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant – (1129)," "Much Madness is divinest Sense – (435)," and "Alas, that Wisdom is so large – / And Truth – so manifold! (568)." Dickinson's poetry embraces ambiguity and multiplicity, insists upon it, emphatically and with great purpose.

The multiplicity of Dickinson's poetry has also made her a key figure for a diverse group of critics as she has been adopted into the schools of Romanticism, Feminism, Modernism, and even Multiculturalism in turn. The multifarious nature of Dickinson's critical reception is most notably exemplified by Susan Howe's recent book

of criticism entitled *My Emily Dickinson*. That Howe feels compelled to title her book of criticism, "*My Emily Dickinson*," indicates the wide variety of interpretations inspired by Dickinson's poetry. Elsewhere, Howe is quoted <sup>as saying</sup> ~~to say~~, "[Dickinson's] poems and her middle and later letters encompass whatever I want to bring to them. Need to bring to them. I often worry that I may be imposing my particular obsessions on her" (Erkkila, 21). Dickinson's readership, beyond the realm of criticism, has also responded in a variety of ways from taking pilgrimages to her home in Amherst, to writing poetic tributes, novels, plays, two operas, and even choreographing a dance in her honor (Sewall, 11). ✓

The publication history of the poems adds another layer of complexity to our encounter with the formal eccentricity and the diverse public reception of Emily Dickinson. The poet never prepared the poems for publication, and the early editors made significant alterations to the original versions by "correcting" grammatical "errors" and trying to make the poetry more coherent. However, the early editors are not entirely to blame for the inaccurate versions of the poetry published after Dickinson's death.

Although many of her poems were in their "finalized" forms, neatly bound in hand-sewn fascicles, much of her work was incomplete, each poem having been written on scraps of paper with various versions in difficult handwriting (Sewall, 7). For instance, the manuscript version of poem 533, "Two Butterflies went out at noon," shows writing that covers the page with scrawls on the side margins, making it difficult to decipher the exact order of the lines. Dickinson also included alternative word choices, <sup>2</sup> never making a final decision on which word to use. In poem 501, "A Species stands ✓

beyond –” may also be read as “A Sequel stands beyond –,” and “To guess it, puzzles scholars –” can be read as “To prove it, puzzles scholars –.”

To reproduce in print the physical idiosyncrasies of Dickinson’s written work also proves to be deeply problematic. Her dashes vary in size from being a mere dot on the page to a medium-length dash, to a long dash, and sometimes a squiggle. The degree of capitalization also varies as she uses a semi-capitalized letter as well as a fully capitalized letter (Miller, 58). These particular physical characteristics may seem minor and easy to overlook, but there is record of Dickinson being very specific about the presentation of her poetry. She wrote a letter of complaint to her literary confidante, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, over an added comma after the third line of the <sup>? explain</sup> illicitly published poem 986, ✓  
 “A narrow fellow in the grass.” “Lest you meet my snake and suppose I deceived it was robbed of me – defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth line were one –” (*Letters*, 316). If Dickinson was this meticulous about a misplaced comma, it is possible that her specificity extended to her other formal eccentricities, presently making an accurate printed reproduction of her poetry virtually impossible. It is questionable whether Dickinson could have produced final and fixed versions of her poetry to be available for print, or if she would even have wanted to publish her poems. She writes in poem 709, “Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man – / Poverty – be justifying – / For so foul a thing.” She also writes in the same letter to Higginson, “I had told you I did not publish...I had told you I did not print” (and yet, she loved books ✓  
 and <sup>w.c.?</sup> benefited from the publication of other literary figures).  
 vague

The critic, Porter, blames Dickinson for not being more artistically responsible and persistent in the publication of her poetry. Gary Lee Stonum summarizes in the *Dickinson Sublime*:

Porter accuses Dickinson of artistic irresponsibility for neglecting to publish, for neglecting to delete the chaff from the wheat in her work, for neglecting to title her poems and thus signal even the nominal finality and the minimal impress of authorial control that titles can supply, for neglecting to define or even broach an *ars poetica*, for neglecting to attempt the magnitude of a sustained poem (much less a deliberate chef d'oeuvre), for neglecting in any other way to rank her poems according to centrality or importance, for neglecting to develop or advance during the course of her career, and most of all for neglecting to provide any cumulative wholeness to the body of her work<sub>x</sub> (Stonum, 8). ✓

Porter further charges that Emily Dickinson is “the only major American poet without a project,” that her poetry is “hyperconsciousness without system or order,” and that it is also an “idiolect of confusion” that reflects the “instinctive formlessness of her thoughts.”<sup>1</sup> Porter’s severest criticism against Dickinson is the apparent incoherency of her poetry. The disjointed nature of her poems is what makes her a “poet without a project” with confused and formless thoughts.

That her poetry is fragmented and deviant from the poetic norm, especially by nineteenth-century standards of poetry, is undeniable. Her close to 1,800 poems lack sequence, thematic organization, and lucid communication of underlying significance. Even Higginson called her poetry “spasmodic” (*Letters*, 409), and Dickinson herself writes, “I have no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize

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<sup>1</sup> Porter’s assertions as quoted by Stonum, p.8

– my little Force explodes” (*Letters*, 414). However, this does not necessarily mean that she has no purpose, no project beneath the fragmentation and incoherence of her poetry. To consider and capture multiplicity and possibility is her poetic project, which inevitably lends itself to a kind of coherent incoherence.

✓  
see my comments in  
my letter to you

At the core of Dickinson’s poetic investigation lies the profound desire to discover and represent the nature of truth. She seems to have realized early in life that philosophy, science, and especially the religion of her age could not offer all of the answers that <sup>they</sup> it claimed to have. She begins poem 501 by confidently asserting, “This World is not Conclusion,” but continues on with increasing doubt to state that “Philosophy – don’t know –,” that “To guess it, puzzles scholars –,” that “Faith slips –,” and finally ends by writing that “Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul –.” Dickinson’s religious disillusionment manifests itself most extensively in her poetry as she recognizes that the “Truth” of Puritan Calvinism—so adamantly impressed upon her system of beliefs by her family, her friends, her community, and her professors at school—could not possibly be the only answer. She perceives that knowledge is infinitely abundant and that the institutions of knowledge are constantly in flux and finally concludes, “Alas, that Wisdom is so large – / And Truth – so manifold!” (568). The motivations behind the fragmented and incoherent nature of her poems are located in her desire, in her poetic project, to retain the manifold integrity of her words, her ideas, and her poetry. She needed a new and experimental poetic form that would effectively embody her particular poetic agenda, an agenda that would <sup>rarely?</sup> ~~not always~~ lend itself to perfect rhymes, neat meters, and lengthy, thoroughly explicated poems.

✓

✓

Finally, the reasons for the mystery of Emily Dickinson are as multifarious as her poetry. However, perhaps the most provocative source of the Dickinson enigma is her lifelong obsession with and musings about the unknown. Dickinson writes in poem 1222, “The Riddle we can guess / We speedily despise –.” The mystery that continues to puzzle, delight, and terrify Dickinson throughout her career is the riddle of the unknown, and especially the unknowable riddle of death. Dickinson invests the most significant measure of her imaginative energies in writing poetry about death; God, heaven, immortality, and the soul are some of her other favored subjects of contemplation. In his thoughtfully precise biography, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, Sewall addresses the abiding need to devote careful attention to the biographical history of Dickinson, which may, in turn, offer insight into the motivations that lie behind her poetry.

With Emily Dickinson, the long process of assimilation has, relatively speaking, just begun. She is not yet ours, and she will not be until her hopes and fears and mysteries become as plain to us as Antigone’s or Hamlet’s are, and with much the same claim on us. (xiii)

This thesis will be dedicated to investigating the “hopes and fears and mysteries” of Emily Dickinson, how she chooses to imagine the unknown in her poetry, and how the unknown can be, at once, a tremendous source of poetic inspiration as well as an inescapable and relentless source of terror and anxiety for the poet.

It is my belief that the multiplicity of Emily Dickinson is intimately connected to her obsession with the unknown as she inscribes the anxiety, uncertainty and ambiguity of her most exigent contemplations into her poetry. What infuses the poetry of Emily Dickinson with mystery and multiplicity, fragmentation and instability, is her desire to

consider and retain all of the possibilities in imagining the unknown. By examining the ways in which Dickinson approaches and imagines the unknown, we can familiarize ourselves with the concerns that she finds most troubling and engaging, gaining insight into the mind and motivations of the poet, who herself has become the unsolvable riddle, and whose poetry itself the unknown.



## Chapter One Formal Multiplicity

What distinguishes Dickinson from her contemporaries and makes her poetry difficult to decipher revolves around the radical ways in which she has experimented with poetic form. Her poems are dense and concise, sometimes mere cryptic phrases strung together. Within this perplexing brevity, there exists collapsed syntax, startlingly unconventional metaphors, and pervasively equivocal dashes. In *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*, Crisanne Miller records, "The poet does tease. The power of her words lies at least in their (and her) ability to give more than a reader can entirely understand and not enough to satisfy the desire to know."<sup>2</sup> She herself writes, "The fascination of reading Dickinson's poetry is one and the same with the frustration of reading it" (19). In this first chapter of my thesis, I will seek to explore the fascination and frustration of Dickinson's particular idiosyncrasies, unpacking the formal complications that present the first interpretive barrier to the reader. I will examine the ways in which her difficult and unconventional poetic form actually reflects and complements the thematic content of her poetry. ✓

The formal eccentricities and experimentation of Emily Dickinson are profoundly related to her interests in the aspects of the unknown: death, understanding and personifying a divine figure, the afterlife, and immortality. The fragmentation of the physical surface and the syntactic structure of her poetry, the ambiguity of meaning and ellipses, the compression and brevity, the slanted rhymes and ubiquitous dashes, all of these formal characteristics of Dickinson's poetry are the physical and literal } ✓

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<sup>2</sup> Keller's assertions as quoted by Miller, p. 19

manifestations of the underlying thematic instabilities, uncertainties and vast possibilities embodied within the unknown as muse.

Perhaps the best-known assertion of Dickinson's investment in possibility and her recognition of variable certainties is poem 657:

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

In this poem, Dickinson equates poetry to possibility, writing that poetry is “More numerous of Windows –,” and “Superior – for Doors –.” Dickinson's metaphors indicate that poetry allows the poet, as well as the reader, to present and understand the ideas which inspire a poem with a more various and inclusive frame of mind and consideration. Through poem 657, Dickinson suggests that one can enter and exit a poem in many ways, through many doors, and that poets are able to provide their readers with these extensive possibilities because of the very nature of poetry, a nature that lends itself to more flexibility and experimentation. She also proposes that poetry offers more views, multiple “windows” of perspective that provide an open and extensive outlook; poetry leaves room for contradiction, conflicting viewpoints, and change. One of the reasons that Emily Dickinson calls herself a poet and appeals to poetry is precisely because it conforms more easily and effectively to her specific purposes: to retain and explore multiple possibilities, especially because writing about the unknown would necessitate such thoughtful ambivalence.

The formal characteristics of Dickinson contribute to the multiplicity and irreducibility of her poetry, as her formal poetic idiosyncrasies become literal inscriptions

of the unknown. Miller acknowledges the difficulty in approaching a poet characterized by such multiplicity and offers insight into making Dickinson's poetry more accessible.

Looking for meaning in a poem's language alone, the reader finds extraordinary multiplicity. The poet's metaphors and extended analogies, her peculiar brevity, lack of normal punctuation...all invite multiple, nonreferential interpretations of what she means. Tempering this multiplicity with a historical understanding of the poet's life...focuses the possibilities of meaning (Miller, 2). ✓

Dickinson's poetry assumes the mystery and impregnability of its muse as she simultaneously contemplates and creates the unknown in her poems. However, as she begins to imagine the unknown, she never loses sight of the fact that an accurate or adequate representation of the unknown is impossible. One of the ways in which she communicates this recognition is to write in a cryptic and fragmented manner, retaining all of the ambiguities and possibilities that are inherent in her choice considerations. As Miller suggests, one of the key elements to decoding the poetry of Dickinson is to familiarize oneself with the history of her preoccupation with the unknown and to elucidate how and why she dedicated so much of her poetic energy to imagining the unknown. I will briefly offer some biographical background that provides some insight into Dickinson's history with the unknown before beginning my discussion of her poetic form.

~

The religious inclination of nineteenth-century America was still deeply Puritanical. Dickinson's family and closest friends subscribed to Puritan Calvinism and urged Dickinson to do the same (Sewall, 389). She writes in a letter to Thomas

Wentworth Higginson,<sup>3</sup> “They are religious – except me,” and in a letter to her friend, Jane Humphrey, she states, “I am already set down as one of those brands almost consumed – and my hardheartedness gets me many prayers” (Sewall, 390, 393).

Dickinson attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary from September of 1846 to August of 1847; ~~and~~ one of the primary concerns of the school was to convert its students ✓ to Christianity. Dickinson was required to attend regular assemblies and sermons and felt consistent religious pressure from her teachers and friends to which she never ① succumbed. The student body was divided into two categories, the “Hopers” and the ① “No-hopers,” and Dickinson was placed within the latter division. She never joined her ① and ② family church, and there is no evidence that Dickinson ever permanently subscribed to seem contradictory or, at the least, ② any particular denomination or organized system of belief (Sewall, 359-361). seems to und the cogent message of ①

Dickinson’s religious “crisis” contributed significantly to the urgency of seeking out the truth, and her early religious disillusionment deeply complicated the way in which she understood and imagined the world around her, as well as the potential afterlife that followed. Although she did not whole-heartedly convert to Christianity, ② she certainly inherited a Christian consciousness that compelled her to imagine and hope for a God and for a divine afterlife. However, she refused to delude herself into believing that religion, or any other system of belief, held the answers to the unknown. Tiechert states:

Although there are poems in the corpus of her work which contain clear, childlike ← statements of faith, the predominant tone in the majority of the poems about God

Perhaps some examples of these?

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson was Dickinson’s literary mentor with whom she corresponded extensively. He was the one whom she turned to for insight into the quality of her poetry, and he is the one who suggested that Dickinson delay publication (Letters, 2:408). Higginson was the youngest of fifteen children. He passed the entrance examination to Harvard University at the age of thirteen. Higginson was the author of one of the first, widely circulated feminist tracts, *Woman and Her Wishes*, and a passionate and dedicated abolitionist. The former minister encouraged young writers, was responsible for the first published editions of Dickinson’s poetry (along with Lavinia Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd), and was a fitting mentor to the rebellious and experimental poet (Howe, 121-126).

is one of wry skepticism, disillusionment and bitterness. The poet appears to long for certainty or reassurance of God's goodness and love, but is too intellectually honest and acutely aware of the contradictions of her own religious experience to be capable of any 'simple' faith (Tiechert, 21).

Dickinson's disillusionment with Christianity and her realization of the multiplicity of possibilities in response to her religious inquiries is evident in poem 568:

We learned the Whole of Love –  
 The Alphabet – the Words –  
 A Chapter – then the mighty Book –  
 Then – Revelation closed –

But in Each Other's eyes  
 An Ignorance beheld –  
 Diviner than the Childhood's –  
 And each to each, a Child –

Attempted to expound  
 What Neither – understood –  
 Alas, that Wisdom is so large –  
 And Truth – so manifold!

When Dickinson begins this poem by saying, "We learned the Whole of Love –," she speaks ironically as it becomes evident by the end of the poem that the "whole of love" or the "whole of life" was not learned and, in fact, cannot be learned. Thus, she criticizes the presumption of Christianity in claiming to hold unknowable answers. She finishes the stanza with, "Then – Revelation closed –." Revelation refers both to the last book of the Bible, and also to the literal meaning of the word "revelation." Dickinson undermines the Christian belief that the "mighty book" contains the "whole" of the answers to life as she plays with the word "revelation" in the last line, a pun which can mean that the revelation of life is complete and closes with the last book of the Bible, but

can also mean that this Biblical revelation is contained only within the book, and closes with it, unable to impart any real truth in life outside of the book.

The inadequacy of Biblical revelation becomes especially apparent in the second stanza when Dickinson writes, “But in Each Other’s eyes / An Ignorance beheld –.” Furthermore, the first line of the second stanza begins with “but,” immediately discrediting the Christian ideals that Dickinson ironically establishes in the first stanza. She says that the “we,” the speaker and one other person, have maintained a “diviner childhood,” an ignorance or innocence that the Bible cannot resolve and that neither understands. The poet never offers any answers for the ignorance of these two figures, but simply ends with the lines, “Alas, that Wisdom is so large – / And Truth – so manifold,” which suggests that they may never find final, authoritative answers, as Christianity contends, but will encounter an inexhaustible <sup>number</sup> amount of *possible* answers as well as questions. She ends the poem with an exclamation point rather than her characteristic dash or absence of punctuation, which implies that although the answers they have received are unreliable and given to change, that “truth is manifold” is a certainty. Ford asserts in response to this poem: ✓

Because ‘Truth’ is ‘so manifold’, she is constantly seeing new and sometimes contradictory facets of truth, and these particular insights are scattered over a large number of poems – her work is as manifold as truth itself is in her conception<sub>x</sub> (Stocks, 31). ✓

Dickinson’s recognition of the multiplicity of ideas and understanding that is present in the world and her exploration of this recognition is translated into her poetry that Ford says is “as manifold as truth itself.” What is not discernable from the exclamation point

is whether Dickinson's conclusion is an optimistic or pessimistic one. Does she celebrate the multiplicity of truth or does she lament it?

Throughout Dickinson's oeuvre, there exists a problematic and provocative tension between the two extremes of curious anticipation and terrified anxiety towards the unknown that perhaps parallels the constant vacillation between faith and doubt in her own life. The intentional ambiguity of her poetry allows Dickinson to capture the polarity of both these states of consciousness, uncompromisingly representing the multifaceted nature of truth. The ability to retain these polar consciousnesses is possible only because of the ways in which her poetic form lends itself to uncertainty, or rather a variety of certainties.

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Although Dickinson is recognized for her extensive and radical experimentation with poetic form, she still adheres to the basic formal traditions of poetry. For the most part, she writes in stanzas, keeps regular meter, and follows conventional rhyme schemes. Miller argues that Dickinson chooses to observe these fundamental poetic traditions in order to temper her other, more radical and experimental poetic devices.

This underlying regularity of meter, rhyme, and stanza forms and the correspondence of her line to syntactic phrase boundaries "cool"<sup>4</sup> the surprise of her disruptive punctuation, inverted and elliptical syntax, occasional metrical irregularity, off-rhyme, and general ungrammaticality. These traditional features, however, also make her disruptions startling by setting them off so quietly (Miller, 44).

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<sup>4</sup> This quotation refers to Letter 265, addressed to Higginson, in which she writes, "I could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled my Tramp," implying that she could not divorce herself completely from the conventions of poetry, which she deeply admired and appreciated.

Dickinson's poetic form embodies the old and the new, tradition and non-tradition, a characteristic that deeply reflects her poetic considerations. The book that is most influential to Dickinson's poetry and most alluded to by Dickinson is the Bible (Capps, 27). However, she makes Biblical references only to challenge and to question Christian doctrine, juxtaposing traditional religious authority with her own critical and intellectual authority, thereby making her defiant assertions more cogent and justifiable.

The main source of Dickinson's verse form can be found in hymns. This unlikely source accounts for the meter used to regulate the majority of her poems. "Her father owned a copy of Isaac Watts's Christian Psalms in which the meter for each song was named" (Ford, 62). That Dickinson would use hymn meters as she simultaneously contests the truth claimed by Christianity is significantly ironic and refers back to the idea of writing radical ideas within traditional form as a claim to authority and legitimacy.

Moreover, perhaps Dickinson embraced the hymn meter because she saw poetry as her own, unique and independent, form of worship and celebration of truth. She frequently represents herself with the metaphor of a bird and represents her poetry as the songs that she sings. Poems 634, "You'll know Her – by her Foot –," 861, "Split the Lark – and you'll find the Music –," and 1585, "The Bird her punctual music brings," are just a few examples of this metaphor that Dickinson applies to herself.

Dickinson's poetry is predominately characterized by slant rhymes as exemplified in the last stanza of poem 712:

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day,  
I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity –



Such imperfect rhymes, as in the words “day” and “eternity,” are pervasive in Dickinson and closely parallel the thematic concerns in her poems. The imperfect rhymes mimic the sense of uncertainty that is so prevalent in Dickinson’s poems, suggesting that something may be askew and lacking absolute security and order. The slant rhymes also reflect the anxiety that Dickinson’s poetic personae (or Dickinson herself) may be feeling.

Furthermore, as we have seen Miller establish, these slight deviations within the system of traditional poetic order to which Dickinson adheres can prove to be even more startling and indicative than if Dickinson had completely abandoned poetic convention. The subtle uneasiness that the slant rhyme creates within Dickinson’s poetry implicitly threatens the overall structure and integrity of the poem, which effectively complements the ways in which Dickinson is highly suspicious of and resistant to fixity and absolute order. Dickinson’s imperfect rhyme schemes parallel the questioning and doubtful disposition of the poet, and represent the inability to order the world (within poetry and without) into systems of perfect rhyme and reason.

One of Dickinson’s more direct deviances from traditional poetic conventions includes the dash. The dash is perhaps the most formally emblematic inscription of the unknown and the multitude of possibilities concerning the unknown, and it is also the single most recognizable characteristic of Dickinson’s poetry. The dash not only concedes the essentially unknowable nature of her muse, but also envelops the vast potential of possibilities that lie within the unknown. It both replaces or strikes out explanatory words and embodies all of them at once. It is the silent symbol of multiplicity, polarity, and the unknown.

The dash functions in a variety of different ways in Dickinson's poetry. Dashes can signify silences in her poetry, when the intensity of a particular emotion or thought becomes ineffable. The dashes serve to bracket off individual words or phrases that she wants to emphasize, and they are indispensable in relation to syntactic doubling in her poems.<sup>5</sup> Dickinson's dashes are also a characteristic of her poetry that accounts for the tremendously compressed nature of her poems. The presence of dashes allows the absence of explanatory words and phrases, troublesome clutter that limits potential possibilities and that is contrary to Dickinson's riddling and enigmatic poetic personality. Moreover, Sewall writes in his biography,

New Englanders were understandably frugal with everything, until frugality became a virtue which in later, more prosperous generations was cherished for its own sake, quite apart from need...the habit of thrift extended to speech. They hated to waste words, a quality which became perhaps Emily Dickinson's most obvious New Englandism<sub>x</sub> (Sewall, 21). ✓

In Dickinson's poetry, the dash can also be seen as the formal embodiment of this particular New Englandism that Sewall addresses.

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<sup>5</sup> "Syntactic doubling" is a term coined by Miller that refers to instances in Dickinson's poetry in which she does not repeat a phrase that would normally be repeated, thereby allowing one phrase bracketed by dashes to accompany both the preceding and following phrases (Miller, 37-39). For example:

Salute her – with long fingers –  
Caress her freezing hair – (P 512)

The "long fingers" in these lines both "salute" and "caress" as Dickinson collapses the two sentences together through her use of dashes.

We find another example of syntactic doubling in poem 501.

It beckons, and it baffles –  
Philosophy – don't know –

The sentence could be read as either "it beckons and it baffles philosophy" or "philosophy don't know." The isolation of the phrase "don't know" between two dashes is also an example of Dickinson bracketing a phrase that she wants emphasized, this phrase being particularly significant in P501, which speaks to the unknowable nature of the afterlife. Syntactic doubling also complicates the traditional forward progression of reading. Instead, we are invited to read both backwards and forwards in Dickinson's poetry in order to understand her meaning.

Furthermore, Thomas W. Ford adds, “her use of the dash reflects- and conveys- a feeling of haste and urgency. Impatient with punctuation, afraid to slow down her creative thought, she placed a dash wherever she desired” (Ford, 183). Similarly, Miller also offers insight into Dickinson’s dashes and claims:

These dashes correspond to pauses for breath or deliberation, or to signs of an impatient eagerness that cannot be bothered with the formalities of standard punctuation. Dickinson’s dashes operate rhetorically more than syntactically. Overall, they create a suggestion that the mind at work in the text is unfettered by normal rules of logical procedure...Dickinson’s punctuation, like her poetry, teaches the reader to trust the play of the mind/ (Miller, 51). ✓

Both Miller and Ford assert that the dashes serve to alleviate the potential disruption to the flow of Dickinson’s creative momentum otherwise hindered by an obedience to traditional rules of grammar and punctuation. The dashes suggest a vigorously active mind, overwhelmed by the ideas that it entertained, and unable to keep up with the rapidity with which they entered her stream of consciousness. ✓

Dickinson’s dashes also physically and formally manifest poetic fragmentation on the surface of the text, which parallels the abstract and unknowable nature of her subject matter, and reflects the poet’s own sense of fragmentation in approaching her more problematic and perplexing topics of consideration. The fragmentary appearance of her poems on the page can be emblematic of the internal emotional, intellectual and spiritual turmoil with which she struggled throughout her life and inscribed into her poetry. The dashes give a stitched appearance to the words and phrases of the poetry on the page, a

fragile and unstable construction of ideas that threaten to unravel at the slightest disturbance.

That the fragility of the physical appearance of Dickinson's poetry corresponds to her thematic considerations is evident in poem 568, as she confronts the realization that the foundations of what she has been taught as a child have crumbled under critical scrutiny and speaks to the transient, manifold nature of truth. Poem 568 maintains both a sense of bright anticipation as a result of the liberation from falsely limited Biblical doctrine, as well as a profound sense of terror at the realization that what one held to be "Truth" is invalid. That knowledge will always beget more questions, which may not have available answers, can be frightening, especially when considering one's fate. This realization leads to instability and groundlessness, which can be the source of terror and incessant doubt. Finally, the disjointed and fragmented form of Dickinson's poetry captures the variety of conflicting sensibilities present within this poem. These various elaborations of the function of dashes are a testament to the multiplicity present in Dickinson's poetry.

The other most recognizable formal eccentricity that Dickinson's poems display is her seemingly random capitalization. Capitalization may serve to emphasize significant words. However, the degree of emphasis becomes extremely complicated when we consider Dickinson's manuscripts in which she utilizes several different sizes of "capitalization," requiring a distinction between medium-sized capital letters and full-sized capital letters (Miller, 58). Some words in Dickinson's manuscripts are also either underlined and capitalized, or just underlined, further complicating the issue of specialized significance. Miller ends her discussion of Dickinson's capitalization by

writing that, “[b]y flagging so many of her substantives, Dickinson seems to invite her reader to make as much of them as he or she will” (Miller, 59). This quotation implies that we cannot know for certain, in many cases, what exact purpose Dickinson’s capitalization signifies, given the seemingly whimsical and unclear manner in which she utilizes this particular formal idiosyncrasy. The inability to make sense of her capitalization or to establish consistent rules with which to read her poetry may also represent the unknown, referring to the unknowable and arbitrary nature of life.

Dickinson comments on the arbitrary creative gestures of God in poem 724:

It’s easy to invent a Life –  
 God does it – every Day –  
 Creation – but the Gambol  
 Of His Authority –

It’s easy to efface it –  
 The thrifty Deity  
 Could scarce afford Eternity  
 To spontaneity –

The Perished Patterns murmur –  
 But His Perturbless Plan  
 Proceed – inserting Here – a Sun –  
 There – leaving out a Man –

The inability to make complete sense of Dickinson’s capitalization (or her poetry and poetic form in general) may be due to an attempt to mimic the arbitrary nature of God’s creative inclinations in her own poetic creations. Thereby, Dickinson effectively expresses the unstable and unknowable nature of life (and the afterlife) through the unknowable nature of her poems. ✓

The system of punctuation that Dickinson uses in her poetry is as seemingly eccentric and sporadic as it is profoundly significant and reasonable. Many of Dickinson’s poems end without any punctuation while others end with a dash or squiggle,

and quite a few of her poems end with question marks that continue to unsettle and create doubt that she has already introduced in the body of the poem. Dickinson also uses exclamation points, although rarely, at the end of her poems, the ambiguity of which is evident in poem 568. They can either indicate assurance of conviction, optimism, or deep regret. However, even more rare than the exclamation point is the period. To end a poem with a period would indicate that the issues, problems, and mysteries present within the poem are complete and finite. A period would suggest that the concerns of the poem have been adequately addressed and explicated, an assertion that is inherently contradictory to Dickinson's poetic and philosophical commitments. Miller insightfully declares,

Dickinson is apt to use the period ironically, to mock the expectation of final certainty. Her periods superficially fulfill the reader's expectation that the poems will conclude instead of just ending, while the poems in fact rarely do conclude.

(Miller, 53)

One such example is poem 419 in which Dickinson writes, "Either Darkness alters – / Or something in the sight – / Adjusts itself to Midnight – / And Life steps almost straight." In this poem, Dickinson advocates dwelling in darkness, preferring suspension within the unknown to the delusional light found in religion. The period at the end of this poem serves two functions: to indicate the assurance of Dickinson's conviction that darkness is better than delusion, and to ironize the conclusion that life will step straight, which the poet also qualifies with the word "almost."<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the brevity, density, compression and syntactical collapse, and elliptical aspects of Dickinson's poetry allow for the multiplicity and irreducibility of

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<sup>6</sup> Further analysis of this poem can be found on pages 26-28.

interpretation and meaning in her poems. If Dickinson were to write long, clearly explicated, lucid poetry, she would not be able to realize her particular poetic agenda, having to compromise the integrity of the multifarious nature of her words and ideas with straightforward, bland, and prosy explanations. Her short, cryptic poems very much resemble the riddles that she is so fond of, and enable Dickinson to accomplish her desire to write experimental poetry that is complementary to her muse of the unknown. Furthermore, through her poetic experimentation, Dickinson literally inscribes the unknown into her poetry and makes the poem itself unknowable, just as her poetic muse is essentially unknowable. Dickinson creates for her readers the sense of fascination and frustration with which she herself approaches her subjects of contemplation, as we simultaneously anticipate the meaning of her poems and feel anxiety towards our inability to do so with complete confidence.

## Chapter Two

### The Unknown as Inspiration: Anticipating the Possibilities

Anticipation of the afterlife pervades the poetry of Emily Dickinson and constitutes one of her preferred topics of consideration. Imagination of the afterlife is a significant component of Dickinson's contemplation of the unknown, and depictions of the afterlife carry a sense of curiosity and excitement at the possibilities that await her. She writes to her sister after the death of her nephew, "'Open the Door, open the Door, they are waiting for me,' was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium. *Who* were waiting for him, all we possess we would give to know...All this and more, though *is* there more? More than Love and Death? Then tell me it's [sic] name!" (*Letters*, 873). Death and the afterlife is the ultimate riddle that fascinated Dickinson as she, at times, expresses envy at the death<sup>5</sup> of others because they are finally able to know the truth that interests, eludes, and perplexes her (Ford, 170). She writes in poem 856:

There is a finished feeling  
Experienced at Graves –  
A leisure of the Future –  
A Wilderness of Size.

By Death's bold Exhibition  
Preciser what we are  
And the Eternal function  
Enabled to infer.

Note that Dickinson ends both of her stanzas in this poem with a period and that they are not being used ironically, which suggests that the content of the poem can be read as definite and undeniable conclusions. That Dickinson chooses to characterize the afterlife



as a “wilderness” and creates syntactical puzzles throughout the poem indicate that revelation is still far away and perhaps even suggests a hint of anxiety in having to wait until death to discover her answers about life. However, the finality of poem 856 is appropriate because there is no room for uncertainty or doubt in the assertions that Dickinson establishes within this particular poem. Upon entering the grave, she will discover the solution to her life-long riddle; she will find answers to her relentless and incessant questions; she will finally know for certain the “function” of eternity. This chapter will be devoted to examining the ways in which Dickinson chooses to imagine the unknown before “Death’s bold Exhibition,” focusing on her more securely and defiantly critical approaches to the afterlife.

At first glance, poem 374 appears to be a simple imaginative attempt at familiarizing the afterlife in order to make the potentially frightening prospect of the unknown more comfortable.

I went to Heaven –  
 ‘Twas a small Town –  
 Lit – with a Ruby –  
 Lathed – with Down –  
  
 Stiller – than the fields  
 At the full Dew –  
 Beautiful – as Pictures –  
 No Man drew.  
 People – like the Moth –  
 Of Mechlin<sup>7</sup> – frames –  
 Duties – of Gossamer –  
 And Eider<sup>8</sup> – names –  
 Almost – contented –

<sup>7</sup> **Mechlin** - \Mech"lin\, n. 1. A lace in which the pattern details are defined by a flat thread. Also called **malines**. 2. A kind of lace made at, or originating in, Mechlin, in Belgium.

<sup>8</sup> **Eider** - \Ei"der\, n. [Of Scand. origin, cf. Icel [æ]ʔr; akin to Sw. eider, Dan. ederfugl.] (Zo["o]l.) Any species of sea duck of the genus *Somateria*, esp. *Somateria mollissima*, which breeds in the northern parts of Europe and America, and lines its nest with fine down (taken from its own body) which is an article of commerce; (*American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition*).

I – could be –  
 ‘Mong such unique  
 Society –

One possible interpretation of this poem is that it exhibits one of Dickinson’s more optimistic responses to or portrayals of the afterlife. Dickinson imagines heaven as “a small Town –,” familiarizing a place that would otherwise seem foreign and frighteningly unfamiliar. Familiarity of place is especially significant to Dickinson who hardly ever left her hometown of Amherst, and on the rare occasions that she did leave, suffered severe homesickness (Sewall, 358). The line, “Lathed – with Down –,” evokes warmth and comfort, further indicating the desire to imagine heaven as a familiar and comfortable place. The Eider, which we can also connect with the “down” that “lathes” Dickinson’s heaven, is a duck that can be found in the northern parts of Europe and America, most likely a bird that Dickinson was accustomed to seeing in Amherst, and therefore, another element taken directly from her familiar environment to characterize the unknown.

The lines, “Still – than the fields / At the full Dew - / Beautiful – as Pictures – / No man drew,” present an instance in which dashes add multiplicity and ambiguity into the text where “Beautiful” refers to either and both the still fields and the pictures. The middle of the second stanza is exemplary of the ambiguous way in which Dickinson collapses metaphors. The lines “People – like the Moth - / Of Mechlin – frames - / Duties – of Gossamer - / And Eider – names –,” are a series of word associations from “Moth” to “Mechlin” to “Gossamer” to “Eider” that read as if Dickinson writes poetry in a stream of metaphoric consciousness. The wings of a moth are like lace, but they are also gossamery, like the feathers of a duck. She shifts from the image of the moth to the image of the duck in just four or five words. ✓ !

Dickinson ends the poem: “Almost – contented - / I – could be - / ‘Mong such unique / Society -.” The “society”<sup>of heaven(?)</sup> that she has chosen to represent of ~~heaven~~ is one that ✓ is specific and uniquely familiar to the poet, one that she has created and imagined to fit her particular wants and needs. Through poetry, she anticipates an afterlife that she would find most comfortable and welcoming, and imaginatively manipulates the unknown for her own pleasure.

However, the words “unique” and “almost” complicate this initial interpretation of poem 374 because these words imply both an unsettling undercurrent of discontent in this society and the recognition that this imagined heaven is indeed a mere invention of the poet. It is colored by her own distinct set of experiences and sources of knowledge, making vain this anticipatory poetic enterprise. The poem can be read as an instance in which Dickinson rejects contemplating an afterlife altogether. The small town may be referring to Amherst as she places herself in a “heaven” that is surrounded with objects in nature with which she is most familiar, like the Eider, indicative of an attitude more invested in the immediate conditions of existence. The poem could be saying that what is knowable is Amherst, and the personal experiences of the poet are the only tools she has with which to construct an image of the afterlife, which would not be an accurate representation, but would indeed be utterly inadequate and unrepresentative.

That Dickinson chooses to illuminate this heaven with a ruby is also problematic. The ruby would cast a red light over the heavenly atmosphere, a color that would more often be used to represent the fiery depths of hell. She writes that this heaven is “Still – than the fields / At the full Dew –,” referring to the calmness of the morning. However, morning is not a secure metaphor for heaven because it will inevitably pass into afternoon

and eventually night. This heaven is also described as being a beautiful picture that “No Man drew,” which may refer to the divine beauty of this heaven that could never be portrayed by a human being, as well as to its nonexistence altogether. ✓

Dickinson also chooses to represent this heaven with the image of a moth, a destructive rather than constructive insect, possibly eating away at the Mechlin lace that frames this paradise. The image of the moth is further problematic when we consider the Bible in the book of *Matthew*. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt” (*Matthew* 6:19). Within the Christian tradition, the moth is the metaphor for corruption, and one that is not associated with heaven. Yet, Dickinson chooses to use the moth to represent heaven in her poem because it is an image of destruction that is appropriately placed at the center of this fictitious depiction of paradise, which begins to deteriorate the more we gain insight into the depths of its metaphors. ✓

Furthermore, Dickinson chooses to lather this heaven with Eider down, a species of duck that was hunted for its particularly soft feathers. Interestingly, the Eider duck had become nearly extinct in the U.S. by the eighteenth-century. To encounter this species became so rare, that the domestic market was eventually abandoned (Howe, 109). Dickinson’s choice of the Eider in poem 374 is too specific for her not to have known about the rarity of this species and further speaks to the impossible existence of the heaven that she portrays.

Dickinson recognizes that whether she attempts to make the unknown more comfortable for herself or whether she rejects representations of the unknown, it is doubtful that she can ever fully succeed in either endeavor. The unknown will never be

comfortable because it must necessarily always be a fictional construction of uniquely acquired knowledge and experience. Dickinson writes in poem 696, “I’m finite – I can’t see –,” and describes herself as having “narrow eyes.” She also writes in poem 285, “I see – New Englandly,” further indicating her own referential limitations. Dickinson concludes poem 696 by affirming that, “This timid life of Evidence / Keeps pleading – ‘I don’t know.’” Dickinson isolates “I don’t know” and follows it with a period giving these words a sense of finality.

Yet Dickinson will always wonder about the unknown afterlife, because she must inevitably face it. She does not seem to assert that indulging in anticipatory imagination is useless. However, Dickinson remains wary of social institutions that insist on possessing the answers to those questions that are unanswerable. Her reluctance to align herself to one confined system of belief manifests itself in her poetry. Almost every line in poem 374 ends with a dash, and Dickinson chooses to end the last line with a dash, leaving a perpetual sense of inquiry and possibility.

Poem 215 is similar to poem 374 in that it is also an anticipation of the afterlife, yet this poem is much more openly defiant than the last, and challenges the existence of a god as defined and established by Puritan Calvinism.

What is – “Paradise” –  
 Who live there –  
 Are they “Farmers” –  
 Do they “hoe” –  
 Do they know that this is “Amherst” –  
 And that I – am coming – too –

Do they wear “new shoes” – in “Eden” –  
 Is it always pleasant – there –  
 Won’t they scold us – when we’re homesick –  
 Or tell God – how cross we are –

You are sure there's such a person  
 As "a Father" – in the sky –  
 So if I get lost – there – ever –  
 Or do what the Nurse calls "die" –  
 I shan't walk the "Jasper" – barefoot –  
 Ransomed folks – won't laugh at me –  
 Maybe – "Eden" a'n't so lonesome  
 As New England used to be!

Poem 215 begins with immediate similarities to poem 374, imagining heaven and attributing <sup>to it?</sup> it with the familiar elements of Dickinson's immediate environment. She asks ✓  
 if there are farmers in Eden and if they hoe (a reference to Amherst which was an agrarian community). She wonders if the society in heaven knows that her present location is Amherst, all deceptively innocent questions at first glance. However, there is a rapid shift in the second stanza to a more interrogative and skeptic attitude towards heaven, and a new source of anxiety and uncertainty is added, which is the figure of God. Dickinson asks, "You are sure there's such a person / as 'a Father' – in the sky –," unveiling her skepticism towards the existence of a deity. <sup>Furthermore (?)</sup> ~~However~~, she uses the paternal ✓  
 role of God to describe him and places "a Father" in quotations, which suggests that she is not only doubting the existence of God, but the existence of a benevolent, paternal figure as a personification of that deity.

Dickinson's anxiety towards what she might encounter is more apparent in poem 215 than it is in poem 374, and instead of filling her imaginations of the afterlife with what is familiar and comforting, she imagines it instead with what is still familiar, but is a source of discomfort rather than comfort. She fears that she might get homesick, which was a ~~real~~ fear for her in reality, and that people might laugh at her, which reflects her ✓  
 selectiveness and anxiety towards the society she kept. There is a general sense of unpreparedness that plagues her throughout the poem, evident in her concerns about

“new shoes,” and fearing that she might have to walk barefoot. However, Dickinson does maintain a glimmer of hope in the poem where she asks questions to which she seems to want positive answers. The phrases, “You are sure there’s such a person,” “I shan’t walk the ‘Jasper’ – barefoot –,” and “Ransomed folks – won’t laugh at me –” express doubt, but they also seem a little hopeful, especially as she ends with a semi-positive note when she writes, “Maybe – ‘Eden’ a’n’t so lonesome / As New England used to be!” She closes with an exclamation mark that could either be interpreted as an optimistic conclusion, or a suspicious hyperbole where the speaker is trying too hard to convince herself of what is hopeful while she is inescapably aware of what is highly doubtful.

~

The courage with which Dickinson asserted spiritual authority over her own life is undeniable. In speaking of her religious defiance, Dickinson writes to her brother Austin, “I am alone in my rebellion” (Sewall, 66). Although Dickinson is faced with a series of questions that will never provide her with definite answers, she accepts this reality and even celebrates it. She writes, “The shore is safer, but I love to buffet the sea...I love the danger!” (Sewall, 25), and poem 419 captures the confidence with which she confronted religious uncertainty:

~~419~~

We grow accustomed to the Dark –  
 When Light is put away –  
 As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp  
 To witness her Goodbye –

A Moment – We uncertain step  
 For newness of the night –  
 Then – fit our Vision to the Dark –

✓ lack of  
 consistency  
 with other  
 poetic  
 reproduc-  
 tions

And meet the Road – erect –

And so of larger – Darknesses –  
Those Evenings of the Brain –  
When not a Moon disclose a sign –  
Or Star – come out – within –

The Bravest – grope a little –  
And sometimes hit a Tree  
Directly in the Forehead –  
But as they learn to see –

Either the Darkness alters –  
Or something in the sight –  
Adjusts itself to Midnight –  
And Life steps almost straight.

Dickinson, whose choice of conversion remained suspended for the entirety of her life, knowingly and appropriately calls herself a “pagan,” (Sewall, 22) one who is in spiritual or religious darkness. Darkness is traditionally symbolic of the literarily negative: evil, ignorance, villainy, and unenlightened states of understanding. However, in poem 419, Dickinson redefines the traditionally poetic and literary representation of darkness, and begins to consider dwelling in darkness and adjusting oneself in the midst of it as a kind of enlightenment. Dickinson defines the “Bravest” as an individual that “grope” and persists, even having “sometimes hit a Tree / Directly in the Forehead.”

In relation to religion, the poet rejects the delusional illumination offered by Puritan Calvinism and any other religious sect or school of philosophy that claims to have known and organized life and the afterlife. Rather, she chooses to remain “unenlightened,” the recognition and admittance of which, in Dickinson’s terms, is the most enlightened state that a human being can attain within the limitations of this present existence. If an individual has the spiritual and intellectual integrity to venture beyond the illusionary light of various systems of belief in order to honestly seek out what



answers may be available within the darkness, Dickinson assures that either the darkness will alter, or one's sight will adjust, promising some answers and guaranteeing continued explorations.

However, the optimism of the speaker's perspective is again problematized by the word "almost," implying a multitude of possible meanings: perhaps that "Life" will never step entirely straight, or that life must confront an endless series of adjustments to various types of "darknesses." It is not clear to what end these explorations will lead, but it is clear that ultimately, Dickinson does not have a concrete end in mind, and recognizes that finality and absolute enlightenment necessarily comes with death alone. And even then, the ability to finally reach conclusions and encounter answers <sup>is</sup> ~~are~~ uncertain, as evident in her apprehensive poems about the afterlife. However, what is particularly noteworthy about poem 419 is that Dickinson chooses to end the poem with a period, signifying that she speaks the conclusions of this poem with uncommon conviction, despite her uncertainty.

~

Over the past century of Dickinson scholarship, the most predominant criticism directed toward the poet is that of lacking a poetic agenda. As discussed briefly in the introduction, Porter accuses Dickinson of not accomplishing any over-arching literary work through her artistic endeavors, calling her a "poet without a project," and claiming that her poetry is simply the confused and incoherent ramblings of an amateur "poetess." It is only recently, with the rise of Modernist criticism<sup>(?)</sup>, that we have been able to comprehend and more fully appreciate the "incoherence" of Dickinson's oeuvre. Gary Stonum writes in the *Dickinson Sublime*,

The recognition began in the 1920's, along with and indeed as part of the modernist rejection of nineteenth-century taste. Because Dickinson's poetry legitimately anticipated several aspects of modernist style, most notably its sparseness and its reliance on discontinuities and disjunctions, Dickinson was largely exempted from the new disdain for things romantic or Victorian. She became, in fact, something of a modernist cause, and it was easy to assume that she shared the anti-Victorianism of her champions<sub>x</sub> (32). ✓

The very work that she was trying to accomplish through her poetry was to communicate that life is inherently fragmented and incoherent, and we, as humans, do not have the faculties to organize, understand or answer the many questions posed by merely existing. Dickinson interrogates life through poetry, but never sincerely pretends to offer any concrete answers because she recognizes that there are none to be had. She courageously remains true to the uncertainty that came with her religious and philosophical convictions despite the anxiety that it caused her. Poem 501 is one example of her honesty. ✓

This World is not Conclusion.  
 A Species stand beyond –  
 Invisible, as Music –  
 But positive, as Sound –  
 It beckons, and it baffles –  
 Philosophy – don't know –  
 And through a Riddle, at the last –  
 Sagacity, must go –  
 To guess it, puzzles scholars –  
 To gain it, Men have borne  
 Contempt of Generations  
 And Crucifixion, shown –  
 Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –  
 Blushes, if any see –  
 Plucks at a twig of Evidence –  
 And asks a Vane, the way –

Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –  
 Strong Hallelujahs roll –  
 Narcotics cannot still the Tooth  
 That nibbles at the soul –

Species] A Sequel –  
 Guess] prove it –  
 Strong] Sure –  
 Tooth] Mouse –

In poem 501, rather than investing in an imaginary anticipation of the unknown, Dickinson focuses on emphasizing exactly the unknowable nature of the afterlife, and the ways in which neither scholarship, religion nor philosophy can offer any concrete or plausible explanations or predictions. First, she begins by asserting that an afterlife does indeed exist, writing that it is “positive, as Sound –,” “positive” meaning “certain” or “definite,” but perhaps also carrying an optimistic connotation. However, the nature of the afterlife, or at least its cognitive accessibility to human comprehension is “Invisible, as Music –.” Dickinson writes that “Sagacity, must go –,” reinforcing the idea that we cannot mentally discern the unknown contours of the afterlife, but also suggesting the profound need to exercise wisdom in approaching this mystery. It is a “Riddle, at the last –,” the “riddle” being a suitably favorite choice of metaphor in representing the unknown. The unknown serves as the most provocative muse in Dickinson’s poetry until the end of her career precisely because it must necessarily remain a riddle until death ultimately discloses the answer. “From the time when Emily Dickinson first began to write poetry until her last fading pencil marks on tattered bits of paper, the mystery of death absorbed her.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mable Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham (eds.), *Bolts of Melody* (New York and London, 1945), p. 5.

The ambiguity of death and what awaited the individual beyond its reach was a lifelong fascination for Dickinson, as evident in the lines, “Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul –.” She persisted in her early conviction that religion, intellectual speculation and philosophy could offer no insight into these queries. Dickinson writes that it “beckons, and it baffles –” philosophy, and that it “puzzles scholars –,” as she vacillates between using the words “guess” or “prove,” which in itself is indicative of the credibility that she is willing (or unwilling) to ascribe to scholarship that “Plucks at a twig of Evidence –.”

Finally, the poet turns her attention/criticism to religion, referring to it almost derisively as she writes, “Much Gesture, from the Pulpit – / Strong Hallelujahs roll –.” The tone of these two lines ~~subtly~~<sup>OK</sup> suggests mockery directed towards the futility present in the “gestures” and “strong hallelujahs” of the pulpit as she contends that all three of these institutions, which aim to answer the unanswerable questions about the unknown, are “narcotics” that merely dull or delude investigation into the unknown without really apprehending it. Dickinson chooses to isolate “– don’t know –” between two dashes in the sixth line of the poem, a formal device that becomes emblematic of the ultimate significance of the poem as a whole.

*Contradiction*

As evident in both poems 419 and 501, Dickinson had a strong sense of self-reliance and confidence in her intellectual capabilities to question and challenge the dominant sources of authority that threatened to impose their ideologies on her. She was not afraid to dwell in “larger darkneses”; neither did she shrink away from investigating new ways to think about the unknown because she might “hit a tree directly in the forehead.” However, I believe that Dickinson’s continual and lifelong contemplation of

the unknown was driven by much more than her love of mysteries and riddles or her defiant rebellion against established authorities.

The unknown was something that she must eventually and inevitably face herself. Because she inherited the Puritan belief of the existence of an afterlife that consisted of a heaven and a hell, and was also surrounded by Calvinistic beliefs, which taught that entrance into heaven was extended only to a predestined group of people elected by God, she must have felt considerable anxiety towards death and facing the unknown. Moreover, any anxiety that she felt must have been further exacerbated by her dedication and enthusiasm for the multiple possibilities that she believed characterized the unknown. Paradoxically, the central source of inspiration for Dickinson and her poetry also becomes the most profound source of terror and anxiety for the poet.

### Chapter Three

#### Multiplicity as a Source of Terror: Anxiety Towards the Unknown

Amidst all of the possibilities, the uncertainties and the multiple certainties, belief and doubt, fear and fascination, defiant rebellion and frightened timidity, <sup>lies</sup> ~~lays~~ the one ✓  
 unchanging certainty that Dickinson could and could not wait to confront: the inevitability of death, and the answer to the riddle of what lies beyond it. Dickinson writes in poem 912, “Peace is the fiction of our Faith –,” and although Dickinson ~~has~~ ✓  
 certainly never wanted to settle on a peaceful fiction, she does, at times, seem to long for peace. Her religious disillusionment in the face of her Calvinist inheritance presents an interesting bind: if God exists, and she doesn’t believe in Him, then she will be damned, and if God doesn’t exist, then she has no idea what might lie beyond death, if anything.

Dickinson writes in poem 413, “Perennial beholds us – / Myself would run away / From Him – and Holy Ghost – and All – / But there’s the “Judgment Day!”” These lines indicate that Dickinson would have gladly abandoned Christianity completely, but she is bound to consider *all* of the possibilities, and one of the pressing possibilities for Dickinson is the unrelenting reality that perhaps she will face “Judgment Day,” as established by Christian doctrine. Although Dickinson places “Judgment Day” in quotation marks to effectively communicate her doubt concerning this particular possibility, it still remains a significant source of concern for <sup>her.</sup> ~~Dickinson~~. “[S]he never ✓  
 permanently loses hold of these spiritual realities, whatever the vicissitudes of her faith. She lived and moved, however restlessly, in the dimension prepared for her by the New England Puritans” (Sewall, 23).

That the poet dedicated much of her poetic energies to depicting heaven and almost none to imagining or anticipating hell is difficult to interpret.<sup>10</sup> We could understand the complete absence of the representations of hell in her corpus as an indication that the prospect of damnation is one that she does not concern herself with, that she does not consider a possibility. However, perhaps this absence suggests her emphatic refusal to consider this one possibility. Perhaps the prospect of eternal damnation is a source of incredible anxiety for the poet and one that she is not willing to confront. ✓

The need to honestly consider all of the possibilities while one of those possibilities is the intolerant doctrine of Christianity, which demands singular commitment and offers devastating consequences otherwise, creates a chief source of tension and anxiety in Dickinson's poetry. Although she writes in poem 657 that her "occupation" is "The spreading wide" her "narrow Hands / To gather" the "Paradise" of possibilities, and this is an occupation that she welcomes and finds exciting, the flip side of this new and adventurous endeavor is the frightening groundlessness that must necessarily follow, as well as the need to abandon old foundations and securities. Dickinson's spiritual, intellectual, and internal division haunts her for the entirety of her life, and it is this provocative sense of polarity that drives her poetry.

Dickinson's anxiety towards having to leave behind the grounding security of Christianity is recorded in the following letter, written towards the end of her last term at Holyoke Seminary.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas H. Johnson records only one poem, 929, under the word "hell" in his subject index. Johnson records nine poems under the subject of "paradise," thirteen poems under "eternity," twenty poems under "immortality," thirty-seven under "heaven," fifty under "dead," and ninety-nine poems under "death."

Can it be possible that I have been here (Holyoke Seminary) almost a year...I tremble when I think how soon the weeks and days of this term will all have been spent, and my fate will be sealed, perhaps. I have neglected the *one thing needful* when all were obtaining it, and I may never, never again pass through such a season as was granted us last winter...I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when the golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian<sub>x</sub> (Sewall, 361). ✓

It is evident in this letter that Dickinson seriously considered Christianity, even longed for the easy security that it offered, but could not concede to a religion that she did not uncompromisingly believe in.

She writes of the bittersweet nature of disillusionment, and the difficulty of reconciling the desires to resume innocent bliss and embrace intelligent honesty, in poem 728:

Let Us play Yesterday –  
I – the Girl at school –  
You – and Eternity – the  
Untold Tale –

Still at the Egg-life –  
Chafing the Shell –  
When you troubled the Ellipse –  
And the Bird fell –

Can a Lark resume the Shell –  
Easier – for the Sky –  
Wouldn't Bonds hurt more  
Than Yesterday?

As much as Dickinson would have liked to become a child again, with a simple, undisturbed faith, she recognizes that she can only “play Yesterday,” that she cannot “resume the Shell” of religious delusion once she has fallen from the ellipse of naivety.



It is difficult to accept that there are no sure answers, difficult to exist without at least the illusion of security; yet, Dickinson resolves that the bonds of delusion would hurt more than living in perpetual darkness—"Wouldn't Bonds hurt more / Than Yesterday?"

Perhaps Dickinson often found herself praying the same prayer as John Henry Newman, ✓ a former cardinal who had also suffered religious disillusionment: "O God, if there be a God, save my soul if I have a soul."

The polar extremes of belief and unbelief, the consistent vacillations between faith and doubt, the profound desire for certainty in the midst of being so ardently and insistently uncertain—these are the conflicting sensibilities coexisting in the poetry of Emily Dickinson that generates such enigmatic power and necessitates such perplexing multiplicity. In many of her poems, Dickinson confronts the unknown with courageous resilience. However, some of her other poems betray an intense and understandable terror towards the unknown. She writes, in poem 1551, about the "abdication of Belief" and the desire for "ignis fatuus," (a delusion or illusion).

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

The abdication of Belief  
Makes the Behavior small –  
Better an ignis fatuus  
Than no illume at all –

The poem reveals a profound sense of anxiety, as the speaker no longer knows what will happen to her after death. "Those – dying then," perhaps refers to a time when disillusionment with religion had not yet set in, and she still believed that she might go to "God's Right hand –." However, she writes, "That Hand is amputated now / And God

cannot be found –,” indicating that she no longer knows where she will go. The word “amputated” is a harsh description and suggests a messy, bloody and perhaps unwelcome break from religion, one that is coerced but also complete and irreversible.

Dickinson finishes the poem by writing that she would rather remain deluded than dwell in darkness (the extreme opposite of her conclusion in poem 419), and it is unclear whether this ending is straightforward or ironic. If we were not familiar with Dickinson’s corpus and her biographical background, it would seem, from this poem, that Dickinson preferred the illusive security of religion, and perhaps, at the moment of writing this particular poem, she did. As McIntosh proposes in his book, *Nimble Believing*, Dickinson experienced a series of certainties, undergoing multiple moments of belief in various truths, considering and briefly committing to a variety of truisms. However, we know that she never permanently succumbed to the religious pressure placed on her by her family and friends, as well as the pressure of her own anxiety towards the unknown. As she writes in poem 728, in the end, the bonds of yesterday would hurt more than continually not knowing.

Dickinson continues her investigation into the unknown with a mixed sense of curiosity, excitement, fear and a continuing recognition that the tension between anxiety and anticipation in regards to the unknown will never be resolved. Poem 712 reflects Dickinson’s attempt at making the unknown more welcome, the idea of death more comforting, and utterly and intentionally failing in the attempt.

Because I could not stop for Death –  
 He kindly stopped for me –  
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
 And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste

And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess – in the Ring –  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –  
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground –  
The Roof was scarcely visible –  
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads  
Were toward Eternity –

Dickinson assumes a playful attitude towards death in this poem, attributing to death a set of genteel and civilized manners. Death does not seem too terrifying at first glance and is personified as a male coachman who “kindly” stops for the speaker and ushers her towards eternity. Dickinson attempts to make the frightening reality of death more comfortable, but she does not succeed in the attempt, as there exists a subtle undertone of discomfort throughout the poem. Although Dickinson personifies death as a coachman that kindly stops for her, the word “kindly” is spoken ironically where the speaker would prefer that death forgo this “courtesy.” She begins the poem by saying, “Because I could not stop for Death –,” implying that she is too preoccupied with life, is too attached to it, and does not want to stop for death, or death to stop for her.

Dickinson merely hints at her discomfort when she writes, [“The Dews drew quivering and chill – / For only Gossamer, my Gown – } My tippet – only Tulle –,” which suggests that she was unprepared for her journey, the idea of being unprepared extending beyond her physical discomfort to a spiritual lack of preparation. The lack of appropriate

*These lines  
have been  
omitted  
above*

apparel represents the idea of being spiritually unprepared and the inability to anticipate what the afterlife holds, a metaphor that she also uses in poem 215 where she fears having to walk barefoot along the “jasper” (streets of heaven). She associates death with the cold and dresses the speaker in a light gown, indicating her state of being religiously unprepared and expressing the anxiety she feels towards this journey that she has no choice but to take.

There is a moment in the second to last stanza when the coach stops at a “House” that seemed “a swelling in the ground,” which must be her grave, but the journey continues on from there, beyond death and burial, to immortality. However, it is not an inviting immortality for she never reaches a heaven, and this journey becomes increasingly aimless and unending. She says “’tis Centuries” since she first realized that she was headed towards eternity, and still there is no sign of heaven. Dickinson does not imagine ever reaching a heaven, but only sees death as a silent, cold, and dreadful journey that is eternal and unappealing, where immortality is an endless sort of purgatory without the hope of ever ascending into comfort. ✓

The portrayal of the afterlife as a state of limbo in which the individual is unable to return to the world or pass onto heaven is present in many of Dickinson’s poems. It reflects the sense of suspension between an inability to anticipate or imagine what the afterlife might be like and the compulsion to try. The suspended state of the individual in the afterlife parallels the state of Dickinson’s own suspension in which she simply does not know what the afterlife holds for her. Anxiety towards the possibility that death is the end and that she will remain in the grave without the hope of ascending into heaven is implicit in poem 712 and appears again in poem 449.

I Died for Beauty – but was scarce  
 Adjusted in the Tomb  
 When One who died for Truth, was lain  
 In an adjoining Room –

He questioned softly “Why I failed”?  
 “For Beauty”, I replied –  
 “And I – for Truth – Themself are One –  
 We Brethren, are”, He said –

And so, as Kindsmen, met a Night –  
 We talked between the Rooms –  
 Until the Moss had reached our lips –  
 And covered up – our names –

To have died for “Beauty” and “Truth” means also to have lived for them, and when the two speakers answer the question, “Why I failed,” they answer with these same words. “Failure” seems to be referring to the unfortunate fate of remaining in the grave without ascending into heaven. Essentially, the speaker seems to be asking, “Why haven’t you been allowed to have eternal life in heaven? Why are you still here in the grave?” The answers “Truth” and “Beauty,” refer to Dickinson’s refusal to indulge in religious delusions and her reliance on poetry to communicate these convictions. Therefore, because she did not compromise her intellectual integrity and subscribe to the Christian faith during her life on earth, but rather lived (and died) for “Truth” (the recognition of multiple possibilities) and “Beauty” (poetry), she remains in the grave, uninvited into heaven because of her refusal to disregard what she feels is “Truth.”

Despite the bravery with which the speaker has faced death, the poem has a terrifying ending, revealing the profound anxiety that plagues Dickinson. She writes that they talked “between the Rooms – / Until the Moss had reached our lips – / And covered up – our names –”. Not only does time, represented by the growth of moss, silence the two companions, but it covers up their names, hiding the very memory that they ever

existed by growing over their epitaphs. This, indeed, is a frightening conclusion as she writes in poem 1251, “Silence is all we dread.” Poem 449 embodies all of Dickinson’s deepest fears: that nothing exists beyond death, that death will permanently silence her, and that she will not be remembered. ✓

Ford writes about Dickinson’s choice muse, “What would death lead to? It was not *a* riddle, but *the* riddle” (Ford, 76). Ultimately and unfortunately, death was “*the* riddle” that Dickinson could never hope to solve.

The poems from the final period reveal that Emily Dickinson never abandoned her determined efforts to understand death...In many instances the poems in this final group assume a somewhat puzzling quality, the result of a rather odd blending of resentment and stoic acceptance—resentment against her own exhausting religious quest for knowledge of death, and stoic acceptance of the fact of death—an acceptance that may have been caused by the depletion of her strength and energy and from her growing awareness that no answers would be forthcoming in this world, (Ford, 175). ✓

In the end, the riddle of the unknown resulted in a perpetual sense of suspension for Dickinson. In the face of her convictions towards the unknown and the multiplicity of possibilities, the poet would have agreed that the state of suspension in this world is, perhaps, the most honest state that an individual can assume, but also the most unnerving and terrifying. She writes in poem 1331:

Wonder – is not precisely Knowing  
And not precisely Knowing not –  
A beautiful but bleak condition  
He has not lived who has not felt –

Suspense – is his maturer Sister –

Whether Adult Delight is Pain  
 Or of itself a new misgiving –  
 This is the Gnat that mangles men –

Dickinson establishes two stages of approaching uncertainty and the unknown in this poem: one of youthful awe and fascination, and the other of “maturer” suspense that elicits a sense of doubt and apprehension rather than excitement. She recognizes, in the first stanza, that this state of wonder is a “bleak condition.” But, she also calls it “beautiful” and asserts that the puzzle of knowing and not quite knowing is enticing. She seems to equate this sense of wonderment and uncertainty with liveliness and the quality of one’s life experiences.

Dickinson’s notion of beauty in poems 449 and 1331 revolves around recognizing and playing with the multiple certainties of life. In poem 1331, she states that “not precisely knowing” is a beautiful condition. In poem 449, she equates the truth of multiplicity with beauty, and in poem 657, she refers to dwelling in possibility as “paradise.” It is evident, again and again, that Dickinson found the lack of absolute certainty provocative. Yet, there is that opposite extreme that is eternally in tandem with this fascination, as Dickinson also describes this condition as “bleak,” portraying it as a “gnat that mangles men.”

However, it seems to be this very tension between the polar extremes of the beautiful and the bleak, the wonderful and the suspenseful, that makes this muse so vibrant and full of energy. It is the aesthetics of terror, that thrilling and perpetually mysterious reality that her inquiries will never have definite answers, which drives her poetry and makes <sup>it</sup> ~~them~~ so alluring. Dickinson uses both her fascination and fright

towards the unknown to create beauty, as she recognizes that it is this duality that makes this inquiry and the resulting poetry so captivating.

The second stanza of poem 1331 is less optimistic; it depicts a stage in life when “not precisely knowing” becomes more anxiety-inducing and even painful. Dickinson calls suspense a “new misgiving,” a further source of doubt and apprehension in addition to the initial uncertainty that once caused such wonder. She ends the first stanza on a positive note, stating that wonder is essential to the human experience. However, she ends the poem with the conclusion that the adult sense of suspense “is the Gnat that mangles men –.” That Dickinson chooses to represent such a deeply troubling and disturbing human condition with an insect as insignificant as a gnat seems incongruous.

Perhaps Dickinson appeals to the image of the gnat because of the small but significant nuisance that it presents. A gnat would be difficult to capture or filter out with a mosquito net, which parallels the abiding sense of suspense that cannot be escaped or resolved. The category of “gnat” also includes any small biting or blood-sucking fly,<sup>11</sup> intensifying the image of the gnat in Dickinson’s poem from a mere annoyance to a serious threat that is a physically harmful, potentially dangerous, disease-carrying insect; one that travels in hordes and swarms a geographical location. When we consider the poet’s social and environmental reference, we realize that New England is invaded with a black fly epidemic each year, which poses significant problems for the local population.<sup>12</sup> The black fly bite is considerably more severe in comparison to the mosquito bite, actually removing a small portion of the flesh as it feeds, potentially scarring its victim, in which case, Dickinson’s choice of the word “mangle” would be absolutely appropriate.

<sup>11</sup> *American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition.*

<sup>12</sup> Knowledge gained from personal experience during the New England Literature Program, 2002.



She writes that suspense “mangles” men, a word that connotes mutilation and disfigurement, effectively expressing the debilitating desperation that she might feel in the face of the unknown.

Throughout these poems, Dickinson consistently refers to the body, to the vulnerability and inevitable decay and destruction that it must undergo. Through her poetry, Dickinson is anxiously anticipating the fate of her soul in the face of the certainty that her body will inevitably pass away and disintegrate. The reality that she will have to leave the only world that she knows and the only body that she knows, which may or may not be inhabited by an eternal soul, proves to be another great source of anxiety as she repeatedly calls attention to the corporeal nature of existence. Dickinson expresses anxiety towards being physically unprepared for heaven in poems 728 and 215. She alludes to the amputated hand of God that no longer presents a secure hand for her own to grasp onto. She refers to the moss reaching her lips, leaving her in physical silence as her earthly body becomes overgrown with weeds in the grave. And finally, she speaks of adult pain and its mangling consequences, all indicating the pressing urgency placed on her spiritual quest in the face of her incurable and irreversible bodily deterioration.

Dickinson writes about her anxiety towards the unknown with almost equally graphic imagery in poem 193:

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

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

In the face of such violent terror concerning the unknown, Dickinson seems to turn to religion for comfort. She relies on Christianity to relieve her anguish, having faith that “Christ” will “explain” and answer all of her questions. Instead of her characteristically knotted and reversed syntax, Dickinson writes with surprisingly straightforward syntactical constructions: “I shall know,” “Christ will explain,” “He will tell me,” and “I shall forget.” The forceful insistence with which she writes these phrases indicates her adamant persistence to find answers, and her desperate attempt to convince or comfort herself in the presence of such “scalding” uncertainty. However, as the period <sup>at the end of this poem</sup> has come to be read as ironic in Dickinson’s poetry, uncharacteristically straightforward syntax also becomes suspicious. The desperate certainty with which Dickinson writes these statements can be read ironically. Beneath the demanding assurance of the words, “I shall know,” and “I shall forget,” lie the inescapable reality that she might quite possibly never know and never forget. Furthermore, the name and Biblical figure, “Peter,” is placed in quotations directly preceding the word “promised,” suggesting that Peter’s promises of the “fair schoolroom” in which “Christ will explain” does not exist, and there is no relief for her suspenseful and scalding uncertainty. ✓

One key reason for the mysterious and multiplicitous nature of Emily Dickinson is the Puritan aesthetic present in her poetry that embodies the vacillations between faith and doubt.

“Miller’s description of the Puritan’s inner turmoil is strikingly close to what puzzles readers of Emily Dickinson’s poems today, their extraordinary shifts and changes of mood, tone, and even belief: the Puritan “lives inwardly a life of incessant fluctuation, ecstatically elated this day, depressed into despair the next.”

It required clinical skill to narrate, in diary, journal, or autobiography, “their surgings and sinkings, all the time striving to keep the line of the story clear” (Sewall/Miller, 23).

Although Dickinson ultimately rejects Puritan Calvinism and resolves to approach the uncertainties of life with independent and intellectual integrity, the doctrines of Calvinism still dictate the majority of Dickinson’s surrounding spiritual community and are doctrines that Dickinson inevitably inherits and is influenced by. Sewall writes, “All these (the spiritual conceptions of Puritanism) were at work...in her complicated consciousness, if not as theological convictions, at least as fixed points in her spiritual navigation” (Sewall, 25). No matter how far Dickinson may have strayed from the spiritual temperament of her time and culture, how much she accomplished in her poetic rebellion against religious authority, she could not completely divorce herself from the beliefs that permeated the spiritual atmosphere in which she lived. As Goethe writes, “Nothing in nature is isolated; nothing is without reference to something else; nothing achieves meaning apart from that which neighbors it.”

It is this schism in the spiritual, intellectual, and imaginative consciousness of Emily Dickinson that can be so contradictory and confusing, yet curiously inviting and alluring. “Dickinson, part Puritan and part free thinker, is herself divided” (Benfey, CC, 33). The irreconcilable tension that exists between fascinated anticipation and terrified anxiety towards death and the unknown infuses her poetry with possibility and polarity, leaving Dickinson perpetually suspended in the face of *the* riddle that dominated her life and poetry. It is this “nimbleness” of belief that necessitates multiplicity in the formal and thematic presentation of her poetry, that makes her poems cryptic riddles which

inscribe the very muse of the unknown that they interrogate, and that results in mysterious ambiguity.

## Conclusion Earthly Immortality and Poetic Liberation

*On a higher level, the “riddle” became metaphoric of cosmic questions that, though they haunted Emily Dickinson throughout her life, provided her very reason for being and writing poetry.*

- Richard B. Sewall

The riddle of the unknown could never offer a satisfactory solution, but it is the compelling desire to imagine and contemplate the unknown that inspired much of Dickinson’s poetry. Furthermore, poetry itself served as the vehicle by which Dickinson would transcend suspension in the face of the unknown. The certainty of death and the uncertainty of what followed was a bind for Dickinson that threw her into a seemingly inescapable cycle of “surgings” and “sinkings” between faith and doubt, delight and terror, bravery and timidity; however, the certainty of words, of poetry, served as her final liberation.

“Sometimes I write one and look at his outlines till he glows as no sapphire.”<sup>13</sup> Words and poetry, for Dickinson, were like luminous gems, and she spent meticulous hours fashioning the perfect cut. Her poems shimmer with each shift in light, each new insight and interpretation, sparkling with the multiplicity that she so valued and believed in. Just as the multi-faceted surface of a gem will glimmer with new light while simultaneously existing as one complete stone, the poems of Emily Dickinson also reflect new and multiple meanings with each reading while maintaining their integrity as one complete and independent piece of art.

That Dickinson chooses to metaphorically imagine her poetry as precious jewels relates again to the passage in *Matthew* 6:19-21,

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<sup>13</sup> Tufariello (p. 178) taken from the *Lyman Letters*, p. 78.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Dickinson inverts the message in this passage of scripture, attributing heaven with moths and corruption because of the uncertainty of its existence (poem 374), and choosing to lay up her own treasure of poetry, a lasting certainty for the poet, here on earth.

Dickinson realized that her body would inevitably pass away, and that the fate of her soul in the afterlife was uncertain, but she preserved for herself a legacy of words through poetry that would survive beyond her mortality, and left the world “glowing sapphires” that would never pass away, assuring for herself an earthly immortality.

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