

# MEETING HER MAKER

## Emily Dickinson's God

Jay Ladin

It's common for secular academics to assume that religious belief—adherence to any religious system or ideology—is fundamentally at odds with the open-minded, exploratory enterprise of critical interpretation. That was certainly my assumption two autumns ago, when, as a new member of the English Department of the women's college of an Orthodox Jewish university, I led a seminar-style exploration of Emily Dickinson's poems about God. The question of Dickinson's religious beliefs—what, if any, beliefs she held and what, if anything, her poems reveal of them—has long been a subject of debate among Dickinson scholars. As I expected, the question was of great interest to my students, who had grown up practicing a modern Orthodox form of Judaism. What I did not expect was that these young women, who knew little about poetry, less about Dickinson, and nothing about Christianity or its nineteenth-century New England manifestations, would see so clearly through the tangle of Dickinson's contradictory portrayals of God and the equally contradictory conclusions scholars have drawn from them. I had assumed that the intellectual habits promoted by traditional religious belief and humanistic inquiry are inherently at odds, that while humanism encourages the exploration of complexity and contradiction, traditional belief encourages the opposite—simplification, homogeniza-

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tion, retreat from the messiness of existence into the comfort of tautological projection. But rather than inhibiting their ability to engage with Dickinson's challenging texts, my students' lifelong immersion in Orthodox Judaism helped them recognize dynamics at work in Dickinson's poems about God that my secular approach had obscured.

One of the nice things about teaching is the way it transforms vexing scholarly uncertainties into signs of professorial sophistication. Rather than feeling anxious that I didn't know the answers to the questions I was raising, I felt quite pleased to introduce the subject of Dickinson's religious beliefs by informing my class that scholars had been utterly unable to agree on them. For example, while Dorothy Oberhaus has argued that Dickinson wrote "in the poetic tradition of Christian devotion," Richard Wilbur and many others since have seen Dickinson's poems as expressions of an idiosyncratic, home-made relation to religious belief—what Wilbur calls "a precarious convergence between her inner experience and her religious inheritance" (Farr 105, 54). Other readers, focusing on Dickinson's most iconoclastic texts, see Dickinson as radically challenging Christianity and indeed all religious belief. This extraordinary range of opinions as to what Dickinson believed—and the abundance of textual evidence to support each of them—has prompted many scholars to adopt what we might call an agnostic attitude toward Dickinson's beliefs. As Denis Donoghue put it, "of her religious faith virtually anything may be said. She may be represented as an agnostic, a heretic, a skeptic, a Christian" (quoted in Yezzi 20). Wary that my students might simplify Dickinson's beliefs by filtering her contradictions through the lens of their own faith, I presented Donoghue-style agnosticism as the only intellectually responsible position possible—that is, the only position that confronted the entire range of beliefs presented in Dickinson's poems. To demonstrate Dickinson's irresolvable religious contradictions, I started my students off with poems that present completely incommensurate representations of God: the amputated absentee of "Those – dying then"; the withholding parent of the poem that begins "Of Course – I prayed – / And did God Care?"; the outgrown childhood God of "I prayed, at first, a little Girl"; the faceless, dematerialized "Infinitude" of "My period had come for Prayer"; the Disneyesque savior of vermin addressed in the poem that begins "Papa above! / Regard a Mouse / O'erpowered by the Cat!" No one, I assured them, could infer a coherent idea of God from this blizzard of conflicting evidence.

My students dutifully jotted down my words, relieved no doubt that I was excusing them from at least one measure of responsibility for under-

standing a poet they found so difficult. Having saved them from the humanistic equivalent of Original Sin—belief in absolute interpretation—I set my students to working their way through the poems line by line. They chose to begin with “Of Course – I prayed”:

Of Course – I prayed –  
 And did God Care?  
 He cared as much as on the Air  
 A Bird – had stamped her foot –  
 And cried “Give Me” –  
 My Reason – Life –  
 I had not had – but for Yourself –  
 ’Twere better Charity  
 To leave me in the Atom’s Tomb –  
 Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb –  
 Than this smart Misery.

At first we focused on grammar rather than theology. My students were baffled by the radical shifts in tone and perspective in the long sentence—or is it a sentence?—that begins “He cared as much as on the Air” and either concludes with “Give Me,” or with “Life.” Or, since “My Reason – Life” can be read both as the end of the thought (“Give Me’ – / My Reason – Life”) that begins the poem or the beginning of the thought that ends the poem, perhaps the sentence never really concludes at all. They were fascinated to discover that Dickinson uses this Moebius-strip-like syntax—an inelegant version of the technique Cristanne Miller calls “syntactical doubling”—to seamlessly shift from the melodramatic rage of the opening lines to the John Donne-like intellectual complaint of the last.

Once my students recognized that the poem represented two distinct attitudes, they began to find it easier to understand. Having themselves wrestled with God as both an inconsistent source of blessings and as the ultimate guarantor of the meaning of their lives, they found the opening lines’ rage at God’s refusal to respond to prayer quite familiar. For them, these lines were dramatizing a childish, egocentric relation to God, in which God is seen purely as a function of one’s own needs. The end of the poem, they saw, was a more adult, intellectualized version of the same relationship. Though they weren’t sure of the speaker’s sincerity in stating that she would rather have been left in “the Atom’s Tomb” as uncreated matter, they understood that God’s unresponsiveness had

provoked the speaker to question the value of consciousness.

Having identified both parts of the poems as forms of rage at God for failing to respond to prayer, my students found themselves back at the question of syntax. What, they wondered, was the relationship between these very different attitudes toward God? Why did Dickinson fudge the syntactical boundaries that would normally enable us to clearly distinguish them? Though they still couldn't figure out the sentence, they began to see that the defective syntax embodied a deeper problem: the difficulty, for the speaker and for anyone engaged in a serious practice of prayer, of separating the psychological from the theological. That is, the blurred syntax reflects the difficulty of distinguishing between subjective rage at a God who fails to personally respond to prayer, and the objective questions, such as the nature of God or the value of human existence, that Divine non-responsiveness raises. Perhaps, they speculated, the defective syntax was Dickinson's way of emphasizing the underlying similarity of these two very different theological tantrums.

I had guided my students through the syntactical issues raised by the poem, but to my astonishment, my students' discussion of its content had changed my own reading of the poem. Before our discussion, I read "Of Course – I prayed" as a deliberately incoherent critique of God. Now I saw it as a trenchant critique of an "immature" relation to God and prayer whose symptoms could range from childish rage to Metaphysical wit to a profound rejection of human existence.

I was both delighted by my students' ability to connect Dickinson's work to their personal experiences, and startled by the effectiveness of that connection. Rather than oversimplifying the complexities of the text, reading Dickinson through the lens of their religious experience had made my students more effective, subtler readers than they would have been had they adopted the humanist framework I offered them.

A fluke, I told myself. My students had transformed my reading of "Of Course – I Prayed," but my overall sense of Dickinson's indeterminate religious belief—a claim based not on individual poems, but on her work as a whole—was still unchallenged. Thus, it was not without a certain eagerness that I turned discussion to "Those – dying then," a poem whose "Nietzschean post-Christianity," as David Yezzi puts it, would demonstrate the essential instability of Dickinson's religious beliefs:

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.

After the syntactical mishmash of “Of Course – I prayed,” my students had little difficulty fleshing out the compressed spiritual history presented in the first stanza. “Those . . . then,” they saw, referred to an earlier time, when belief in God and the afterlife was far more firmly and generally established. They also recognized the epistemological shadings in the stanza’s phrasing—that is, that rather than making a statement about the actual organization of life, death and eternity, the statement that “Those dying then / Knew” they were headed to “God’s Right Hand” was describing “Their” beliefs. With this understanding, it was easy for my students to see through the shock of the imagery of the amputated “Right Hand” to the deeper shock of moving from a description of beliefs (what “They” used to believe) to a statement of ontological fact (what God is now). They saw that, like the defective syntax in “Of Course – I prayed,” this shock raises but does not answer the question of the relation between human belief and the nature of reality—whether the decay of human belief in some way led to God’s amputated “abdication,” or, conversely, whether “Those – dying then” were simply shielded by their belief from the harsh realities the last lines of the stanza assert.

This of course was the very sort of “Nietzschean post-Christian” perspective I wanted my students to glean from the poem, and I rather smugly pointed out that the vision of God this stanza presented was utterly unlike the God about whom the frustrated speaker of “Of Course – I prayed” complains. While the speaker of the first poem blames God for failure to respond, the second poem’s image of God’s amputated hand suggests a deity who is powerless to respond. Obviously, I concluded, the poems represent different theological universes—and demonstrate the inconsistency of Dickinson’s beliefs.

Here, however, my students balked. Both poems, they argued, represent dif-

ferent takes on the same fundamental problem: the difficulty of establishing a relationship with God. One student startled me by pointing out that the statement “That Hand is amputated now” presents God’s existence as ontological fact rather than simply a matter of belief. While the statement can certainly be read figuratively, as a metaphor for Divine ineffectuality in the face of modernity, it also presents a vividly physical image of God—an image that emphasizes rather than undercuts the sense of God’s existence. They also challenged my claim that the poem’s second stanza represents a Wallace Stevens-type assertion that humans need “supreme fictions” such as belief in God, even when we know they are fictions. Rather, they argued, the leap from “God cannot be found” to “The abdication of belief” suggests that God’s absence may be a sign of human dereliction of duty (the peculiar verb “abdication” implicitly equates human “Belief” with royal obligation). Just because God “cannot be found,” they said, doesn’t mean that God is not there; after all, Jews have wrestled for millennia with the question of how human beings should respond to the “hiddenness” of God at times of personal and collective suffering. From their perspective, the second stanza laments not the absence of God but human acceptance of God’s absence.

Though I insisted on the ambiguous relation between the stanzas, I could not escape the sense that my students were right: even here, at her most apparently nihilistic, Dickinson’s poetry evinced a passionate engagement with God, an engagement that affirmed God’s existence and importance even as it fretted or raged over God’s inaccessibility.

My students had opened my eyes to the superabundance of evidence of Dickinson’s relationship to God—evidence so strong that it appears to rule out the idea that Dickinson was an “agnostic” or a “skeptic.” Though Dickinson wrote deeply skeptical poems, as my students demonstrated with regard to “Those – dying then,” even these poems can be understood as reflecting a tumultuous but clearly ongoing relationship to God. Robert Frost, who wrote some of the bleakest verses ever penned in English, claimed he had a lover’s quarrel with life. My students convinced me that the same could be said of Dickinson and God. Like Frost’s quarrel with life, Dickinson’s quarrel with God reflects the full panoply of human disaffection. But though Dickinson’s God rarely seems to make her happy, she never breaks off the affair, never rejects the idea that, however incompatible we may be, human and Divine are made for each other.

Once I accepted my students’ contention that Dickinson’s belief in God was neither contradictory nor inconsistent, I also found myself agreeing that the nature of Dickinson’s relationship to God was not, as I had insisted, “indeter-

minate.” The relation to God my students found in Dickinson’s poems is both simpler and more complex than most critical accounts suggest. Rather than contradictory religious beliefs, they recognized in her rhetoric and imagery a core assumption of God’s existence—an assumption that underwrites and gives rise to a range of challenges and pleas. For them, what is at stake in Dickinson’s religious poems is not God’s existence, but God’s accessibility, responsiveness, accountability, comprehensibility, and concern for the human condition.

From my students’ perspective, the baffling array of religious attitudes Dickinson portrays in her poems reflect a clear, coherent and—to young women born along the fault-line between traditional religious belief and American modernity—quite familiar spiritual struggle. As a longtime ponderer of Dickinson’s highly theatrical poses, I realized that I found her relationship to God familiar in a different way. Dickinson adopts a similar variety of moods and roles in her letters. For example, in her famous correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson shuttles from flirt to adoring “scholar,” condescending epigrammatist to eyelash-batting naïf. As in so many of the relationships she carried on via written language, Dickinson ceaselessly reinvented herself and her relationship to God. The list of Dickinson’s theological poses is nearly as long as the list of her God-related poems: the lisping child of “I never felt at Home – Below” who anticipates wanting to run away from “Paradise” because “it’s Sunday – all the time – / And Recess – never comes”; the beset but endearing rodent of “Papa above!”; the ontological adventurer of “My Period had come – for Prayer,” who travels “Vast Prairies of Air” in an effort to face the ultimately faceless “Infinitude”; the sardonic skeptic of the poem that begins “It’s easy to invent a Life / God does it – every Day.” As in her letters, in her poems about God, Dickinson—or her alter egos—wheels from dominance to submission, from childish directness to arch sophistication, from loneliness to love.

In fact, the more closely one compares Dickinson’s poems about God to her letters to acquaintances, the more typical of Dickinson her relationship with God seems. Both the poems and letters express an insatiable need for a level of response Dickinson’s addressees rarely seem to supply. And in both poems and letters, whatever posture Dickinson adopts in her protean playacting, as my students noted, the focus, the drama, centers ultimately on her rather than her addressee, who recedes, despite the speaker’s rhetorical grasping, into a life beyond her ken.

Perhaps that recession was the point of Dickinson’s posturing. Though God and the others she engaged so passionately through her words always seem to

fail her, their very distance secured the integrity of the self Dickinson kept so closely guarded. Many of Dickinson's religious poems dramatize her fear that God, unlike her human correspondents, would prove too present, too perceptive, too insistent to evade. The childish speaker of "I never felt at Home – Below," for example, worries that God, "a Telescope // Perennial beholds us." This nightmarish (for the reclusive Dickinson, at least) vision of an All-Seeing God obsessed with eyeing any soul foolish enough to attempt to hide itself rises to a pitch of post-Puritan paranoia in "Of Consciousness, her awful mate," which envisions a God as inescapable as consciousness itself, whose "Eyes" are "triple Lenses" that "burn" through any attempt at anonymity.

My students readily grasped Dickinson's rage at God's silence or absence; such feelings are common aspects of religious engagement. But as religious people focused on seeking rather than evading God, and as young women focused more on finding life partners than on maintaining personal boundaries, they found it difficult to understand Dickinson's horror of God's "triple lenses." A lifelong relationship involves endless negotiations over intrusiveness and distance, power and impotence, but even during the most difficult periods, there are moments when a couple's eyes will meet, and each will recognize the other and the difficult bond they share. For Dickinson and God, this moment seems to have come when both found themselves stranded face to face between Earth and Heaven, Eternity and Time:

It was too late for Man –  
 But early, yet, for God –  
 Creation – impotent to help –  
 But Prayer – remained – Our Side –

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

My students' readings of Dickinson's relationship to her "Old neighbor – God" do not constitute a conclusive account of her religious thought. But they do expose the fallacy of assumptions about the inherent intellectual limitations of religious belief. Rather than preventing my students from engaging with complexity, their beliefs helped them discern complexities I had sought to bland



into the all-embracing, post-modernist vanilla of indeterminacy. For my students, as for Dickinson, religious belief is not a static answer but a lifelong pursuit of the most difficult existential questions, a pursuit that makes them supremely sensitive to the nuances and contradictions of the human effort to engage with that which is beyond us.

**Works Cited**

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