

“‘FAITH’ IS A FINE INVENTION”:
EMILY DICKINSON’S CRITIQUE OF EMPIRICISM

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In opposition to those who might read Emily Dickinson’s opus as emblematic of nineteenth-century empiricism, or at least the work of a poet enthralled with and enchanted by modern science, a close examination of Dickinson’s poems demonstrates her attention to the constructedness of empirical science. The roots of Dickinson’s examination of empiricism lies in her exploration of selfhood and the relationship between experience and knowledge. As such, Dickinson’s critique of empiricism is contained within a critique of secularizing visions of human autonomy. In a few isolated poems Dickinson explicitly addresses empiricism, but on the whole she prefers to approach empiricism at the level of its axiomatic assumptions about the nature of the self and its relationship to sense experience. In contrast to much of the scholarship on Emily Dickinson’s attitude towards religion and science, this essay will not seek to interpret Dickinson’s poetry through the lens of what books she may or may not have read on the subjects of science or religion, nor will the essay make assertions about what Dickinson may or may not have believed about science and religion. This is not to say that biographical and psychoanalytic methodologies are without merit, but rather to focus attention to the fact that one’s reading habits do not necessarily comfortably correlate to one’s views on this or that topic, and also—more importantly—to let Dickinson’s poetry speak for itself. To

this particular writer it seems unfair to a literary figure, and an indisputably great one at that, to suggest that Dickinson completely agreed with John Locke and John Wesley, as does the pioneering scholar of Dickinson and science, Richard Brantley.¹ Furthermore, even scholars who offer a version of Dickinson who displays a more reticent attitude toward nineteenth-century science, such as Robin Peel and Roger Lundin, still cede the epistemic high ground to empiricism and interpret Dickinson as questioning science, but in the final account largely accepting nineteenth-century assumptions about experience, selfhood, and knowledge.² Given Dickinson's well-earned and enduring reputation for idiosyncrasy and occasional outright obstinance, it seems both prudent and reasonable to look to her poetry for a substantive critique of nineteenth-century scientific conventions.

Dickinson's interrogation of empiricism emerges from her suspicion of the self-ordered, self-disciplined, self-created, autonomous, dualist subject who occupies the core of Enlightenment and much of U. S. Protestant and secular ideology.³ Her poetry's questioning of this autonomous self takes on many forms, but perhaps the most poignant is the gothic horror of "The Soul has bandaged moments," in which the Soul finds itself at the mercy of "Fright," a "Goblin," and "The Horror." Few characterizations of selfhood could be more dissimilar from the assertive self articulated by empiricism and the closely related mechanizations of secularity:

The Soul has bandaged moments -
 When too appalled to stir -
 She feels some ghastly Fright come up
 And stop to look at her -

Salute her, with long fingers -
 Caress her freezing hair -
 Sip, Goblin, from the very lips
 The Lover - hovered - o'er -
 Unworthy, that a thought so mean
 Accost a Theme - so - fair -

The Soul has moments of escape -
 When bursting all the doors -
 She dances like a Bomb, abroad,
 And swings upon the Hours,

As do the Bee - delirious borne -
 Long Dungeoned from his Rose -
 Touch Liberty - they know no more -
 But Noon, and Paradise -

The Soul's retaken moments -
 When, Felon, led along,
 With shackles on the plumed feet,
 And staples, in the song,

The Horror welcomes her, again,
 These, are not brayed of Tongue - (*Fr* 360)⁴

From the poem's opening line, "The Soul has bandaged moments," we encounter a subject in distress. The distress intensifies as we find that the subject is faced by a "ghastly Fright" and finds herself paralyzed in inaction, "too appalled to stir." The subject then discovers herself in a terrifying intimacy with a "Goblin" who "salute[s]" and "caresses" her. The "Goblin's" kiss, of the subject who is already paralyzed and "freezing," is a kiss of death that "Sip[s]" out whatever life remains. The soul in this poem is trapped in a body—possibly dead—which is incapable of asserting itself. In the third stanza the soul finds itself liberated and "dances like a Bomb." When liberated, the soul still refuses to be or is incapable of being an ordered self. The Soul, once no longer entombed with the Goblin, moves "delirious" like a bee in search of a rose. However, the ecstasy does not last forever, and "With shackles on the plumed feet" the soul ("Felon") is returned to the "Horror" she first encountered. Once returned to the Horror, she is again subservient, and silent. The poem then ends on the innuendo "brayed of Tongue" which is both a shout or scream and a homophone for braid. The soul finds herself tongue-tied and screaming. Simply put, the staid empiricist reasoning of Brantley's reading (and many others in different versions) of Dickinson cannot account for, nor make room for, the anarchy that haunts Dickinson's opus.

The misapprehension of the constitution of Dickinson's subject lies at the core of assertions of Dickinson as a poet of empiricism. Although not directly concerned with empiricism, Shira Wolosky identifies and diagnoses this blind spot in Dickinson studies. An American audience, writes Wolosky, particularly struggles to recognize Dickinson's critique of American identity (which Wolosky links to Ralph Waldo Emerson):

Our stubborn Emersonian/American paradigm seduces us to see independent, autonomous selfhood as ideal and obtainable, even if at a price, blinding us to the disturbing disjunctions Dickinson's poems offer.... Unlike Emerson's Self-Reliant who is called on to "shun father and mother," Dickinson, for all her solitude, remained profoundly enmeshed in family life, in a personal network of friendships, and in the domestic duties of cooking, baking, and sewing.... Hers, rather, is a selfhood aware of its boundedness in ways that support as well as constrain it, and suspicious against fantasies of unfettered independence, or absolute self-definition.⁵

Wolosky's positioning of Emerson's autonomy against Dickinson's enmeshment presents a starting point for thinking about Dickinson as a critic of empiricism. Where Emerson provides an affirmation of personal autonomy and the authenticity and reliability of sense-experience, Dickinson offers contingency: a self divorced from itself, both trapped in and excluded from its body. Emily Dickinson articulates a self who resists fictions of autonomy and self-possession and provides a counter-narrative to Emersonian optimistic immanence. Dickinson's self is one who acknowledges external authority, who acts and is acted upon, and for whom transcendence is always a process in which the self risks losing itself into an abyss of its own unknowability.⁶ Her self is a genuine hybrid: neither wholly immanent nor transcendent, but dwelling somewhere outside, between, or around these two poles (much like the center of the clock in *Fr* 1099, with which this essay will conclude).⁷ The Dickinsonian self emerges within contexts, always constituted by but not reducible to the forces that act upon it.

The fundamental weakness of extant interpretations of Emily Dickinson as an empiricist partially lies in their persistence in presenting a one-dimensional portrait of the poet's thoughts and beliefs. My objection to these readings is not merely semantic, but also draws attention to Dickinson's poems that clearly call into question empiricist assumptions about the nature of selfhood, experience, and knowledge. Brantley, probably the most eminent scholar of Dickinson and science, reads Dickinson as a quintessential nineteenth-century Deist who subsumed God and religious tradition into the wisdom of modern science. Brantley writes that Dickinson "did not so much contemplate a godless universe, or hear the bare, ruined choirs of godless science, as accept, and bridle at, the bald, cold truth of God's science."⁸ Here Brantley allows that Dickinson may have "bridled" at science, but in the final account still reads Dickinson as accepting science (empiricism) as the arbiter of truth. Elsewhere Brantley makes his opinion clearer, arguing that Dickinson "bequeathed to her readers an art less of belief than of knowledge and more of epistemological/scientific witness than of revival testimony [and] when she enjoyed faith, as she did on occasion, she gave the last word to experience."⁹ Perhaps more troubling than Brantley's assertion of Dickinson's thoroughgoing empiricism is his binary opposition of experience vs. faith and the implication that Dickinson too believed in experience's and faith's separateness.

Others more sympathetic to religion and faith than Brantley also interpret Dickinson as an unquestioning empiricist. In particular, Roger Lundin reads Dickinson as a respector of modern science, and one who deeply struggled to work out the apparent conflicts between modern scientific thought and traditional religion. Based on her education, letters, poems, and known

reading habits, Lundin argues that Dickinson “took seriously the advances in scientific theory and practice” and accepted them at face value.¹⁰ Rather than attempt to resolve the conflicts between Amherst Congregationalism and modern science, as did many of her contemporaries, in Lundin’s reading Dickinson’s poetry negotiates between the liberal-rationalism of new denominations such as the Unitarians and the conservative-rationalism of Amherst’s Congregationalism. To provide a space for negotiation between religious belief and modern science, Lundin writes that Dickinson approaches “the question of [Christian faith] by way of a nineteenth-century distinction between verifiable knowledge and religious belief.”¹¹ Lundin goes on to argue that because of this belief in the separate spheres of scientific knowledge and religious belief, Dickinson concluded that “we can *know* that which we can track with our senses...while we *believe* that which our appetite desires and our spirit requires.”¹² Although not as strongly worded as Brantley’s claiming of Dickinson as “an agnostic-if-not-atheist Christian,” Lundin still articulates a Dickinson who is in agreement with the general mood of nineteenth-century science and theology.¹³

While I find much to admire in both Brantley’s and Lundin’s readings of Dickinson’s knowledge of and engagement with science as practiced in the nineteenth-century United States, I would like to contend with their assumptions about both Dickinson and science with the following questions: Is not empirical science, like religion, also an aspect of human desire and a methodology possessed of faith commitments?¹⁴ An observer of the human condition as acute as Dickinson would certainly be remiss to disregard the desire for mastery and regulation implicit in empirical pursuits. I’d like to add the following nuance and challenge to Lundin and Brantley: Dickinson may or may not have ultimately accepted the empiricist distinction between science and religion, but she certainly did not accept the distinction unproblematically. In fact, Dickinson appears to reject the distinction between religion and science. Rather than exclusively use science to interrogate religion or faith commitments broadly, Dickinson also uses religion (and the language of faith) to interrogate science. As Brantley, among others, has documented, Dickinson demonstrates discomfort with religious fundamentalism, but she directs equal scrutiny towards empiricist fundamentalism.

The narrative that Dickinson tells about the self is always also a narrative about religion and belief. Dickinson’s subject is one for whom experience is conditioned by faith. Dickinson’s poetry frequently characterizes aspects of Christianity as fiction, invention, apparatus, or implement, emphasizing the human agency at play in the maintenance of belief structures. These terms might at first seem derisive, but Dickinson’s primary focus for the

metaphors of creation is not merely to explore ways in which a person can negotiate her beliefs during a time of upheaval (as Lundin or James McIntosh might—correctly—argue), but as well to destabilize the foundations of and the arrogance of nineteenth-century empiricism. For Dickinson, the made (for example, a fiction, an invention, etc.) is not unreal or inauthentic, or ever wholly made: fictions and inventions constitute human selves even as those selves create fictions and inventions. Her poetry represents making and becoming as integral parts of human subjectivity—in particular, the making and remaking of faith commitments and beliefs. In the interest of terminological consistency in the face of a rather sticky and abstract subject, this essay seeks to describe Dickinson's contingent non-dualist self and its relationship to her critique of empiricism.¹⁵

The self in Dickinson's poetry has the character of an abyss that can never be wholly known, and thus its experience can never be verified. The abyss that Dickinson's speaker finds in herself is unknowable to the speaker and to the outside observer. There is always an unease with fragmentation and contingency; she finds herself threatened from both within and without. The beleaguered speaker in "One need not be a Chamber" (*Fr* 407) faces enemies hiding in "The Brain," "its interior," and confronts an "Assassin" lurking in his apartment. The speaker's self in *Fr* 407 is divided in a fashion reminiscent of Freud's tripartite mind structure. Like the conscious ego or super-ego the "Chamber" of the known self is haunted by another id-like self who is not fully knowable, but manifests in affective responses. This second unknowable self lurks in "lonesome Place" to ambush the conscious self. By the end of the poem, the speaker's conscious self appears to play second fiddle to the "superior spectre" of the id-like unknowable self:

One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -
 One need not be a House -
 The Brain has Corridors - surpassing
 Material Place -

Far safer, of a midnight meeting
 External Ghost
 Than its interior confronting -
 That cooler Host -

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
 The Stones a'chase -
 Than unarmed, one's a'self encounter -
 In lonesome Place -

Ourself behind ourself, concealed -
 Should startle most -

Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least -

The Body - borrows a Revolver -
He bolts the Door -
O'erlooking a superior spectre -
Or More -

Chased through the brain, confronted at midnight, hunted down in his own apartment, the self bolts the door against the "spectre" of his other self, only to discover that the other self is not merely a potentially hostile force but also an abyss who confronts the conscious self. The last line "Or More -" drops the final two syllables of Dickinson's typical hymn meter and lurches the reader into the depths of absence. For Dickinson, unlike Emerson, transcendence is not a self-evidently good or desirable experience; she is equally attuned to both the ecstasy and horror of the eclipse of the conscious self. Dickinson's self is locked in a struggle between the known, which in "One need not be a Chamber" seems to equate to the material, and the unknown, which haunts the material. Although these equivalences appear to lend themselves to a simple material/immaterial binary, the immaterial is intimately connected to the material and in part constitutes it. The brain's corridors "surpass" material place; the corridors move through the material into a space that is beyond the material, but not completely distinct from it.¹⁶ In the same way, the known self struggles to ward off the ever-present abyss of the unknown, which forms an integral part of the self, yet threatens its self-possession. The Dickinson self is not wholly self-possessed because the self is always in part an abyss.

A later poem, "Hope is a strange invention -" (*Fr* 1424), demonstrates how Dickinson articulates a self for whom experience is never merely individual nor wholly immanent. In the poem, Dickinson meditates on what might now be called the mind/body problem. The speaker struggles to find the origin of "Hope," which the poem represents as a relentless and mysterious force, both transcending and dwelling in the body:

Hope is a strange invention -
A Patent of the Heart -
In unremitting action
Yet never wearing out -

Of this electric adjunct
Not anything is known
But its unique momentum
Embellish all we own -

In *Fr* 1424, the heart owns “Hope,” yet hope is not equal to the material, mortal organ which makes claim to it. Like the heart, hope operates constantly; unlike the heart, which will eventually die, hope never ceases to work. The heart’s hope appears to be both immanent, of the human, and transcendent, persisting beyond and outside the material body. Hope serves as an eternal “adjunct,” an accompaniment to the finite material heart, and even after the human heart eventually fails, hope continues on elsewhere. The human heart can “invent” hope, yet hope is not reducible to a biological function like the heart, and neither is hope biologically essential to human life; it is an embellishment, a beautiful decoration. As in Elisa New’s Kierkegaardian reading of Dickinson’s poems of circumference, the feeling of hope can be read as a limiting factor on the human. A person can experience hope as physical sensation, but she will never fully grasp what it is, or where it comes from. Hope manifests in, through, and beyond the body.

While the self in Dickinson’s poems forms a nexus of the immanent and transcendent, the knowable and the abyss, Dickinson explicitly addresses the question of science’s and religion’s parameters in the oft quoted “‘Faith’ is a fine invention” (*Fr* 202) and points to the faith investment that, along with experience characterized as sight, forms the hybrid core of both religion and empiricism:

“Faith” is a fine invention
 For Gentlemen who *see!*
 But Microscopes are prudent
 In an Emergency!

On the surface, the poem creates a clear distinction between the “invention” “Faith” and the “prudent” microscope. Dickinson’s cryptic quotation marks draw our attention to the word “Faith” and suggest we ought to pay closer attention: the word has been pulled out of its original context. The poem presents faith as disingenuous, or at least redundant. Those who have faith already see; their faith is no faith at all, but empiricism misnamed. By implication, faith is imprudent, a naïve assumption about the way things seem to be or an “invention” to explain what is seen. Those who do not “see” clearly enough to possess the certainty the poem associates with faith, prefer to look under the surface with a microscope, which reveals the evidence-based truth. Or at least, that is what the poem’s surface appears to tell us.

Let’s now take Dickinson’s “prudent” path and look at the poem through a microscope. Notably, the poem inverts the intuitive roles of “Faith” and “Microscopes,” reducing Faith to something enabled by sight, and claiming that Microscopes (an invention that rely on sight) might be a better method for grappling with an emergency. What then is the difference between the

view through faith and the view through a microscope? It's difficult to say, but the difference appears to hinge on the context of an emergency. Where faith's sight ends, the microscope's sight begins (again, the ironic inversion is obvious). The microscope signifies faith's limit, and in the same moment becomes an implement of faith. In a visual sense, a microscope reveals the unseen; analogously, faith could be said to do the same. The microscope thus also becomes a faith-based object, an invention used by limited humans who cannot see the desired object unaided. The microscope mediates between the eye and the object of examination, transcending human physical limitations and giving the eye access to what was previously hidden. As a revealer of secrets, the microscope requires faith from its user, faith that the optical technology transmits a true image of the natural order. The microscope, a tool of sober, scientific rigor is paradoxically the solution to the emergency, the crisis, the unexpected event—an instance for which it is, in fact, ill suited. “‘Faith’ is a fine invention” sets up a faith/knowledge dichotomy, which it then subverts, replacing the dichotomy with the assertion that all instances of seeing, religious or scientific, are invested with faith.

Dickinson uses scientific language to deconstruct the science/religion binary, demonstrating that both are contestable categories. “Faith is a fine invention” indicates Dickinson's awareness that scientific investigation does not operate in a vacuum—language and metaphor guide scientific methods and knowledge.¹⁷ While nineteenth-century science often enjoyed the presumption of ahistorical objectivity, progressive skeptics willingly attacked religion as a historically contingent subjective satisfaction of human desires, in contrast to ahistorical, universal science. Dickinson's scientific language interrogates empiricism's faith versus knowledge binary. Neither science nor religion are ahistorical phenomena, and both are contingent upon the desires, attitudes, and practices of their adherents. Nina Baym and Lundin have advanced similar lines of argument. Baym asserts “the sciences in themselves held little interest for her. They are mere tools.... Dickinson's overriding intellectual poetic projects where science is concerned are to query the existence of heaven.”¹⁸ Lundin also argues that Dickinson dealt with her uncertainty and doubt by “shifting the question of truth from history to eschatology.”¹⁹ Lundin reads Dickinson as rejecting the dominant nineteenth-century materialist view that truth exclusively and self-evidently emerges from history (the view through the “Microscope”), and instead choosing to believe that truth is always a matter of faith commitments, and as such can also manifest outside of and beyond the material. Baym's and Lundin's points are well taken (though a few scholars—Brantley and Robin Peel come to mind—might take exception), but come into conflict with each other, and fall short of accounting for Dickinson's persistent investigations

of transcendence. If Lundin, Peel and Brantley are correct that Dickinson adhered to empiricist principles and thus the division of faith and knowledge, then it would then be odd for her to, in Baym's words, "query the existence of heaven" with science. Perhaps, rather than only employ science to probe the possibility of an afterlife (Baym) and the truth of religion (Brantley), Dickinson, as she does in "Faith' is a fine invention," also uses religion to question the possibility of science.

Dickinson frames science as a creative, faith-inflected act analogous to the creative, faith-inflected act of religion. Both are points of hybridity that resist becoming etherized into mystical abstraction or reduced to empiricist materialism. In a related vein, McIntosh argues that Dickinson's "spiritual longings are genuine...yet she keeps 'Believing nimble' and does not allow herself to be assigned summarily to any ideological camp."²⁰ Yet this "nimbleness" is often only ever read in one direction: as a defensive attempt to preserve a space for religion from aggressing science. If Dickinson's believing can truly be considered nimble, then she must question the legitimacy of scientific rationalism, as she does in *Fr* 202, and offer a more substantive defense of religious experience rather than relegate it to creative acts or shift it from history to eschatology. Dickinson's "nimble believing" applies not only to religion but also to empiricist ideology.

For Dickinson, empiricist faith is no different from religious faith: both are perpetually in flux. The poet, similarly to Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, appears to think about "belief and unbelief, not as rival *theories*," but as inescapable aspects of "lived experience."²¹ She too rejects the "subtraction story" of scientific progress inevitably chipping away at the foundations of Western religion, eventually "liberating" humans from the old superstition.²² Dickinson's faith, such as it was, endured in the face of empiricism's march because she refused to wholly cede either faith or knowledge to religion or science. McIntosh, Lundin, and Baym make complementary arguments that Dickinson's faith rested in a framework unassailable by modern science, while Brantley charts the opposing path. Neither of these two camps is quite correct. What poet of unassailable or "nimble" believing could pen "Why - do they shut Me out of Heaven?" (*Fr* 268), a poem in which the speaker contemplates her own damnation?

Why - do they shut me out of Heaven?
 Did I sing - too loud?
 But - I can say a little "minor"
 Timid as a Bird!

Would'nt the Angels try me -
 Just - once - more
 Just - see - if I troubled them -
 But dont - shut the door!

Oh, if I - were the Gentleman
 In the "White Robe" -
 And they - were the little Hand - that knocked -
 Could - I - forbid?

Jane Eberwein comes closer when she suggests that Dickinson's faith depended "more on riddles, surprises, and everyday miracles than systematic embrace of doctrine."²³ Or, in a more Calvinistic vein, as Magdalena Zapadowska suggests, Dickinson "detested," but "could not renounce" God.²⁴ Belief was inescapable. Even in *Fr* 268 when the speaker expresses shock and horror at being shut out of heaven, she does not question the truth of damnation or reality of heaven. The fear she expresses is the fear of something she believes is real. The poem does not express anger at heaven's exclusivity as much as fear of being excluded.

To offer a challenge to reductive empiricism, Dickinson's poetry articulates a God who is always both immanent and transcendent. In a similar fashion to the theology of the incarnation—the paradoxical union of God (the infinite) and human (the finite) in the person of Christ—Dickinson's poetry seeks to create an incarnated subject. To make space for this hybridity, Dickinson opposes both contemporaneous Congregationalist and Unitarian tendencies: the Congregationalists, who sought to prove God through human means, and the Unitarians, who accommodated Christian dogma to modern rationalism. Both denominations participated in alternate versions of the same error: representing God on human terms.²⁵ To avoid the shortcomings of the Unitarians on the one hand, and the Congregationalists on the other, Dickinson investigates, in New's terms, "the idol-making power of the mind" and the mind's "tendency to formally fix, or compass, time within the parameters of its own limitations."²⁶ Mainline New England Protestantism sought to strip Christianity of faith, and bring it into harmony with the narratives offered by contemporaneous natural science. Rather than attempt to cleanse religion of supposed irrationalism and see God through the imperfect mediation of human reason, Dickinson writes in search of a subject for whom such transcendence is possible. Dickinson resists the secular urge to regulate and purge God of the transcendent, and focuses instead on her ostensibly mundane everyday experiences as a method for negotiating her own religious belief. However, in slight resistance to New's Kierkegaardian reading, I propose that Dickinson is not merely

concerned with transcendence in a straightforward way—she refuses to offer a neat demarcation of the immanent and transcendent, and instead locates transcendence simultaneously within the here and the beyond. Transcendence, for Dickinson, is not a state that must be labored for or achieved. Transcendence is always indwelling in every subject.

Religious transcendence is a reciprocal process in which both God and persons necessarily participate. Dickinson's speaker desires to experience God, but God must respond to the speaker's desires. In "Prayer is the little implement" (*Fr* 623), "Men" attempt to reach God through the tool of Prayer:

Prayer is the little implement
Through which Men reach
Where Presence - is denied them -
They fling their Speech

By means of it - in God's Ear -
If then He hear -
This sums the Apparatus
Comprised in Prayer -

The poem begins with "Men" attempting to communicate with God through prayer, which mediates between them and the always deferred presence of God. The poem's first six lines feel despairing, lamenting the absent God. But a reversal occurs in the two final lines. Prayer, originally ascribed to a subcategory of implements—a type of invention—transforms into the dominant category, to which apparatus and implement are subordinate. In the first stanza "Prayer" begins as the subject, and is compared to the object of "Implement," but then in the second stanza the roles reverse and "Apparatus" is the subject compared to the object, "Prayer." The apparatus and the implement aid the men's efforts to reach God, but human tools are not the sum total of prayer. Human language attempts to transcend, and finally relies on God to reciprocate. The apparatus is a part of the process, but not the whole. Here again we see a joining of opposites, and a contingent attempt to translate the divine into human language. Prayer, like hope, proceeds from two sources: one immanent, one transcendent, one human and one divine. "Comprise" means to include, to understand, or to comprehend. The apparatus of prayer, through which men fling their speech at God, is the part of prayer that we can understand, but the other part—the reception by God, if "He" hears—is beyond our control and ken. So, faith is an invention or a fiction, and prayer is an implement or an apparatus, but those acts of creation do not negate their authenticity. Faith and prayer are

constituted by multiple influences, just as are science and technology. The metaphor of invention resists both sides of the Amherst theological debate and forges a distinctive faith rooted in human purposiveness ordered toward eternity and the possibility of salvation.

Of particular consequence for Dickinson's representation of empiricism and subjectivity are her poems dealing with birds, which present an incisive account of hybrid objects resistant to empiricist purification. Utilizing language similar to that of *Fr* 504, *Fr* 583, and *Fr* 1099 (all of which will be discussed), "No ladder needs the bird but skies" (*Fr* 1605) follows the trajectory of a bird through the air:

No ladder needs the bird but skies
 To situate its wings,
 Nor any leader's grim baton
 Arraigns it as it sings.
 The implements of bliss are few -
 As Jesus says of *Him*,
 'Come unto me' the moiety
 That wafts the cherubim.

The poem begins with a bird flying of its own accord, and ends in a place unreachable by any ladder. The bird climbs into the sky alone and unaided, and sings independent from any directions. The bird, like the ideal individual-as-empirical-knower, appears to exist in a state of absolute freedom. The poem's second half shifts from the scene of a bird in flight into God's heavenly kingdom. Heaven, despite being a place traditionally located above, is unreachable through flight, and only reachable by invitation, which Jesus offers in the phrase "Come unto me," a phrase uttered perhaps most famously in Matthew 11:28 (KJV), "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." Similarly, "moiety," an essential part or portion of the gospel (or Bible, more generally), in the poem refers to Jesus' summons to "Come unto me." This heavenly summons is offered to the bird, who at the poem's end is described as a cherubim (biblical celestial beings who are often winged). The bird begins in free flight and ends the poem called into Christ's presence.

In *Fr* 853, a second bird takes flight, and again demonstrates the reciprocal and contingent nature of the subject:

She staked Her Feathers - Gained an Arc -
 Debated - Rose again -
 This time - beyond the estimate
 Of Envy, or of Men -

And now, among Circumference -
 Her steady Boat be seen -
 At home - among the Billows - As
 The Bough where she was born -

The bird charts a path subject to revision. The bird plans her "Arc" as she flies through the air, debating her trajectory, and always maintaining control along a curvature towards a destination. From all appearances, she flies independent of any aid. As the bird dips and rises again, she encounters what Gary Stonum might call the Dickinson sublime and others might call transcendence, but can also be understood as hybridity. Along the arc "among Circumference" the bird loses or relinquishes control of her movements and allows an outside force to control her. The image of a bird in the air transforms into a boat that, in contrast to the bird's careful planning of her movement, is tossed by the waves. The water, often standing in for the infinite unknown in Dickinson's poetry, provides a surface across which the boat (bird) may move, and be tossed by, but never completely enter. As the bird encounters the sea, she no longer "staked" her feathers for flight, but floated on the water's surface, at the mercy of the waves. To reinforce this sense of the sea taking control of the bird's movement, the second strophe begins to strain the even 4/3/4/3 hymn meter of the first strophe. Although the second does not break the rhythm, the repetition of the consonant "B" sound strains and complicates the rhythm of the first strophe. As the boat is carried away by the waves, so too is the meter's rise and fall punctuated by the consonance on the letter "b." In the first strophe, the iamb "beyond" wants to be read as a trochee, which begins to upset the rhythm, introduces an element of uncertainty as the bird moves from sky to sea, and sets the stage for the percussive "Boat," "be," "Billows," "Bough," and "born" pattern which exaggerates the stresses in the 4/3/4/3 rhythm, but in the end remains comfortably within the iambic tetrameter/trimeter pattern. Despite her loss of autonomy, the bird remains comfortable in her passive state.

In *Fr* 504, a flock of birds form a hybrid object as well as bring a liminal space into being. In their hybridity, the birds retain their individuality, "Brook by Brook," while singing their symphony:

The Birds begun at Four o'clock -
 Their period for Dawn -
 A Music numerous as space -
 But neighboring as Noon -

I could not count their Force -
 Their numbers did expend
 As Brook by Brook bestows itself
 To multiply the Pond.

The uncountable birds and their “numerous” music present a blending of individual voices. Like the tributaries of a river (or in this case, a pond), the birds meld into one mass and one song. Their countless voices produce a music that is vast and all encompassing. They and their song transcend, but do not erase, their individuality and merge into a hybrid entity. Despite their overwhelming, almost sublime, song, the poet feels that the birds are familiar, a mundane regular part of life, as recognizable as neighbors or noon. The birds are simultaneously alien and familiar; they are an overwhelming transcendent symphony and a simple morning birdsong. But the deceptive simplicity means that few people, if any, hear the birds’ music.

The Listener - was not -
 Except Occasional Man -
 In homely industry arrayed -
 To overtake the Morn -

Nor was it for applause -
 That I could ascertain -
 But independent Extasy
 Of Universe, and Men -

By Six, the Flood had done -
 No tumult there had been
 Of Dressing, or Departure -
 Yet all the Band - was gone -

The Sun engrossed the East -
 The Day Resumed the World -
 The Miracle that introduced
 Forgotten, as fulfilled.

The “Miracle” that introduces the day is the concurrence of a variety of influences: the birds, the early morning hours, and the lone “Occasional Man.” No one of the three holds full responsibility for the miracle: each plays a small role. The birds begin to sing with the rising of the sun, and vanish without a trace afterwards. Their ability to sing coincides with the indeterminate space of the hours between four and six—neither night nor day. Once the day emerges from liminal hours between four and six the birds’ hybrid song fades. In essence, the miracle (an inescapably religious word) is only possible prior to the totality of “The Sun engrossed the East.” Once the space for hybridity is purified, miracles are no longer possible in the same fashion.

Hybridity is constituted not only in spaces but also in individual objects. As New has argued at length, Emily Dickinson often longs for individual

transcendence. However, this is not the entirety of Dickinson's interest in transcendence; she does not merely desire to discover the modes of transcendence, but points out that transcendence is a constant state of being. To exist is to transcend. Like the birds and their song in *Fr* 504, the single bird in *Fr* 1605, the praying men in *Fr* 623, and hope in *Fr* 1424, all communication, all individuals, and all collectives are instances of transcendence. New's assertion of Dickinson's desire to move beyond circumference is further evident in "At Half past Three" (*Fr* 1099), but so is the possibility that transcendence and immanence are contingent states in perpetual flux. The poem is cryptic, even for Dickinson, and her preferred version of Webster's dictionary is invaluable in teasing out its movements. *Fr* 1099 struggles to fall into hymn meter, always almost achieving it, but every time falling short in one aspect or another. Each strophe approximates, but never achieves, the familiar 4/3/4/3 rhythm:

At Half past Three
 A Single Bird
 Unto a silent Sky
 Propounded but a single term
 Of cautious Melody.

At Half past Four
 Experiment had subjugated test
 And lo, her silver principle
 Supplanted all the rest.

At Half past Seven
 Element nor implement be seen
 And Place was where the Presence was
 Circumference between

If combined, the first two lines of the first stanza complete a four beat hymn line, but the line breaks into two iambic dimeter lines and the following three lines then finish the 4/3/4/3 pattern. The meter complements the image; the line splits in half along with the hour. The meter of the first two lines of the second stanza is divided as well; the second line steals two beats from the first line, rendering the first iambic dimeter and the second iambic pentameter. This curious rhythmic division points to the "Experiment" subjugating the "test," just as the second line subjugates—takes control of—the meter of the first. An experiment, as prescribed by the scientific method, is a feedback loop between hypothesis and test, each revising the other for increased accuracy and precision. A good experiment is constructed of a series of tests, but this particular experiment deviates from protocol and takes control over its constituent tests. The poem confuses the proper

roles of experiment and test and, anticipating philosophical critiques of induction, posits a situation where the experiment gains ascendancy over the test, hence predetermining the results. In the poem, the experiment, the ideological cornerstone of empiricism, attempts to purge itself of the tests on which it depends. The experiment's tenets or axioms, its goals, become the only guide to the process of investigation. Through this elimination of contingency, the scientific method transforms into bias-confirmation rather than a search for truth. The hypothesis is proven, but not tested. The experiment's "silver principle" dominates. According to the 1844 Webster's dictionary, "silver" can mean simply a coating, an inexpensive layer atop an inferior metal. The experiment's guiding principle is an imitation, dressed up in authenticity, propounding truth, but like the "Single Bird" in the first stanza propounding "but a single term" into an otherwise "silent sky," the experiment monopolizes discourse, allowing no other voice to disrupt it, subjugating and supplanting those who dare to ask questions (in contrast to the multiple singing birds in *Fr* 1099, and the single bird in *Fr* 1605 who gives itself over to hybridity).

In contrast to the totalizing "single term" and empiricist "subjugation" in the initial two strophes, the third strophe resists purification and opens up the possibility of hybridity. In the third strophe, the experiment's axioms and methods disappear, and neither "Element nor implement be seen." Both foundation and method are absent. In "place" of their single "term" lies "Circumference," the circumference of a clock, by whose ticking the poem tracks itself. Circumference confounds the experiment's single "term," its limit. The clock's motion "At Half past Seven" moves beyond the experiment, leaving both "Element" and "implement" behind. Experimentation is bound both by place and time, and as time passes and place shifts, so do the grounds for the experiment. The bird sings to an empty sky at three-thirty and is never heard from again; the experiment monopolizes the test at four-thirty and disappears. The poem begins "At Half past Three," moves to "Half past Four," then skips three hours ahead and ends "At Half past Seven." After this three-hour time gap, of all the poem's images only the presence of circumference remains in the "Place" once occupied by the bird and the experiment. The "presence" of "circumference between" would be difficult to conceptualize as a place, and in the context of a clock, would appear to indicate the passage of time. So what is the location of the "place?" Or what occupies that "place?" If place is "circumference between," then place appears to be the space on the clock's edge as indicated by the hands of the clock. Time is not a place, but the representation of time—the hands of a clock—form a triangle, the third point of which lies in a place both inside and outside of time. The place indicated by the presence of "Circumference

between” is the clock’s center at which point the hands meet and turn. The clock serves as a visual metaphor for immanent/transcendent hybridity. The clocks’ hands mark the passage of time in reference to the unmoved center.

The center of the clock represents a hybrid place that exists both inside and outside of time. It is, literally, the unmoved transcendent around which time is measured. During the disappearance of “Element” and “implement,” the hands move between 3:30 and 7:30. But the exact time does not matter, and, despite the measurement of the passage of time, the “place” remains unchanged: the “presence”—the space—between the three recorded times always points towards both the center and the edge. The truth that the experiment attempts to find becomes apparent only when the experiment ceases. The poem contrasts the experiment’s effort to eliminate contingency with the clock’s dependent structure of hands attached to a center. While the “presence” along circumference is not the center, it nonetheless points to the center. Time is never stable; finiteness is constant motion. The stable center—always present, but never reached—provides the means by which a clock becomes intelligible. Without the stable center there is no meaning. Time, the finite, depends upon the clock’s center, the infinite, to be understood. But, the meaning, the hands of the clock, does not reside in the center. The clock’s intelligibility always points toward, and orders toward and is ordered by, the center. The center is timeless and resides outside of time. Events within time (for example, the hands of the clock) make us aware of the center, and how it orders our lives. The circumference of a clock—that is, time—limits and constrains. The center of the clock is at once inside and outside of time, transcending time, but always referenced by it.

Dickinson uses the clock—like hope, prayer, and knowledge—to demonstrate hybridity and indicate the integrated nature of transcendence as both here-and-now and there-and-beyond. Her machinery incarnates, attempting, like Christ, to point to the contingency of all things: infinite/finite, faith/knowledge, mind/body. In one possible reading, such as Lundin or McIntosh might make, this place of circumference could represent Dickinson’s space beyond rationalism’s reach where she negotiates truth and exercises her “nimble believing.” On the other hand, nimble believing might, and perhaps ought to, indicate a rigorous engagement with empiricism, as Brantley and Peel demonstrate. But a rigorous engagement with empiricism need not indicate acquiescence to empiricist dogma (no more than engagement with religion indicates agreement with its tenets). A third Dickinson is possible: one whose nimble believing entails acknowledging the faith investments of religion and science. She seems in agreement with Thomas á Kempis, whose *Imitation of Christ* she owned and presumably read, and who said that the purest truth must be made manifest “not in signs and

words that fade, but as it actually is;" pure truth is always revealed and cannot be located by human reason.²⁷ Dickinson's hope in incarnational truth motivates her to strive beyond her circumference, always aware that she cannot move beyond the limit, but also acknowledging that what is beyond the limit, as in the clock metaphor, also resides in her at the timeless center.

Dickinson's poems indicate a persistent, even if not wholly consistent, vision of a world of objects constituted by multiple forces. Her work emphasizes plurality, disjunction, and particularity that is at odds with modernity's push towards homogeneity, regulation, and universality. Procedural knowledge and the corresponding temptation to mastery, in the sense articulated by Martin Heidegger, are objects of suspicion in Dickinson's poems.²⁸ The poems present a world of chance and play, where a bird becomes a boat, a brook, a river, a song, an experiment, or simply disappears and is never heard from again. It's fitting then that time, which seems impossible to master, plays a key role in two of the poems that demonstrate hybridity. The birds in *Fr* 540 and *Fr* 1099 are subject to time, which marks their movements and demarcates their moment to sing. For the symphonic flock of birds in *Fr* 504, time acts as a music conductor. Their song begins and ends with the cues of the dawn. The single bird in *Fr* 1099 pays no attention to time, and attempts to totalize, to master, the silence with its "single term," but cannot sustain the note on its own (unlike the flock's cacophony in *Fr* 504) and disappears from the poem. The bird's attempt at mastery is immediately followed by the experiment's attempt at mastery, which also gives way, in the face of time, to the hybridity and contingency of the clock. The things that endure, in Dickinson's verse, are the things that do not attempt to regulate and cleanse themselves of contingency, but rather those that are open to constitution by outside influence. This forms the core of Dickinson's hybrid subject: a self or a thing that resists secularizing fictions of autonomy and purity, and instead embraces and makes room for multiplicity and contradiction.

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NOTES

1. Brantley, *Dickinson's Rich Conversation*, 43. Brantley offers the interpretation that "Locke, Wesley, Wadsworth, and Dickinson thought that all people should heartily endorse sense-based reasoning and faithfully strive for up-to-date knowledge of empirical philosophy and of science."

2. Peel, *Dickinson and the Hill of Science*, 14, 330. Peel reads Dickinson as a "concealed

natural philosopher/scientist" who negotiated her "quotidian world of ideas and experience...with poetry as her speculative and empirical tool" (Lundin, *Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, 4-5). Lundin, one of the foremost religious interpreters of Dickinson, interprets her as not only as "one of the first to trace the trajectory of God's decline" but also as exemplifying the "Protestant tendency to shift the center of God's activity from the world outside the self to the spiritual world within it." In other words, even Lundin—a scholar highly invested in Dickinson's religiosity—understands her to accept the privatization of religious belief in the face of outside pressure, which Lundin attributes in large part to Charles Darwin.

3. See Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* and Asad's *Formations of the Secular* on selfhood and secularity, and Bercovitch's *Puritan Origins of the American Self* and *American Jeremiad*, Noll's *America's God*, and Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* on United States' selfhood and Protestantism.

4. Dickinson, *The Poems*, ed. R. W. Franklin, poem 360. All following quotes from *The Poems* will be cited parenthetically by *Fr* and poem number.

5. Wolosky, "Dickinson's Emerson," 135-38.

6. Any doubts about the hybridity and instability that characterizes the Dickinson self might be quickly dispelled with a glance at either "Of nearness to her sundered things" (*Fr* 337) or "The Soul has Bandaged moments" (*Fr* 360). Both of these gothic poems indicate a self struggling to come to terms with itself and its surroundings. In *Fr* 337, the self is "sundered," "divided" and "perished." In *Fr* 360, the self is "Bandaged," "appalled," "a Bomb," and is led through a "Dungeon" by some "Horror." Whatever the cause or consequence, the Dickinson self is certainly far from the self-assured self of Emerson or the rational-knowing Enlightenment self.

7. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 51-55. The definition of hybridity represented here relies on Bruno Latour, who defines a hybrid as a "quasi-object" that exists "in between and below the two poles, at the very place around which dualism and dialectics had turned endlessly." The "quasi-object" is constituted by countless forces, and as such cannot be reduced to any single one of them.

8. Brantley, "Interrogative Mood," 163.

9. Brantley, *Emily Dickinson's Rich Conversation*, 33.

10. Lundin, "Nimble Believing," 83.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Brantley, *Emily Dickinson's Rich Conversation*, 13.

14. Noble, *Religion of Science*, 18-22. Noble argues that scientific innovation in the West is frequently imbued with Christian theological impulses, especially as a way to "make all things new," and a desire to recover the lost Edenic paradise.

15. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 101, 201. Asad argues that a central feature of the liberal or secular self is its understanding of itself as an unmade maker, and as such it reflexively expels or purifies itself of any outside influence. Emerson's self, in my reading, fits this definition. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 10-11, 27-29. Bruno Latour similarly defines modernity, and thus the modern self, as a project that denies contingency and hybridity in favor of a fiction of pure ontological categories.

16. The *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* defines "surpass" with the following examples: "Homer surpasses modern poets in sublimity. Pope surpasses most other poets in smoothness of versification. Achilles surpassed the other Greeks in strength and courage. Clodius surpassed all men in the profligacy of his life. Perhaps no man ever surpassed Washington in genuine patriotism and integrity of life." The surpassing subject moves beyond, it is still of the same kind as the things it exceeds.

17. Bruno Latour's *Science in Action* provides an exhaustive account of the social and linguistic networks that constitute what we call "science."
18. Baym, "Emily Dickinson and Scientific Skepticism," 147.
19. Lundin, "Nimble Believing," 84.
20. McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 36. The phrase "nimble believing" comes from a letter penned by Dickinson to Judge Otis Lord, in which she exclaims "we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps Believing nimble" (*Letters*, 728).
21. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 4.
22. *Ibid.*, 22.
23. Eberwein, "Outgrowing Genesis?," 66.
24. Zapedowska, "Wrestling with Silence," 394.
25. A detailed and specifically theological account of these transformations can be found in Dorrien's *Making of American Liberal Theology*, in particular chapters 1-3.
26. New, "Difficult Writing, Difficult God," 18.
27. Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 3.
28. Heidegger, "Age of World Picture," 124; "The Question Concerning Technology," 5. Heidegger expresses concern that modernity reduces science to research, and subsequently reduces research to endless procedure. This environment transforms knowledge into an "ongoing activity" with no end point or goal. Relatedly, he cautions that the will to mastery conceals the slipping of modern technology, and procedural science, from human control.

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