

SELF, WORLD, AND GOD  
IN THE POETRY OF  
EMILY DICKINSON AND  
HERMAN MELVILLE

by

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A DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville are the major nineteenth-century representatives of a strain of American poetry that may be termed, following Elisa New, “religiocentric.” In support of this proposition, this study explores the following ideas: the meaning of the term “religiocentric;” the vexed issue of the value of Melville’s poetry generally; form, content, and value Melville’s *Clarel: A Poem and a Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876); the religious views of Melville and Dickinson, and the areas where they overlap; the interrelationships of religion and textuality in Dickinson’s work.

In describing “religiocentric” poetry, I begin with R.W.B. Lewis’s ideas of the emergence in the nineteenth century of what he calls the parties of “Hope” (exemplified by Emerson), “Memory” (for example, in sentimentalist literature and piety), and “Irony” (for example, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s sympathies with both of the other parties but his refusal to embrace either). I locate Dickinson and Melville in the party of Irony. Elisa New’s recent work identifies the dominance of the effects of Emersonianism and the party of Hope in American poetry and describes a different strain which retains an idea of Original Sin and generally has a clear awareness of the problem of suffering. I follow her description of this strain as “religiocentric.”

Chapters 2 and 3 argue that Melville should be ranked with Dickinson and Walt Whitman as major American nineteenth-century poets. I discuss two relatively recent articles, by Helen Vendler and Rosanna Warren, which make forceful arguments on behalf of Melville’s poetry, Warren more fruitfully than Vendler. I propose that Melville’s immense

and difficult *Clarel* has aesthetic value in addition to its service as a vehicle for the expression of various religious points of view.

Dickinson and Melville were deeply interested in and troubled by religion. Though there are important differences in their outlooks, they were both theists and were both firmly grounded in the text of the Bible, even if their theisms ranged outside Christianity. The particular issue of textuality in Dickinson's poetry permits us to see a synthesis in her religious outlook of the transcendent and the material.

DEDICATION

*in memoriam*

Clara Ruth Gilliland

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CHAPTER 1  
HOW TO READ AMERICAN POETRY

Of the major American poets of the nineteenth century, Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville share the distinction of having been the most anonymous during their lifetimes. Dickinson did not actively seek publication and only a very few prominent members of the literary establishment knew about her abilities as poet. Melville published most of his poetry, but in very small runs, and had no expectations that they would be widely read. In addition, neither poet was inclined to write the kinds of poetry that might have brought wide public attention, such as, for example, poetry of the expansive optimism of the early Walt Whitman or of the decorum and gentility of James Russell Lowell or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In her 1993 book *The Regenerate Lyric* Elisa New describes a strain in American poetry that she opposes to the Emersonian strain that is often referred to, following Harold Bloom, as the American Sublime. Dickinson's and Melville's periods of greatest productivity overlap roughly from 1860 to 1880; we may view the poets retrospectively as having been, during these decades, the pre-eminent poets of the strain New describes. I seek to extend New's thinking to include two areas she does not address: Melville's poetry in its entirety, and textual issues in Dickinson's poetry.

In his 1955 book *The American Adam*, R.W.B. Lewis formulated three modes of thought—we might call them “tempers”—in nineteenth-century America: Hope, Memory, and Irony. Lewis describes the “dialogue” that emerged in nineteenth-century America in terms of a

list of characteristic “terms and ideas”: “innocence, novelty, experience, sin, time, evil, hope, the present, memory, the past, tradition” (2).<sup>1</sup> In Lewis’s account, on one side of this dialogue these ideas contributed to the development of mythology in which America was a world that had begun again, “under [a] fresh initiative” made possible under a sort of new dispensation that gave divine sanction for a “second chance for the human race.” The myth found its hero in the person and idea of the prelapsarian Adam, “the first, the archetypal, man.” As the human who existed “prior to experience,” whose “moral position” was impeccably “innocent,” it was appropriate that he should carry forward this new beginning (5).

However, this was but one side of one dialogue. Lewis’s list actually creates an intricate contrast among categories of opposed attitudes: the first addresses the human moral condition (sin and evil versus innocence); the second is an outlook from the existential present, which either (a) is wary of the future and reveres the power of the past, in memory, tradition, and experience, or (b) finds fulfillment in the present and looks optimistically toward the newness of the future. These oppositions relate to what Lewis calls the “two polarized parties” that Ralph Waldo Emerson described: “‘the party of the Past and the party of the Future,’ [...] or the parties ‘of Memory and Hope [...].’”<sup>2</sup> Those in the party of Hope (such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman) felt that they “had no past, but only a present and a future”; the essential term in their “moral vocabulary” was “‘innocence.’” Those of the party of Memory were “‘nostalgic’” (the quotations marks are Lewis’s); for them “the sinfulness of man seemed never so patent as

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis specifically refers to the second quarter of the nineteenth century, but I think it is true to the spirit of his study to discuss his ideas with a broader range that includes the second half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis does not cite his sources for his quotations generally, but his Emerson quotations here more or less correspond to passages in the text of Emerson’s 1841 lecture titled “The Conservative,” published in *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* in 1849. Emerson ends the essay, not surprisingly, on the side of Hope: “[I]t is a happiness for mankind that innovation has got on so far, and has so free a field before it. The boldness of the hope men entertain transcends all former experience. It calms and cheers them with the picture of a simple and equal life of truth and piety.”

currently in America,” and they countered Hope’s “mounting contempt for the doctrine of inherited sin” with “ever more emphatic accents” on “the fixed legacy of corruption” (7).<sup>3</sup>

Emerson’s depiction of this as polarization, says Lewis, has the effect of perpetuating an idea of a dualism in American culture, which takes the form either of a view of a parallel development or of the domination of one by the other, with the party of Memory as merely “a bleak foreign hangover” (a remnant of the Old World) or the partisans of Hope as captive to “immature native foolishness.”

In a very late poem (1884), Emily Dickinson says “Show me Eternity, and I will show you Memory – / Both in one package lain / And lifted back again –” (F1658).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Lewis sees a more conflicted interrelationship between Hope and Memory than does Emerson. For example, Emersonian optimism gave vitality to the party of Memory and even to the doctrine of original sin:

The illusion of freedom from the past led to a more real relation to the continuing tradition. The vision of innocence stimulated a positive and original sense of tragedy. Without the illusion, we are conscious, no longer of tradition, but simply and coldly of the burden of history. And without the vision, we are left, not with a mature tragic spirit, but merely with a sterile awareness of evil uninigorated by a sense of loss. For the

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<sup>3</sup> It is useful to contextualize this conflict by noting that it roughly parallels a debate that occurred among early Christians. In the early fifth century CE adherents of the Pelagian movement within the Christian church stirred up controversy by their denial of the transmission of Original Sin. This resulted in the Church’s affirmation in a council in 418 of the doctrine of the Fall and of Original Sin, and its transmission to humankind, a doctrine of which St. Augustine had been a prominent proponent. The doctrine tended to moderate over the succeeding centuries, until it was revitalized by Martin Luther and John Calvin (“Pelagianism,” “Original Sin”).

<sup>4</sup> With respect to the citations to poems: References to Melville’s *Clarel* give section number, canto number and line number as they appear in the Newberry-Northwestern edition listed in the Works Cited page. All other poems by Melville are cited by page reference to Warren’s *Selected Poems*. All poems by Dickinson are cited by poem number in R.W. Franklin’s *Reading Edition*, even when secondary sources cite Thomas Johnson’s edition, unless a letter follows the number, in which case the citation is to Franklin’s variorum edition. All other poems are cited by the page number(s) on which they appear in the edition listed in the Works cited page.

notion of original sin draws its compelling strength from the prior notion of original innocence. (9)

On the other hand, Hopefulness also had a reactionary effect within Memory. Lewis notes that the “general epidemic of confidence in human nature [...] even infected the party of Memory,” whose members, “watching the new cheerfulness with increasing agitation,” were quick to try to “spot it within their own citadels” (29), somewhat in the spirit of the Salem witch trials of an earlier time and the McCarthyism of the century to come.

But, as mentioned above, Lewis also detects a third dominant voice, that of the “party of Irony” (7). One characteristic of this temper is demonstrated by the way Nathaniel Hawthorne managed to be both “skeptically sympathetic toward both parties” and “confined by neither” (7). The party of Irony transforms and complicates characteristics of the other parties: the Ironists feel optimism, but it is a “tragic optimism” that is “unthinkable among the hopeful”; and they are acutely aware of human suffering, but find in it the possibility of a “heightened perception and humanity” that is correspondingly “unthinkable among the nostalgic” (7-8). Lewis is more specific in a later discussion of a passage in *Moby-Dick* where Melville, having “penetrated beyond both innocence and despair,” arrives at “some glimmering of a moral order which might explain and order them both” (133). The passage consists of Ishmael’s meditations in the three final paragraphs of “The Try-Works” (chapter 96). The *Pequod* had passed through the Straits of Sumatra on its way to the Philippines, and was headed from there to hunting areas near Japan, where it was to meet its end. Not long before, Stubb had taken a whale, at the expense of Pip’s sanity.<sup>5</sup> In “The Try-Works” chapter itself, Ishmael had fallen asleep at the helm of the *Pequod*,

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<sup>5</sup> Pip’s predicament (he had jumped out of a whale boat) was archetypally isolating: “Now, in calm weather, to swim in the open ocean is as easy to the practiced swimmer as to ride in a spring-carriage ashore. But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?”

sometime after midnight, while watching the infernal process of boiling down a whale's blubber, and then awoke with a start, "horribly conscious of something fatally wrong" (534). He had let go of the tiller and turned himself around, so that he was "fronting the ship's stern," which is to say that he was looking at where the ship had been, not at the compass which guided its progress: "Uppermost was the impression, that whatever swift, rushing thing I stood on was not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern" (534).<sup>6</sup> At the last moment he gathers his wits and rights the ship, only barely avoiding "the fatal contingency of being brought by the lee" (535). Then begin the final paragraphs which Lewis, noting their poetic quality, justly calls "three stanzas" (132).<sup>7</sup> Lewis describes their "subject" as "the different degrees of moral alertness" (132), depicted as "a series of displacements" (133). The first is Ishmael's immediate response to his brush with disaster, which, oddly, is a rather sunny optimism:

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis I think misconstrues the setting here when he says that upon waking Ishmael realizes "that he has turned in his sleep and is facing the two furnaces, or 'try-pots,' amidships [...]" (131). From his position at the helm, at the ship's stern, Ishmael has already been observing the furnaces which are before him; when he awakes he finds himself staring backward, to "nothing [...]" but a jet gloom" (534). This detail is not one that is relevant to the part of Lewis's remarks that I wish to emphasize.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis's statement that "Melville was a poet" is but one of the many times during the course of Melville's reception that critics have described his prose as "poetry" or as having a "poetic" quality. Herschel Parker discusses this at length in chapter 1, titled "A Poet in Prose: How Critics Prepared Me to Think of Himself as a Poet," of *Melville: The Making of a Poet*, where he cites numerous examples of descriptions of the "poetic" qualities of his prose even before the publication of *Moby-Dick*. For instance, *The New Bedford Mercury* of June 8, 1849 (very oddly, it must be said) reviewed *Mardi* together with Longfellow's *Kavanagh: A Romance* and Arthur Hugh Clough's *The Bothie of Toper na Vuolich*, remarking, "We are not sure but that we ought to have entitled this notice—Three new poems. They seem to stand on the debateable [sic] land between the two realms of poetry and prose, outlaws from the stricter jurisdiction of either [...]" (qtd. in Parker, *Making* 16-17). The *Springfield Daily Republican*, in its July 9, 1856, edition praised the introductory essay to *The Piazza Tales* as "a poem—essentially a poem—lacking only rhythm and form." (qtd. in Parker, *Making* 22). (It is intriguing to imagine what Emily Dickinson, devoted reader of the *Republican* and close friend of its publisher and editor Samuel Bowles, may have made of this review.) Parker finds that with *Moby-Dick* Melville had prepared himself "to attempt extraordinary experiments in literary styles," writing prose that was "now genuinely poetic, and at times expressed in lines closely akin to Shakespearean blank verse" (20). (It should be noted that while prose might well have a metrical quality, it is hazardous to attempt to describe it in terms of line lengths, and fails to acknowledge that one of the key features of prose poetry is its play with the idea of the absence of the constraint of the poetic line.) Parker properly concludes that Melville "would have been inattentive to his critics if he had not, years before [the publication of *The Piazza Tales*], begun to think what it would be like to write poetry instead of only writing poetic prose" (22).

Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm!  
Turn not thy back to the compass [...] To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be  
bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other,  
at least gentler relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp – all others but  
liars!

Here is the ideology of the party of Hope, which one might also call a party of Serenity, where  
“[a]rtificial light gives way to natural light, darkness to morning” (133). When Lewis points out  
also that there is a shift in the mode of verbal expression, from the imperative mood to the  
indicative, we notice that for the Serene, the “is” is sufficient, the “ought” unnecessary. But  
Ishmael recognizes the indicative mood as (in Lewis’s words) “an empty innocence, a tenacious  
ignorance of evil, which [...] must be either immaturity or spiritual cowardice” (132).

Accordingly, in his next paragraph, “dawn and sunlight yield to darkness, to the moon and ‘the  
dark side of this earth’—to hell, to sickness and to death” (133):

The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds  
of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that  
mortal man cannot be true—not true, or undeveloped. With books the same. The truest of  
all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon’s, and

Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. ‘All is vanity.’ ALL. (535).

This takes up with the party of Resignation in brooding upon “a sense of evil so inflexible, so  
adamant in its refusal to admit the not less reducible fact of existent good that it is perilously  
close to a love of evil” (132). Again, Ishmael recognizes this and so arrives at his “moral insight”  
(133):

But even Solomon, he says, “the man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain” (*i.e.* even while living) “in the congregation of the dead.” Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar. (535-536)

Here “hell and death are the source at last of a new and loftier life, new ‘sunny spaces’ and new imperatives.” But the sunny spaces are not lit by Hope’s “golden, glad sun” from the earlier paragraph, for the intervening “vision of hell and death” has deepened the understanding of the “moral imagination” (133). Lewis equates these sunny spaces with Irony’s “tragic optimism” and with Melville’s “Catskill eagle” of the soul (133). Elizabeth Hardwick has written that critics are “too quick to rob [Melville] of a melancholy atheism”; she detects in Melville “the moral intransigence of one acquainted with those damned by life” (124). However, judging by the passage above from *Moby-Dick*, and Lewis’s reading of it, Melville has at least seen the possibility of Lewis’s “tragic optimism,” a way out of the mire of “moral intransigence.” Indeed, Melville’s experience, the “acquaint[ance] with those damned by life,” and even his own feeling that he was “damned by life,” are what has made this “tragic optimism” possible.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hardwick does not specify the “acquaintances” she refers to here, but such figures are not difficult to identify. In his own life, Melville experienced his father’s bankruptcy and death in his youth, and the suicide of his son Malcom toward the end of his life. In Melville’s writing, there are, for example, Ahab, who is doomed, as it were, by fate, and Mortmain in *Clarel*, who is doomed by “some unrenderable thing” (2.4.131-132). As for himself, the biographical facts indicate ample opportunities from which Melville might have felt himself to be damned by life, even if the circumstances do not establish such damnation as a fact.

Lewis's conclusion with respect to Melville is that with *Billy Budd* he reaches this tragic optimism in his oeuvre considered in its entirety with what we might call Billy's apotheosis in death. W.H. Auden presents a compelling poetic expression of this view of the connection between the biographical Melville and *Billy Budd*. Written in 1939, his poem "Herman Melville" treats the thirty-year period between *The Confidence Man* and *Billy Budd* as a time when Melville merely whiled away his time at the Customs Office. Here are its opening lines:

Towards the end he sailed into an extraordinary mildness,  
And anchored in his home and reached his wife  
And rode within the harbour of her hand,  
And went across each morning to an office  
As though his occupation were another island.

Goodness existed: that was the new knowledge.

As Lewis points out, these lines portray Melville as Odysseus, finally coming home after years of struggle (147). Despite the existence of "Evil," "we are introduced to Goodness every day," and "He has a name like Billy and is almost perfect." Quoting the words from *Moby-Dick* that we noticed earlier, Auden says that the phrase "All, all is vanity" was now "not the same":

Reborn, he cried in exultation and surrender  
"The Godhead is broken like bread. We are the pieces."

And sat down at his desk and wrote a story. (251-252)<sup>9</sup>

The set of emotional conditions that Lewis traces in Melville are startlingly similarly evident in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, though we cannot observe such a concise progression as Lewis shows in Melville's "Try-Works" chapter. Dickinson's poems considered as a complete body of work resemble the Psalter, for example, in their manner of expressing a range of emotional states throughout. In this respect both are truer to human life experience than the

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<sup>9</sup> Auden quotes here from Melville's November 1851 letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne. In the context of its surrounding sentences it reads: "Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips—lo, they are yours and not mine. I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling."

Ishmael passage in not suggesting a straightforward evolution. A poem that shows the unreflective optimism of Melville's "golden, glorious, glad sun" paragraph is the well-known "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" (F235). The speaker keeps the Sabbath "staying at Home -," with "a Bobolink for a Chorister - / And an Orchard for a Dome -." In terms much like those of Emerson's "Nature," the speaker here confidently concludes that "instead of getting to Heaven, at last - / I'm going, all along." With her choice of the word "going" here Dickinson indicates a state of being in "Heaven" already, as opposed to a not-yet teleology "getting" there "at last." A similar mood suffuses "A something in a summer's Day -" (F104), where the late afternoon "solemnizes" the speaker as the day's "flambeaus burn away" and she experiences a "Transcending extasy." The feeling is not fleeting but engages with the cyclical patterns of nature, for after "- the night - the morn," the speaker joyfully "meet[s], coming thro' the dews / Another summer's Day!" In a later poem, which R.W. Franklin dates at 1877, Dickinson explicitly expresses a firmly confident hope; its conceit of invention and patent law is an expression of the optimistic American can-do spirit:

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 it's unique momentum  
 Embellish all we own -       (F1424)

In the following poem, the moment of transcendent illumination, a mountaintop experience, is brief, but is nonetheless powerfully felt:

The Soul's Superior instants  
Occur to Her – Alone -  
When friend – and Earth's occasion  
Have infinite withdrawn -

Or She – Herself – ascended  
To too remote a Hight  
For lower Recognition  
Than Her Omnipotent -

This mortal Abolition  
Is seldom – but as fair  
As Apparition – subject  
To Autocratic Air -

Eternity's disclosure  
To favorites – a few -  
Of the Colossal substance  
Of Immortality - (F630)

But Melville's "truest of all Men," "the Man of Sorrows," also appears (as Woman) in Dickinson's work. For example:

Pain – has an Element of Blank -  
It cannot recollect  
When it begun – Or if there were  
A time when it was not -

It has no Future – but itself -  
It's Infinite contain  
It's Past – enlightened to perceive  
New Periods – Of Pain. (F760)

The poem begins in "Pain" and ends in "Pain." Like the Serenity of the previous poems, the Pain is a condition of being. The "Element of Blank –" conceives of a Pain that is like original sin, only worse: there may *never* have been a prior innocence, "A time when it was not –." Its "Future" is similarly bleak and resigned, having been cruelly "enlightened" only to the "Infinite" succession of "New Periods – Of Pain." In Lewis's terms, the poem has yielded "to hell, to

sickness and to death.” In the following poem Dickinson presents a hope that is perpetually defeated. Its first stanza (of three) indicates the condition of the poem as a whole:

I know a place where Summer strives  
With such a practiced Frost -  
She – each year – leads her Daisies back -  
Recording briefly – “Lost” - (F363)

In the poem referred to earlier, “a summer’s afternoon” is “Transcending extasy” (F104). Here, ice-cold despair always wins again the “Daisies” of Summer. It is the dangerous cold that for Dickinson often accompanies the depths of despair and alienation. For instance, the Dickinsonian cold here depicts suffering in terms of its somatic effect:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –  
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –  
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’  
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –  
A Wooden way  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –  
Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –  
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go – (F372)

The “great pain” that is depicted could be physical, for example a kind of horrific injury such as those Americans were trying to come to terms with during the war (the poem is dated at 1862).

However, the fact that the “formal feeling” comes “after” the “great pain,” and because the “feeling” is at least in part psychological, it seems more likely that the speaker describes an experience that follows a spiritual or emotional crisis. That being the case, the poem gives a Dickinsonian view of the unity of body and psyche. “The Nerves,” referring both to the physical body and to one’s emotional condition, “sit [...] like Tombs –.” The “ceremonious” posture is

rigidly formal, and the word appropriately joins with the comparison to “Tombs” by the allusion to the ceremonies in which corpses are shrouded for burial. The “heart” is “stiff,” the “Feet, mechanical,” as we notice in the regular iambic meter that marks out much of the movement in the poem, and in the traditional pentameters of lines preceding the appearance of “Feet,” which are unusual in Dickinson and give a “formal feeling” of a stultified poetic language.<sup>10</sup> The speaker states with chilling effect that “This is the Hour of Lead,” heavy, gray, and inert, and she likens it to “Snow,” which though relatively weightless and windblown, is, as she puts it in another poem, “that White Sustenance – / Despair –” (F706), bearing the whiteness of the death pallor and a chill like cold metal. In the final lines, the boundary between “recollect[ion]” of the survivor and the “stupor” of the dying loses definition incrementally, until finally the “letting go,” in surrender to death, prevails.

The wonder and sense of sacrament in nature seen in many Dickinson poems is offset by this strain, as for example when she says that:

Doom is the House without the Door –  
'Tis entered from the Sun –  
And then the Ladder's thrown away,  
Because Escape – is done –

The “Doom” is exacerbated, it seems, by the speaker’s ability to know what is happening in the world of nature:

'Tis varied by the Dream  
Of what they do outside –  
Where Squirrels play – and Berries dye –  
And Hemlocks – bow – to God – (F710)

Death is suggested in the homonymous word “dye” used intransitively, as “die” would be used, and the unexpected mention (after the rather ordinary “Squirrels” and “Berries”) of hemlock with its traditional association with death, depicted here again with a word (“bow”) that could be a

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<sup>10</sup> On Dickinson and iambic pentameter, see A.R.C. Finch, “Dickinson and Patriarchal Meter.”

noun but is used as an intransitive verb. As in “My life had stood – a Loaded Gun -” (F764), where the speaker has “but the power to kill, / Without – the power to die -,” the speaker suggests that part of her “Doom” is a similar inability to die in the ordinary course of nature. Dickinson often presents the idea that a pain is magnified by the awareness of or a closeness to an opposite condition of something like grace. For example:

Except the Heaven had come so near –  
So seemed to choose My Door –  
The Distance would not haunt me so –  
I had not hoped – before –  
  
But just to hear the Grace depart –  
I never thought to see –  
Afflicts me with a Double loss –  
'Tis lost – And lost to me – (F702)

For the speaker “to hear the Grace depart –” is much like “the Dream / Of what they do outside –” that punctuates and makes more piercing the feeling of “Doom.”

Dickinson’s version of Lewis’s “tragic optimism” of the party of Irony is muted but no less present than in Melville. Here is one example, from 1862:

The Zeroes taught Us – Phosphorus –  
We learned to like the Fire  
By handling Glaciers – when a Boy –  
And Tinder – guessed – by power  
  
Of Opposite – to equal Ought –  
Eclipses – Suns – imply –  
Paralysis – our Primer dumb  
Unto Vitality – (F284)

Just as “Opposite” here has the “power” to effect a stanza break and a shift from the past tense to present, so does that “power” bear witness to a prospect of hopefulness on the other side of pain. In this poem, “great pain” does not leave a “formal feeling” in its wake; instead, the darkness of “Eclipses” and the “Paralysis” of Resignation “imply” the existence of “Suns” and “Vitality.” In

this way they serve as the “Primer dumb” that guides one through the *via negativa* to the place of Wary Hope. She expresses a similar idea in a poem from 1871:

Of so divine a Loss  
We enter but the Gain,  
Indemnity for Loneliness  
That such a Bliss has been. (F1202)

Here the speaker’s present “Bliss” is a node on a continuum of emotional response to an experience of something “divine.” The emotion “has been” a feeling of “Loneliness,” but it has now “enter[ed]” into the compensatory “Indemnity” not only, it seems, for the “Loneliness,” but for the “Loss” itself. This differs from “The Zeroes taught us,” however, in ending in a state of Serenity as the payoff for a prior loss, perhaps a version of the Fortunate Fall. In the previous poem, we saw an equipoise between “Paralysis” and “Vitality.”

The following poem presents a similar idea but the emphasis is on a necessity for pain:

I lived on Dread –  
To Those who know  
The stimulus there is  
In Danger – Other impetus  
Is numb – and vitalless  
  
As ‘twere a Spur – opon the Soul –  
A Fear will urge it where  
To go without the spectre’s aid  
Were challenging Despair. (F498)

“Dread” and “Danger” do not bring on paralysis but instead stir one to act and are even life-giving. For “Those who know” this—those who have a knowledge derived only from this experience, it would seem—no other “impetus” has this life-energy, but is “numb” and “vitalless.” The word “vitalless” is emphasized by its placement as the final word of the stanza and its ironic rhyme with “stimulus” and “impetus.” The second stanza shifts back to movement with the simile of the “Spur” to represent “Fear,” a connection tightened by the rhyme of “Spur”

with “urge”—the verb describing what Fear does—and “twere”—the verb that effects the comparison of “Fear” and “Spur.” Despite the near rhyme of “Fear” and “Despair,” the latter word represents what the “impetus” and “Spur” enable the speaker to avoid. Nonetheless, “Despair” remains a powerfully ominous presence. It is the last word of the poem, literally and, it is suggested, figuratively, and as such it complements the dead “vitalless” condition that ends the first stanza. Also, the syntax of the last lines is ambiguous, with “To go” serving a double function: as part of the nominal phrase “To go without the spectre’s aid,” it represents what will lead to a confrontation with “Despair.” And although reading it this way leaves the preposition “where” without an object, reading “where / To go” as what “Fear” indicates to the “Soul” leaves what follows “To go” syntactically incoherent. Thus, while the speaker describes how she has “lived” (albeit in a psychologically fragile condition), and thereby presents an element of Hope, the “spectre[]” appears following the center of the ambiguity, on the side where “Despair” occurs, which, together with the elements that emphasize the word “Despair,” undermines the speaker’s faith in the “stimulus” and “Spur,” and suggest that Despair might be inescapable: the speaker “lived on Dread —,” but we do not know her present condition. In the end, though the poem is not one of Resignation, it is very wary indeed about the hope it expresses.

Lewis says that for Henry David Thoreau (of the party of Hope), “conventions and traditions [...] had to be washed away, like sin, so that the natural could reveal itself again.” Lewis depicts this act of renunciation as a sort of self-baptism that left one eligible for the sacrament of communion with nature. Lewis’s description of Thoreau’s renunciation suggests the experience that Harold Bloom would later describe in *The Anxiety of Influence* as *askesis*, “a movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude [in which the poet] yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself

from others” (15). The poet in this respect “is the direct descendant of every Orphic adept who rolled himself in the mud and meal that he might be raised out of the fury and the mire of being merely human” (117). However, Bloom says, in American poetry, the idea of the “Great Original” and the domination of the eye do not allow for *askesis*. Bloom quotes Emerson: “As [...] objects paint their images on the retina of the eye, so they, sharing the aspiration of the whole universe, tend to paint a far more delicate copy of their essence in [the poet’s] mind.” This eye, the “most tyrannous of the bodily senses,” is not amenable to purgation; thus, “[t]he solipsism of our major poets—Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, Crane—is augmented.” Finally, for these poets, “[r]eality reduces to the Emersonian Me and the Not-Me (my body and nature)” (132-133). However, as I discuss throughout this study, this idea that “our major poets” are those who toe the party line of the “Great Original” is wildly inaccurate, particularly with respect Dickinson, who should not be in this group, and Melville, who is presumably not in Bloom’s list because he so obviously does not follow Emerson. Furthermore, it does not take into account the entirety of Whitman’s body of work.

Lewis refers to Dickinson only once, in the discussion of Thoreau mentioned above. Citing Dickinson’s “Renunciation – is a piercing Virtue –” (F782), he says that the value of “Renunciation” for Dickinson was that it led to “an experience of self in a bath of nature,” as opposed to the kind of ascetic practice that opens one to “an experience of God in an infusion of grace” (23). Though Lewis’s context is Thoreau, and his remark is perhaps offhand and is certainly not essential to his larger point, it is instructive to investigate it further. Read closely, the poem Lewis refers to is highly ambiguous and deals more in psychology than transcendentalism. Dickinson seems to be talking about a renunciation of present experience (“The letting go / A Presence –,” a “Sunrise,” for example) in deference to “an Expectation” of

future experience (the coming “Day,” for example). Without the renunciation of present Sunrise, “Day’s Great Progeniture,” would “Outvie,” or (in Dickinson’s variants) “Outshow” or “Outglow,” the lesser experience of “Day.” Although the poem later goes into bewildering abstraction (Renunciation’s choice “Against itself – / Itself to justify / Unto itself), it is safe to say that the poem is something much more complicated than a primer on how to have “an experience of self in a bath of nature.” Read as a process of making room to appreciate the “Day,” the poem does not choose the greater “bath of nature” that “Sunrise” offers. In any reading, the poem is about renunciation of one sort of experience to enhance to pleasure of another experience (both relating at least to nature, and perhaps more broadly). Though it may be about “experience of self,” the poem does not oppose nature and not-nature.

In discussing ways in which a precursor’s poetry begins to sound as if were written by the epebe, Bloom quotes Emerson’s poem “The Humble-Bee,” “a poem for which Dickinson admitted some fondness.” It ends with these lines: “Wait, I prithee, till I come / Within earshot of thy hum,— / All without is martyrdom.” Bloom remarks: “*All without is martyrdom*—certainly this ought to be Dickinson” (153; emphasis in original). Although the poem does strongly resemble many of Dickinson’s, it is not this line that clinches the case; again, Bloom’s view of Dickinson as solipsist is, like Lewis’s view of Dickinson as Puritan ascetic (arguably oxymoronic anyway), radically incomplete.

Lewis’s literary taste in any case prefers prose narrative over poetry, as Whitman is the single poet whom Lewis discusses, though this may be a symptom of the critical climate of his time, as discussed above with regard to Dickinson, and because of the general disinterest in Melville’s poetry. It is consistent with this concentration on narrative that Lewis finds, for example, that the Irony group was especially prominent in fiction, where their views on Hope

and Memory “affected both form and content: an organic relation between past experience and the living moment became a factor in narrative—a recurring theme *of* narrative” (8).

Whitman is a standard-bearer for the party of Hope in his early poetry, but in a way that is so truly Adamic that it presents a paradox in the logic of the party of Hope:

The young Whitman, at least, was not an apostle of progress in its customary meaning of a motion from worse to better to best [...]. For Whitman, there was no past or ‘worse’ to progress from; he moved forward because it was the only direction (he makes us think) in which he could move; because there was nothing behind him—or if there were, he had not yet noticed it. There is scarcely a poem of Whitman’s before, say, 1867, which does not have the air of being the first poem ever written, the first formulation in language of the nature of persons and of things and of the relations between them; and the urgency of the language suggests that it was formulated in the very nick of time, to give the objects described their first substantial existence. (44)

Thus Lewis says that *Leaves of Grass* “brought to its climax the many-sided discussion by which—over a generation—innocence replaced sinfulness as the first attribute of the American character” (28).<sup>11</sup> The paradox arises out of Whitman’s version of “progress,” which involved going backward, “all the way back, to a primitive Adamic condition, to the beginning of time.” Thus, at the same time as he attempted to replace sin with innocence, Whitman attempted to change “Hope” from an idea of “progress” into an idea of “a complete recovery of the primal perfection” (42).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> It is this period of one generation that Lewis seems to have in mind in his specification of the second quarter of the nineteenth century as the period when the terms of the dialogue between the parties of Hope and Memory became fixed.

<sup>12</sup> New says that Lewis’s treatment of Whitman has led to the present situation that “it is the Emersonian Whitman, the Whitman of ‘Song of Myself,’ who has by and large been institutionalized” (96). However, recognizing Lewis’s

Among those whom Lewis puts in the party of Hope, Whitman differs from his fellows in being especially grounded in materiality and the body. This difference likely accounts for Whitman's backward motion to "primal perfection," as seen for example in lines that Lewis quotes (42), which comprise the last of the *Children of Adam* poems, "As Adam Early in the Morning," first published in 1861:

As Adam early in the morning,  
Walking forth from the bower refresh'd with sleep,  
Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach,  
Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass,  
Be not afraid of my body. (111)

In the Gospel of John, Jesus instructs Mary Magdalene to "Touch me not" ("*noli me tangere*") after she recognizes him, newly resurrected (John 20.17). But the command of Whitman's new Adam—"Touch me"—is precisely the opposite, and Whitman also alludes to the permission Jesus grants to Thomas to "reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side" (John 20.27). Whitman is not seduced by such solipsistic abstractions of the Transcendentalists as Emerson's ineffable transparent eyeball, a subject that only sees, and is not the object of any other subject's touch. The affirmation made manifest by the touch relates to what Susan Stewart refers to as "myths of animation" (for example that of Sleeping Beauty, who brought to life by a kiss), which involve "the image of a living thing bringing a dead thing to life through the transitivity of touch" (165). Thus in Caravaggio's painting of this scene, Thomas's face displays a sense of awakening as he pokes his hand in Jesus's side. Stewart quotes a poem by John Keats—most certainly a poet of the senses—that he probably wrote in late 1819 but was not published in his lifetime, that complements the Whitman poem:

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"qualified language" concerning this issue, she reserves her special rancor for Harold Bloom, who she says "sees Whitman as the key disseminator of that 'American Sublime' that Emerson invented" (249-250 n.2).

This living hand, now warm and capable  
 Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
 And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
 So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights  
 That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood  
 So in my veins red life might stream again,  
 And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is  
 I hold it towards you— (331)

Elisa New's *Regenerate Lyric*, published in 1993, links with and contrasts to Lewis's *American Adam* of some forty years earlier. New proposes a revision of what she describes as the dominant view of the American poetic tradition that began with Emerson and continues in the present day in the criticism of Harold Bloom and others (in Lewis's terms, the "party of Hope"). This dominant view, she says, sees American poetry as "prophecy," as a "prospective speech" that aims to regain "the newness that the Fall occluded" (1). Emerson demonstrates his conviction that this recovery is possible in "Nature," where he proclaims the ideal of "an original relation to the universe," with rhetoric that harkens back to the prophecy of Ezekiel: "Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? [...] [W]hy should we grope among the dry bones of the past [...]?" (3). The defining moment of this "recovery" effort is the apostasy of his "Divinity School Address," which represents the attempt to replace (in New's words) "religious conversion" with the kind of "poetic inspiration" illustrated in Emerson's ruminations in essays like "Nature." This idea of poetry as prophecy has prospered to such a degree, says New, that critics now take as axiomatic that it is now "the deciding influence [...] on the development of our major poetic tradition." (2).

New radically reconceives this understanding. For her, the American poetic tradition, which begins with Edward Taylor, is the repository and sustainer of the fundamentally "religiocentric" nature of American literature, which draws its theology from Jonathan Edwards

and is characterized by a deeply engrained need to contemplate “the End” as well as “the subject who experiences that End.” Despite the immense impact of Emerson’s “The Divinity School Address,” she says, the religiocentric tradition did not suddenly disappear but simply relocated, “out of the care of seminarians and into the care of poets” (3).<sup>13</sup> Though the major American voices New refers to—Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, Lowell, Frost—do at times “try out the Emersonian ‘power’” in works we often view as “major,” they also “interrogate that power” in important poems that are relatively less well known (3). For these poets the ideas and attitudes of Edwards and Taylor remain urgent, vital, looming, and above all dominating. They include the processes of time (“Beginnings and Ends,” the Judgment Day); the inconceivability of living “without shame”; the normativity of “the prohibition against idols.” Each of these poets, she says, remains “fruitfully exercised” by the very ideas—“appurtenances of the Logos”—that Emerson sought to be rid of in his “original relation.” These stimulating “appurtenant” ideas include both “purity and the Incarnation” and “idolatry and God’s unnameability,” as well as a host of others, which she lists in a manner similar to Lewis’s list of “terms and ideas”: “awe, dread, and the lure of the Nations; sin, Doom, and the Fortunate Fall,” and “the Atonement and the Chosen” (3-4).

In the final analysis, New’s proposal seems to be much more than a claim that this an alternative strain in American poetry, a “countertradition.” She often seems to argue, with justification, that it is the dominant tradition, hitherto unrecognized, as for example when she says that “it is ‘regeneracy’ rather than ‘originality’ that is the American poet’s modus operandi

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<sup>13</sup> New often describes this in terms of shelter for this “countertradition”—“giving sanctuary,” “going underground,” “giving quarter.” (3,4)

and native mandate” (3, 7).<sup>14</sup> This is particularly evident as she traces this tradition to Edward Taylor and the “basic tension between [his] the fallen poetry [...] and the unfallen poetics of Emerson” (4). In this perspective, “the theological ‘un-original,’ or fallen, [can prove] more consonant with the development of the poem than the ‘original.’” (4). Whereas Emerson sought to recognize a humanity with its unblemished soul still remaining, the American poets maintained and have continued to feel the wound of the Fall and to seek healing through rebirth.<sup>15</sup>

As we have seen, Emerson challenged American poetry in 1836 with the question, “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (3). New finds this a supremely and importantly “dangerous invitation” in the rhetorical situation of a culture that remains “not unconvinced of man’s innate depravity since Adam” (17). A major problem New finds with Emerson’s formulation is that this “original relation” is to be “enjoyed,” which is to say experienced “in pleasure rather than shame” (18). As New describes it, Emerson proposes nothing less than “a new theology gained through a new kind of poetry,” a theology that aims at “a spiritual satisfaction secured through a poetry outside time, exempt from the Fall’s strictures” (18). The poet who discovers an “original language” will himself “be original,” removed from

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<sup>14</sup> This idea relates particularly closely with Melville, for whom, as discussed below, “originality” is not a priority. Note also that New’s interest here is on the existence of this strain in American poetry; Hawthorne and Melville (the prose writer) come to mind in much of what is discussed in the paragraph. At least part of her aim in concentrating on poetry, it seems, is the worthy one of reclaiming its worth in the wake of reactions against the New Critics’ excessive reverence for the genre. As noted, supplementing New’s ideas with consideration of Melville’s poetry is one of the aims of the present study.

<sup>15</sup> New finds that “[i]n this poetic tradition, liberal enlightenment driven back on itself finds: mystery” (3). In his recent book on the history of American religion and politics, *Head and Heart*, Garry Wills traces co-existing strains of “Enlightened” and “Evangelical” religion (and his preference is for the former—head over heart—in no uncertain terms) that roughly parallel the literary distinction that New marks out. His particular concern is with the interactions of these two strains in American politics. For one sympathetic with Wills’s argument, it could be argued that “anti-Emersonianism” might make for good poetry even if it produces bad political theory and theology. But for Emerson, as New demonstrates, poetry and theology are inseparable.

temporality and set free to “recapture his innocence, shed his experience,” free to discard the self, to be “in a world not projected by him, not haunted by him” (17).

But New finds that the phrase “original relation” itself cannot stand up to close scrutiny: “[T]he truly *original*,” because it is “prior to all *relation*,” cannot be described with “temporal or spatial metaphor,” for it “recognizes nothing like priority, nothing like extension, having neither precedent nor fulfillment, neither size nor dimension” (19; emphasis supplied). And as for “relation”: “Theologically speaking, relation is the condition of our dividedness from God. Temporally speaking, relation distinguishes past from present and so gives us history. [...] Linguistically, relation defines our capacity to name. The etiology of all three is a dividedness, a scarcity of the original, yearning for reparation” (19-20). The only alternative for New is in an “*ab*-originality,” but that experience, like the face of God, is “nearly unbearable to contemplate.” New shows how Emerson’s own poem, “The Snow-storm,” demonstrates this:

[U]nformed and void till we ‘come see’ it, [the storm] possesses an aboriginal power that is simultaneously chaotic and apocalyptic: It has the yawning vacancy of the one—before Creation—and the implosive power of the other—after Creation has exhausted itself. Such originality is relieved only by our relation to it, which is to say, by its compromise. [...] Emerson’s imagined places of Beginning without mark are as likely to horrify as to free.

Finally, then, we find that “originality,” “imagined as a space prior to dimension, regathers to it the Mystery earlier Calvinists knew for one attribute of God’s power: The aboriginal terrifies.” New concludes that “[t]he ‘original relation’ is [...] ironically, almost indistinguishable from the original sin it would annul,” by which she seems to say that the prospect of the “enjoyment” of

the original relation is equivalent to the bite of the apple of the tree of knowledge that marks our division from God (20).

The case of Edward Taylor, a poet and a first-generation Puritan in America, provides an instructive contrast, as New demonstrates. In Taylor we observe “the poetic utility of a sense of stain,” of “how the weight of the Fall gives the poem both impress and moment, dimension and timing, depth and time” (18). Taylor’s poems, unconcerned with anything like Emerson’s notion of originality, “strike for a state of renewal—a *regeneracy*—by which the lyric keeps faith with the Fall and so with the timbre of a mortal voice speaking in time” (18; emphasis in original). In fact, it would seem to be a necessary (if not sufficient) condition of any notion of art, and certainly of the lyric poem, that it consist in a “mortal voice speaking in time.” Thus one must ask whether any interesting poetry must in some way seek regeneracy or otherwise “keep faith with the Fall.” Although the theological terminology may not be universally applicable, it does seem that a sense of woundedness is a necessary (but again not sufficient) element of good poetry.

To Emerson’s question about the “original relation,” New aptly notes that Taylor might respond: “Simply because as sinners we are unoriginal. Ours is not to enjoy.” Furthermore, as human productions, “words are simply embodiments of sin,” or “[v]irtual waste products of the poet’s struggle to escape the sinful self.” As such, for Taylor they “metonymize [...] man made a waste product to his own former virtue” (21). Nevertheless, words are “paradoxical vehicles to grace” that “tamp down a route to that experience of sin from which salvation breaks” (21):

What the poet seeks here is the full experience of that degradation of the Logos in the corporeal (the Fall) which is mended in the Word made flesh (the Incarnation). Taking up the burden of shame in a language inextricably bound to body, Taylor makes language

the register of his fallen state. Through his words he can not only accede to, but reexperience, the Adamic sin from which he issues. This is the experience prerequisite to saving grace. Shame, for this Puritan poet, is simultaneously the pivot of salvation and that on which all poems turn. (22)

In the American Calvinist strain of poetry, Emerson's "original relation" constitutes a blasphemous "aspiration to a language unstained by sin," as if it were a desire to view the face of God, from which we might trace Dickinson's insistence on indirection so that truth is told "slant" (F1263). Thus, "the human inadequacy, the poetic pitiableness, that mandates the poet's subordinately fleshy relation to God also serves as ballast against such weightless hyperbole" as we hear in Emerson (24). And it is human inadequacy, not Emerson's "original relation," that makes for strong poetry. New concludes:

To be sure, it is this very craving for a sight beyond the human prospect—for, if you will, Power—that is implicated and interrogated in the work of poets writing after Emerson. Again and again, Emerson's moment of supernal freedom, where the vision is seen through and the self goes transparent, is found wanting, not only wanting humility but also wanting weight. (24)

It should be noted that this process of forging strong poetry out of the "degradation of the Logos" does not, in New's analysis, constitute a form of resistance to or rebellion against God. She links the idea that "poetic language crystallizes its differentness under pressure of, in diacritical tension with, a normative cultural discourse" with Emerson, who by "superimpos[ing] [...] possibility on determinacy, or freedom on fate, produced the heuristic category of *resistance*, or, in Bloom's terms, *agon*" (152; emphasis in original).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PROBLEM OF MELVILLE THE POET

The previous chapter considered R.W.B. Lewis's discussion of Melville as well as (more briefly) Auden's poem "Herman Melville." It is significant that both of these writers show either no awareness of or no interest in the poetry.<sup>16</sup> Although Melville's poetry has never been entirely unknown, many critics have ignored it as being of negligible value, and many astute readers have overlooked it, perhaps because of its unavailability due to critics' dismissal of it. In a 1905 collection, Curtis Hidden Page identified the "Chief American Poets" as William Cullen Bryant, Edgar Allan Poe, Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Whitman, and Sidney Lanier. It will be noted this list excludes not only Melville but also Dickinson. In his Preface, Page says that his aim was to present "the best work of our few chief poets, rather than the few best poems of our many minor singers" (v). As this statement suggests, he felt secure in his selection of who was "Chief," saying that he was guided in his selection by "the consensus of opinion, now pretty well formed, as to which poems of our elder authors are the best and most representative" (vi). The point here is not so much to sit in judgment over Page's efforts (any such collection will look more or less bizarre after one hundred years) but to give an idea of how nineteenth-century poetry was viewed retrospectively shortly after its end, and within only twenty years of the deaths of Dickinson (1886) and Melville (1891).

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<sup>16</sup> This inaccuracy on Auden's part does not particularly affect his poem's aesthetic properties or its merits.

Around fifty years later, Louis Untermeyer, in his preface to his 1950 anthology of what is described as “Modern American Poetry,” says that “with the advent of Mark Twain, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman, American literature became modern as well as American.” “Modern American poetry,” he says, similarly begins with the “publication of *Leaves of Grass* and the Civil War.” However, though he refers to Melville’s place in “American literature,” and despite the comprehensiveness of his collection, there is nothing that would suggest that Melville was a poet. Consistently with his definition of “modern,” Untermeyer includes Dickinson and Whitman, but they are the only poets born before 1850 who appear. Poets such as Lowell and Longfellow are of the “old order,” which is presumably why he excludes them, though of course they were active well after the end of the Civil War (3).

A recent detractor, whose criticisms may be taken as representative, is Alan Shucard, in his 1988 survey titled *American Poetry: The Puritans Through Walt Whitman*. Shucard maintains that when Melville had stopped writing fiction (except for *Billy Budd*), he “was no longer the man he had been,” for his poems never attained “the poetry of his fiction” (100). (Again we see the focus on the poetic quality of his prose.) Shucard too raises the often-posed question of whether Melville’s poetry would have ever been noticed were it not for what are considered to be the far greater accomplishments of his prose fictions. He prefaces this, however, with an exception for *Battle-Pieces*, which he ranks with Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* as “the two best books of [Civil War] poems” (102-103). This is an enormous exception that practically negates his suggestion that the other poetry is unworthy of critics’ time.

Further, it seems to me that in Melville’s case the “quality” of his poetry is secondary to other reasons for taking it seriously. Ordinarily, the quantity of a poet’s body of work is not a significant factor in this regard. However, in the case of Melville, the poetry is of such an

unusual style—for better or worse, different from any of its time—and of such variousness, in both form and range of subject matter, that it must be reckoned with in any responsible appraisal of major American poetry of the nineteenth century.

Prominent critics have come to Melville's defense. Randall Jarrell maintained that Melville was of the company of Dickinson and Whitman as "the best poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century here in America." Of Melville he says that the poetry has been "grotesquely underestimated" and that "in the long run, in spite of the awkwardness and amateurishness of so much of it, it will surely be thought well of." Jarrell does further qualify his assessment, however, with his version of the strain of opinion that runs throughout Melville criticism, that Melville is "a great poet only in the prose of *Moby Dick*" (112).<sup>17</sup>

Robert Penn Warren is one of the most influential of the proponents of Melville's poetry in the twentieth century. He published a generous volume of selected poems in 1970, with extensive annotations and a lengthy introduction that focuses especially on *Battle-Pieces* (where, among other things, Warren describes important differences between Melville and Whitman as poets of the Civil War); on *Clarel*; and on "Billy in the Darbies," from *Billy Budd*, which Melville wrote first with a prose headnote which, as Warren puts it, "exfoliated" into the prose manuscript of *Billy Budd* (56).<sup>18</sup> Warren sees Melville's poetry as emerging from "that second

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<sup>17</sup> Notice Jarrell's quite agreeable prose in the first quoted passage: it is the poetry not of the nineteenth century "in America" but "here in America." His remarks on Melville (as well as a sentence in commendation of Dickinson) are in the context of a chapter on why "'serious readers of modern poetry' [...], people who are ashamed of not knowing all Hopkins by heart, are not at all ashamed to say, 'I don't really know Whitman very well'" (113). He recognizes, for example, that "just as few poets have ever written better, few poets have ever written worse." But Whitman is "a poet of the greatest and oddest delicacy and originality and sensitivity," as well as one for whom Hopkins himself reluctantly (because Whitman was a "scoundrel") confessed a great admiration (114, 113). Jarrell also gets at the heart of Whitman, it seems to me, in a remark about Whitman's syntax: "Whitman is more coordinate and parallel than anybody, is *the* poet of parallel present participles, of twenty verbs joined by a single subject: all this helps to give his work its feeling of raw hypnotic reality [...]" (130). Jarrell's sentence continues and accretes a Whitmanian length, ending with the point that the effect is "to give Whitman some of the freshness of childhood" (130).

<sup>18</sup> One point Warren makes in his detailed contrast of Whitman and Melville is that Whitman's war poetry as "primarily 'synthetic,'" in that it "gives strong representational images [...] which draw into focus and unify

half of his life after he had rounded his Horn and was trying to beat north to a latitude where peace might, at last, be possible” (5). Warren marks the low period of his life, when he “had touched bottom,” as around that time when, in 1856, he made his well-known comments to Hawthorne about having “made up his mind to be annihilated” (5). Thus Warren joins with the general critical view that Melville’s trajectory from this point ultimately reached the redemptive possibility that *Billy Budd* holds out. Warren’s astute tracking of Melville’s progress as a poet is consistent with that which Herschel Parker has worked through in detail in *Making of the Poet*. Warren discusses the poems that are included in *Mardi* (although “among them [...] there is only one flash of poetry”), and says that with *Moby-Dick* Melville had “become a poet,” as shown in that work’s “powerful conceptions” and “thousands of vivid images and rhythms,” but that these were “absorbed into the texture of his prose” and were “not offered with the concentration and focus of verse” (6-7).

In her short biography of Melville published in 2000, Elizabeth Hardwick refers to *Billy Budd* as Melville’s valedictory “return to repose in fiction, [...] a going back to the spirit of his earlier work before the diversion into poetry” (142). Herschel Parker’s *The Making of a Poet* is dedicated to, and firmly establishes, the proposition that Melville was just as much a poet as he was a writer of fiction. His poetry was not a “diversion.” One point that Warren made in 1970, and for which Parker has now presented evidence which is as conclusive as evidence can be, but that even recent critics have failed to recognize, is that Melville had prepared a volume of poetry for publication in 1860 which he left with his wife before setting forth with his brother on the

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whatever attitudes and emotions are already available in the reader.” Melville’s poetry, by contrast is “analytic,” in that it “often strives to analyze the implications of his images and the attitudes evoked by them” (26). Warren also quotes George Santayana’s “The Poetry of Barbarism,” saying that the “clear thought” and “positive action” which “Santayana names as [...] two things not granted Whitman to achieve” are central to Melville’s poetry, as shown by his effort to deal with the “paradoxes of life” and his “need to understand the complicated context” of action and “to confront [...] the costs of action” (30-31).

ship *Meteor*. Although it was not published, this fact does show that *Battle-Pieces* was not his first book of poetry.<sup>19</sup> However, Warren finds that “[i]n a very profound way it can be said that the Civil War made Melville a poet. It gave him the right ‘subject’; and for him the right subject, in prose or poetry, was absolutely essential” (11). In Warren’s view, though Melville had written a good deal of poetry before this, he was still awkward and at the apprentice level, and if he was a “poet” it was only in the medium of his prose. The poems that Warren identifies as having been in the 1860 book and collectively titled “Fruit of Travel Long Ago” in *Timoleon* in 1891 are, Warren says, “the work of a beginner, a poetry of fits and starts, conventional and often inept,” though not without “flashes” (7).<sup>20</sup> Thus it seems that Warren’s point is that the Civil War enabled Melville to mature into a true poet.

Writing in 1972, Aaron Kramer reported that Melville’s poetry was mostly “either ignored by Melville specialists in their most ambitious commentaries, or apologized for in one or two condescending phrases based less on a study of the poems than on an inherited attitude” (9). The subtitle of Kramer’s book calls it “A Thematic Study of Three Ignored Major Poems.” The three poems still get little attention, and Kramer does not help his case any by his failure to include any textual details or sources. They are all relatively long, and mostly narrative in form: “Bridegroom Dick” is from *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888), and, like the prose fiction *White-Jacket*, takes up the issue of flogging as a means of discipline at sea. The Civil War poem “The Scout Toward Aldie,” “an extraordinary 800-line ballad” from *Battle-Pieces* (1866), draws on Melville’s experience accompanying a Union scouting party as it searched for a Confederate guerilla leader (20). Kramer’s third poem is what he calls “Marquis de Grandvin,” a “1400 line

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<sup>19</sup> Herschel Parker gives full details in *Making of a Poet* at 126-143. One still wonders why he did not rearrange his affairs so that he could see it through personally.

<sup>20</sup> Parker gives a far more detailed treatment of the contents of the 1860 book, and proposes that it contained a good deal more than the poems Warren refers to (*Making of the Poet* 135-143). He concludes that the book “did not consist of the amateurish verse of a ‘fledgling poet’” (as Robert Milder had asserted in 2005) (143).

poem,” “[b]y far the largest of Melville’s ignored poems” (31). It is here that textual support would be especially helpful, because what Kramer gives are two poems, “At the Hostelry” and “Naples in the Time of Bomba,” which were unpublished at the time of his death. Each is divided into numbered sections with brief prose introductions. According to Herschel Parker, the manuscript indicates that Melville had planned a single volume which included both poems (*Poet* 143). Kramer does not explain the source of the title “Marquis de Grandvin” or why he considers the two poems to be parts of one larger poem. But what is most significant here is that Kramer seems to be the only critic who detects a relationship with *Clarel* in Melville’s other poetry (he appears to be referring to “Naples” here, which, perhaps not coincidentally, is based on Melville’s 1856-1857 trip in Europe and the Mediterranean which was also the basis for *Clarel* (Parker, *Poet* 141-142)): the “representation of differing viewpoints within a narrative tetrameter framework closely resembles the tremendous philosophic debate that is at the core of *Clarel*” (32).

A very recent appreciation of Melville’s poetry, and in particular his response to the Civil War in *Battle-Pieces*, is found in Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering*. Like Robert Penn Warren, she notes Melville’s theme of “the loss of innocence that rendered initial expectations absurd” (200). She sees the war as a decisive influence on Melville’s literary path: “Melville was launched on a new literary venture in an unfamiliar form. War would be his subject, and poetry his genre. [*Battle-Pieces*] presents the conflict in a collection of glimpses and fragments,” “reflect[ing] his judgment that ‘none can narrate that strife,’ and even ‘entangled rhyme / But hints at the maze of war’” (201). Faust observes that “the heart of Melville’s poetic inquiry” is concerned with “the riddle of death,” a problem “of which the slain / Sole solvers

are,” and as Faust rightly points out is “a question with which he had been personally much concerned before war propelled it to the center of national consciousness” (201).<sup>21</sup>

The question of the quality of Melville’s poetry brings us face-to-face with the issue of aesthetic quality. Melville’s poetry is, if for no other reason than its uniqueness, not clearly dismissible in the way, say, much of the genteel verse of Lowell or Longfellow is (at least in current tastes). Thus we must look for specific criteria for judging quality, knowing that we cannot ever finally determine it. It is also reasonable to adopt as a principle of criticism that the critic should attempt to discern the poetic principles under which a poet writes, and then to evaluate the extent to which it succeeds in working within those principles. At that point the critic can make a responsible assessment about whether the poetry is good under its own terms, and whether its own terms are interesting. But the hazard lies in adjudging work deficient under criteria that are foreign to it.

One example of how very easy it is to misread Melville is shown in a recent article by Virginia Jackson. The notion of genre in nineteenth-century American poetry has been vigorously, if not always clearly, re-thought recently in her work.<sup>22</sup> In a 2008 essay, responding to the question posed by her title “Who Reads Poetry?”—and specifically the matter of an apparent surge of interest poetry in some segments of popular culture as opposed to an apparent disinterest in “literature” among literary critics—she focuses on what she describes as the phenomenon of the “idealization of poetry.” This “idealization,” she says, has “attached” an unprecedented degree of “power” “to a genre [the lyric poem] we keep being told that most of us

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<sup>21</sup> The lines quoted in this paragraph are from the last stanza of “The Armies of the Wilderness” (135). As noted above, it is very probable that Melville had a volume of poetry ready for publication in 1860. Although this is an obstacle to Faust’s idea of the Civil War as radically affecting Melville’s choices of literary form and style, her observation that “the riddle of death” had already been one of Melville’s main concerns gives her point a broader applicability.

<sup>22</sup> She has developed these ideas with respect to Dickinson in her book *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*.

don't read" (182). (The "we" she refers to is apparently the academic audience to whom her essay is addressed; she has earlier described a split between those of her audience who think this is good and those who do not.) Jackson maintains that those who lament the apparent disinterest in poetry are motivated primarily by the worry that "we may be losing something poetry *represents*: subjective experience, say, or deep thought, or social consciousness, or beauty, or truth, or literature" (183; emphasis supplied).

It seems that the idea that poetry represents these other things is what Jackson associates with the "idealization" of the lyric. As she puts it, this idealization of poetry contributes to the perception that "we are in danger of losing access to the ideal" (183). Although it would seem self-evident that an "ideal" cannot be lost if it has not been given existence by a process of "idealization," the claim that follows is more intricate: "Our own abstract idea of the lyric makes it possible for us to imagine that we could liberate reading from it [which some might be in favor of] or that we are losing our academic discipline culture, or minds if people aren't reading it" (183). She seems to say here that the whole reason that the question about whether or not "we" should be reading poetry has been a result of the process of "idealization."

This idealization has occurred, Jackson says, as a "shift from poetry as cultural practice to poetry as pathetic abstraction," a "historical transformation of many varied poetic genres in the single abstraction of the post-Romantic lyric" (183). It is this "lyricization" of poetry that "is responsible for our current spectral idea of a genre powerful enough to overcome our habits of not reading it" (183). Jackson goes on to describe two "symptoms"—a "primary" and a "secondary"—of this lyricization. The "primary symptom" is "[t]he notion that poetry is or ever was one genre," inasmuch as "the songs, riddle, epigrams, [...] considered lyric [...] before the nineteenth century were not lyric in the same sense as the poetry we think of as lyric." The

“secondary” symptom is the “fact that we think of almost all poetry as lyric,” for “[w]hen the stipulative functions of particular genres are collapsed into one big idea of poems as lyrics, then the only function poems can perform in our culture is to become individual or communal ideals” (183). Thus, “the more ideally lyric poems and poetry culture have become, the fewer actual poetic genres address readers in specific ways” (as opposed, in seems, to the “songs, riddles, epigrams,” and so on that she has mentioned earlier) (183). What Jackson proposes is not that we “reject the lyricized version of the lyric we have inherited,” but rather that we have a better sense of “the history of lyricization” (183).

Jackson reads Melville’s “*The Portent*” as a moment in this history:

*Hanging from the beam,  
 Slowly swaying (such the law),  
 Gaunt the shadow on your green,  
 Shenandoah!  
 The cut is on the crown  
 (Lo, John Brown),  
 And the stabs shall heal no more.*

*Hidden in the cap  
 Is the anguish none can draw;  
 So your future veils its face,  
 Shenandoah!  
 But the streaming beard is shown  
 (Weird John Brown),  
 The meteor of the war. (91)*

She notes the textual features of its presentation in the book *Battle-Pieces*, namely its absence from the table of contents and the italicization of the entire poem, including its title. This suggests, she says, that its “function” is as a “preface” to the book or a “portent” of the poems that are to follow (184). She quotes the review of *Battle-Pieces* by W.D. Howells in the *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1867:

[Melville's] work possesses the negative virtues of originality in such a degree that it not only reminds you of no poetry you have read but of no life you have known. Is it possible ... that there has really been a great war ...? Or is it only that Mr. Melville's inner consciousness has been perturbed, and filled with the phantasms of enlistments, marches, fights in the air, parenthetic bulletin boards, and tortured humanity shedding, not words and blood, but words alone?" (184; ellipses in original)

Howell's question about whether Melville's representation of the war is notably contradictory to Warren's claim that Melville is exemplary in his depiction of the "real war." Jackson's reading pays special attention to Howells's phrases "negative virtues of originality" and "inner consciousness." Howells's criticism misses the mark, Jackson seems to say, by reading the poems as lyrics, "at least in our current sense of the term," that "represent only Melville's subjective experience, his 'inner consciousness'" (184). But Jackson focuses on "*The Portent*" and asks whether this poem "about the obscurity of consciousness, about lack of access to the historical experience of John Brown," is properly considered a "lyric" (184). She notes that it does not "represent anyone's subjective experience," but rather gives a "double perspective" on this past occurrence, which she describes as "the represented view of the war's instigation in the state execution of John Brown [...] and the retrospective view of that execution as 'portent' of all the executions that followed, during the war" (184). She seems to distinguish here between the hanging as a causal historical agent that contributed to the outbreak of war and the hanging as an oracular prediction of the outbreak of war. Although this is a valid distinction, they are still both "retrospective" views, so it would be much clearer, and perhaps more useful to her argument, to describe the first perspective as simply a depiction of the historical event, as though in the

present tense, which would emphasize the “retrospective” nature of the perspective that sees it as “portent.”

Nor, says Jackson, does the poem exhibit a mode of what she refers to as “political subjectivity.” She says that what Howells “rightly called a ‘negative virtue’” may relate to “the appearance of a political subjectivity” in the poem” (184). She says that “[s]ubjectivity (political or otherwise)” is “inaccessible” to John Brown, which is true (he’s dead), and that “it is no less inaccessible” to the speaker who describes the execution. The latter is a much less clear proposition, even if she is saying that, while it is possible for such a speaker to be subjective, the speaker in this case is not. That this may be her point is suggested her reference to “the italics’ lack of perspicacity, or thought”; “[b]etween” this lack, she says, and the inaccessibility of “the dead body’s dead thoughts” (“*the anguish none can draw*” that is “*Hidden in the cap*” of the hanging figure), “we can draw our own conclusions”: that “the violence that Brown’s raid and execution inaugurated escalated after 1861” (apparently because the “italics” say as much) and that “the personified ‘Shenandoah’ can’t know what was about to happen” (which is presumably why the italics apostrophize ‘Shenandoah’) (184-185). Although once again the point is far from clear, what Jackson seems to say here is that this information is much closer to objective truth than to subjective experience.

And indeed Jackson follows with the assertion that the poem does not comment on, or even ask, (presumably subjective) questions such as whether people should have seen the hanging as portent of war and whether, if they had, what if anything they should they have done about it. To the degree these questions are subjective, they would appear to be in the category of Jackson’s “political subjectivity.” In any event, what Jackson finds “most remarkable [...] about this lyric is that no one is there to ask any questions at all”: “[*T*he *anguish none can draw*’

while ‘*the streaming beard is shown*’ is indeed a negative and passive virtue of (*Weird John Brown*). The parentheses [...] enclose the closest thing we get to subjective commentary, which takes the form of passive, pseudo-choral remarks: ‘(*such the law*),’ ‘(*Lo John Brown*),’ ‘(*Weird John Brown*).’ But whose remarks are these? A lyric speaker’s?” (185).

The parenthetical remarks—like “(what like a bullet can undecieve?)” in the poem “Shiloh”—have some of the quality of the lyric that Jackson describes by reference to John Stuart Mill’s “eternal, placeless, overheard speech,” which helps explain “some of the distance that irked Howells” (185). But what Jackson finds most striking about the parentheticals is their “disconnection from the lines outside the parentheses, which belong to not-yet or at least differently lyricized genres” (185). Jackson finds that in the poem Melville alludes to two popular “modes” of verse: the popular song, specifically the “river song” “Oh, Shenandoah,” which Melville “may well” have been familiar with from his days as a sailor; and the “high literary sonnet” of the type that was immensely popular in American magazines after the war (185).<sup>23</sup> As the sonnet’s popularity came “on the heels of the many popular ballads and songs and tales that flooded newspapers and magazines during the war,” Melville’s mingling of the two is of particular interest: though Melville’s poem has fourteen lines, it does not otherwise resemble a sonnet, with its arrangement in two stanzas, its pattern of varying line lengths, and the refrain-like repetition of “Oh, Shenandoah” in the central (fourth) line of both stanzas (185).

Thus, says Jackson, “[u]nlike the popular poetry that circulated outside books, Melville’s verse incorporated genres rendered practically unrecognizable by their alienation from their expected contexts” (185). And from this it can be seen that to call the parenthetical lines “lyric” is to read them as “the exception rather than the rule for the battle poetry that Howells expected” but did not find (186). For “[i]n Melville’s hands, the lyric in parentheses marked a departure

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<sup>23</sup> As I read her, Jackson does not take this kind of sonnet to be a “lyric” in the sense she is using the term.

from the poetry everyone was reading during the war” (186). However, it also seems that the treatment of the other genres that Jackson refers to is different from “the poetry everyone was reading”—so she is not proposing that Melville was writing in those other genres, but that he was using them (in a postmodern-ish way?) to fashion some other kind of poetry. It should also be noted that an important, but unemphasized, element of her analysis is the difference between the “popular” genres she is interested in and some form of elite poetry, which she associates with the lyric but which perhaps is a broader category than that. The precise point that Jackson is trying to make with all this is not at all clear; however, her analysis is useful in demonstrating that, whatever Melville’s poems are, they are not “lyric” in the sense described by Jackson as the genre that in our time has become a standard, the kind that we take to be natural but that Jackson shows simply a contingent characteristic of our literary culture.

As Herschel Parker demonstrates in *The Making of the Poet*, Melville was very interested in studying the poetry of past masters and in reading his contemporaries’ prescriptive views on poetry. Parker’s implicit claim, that he only explicitly raises in his epilogue, that Melville was a great poet, is in Parker’s case founded on the idea that great poets at least in part undergo an apprenticeship of some sort, even if it is autodidactic, which involves reading and training in great poets of the tradition. Perhaps Melville’s poetry is more an American culmination and summing-up of European poetry—but a distinctly American version—as conceived in the context of Parker’s evidence of his strong desire to learn the craft of poetry and to be sure he read the great poetry of the tradition represented by European poetry. Melville presented what we might see as an aesthetic credo in lines he wrote in his copy of Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Eminent Painter, Sculptors, and Architects*, which he acquired in March 1862 (Sealts 228):

Attain the highest result.—  
A quality of Grasp.—  
The habitual choice of noble subjects.—  
The Expression.—  
Get in as much as you can.—  
Finish is completeness, fullness,  
Not polish.—  
Greatness is a matter of scale.—  
Clearness & firmness.—  
The greatest number of the greatest ideas.—  
(qtd. in Parker, Historical Supplement 647)

From this passage, the lines “Finish is completeness, fullness / Not polish” are especially prominent. The passage has the look of a poem by Dickinson, and these two lines even have Dickinsonian slant rhyme. However, the content of the lines is a clear statement of Melville’s self-identity as a poet, and indeed its dating at 1862 connects it with the beginnings of his career as a poet.

Perhaps critics are more willing to recognize Dickinson and Whitman as “great” because they are representative of newness and innovation in American poetry, Whitman self-consciously so, and in Dickinson’s case because of (or despite) her chosen situation of privacy and unconcern about a place in American literary history. Thus, to paraphrase Alan Tate: Melville is looking back into history (both poetic tradition and the history of Western culture, including America), Dickinson perhaps occupying a contemplative presence, and Whitman looking ahead (at least as a younger poet), attempting to lead American poetry into the future.

With respect to the merits of Melville’s poetry, William Spengemann looks to the “Advertisement” that prefaced the 1798 collection of poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, published anonymously as *Lyrical Ballads*. There “the author” acknowledges that readers “accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers [...] will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and aukewaredness [*sic*]: they will look

round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.” The author warns that that “Poetry” is “a word of very disputed meaning,” and that a “dreadful enemy to our pleasures” is “our own pre-established codes of decision.” The author maintains that the poem of *Lyrical Ballads* will be better understood “the more conversant the reader is with our elder writers.” Furthermore, “[a]n accurate taste in poetry [...] is an acquired talent, which can only be produced by severe thought, and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition.” It is furthermore incumbent on the critic to “temper the rashness of decision” (3-4). Melville’s poetry in its own ways presents the reader with “strangeness and aukewaredness,” the “crudities” Warren refers to. As Wordsworth goes to great pains to show, that is not a criterion for a judgment about artistic merit. Spengemann states the apparently obvious when he declares that poetry is not “a known, unchanging form against which individual efforts can be measured for adequacy”; that, again quoting Wordsworth, “‘poetry’ is merely a word, one ‘of very disputed meaning’”; that the term does not “dictat[e]” what a writer who wants to be a poet “must do,” but that “what poets do” is what “define[s] and continually redefine[s]” what poetry is (Spengemann 571). In the case of Melville, this seemingly axiomatic set of propositions bears recalling, because of what is simply the unique sort of peculiarity his poetry presents us with. One explanation Spengemann proposes is that Melville refused to “cleave nostalgically to obsolete poetry or resignedly to heartless prose” but instead “struggled to close the widening breach between them.” He did this, Spengemann says “by devising a poetry suitable to a prosaic age” (Spengemann 585). It will be noted that the idea of struggle that Warren explores so thoroughly is a part of Spengemann’s description of Melville’s poetics.

Spengemann continues by noting that the “the question of his ultimate poetic importance” is so vexing in large part because the poetry is “so unlike that of almost any other poet may presently esteem.” He rightly notes that “uniqueness” does not by itself demonstrate “poetic importance.” The question, then, is whether Melville’s “difference” is of the kind that makes a difference. For Spengemann, such a “difference” reveals itself in “represent[ing] something larger than itself, like the onset of a new style and sensibility” (599). This is not a description that takes us very far, however, inasmuch as it begs the question of importance—is the “something larger than itself” necessarily something important?—and poses another question—whether “a new style and sensibility” is a sufficient constituent of important poetry. However, if Spengemann’s description of Melville’s poetics is accurate, it comes very close to describing poetic activity of great merit:

Melville considered poetry supremely important, essential, central, necessary to human existence in the modern world. Rather than a vehicle for the conveyance of agreeable ideas and sentiments, poetry was for him a way, the only available way, of knowing anything at all true in the absence of traditional authorities—scriptural, institutional, natural, or psychological. As a result, he cared less about selecting and arranging his words to make them look as much as possible like what readers understood to be poems than to do with words whatever seemed necessary to apprehend the world that was unfolding around him. (601)

Indeed, an artist whose aim was “to do with words whatever seemed necessary to apprehend the world that was unfolding around him” is one whose poetry is worth paying attention to. This also takes in what we have seen in Warren’s discussion of Melville’s poetry as a form of struggle in the attainment of a tragic knowledge of the world. This statement also encompasses the necessity

that the experience of writing the poem is prior to and determines the poem's form. We see this priority in the poetry of Dickinson and Whitman, and, as I observe several times in this study, in the poetry of Melville as well.

Given what appear to be Melville's lapses in prosodic competence and his various uniquenesses of subject matter, it is not unreasonable to place the burden of proof on one who argues on behalf of Melville. Melville's advocate's job is then to discuss the poetry in detail, to tease out qualities—whatever they may be—that are some agreed-upon indicia of “poetic importance.” Unlike the case of Dickinson and Whitman (whose reputations are secure), the case of Melville's poetic importance seems to be one that will never be finally resolved. Melville's advocate's job is made easier in the sense that, because of Melville's unquestioned stature as a prose writer, the question of his poetry will never entirely disappear.

Spengemann offers a very good illustration of this marginal status by comparing Melville's poetry to the Flying Dutchman. He notes the “anomalous relations” of Melville's poetry to the nineteenth-century poets who are the “most [highly] valued in our time.” Those poets, who Spengemann takes to include Whitman, Dickinson, Hopkins, and Browning, like Melville “sought ways to escape the poetic conventions of their own.” However, their efforts have credence now “only insofar as they seem in retrospect to presage some defining modern convention: informality, say, associative composition, or displaced subjectivity.” Melville too was outside his time's “poetic conventions,” and thus for our tastes “satisfies the requirement of difference from mill-run contemporaries.” However, says Spengemann, he does not succeed as the others did because we do not find him to have “presage[d] some defining modern convention,” because he does not bear a sufficiently “clear resemblance to either of the two main schools of twentieth-century poetry in English: the formally experimental and the stylistically

colloquial.” He is “as stylistically difficult and allusive as Eliot or Pound,” but he “remains formally conventional, at least in appearance.” And though he is at least apparently “formally conventional” (Spengemann likens him in this respect to Edwin Arlington Robinson, Hardy, and Frost), he is “anything but colloquial.” The fundamental problem that Spengemann so accurately describes is that “[t]he total impression [of his poetry] resembles the manner of twentieth-century poetry as little as it does that of poetry in his own time. As a result, Melville remains a sort of poetic Flying Dutchman, neither at home in his own century nor quite welcome in ours” (604).

Two influential articles appeared in 1999 that championed Melville’s poetry. One was Helen Vendler’s “Melville and the Lyric of History.” As her title indicates, and unlike Virginia Jackson, she assigns Melville’s poetry the genre description of “lyric” (581). She describes the poetry as “arresting and wholly original,” “visibly a product of the same mind that produced the greatest American novel,” and “learned, philosophical, and considered” (579). Its “chief monuments” are *Battle-Pieces* and *Clarel* (579). However, though her attention to the poetry is welcome, her reasons for it do not satisfy because her approach is to discuss the poetry in order to explain its reception history, instead of discussing the poetry on its own terms.

She sees the onset of the Civil War as “the external equivalent of [the] inner crisis” Melville was experiencing by 1861, when, in what we would consider his middle age, he “had seen his genius unrecognized and misunderstood,” and found “his ability to make money severely compromised” (580). Like Faust, then, Vendler relates Melville’s turn to poetry to the crisis brought on by the war. (Though yet again it should be noted that Melville’s first book of poetry was ready for publication in 1860.) One reason, Vendler says, for the persistent lack of recognition of Melville’s poetry is that its content and emotional register are against the American grain. But on closer analysis this does not prove to be a satisfactory explanation.

Echoing ideas of Lewis and New that I have discussed earlier, she says that the “grim view of history, war, politics, and religion” is fundamentally at odds with the “the Emersonian optimism that American readers have tended to prefer” (581). Dickinson and Hawthorne are similarly at odds with this “Emersonian optimism,” but the “grim view” of contemporary social conditions that Vendler describes is indeed uniquely Melvillean. However, *Moby-Dick* certainly gives expression to the grim view, and in American critical and popular opinion it ranks, as Vendler has said, as “the greatest American novel.” It seems therefore that Vendler considers poetry to occupy a separate place, to require special pleading, in the formation of American literary preferences, but she does not say this outright.

She does continue by limiting the discussion to poetry. Vendler argues (also, it seems, with a nod to Tate) that Melville differs in his attitude from Dickinson, whose “gaze is [...] upward” and from Whitman, who gazes outward in “a democratic horizontal” (581). As compared to Whitman, Dickinson is more clearly un-Emersonian; perhaps Vendler attributes her greater popularity as compared to Melville to her “upward gaze.” But it should be noticed that neither generalization is accurate, as, for example, Elisa New shows in her discussions of the prominent awareness of human loss in both poets, and as I show with respect to Dickinson in Chapter 4, in my discussion of her attitude toward the material world (which one might say is a rejection of the upward gaze). Vendler’s metaphor of vision in her description of the Melvillean “gaze,” as compared with those of Dickinson and of Whitman, recalls the focus of the “grim view” she has earlier described, but here the object of the gaze is more generally philosophical, less directed toward particular cultural conditions: “pitched downward,” the gazes fixes itself on “the drowned under the sea,” or “the fiery hell at the core of the earth” (581).

Again, this is only partially accurate. Concerning *Clarel*, for example, Stan Goldman argues very plausibly for the recognition of a Melvillean “protest theism,” which by no means entails a view of a malevolent God:

The surrender of the human heart to God [...] has a significance and purpose internal to itself—not dependent on any verifiable revelation or definition of God. The unsatisfied heart is a call for a response to a lonely God. Rather than a heart-to-heart connection with God as the fruits of faith, the unsatisfied heart is now the essence of faith. God hides from man, in a sense, so that He might know the choice of the human heart—to turn to or away from God. (163)

Nor, as the term indicates, does it correspond with what Vendler elsewhere calls Melville’s religious “nihilism”: *Clarel*, for example, “displays a similarity of genre, language, and thought to the biblical voices of lament and theodicy in books such as Jeremiah, Job, Psalms, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes” (Vendler 584; Goldman 183 n.2;). Nonetheless, Vendler does justice to Melville’s stature as a poet by the comparison with the others to allow Melville to begin to create a triangulated space within the seemingly permanently fused reputations of Dickinson and Whitman.

Another rationale for Vendler is that Melville “sees original corruption everywhere” in American culture, a view that is “not incompatible with Calvinism” (582).<sup>24</sup> Again, however, she says, this view was incompatible with the tendency of nineteenth-century America “to forget the darker side of its own Protestantism” (582). This might have some relevance to the period of the Gilded Age, but if that period is judged as beginning in the 1870s, the optimism that Vendler

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<sup>24</sup> Vendler’s hedging is odd here. Not only is the view of “original corruption” “not incompatible” with Calvinism, it is one of the central tenets of the Westminster Confession upon which American Calvinism was founded (see Noll 21). And although the foundational American Calvinism differed from the nineteenth-century version, the concept of original sin was still very much alive, Emersonianism notwithstanding.

identifies, and the economic prosperity that fueled it, had not yet taken hold, for example, in the post-Civil War period when Melville published *Battle-Pieces* in 1866. Further, as noted above, this does not fit with the fact of Hawthorne's relative success. Also, as shown by Drew Gilpin Faust, the idea of the "Good Death"—a death preceded by an acceptance of Christianity and prayer for forgiveness—indicates that the concept of original sin was alive and well during this time at the level of popular modes of piety (6-17). Also, also will be seen in Chapter 3, one cannot say, or at least cannot easily say, of *Clarel* (1876), that it "sees original corruption everywhere" (although that may be true of some of its characters).

Vendler continues to describe the lack of acceptance of Melville's poetry in this vein: "[E]ven at its most political and social," its sense of "the loneliness of thought in human life" and its tone "rhetorical aloofness," end up "estranging many readers" (582-583). Despite the Melville "renaissance" in the 1920s, the developments of twentieth-century poetry in modernism, post-modernism, and beyond, and the politicized critical climate of recent decades, Vendler maintains that it is "[p]recisely because of his exposure of the moral ambiguities in American history" that Melville as poet "has not been incorporated into American culture" as compared with Whitman and Dickinson" (580). She recognizes that both those poets "are in their outer reaches as heretical as Melville," but (rightly) notes that general readers tend not to reach those outer reaches (583). By contrast, she says, "[a]lmost anything by Melville [...] is subversive enough to raise hackles" (583). By these remarks Vendler seems to be making a definite distinction between the respective places of fiction and poetry; she acknowledges early on that Melville's fiction—which, it must be said, possesses many of these same qualities—has a secure place in the canon of American literature (581). Finally, and most dubiously, Vendler maintains that "if Melville's tragic sense of history is repugnant to American optimism, his religious

nihilism, [which is] present in *Battle-Pieces*, is even more so” (584). As I aim to establish throughout this study, Melville’s attitudes are complex and conflicted, but he cannot be fairly be called a “religious nihilist.”

One must agree with her assessment that “our literary history has not yet fully absorbed Melville’s lyrics into its picture of nineteenth-century culture” (584).<sup>25</sup> However, one difficulty in Vendler’s explanation of the reasons for this is its focus on the popular reception of Melville’s poetry. Vendler does not state her premises about the relationships between popular and scholarly reception (surely it is symbiotic). Thus, when Vendler moves to the issue of the poetry’s “claims to greatness,” one assumes that Vendler considers that that is a different topic from the poetry’s popular recognition and that it is a topic best addressed by literary criticism (584). These assumptions may or may not be accurate, but Vendler—a critic to whom all readers of American poetry are indebted—has not made her logical connections clear in this part of her essay.

Vendler finds (though without saying so explicitly) that “claims to greatness” in Melville’s poetry are justified by the way Melville is able to fashion his own genre, a genre that Vendler calls his “lyric of history.” She finds in Melville’s historical poetry (her concern in the essay is on the poems of *Battle-Pieces*) a particular “structural principle,” one that “reverse[s] the usual manner in which lyric poems unfold.” She describes the “usual” structure of “the normative lyric” as beginning with a “first-person narrative with its accompanying feelings,”

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<sup>25</sup> Although, whether they are indeed “lyrics” remains an open question in many cases. And whatever the genre of *Clarel* might be, it is not a lyric.

followed, and then “only secondarily, when plot and emotion have been exposed and clarified,” by a “turn[] to philosophical generalization)” (584).<sup>26</sup>

Melville’s “March into Virginia,” she says, inverts that “structural principle” by beginning with an expression of “the philosophic and political knowledge that an historical experience has produced”; next comes the “primal narrative”; only then, and at the conclusion, does it express “lyric feelings,” although in this case they are not those of the speaker but of the soldiers (586). As Vendler notes, point of view in this poem is a complicated affair:

The reader accustomed to a lyric “I” will wonder where the speaker of these opening generalizations is hiding. The speaker is Melville as omniscient narrator—a personage not often found in nonballad lyric, though regularly present in epic. The storyteller of a ballad, however, does not philosophize like M’s persona. And instead of retelling his own emotions, as the usual lyric speaker does, M’s narrator focuses on the feelings of the young soldiers [...]” (585)

The complications concerning point of view are similar to those described by Virginia Jackson in her reading of “*The Portent*.”<sup>27</sup> In Jackson’s view, such complications are symptomatic of what might be called the hegemony of the lyric, and I think that that is the case here. Vendler does recognize the omniscience of the narrator, and remark that the narrator’s knowledge of “life’s evil”—in the form of the fate of the soldiers—is what informs the reflections on innocence that begin the poem (586). Although she sees the presence of other genres in the poetry, she always returns to a description of it as some version of the lyric. And though she finds “complexity of

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<sup>26</sup> Vendler does not provide an example, but the Metaphysical poets and the Wordsworth of “Tintern Abbey” come to mind.

<sup>27</sup> Consider also Allen Grossman’s thoughts on the lyric speaker’s nameless identity: “the speaker in lyric by contrast to the speakers in drama (all of whom are named) and the speakers in epic narrative (all of whom are named except the narrator) is only equivocally named, has in effect a sponsor (the author) but no name, is prior to or posterior to name, is an orphan voice” (212).

grand proportions” in the poetry she nevertheless sees such complexity in what she calls “short lyrics” (591). Thus, she does not pursue the idea she raised in the passage quoted above, that the entire notion of lyric subjectivity is called into question by the speaker’s omniscience.

This omniscience is specifically shown in the narrator’s reports of the feelings of the young soldiers and in his knowledge of their fate: instead of marching to battle, the narrator has the soldiers “file toward Fate,” which will so greatly contrast with their present mood of “Bacchic glee”; the narrator also reports on what that “Fate” is to be, that in death some will become “experienced,” “enlightened by the vollied glare,” and that others who “survive” will, with a resolve “like to adamant,” join “The throe of Second Manassas.” The reflections on this horrific loss of innocence (particularly in the opening lines of the poem) have an emotional weight, but the only feelings explicitly represented as such are those of the soldiers. Thus, although the poem has aesthetic substance and has something like “lyric feeling,” the absence of a centering subjective “I” makes it difficult to call this a “lyric,” let alone a variant of the “normative lyric.”

Nevertheless, I also take issue with Vendler’s use of such terms as “invention,” “innovation,” and “experimentation” in urging that Melville attempts to discover and use an “original” form that would permit him to “fold the epic matter of history into lyric” to create what she calls the “epic lyric” (584). Vendler’s claims seem to link the degree of subjectivity of the lyric to the degree to which it achieves originality of the expression of lyric feeling, and to look for that kind of originality in assessing a poem’s “claims to greatness.” However, as we have seen with respect to Melville’s reverence for the “elder poets,” the evidence does not support a claim that Melville viewed “originality” as an important feature of his poetry. Vendler’s astute observations about the characteristic pattern of the progression of ideas within

these poems help us see what it is that makes the poems feel odd and gnarled . But this is separable from the question of whether Melville’s intention was to find “the most original method.” In *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, as the subtitle indicates, Herschel Parker details the enormous attention Melville gave to the “great” poets, such as Spenser and Milton, and to leading critics of the day, most notably Matthew Arnold.

And not only does the evidence not indicate a concern with being “original,” such a concern does not accord with Melville’s view of the corrupted world, as Vendler herself notes. As Elisa New shows, a desire to be original is foreign to the American Calvinist world view, a view that is very similar to Melville’s own; thus it should not be expected that Melville would be interested in discovering an “original method” for structuring the poems. An intention to be “original” need not be imputed to a poet whose poems are unusual in, for example, not possessing the “structural principal” of the “normative lyric.” Also, this poem deals importantly in the transition from innocence to experience, a topic which, as Robert Penn Warren noted, is present in so much of Melville’s poetry. This representation of a passage from the innocence of Eden to the experience gained by original sin is, as both New and R.W.B. Lewis show, is an important strain in American thought of the nineteenth century.

Although the sequence of presentation of ideas may be unlike that of the “normative” lyric, this need not be taken so much as evidence of a conscious desire to be original as simply a demonstration of Melville’s poetic ability in crafting a form for the poem that was suited to the ideas presented in the poem. A poet need not be “original” in this element of craft. For instance, in *Clarel* Melville employed entirely conventional verse paragraphs of rhymed tetrameters, a form that, as I discuss in Chapter 3, is fully appropriate to that work. Also, as we have seen, Virginia Jackson shows that in the poem that opens *Battle-Pieces*, “*The Portent*,” Melville draws

on elements of popular sonnetting and river-song in deriving its nonce form. Vendler says that Melville wanted to “invent a lyric genre” that could do justice to “the complex feelings generated by the epic event of battle,” yet his “formal innovation,” Vendler says, without reference to the lyric, is his making a “hybrid of the paean, the narrative, and the elegy” (588). And again, Vendler says that Melville invented a capacious “species of epic lyric,” but nevertheless the form is one that encompasses prior categories: “metaphysics, narrative, panoramic tragedy, and individual pang” (593). Overall, it is more accurate to say that Melville’s achievement was as a consolidator of existing materials (in the manner in which J.S. Bach is described as a late consolidator of Baroque musical elements) than as an innovator. It is simply contrary to Melville’s poetics to describe him as innovator or inventor.

In the other prominent 1999 article on Melville’s poetry, Rosanna Warren explores ways in which Melville’s poems represent, or even constitute, Melville’s search for “knowledge,” or “private perception,” through the experience of “struggle.” She finds that what he arrives at is what she calls a “tragic knowledge” (100-101). The “inwrought, crabbed, ponderous” quality of his “grimmed verse”— what a contemporary review of *Battle-Pieces* called its “great crudities”— gives an outward and audible representation of this interior struggle. The element of struggle is involved in Melville’s religious outlook, as well. Goldman compares Melville’s thought to Jacob’s struggle with the angel in Genesis; such wrestling, he says, “provides the way to an authentic and deeper experience of God, although at great personal risk and cost.” But beyond this, “[t]he fusing of Jacob and the divine angel in a wrestler’s grip metaphorically illustrates the divine-human continuum” that Melville presents in a work such as *Clarel* (Goldman 75).

Warren contrasts Melville’s case with the superficial thought in the poetry of highly-esteemed poets of his day, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell

Lowell, and the corresponding “genteel and expert mellifluousness” of their prosody (115-116). As an example, Warren cites lines from Robert Lowell’s “*Memoriae Positum*,” written in honor of Colonel Robert Shaw, who had died leading a black infantry group, in which the speaker declares, “Brave, good, and true, / I see him stand before me now.” In his “mouth firm-set, / And look made up for Duty’s utmost debt,” the speaker feels assured that Colonel Shaw is ready for “death within the sulphurous hostile line, / In the mere wreck of nobly-pitched designs.” Continuing, the speaker goes on to opine that those “Who vanish down life’s evening stream” in old age die “Happy,” having enjoyed a “Happy long life, with honor at the close.” Nevertheless, for a young man like Colonel Shaw, “to spend / All at a gush, keeping our first faith sure / From mid-life’s doubt and old’s contentment poor, / What more could Fortune send”? (Lowell 337-339).

Warren rightly remarks that the lines are caught in illusion, as is the poem overall; it depicts “neither the young man [Colonel Shaw] nor more than a glimpse of the action which killed and glorified him [the ‘sulphurous hostile line’]” (Warren 102; Lowell 338). It is not difficult to agree with Warren’s point that, as compared with Melville’s verse, this does not involve “struggle” either in content or prosody. Warren cites the absence of “struggle” in John Greenleaf Whittier as well: he matches his “ease of prosody” with the “easy freight of his abstractions and undisturbed convictions.” Whittier’s poetry could “confidently and easily declare[], ‘I know,’” whereas Melville’s war poems “labor for their knowledge” and at the same time bring “the reader in[to] that struggle” (102).

Warren thus links Melville with Dickinson and Whitman as among the very few nineteenth-century American poets who refused to meet the expectations of “a reading public accustomed to the confirmations of regularity” (115). Referring to these three poets, Warren

notes that “the expressive irregularities in rhythm, diction, and syntax with which [they] responded to the strongest promptings in English had almost no purchase on the minds of contemporary readers” (116). William Spengemann offers an interesting elaboration on Warren’s point and a context for Melville’s conception of diction and poetic line that gives it the gnarled quality Warren refers to:

It is often said of [Gerard Manley] Hopkins that he always tried to avoid those merely grammatical signs that tend to dissipate the meaning and of A.E. Housman that he sought doggedly the most compact forms of expression. [One can identify] an unacknowledged confederation of later nineteenth-century poets joined in a common cause: the rescue of poetry from the coils of gorgeous nonsense in which the Romantics had entangled it. Seemingly atypical of their time, in fact these poets constitute what is surely the most important poetic movement of that time, a movement of which Melville seems to have recognized himself a member in good standing when he triple-checked, in Arnold’s *New Poems* (1867), the title of the allegorical sonnet called “Austerity of Poetry” [...]. (603)

Warren, however, sees another value in verse such as Melville’s, in addition to “rescue” from “gorgeous nonsense,” as she makes the larger claim that a necessary attribute of the “greatest art” is that it continually “wars *against* illusion,” and thus necessarily involves “struggle” (103; italics in original). An “illusion” is something that one apparently sees but is in fact unreal, or untrue (assuming for the sake of argument that truth and reality are the same things); in the lines by Lowell that Warren has referred to she notes that their depiction of war is illusory, which is to say, untrue. Though art may depict events or things that did not actually occur or do not really exist, if it nevertheless presents a “truth” it is not illusory. Warren quotes Simone Weil in relation to her point here: “To love truth means to tolerate the void, and

consequently to accept death. Truth is on the side of death” (103). In Warren’s argument the “love [of] truth” is necessary to aesthetic value, and Warren finds that Melville’s poetry possesses this quality in the manner in which his art “tolerates the void and accepts death” (103). Warren and Weil are certainly correct if the alternative is a view (such as might be said of Emersonianism in addition to the genteel poetry that is her immediate context) that attempts to ignore the reality of pain and death. However, if we can safely say the death is real and “true,” we must also be able to say that its opposite, namely life, is true. Thus Warren’s idea of the necessity of struggle and the recognition of adversity in art makes most sense in this nineteenth-century American literary context, where the validity of the idea of original sin is so much at issue. In this context, the poets whose art consists in struggle are those who do not have an illusory view about the existence of pain and death, which for Melville and Dickinson is most readily described as original sin.

We must consider the religious and psychological effects the Civil War had on Americans’ concepts of death. For this I draw on Drew Gilpin Faust’s study presented in her 2008 book *This Republic of Suffering*. As mentioned previously, the concept of the “Good Death” was a pervasive element in nineteenth-century America, a version of the long tradition of *ars moriendi* that was guided by “Victorian ideals of domesticity”:

One should die among family assembled around the deathbed. Relatives would of course be most likely to show concern about the comfort and needs of their dying loved one, but this was ultimately a secondary consideration. Far more important, family members need to witness a death in order to assess the stated of the dying person’s soul, for these critical last moments of life would epitomize his or her spiritual condition. The dying were not losing their essential selves, but rather defining them for eternity. Kin would use their

observations of the deathbed to evaluate the family's chances for a reunion in heaven.

(10)

Representations of this art of dying frequently appeared in popular culture, for example with the death of Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Eva's salvation is assured, and in her last days she instructs the "servants" and questions her father about their own possibilities for meeting her in heaven. Faust notes that the dying person's last words "had always held a place of prominence in the *ars moriendi* tradition," and Eva's deathbed scene, witnessed by father and Tom and all the other members of their household, provides a good example (10):

The child lay panting on her pillows, as one exhausted,--the large clear eyes rolled up and fixed. Ah, what said those eyes, that spoke so much of heaven! Earth was past, and earthly pain; but so solemn, so mysterious, was the triumphant brightness of that face, that it checked even the sobs of sorrow. They pressed around her, in breathless stillness.

"Eva," said St. Clare, gently.

She did not hear.

"O, Eva, tell us what you see! What is it?" said her father.

A bright, a glorious smile passed over her face, and she said, brokenly,---"O! love,---joy,---peace!" gave one sigh and passed from death unto life! (427-428)

In Stowe's depiction, then, Eva has not really died, but passed "unto life."

Dickinson presents a similar Good Death setting in the second quatrain of "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –" (F591), but without Eva's serenity:

The Eyes around – had wring them dry –  
And Breaths were gathering firm  
For that last Onset – when the King  
Be witnessed – in the Room –

The speaker heard "a Fly buzz," and there was a terrible "Stillness in the Room" that was "like the Stillness in the Air - / Between the Heaves of Storm –." In her last moments "the Windows failed" and she "could not see to see –." Read in the context of cultural attitudes about the Good Death, one especially notices how Dickinson's use of the point of view of the dying person

presents an alternative version of the deathbed scene from that of those gathered to witness the death.

The unexpectedly enormous scale of death of the Civil War gave the experience of grief a special degree of immediacy in American culture. Faust has found that, in expressing their inability to accept the reality of a death, “Civil War letter and diary writers [...] repeatedly proclaimed their inability to ‘realize’ a death—using the word with now antiquated precision to mean to render it real in their own minds.” Because there was not yet an established system for identifying bodies and dealing with corpses, relatives often could not find out where, or even if, remains were buried, and sometimes could not even get definite information about whether their soldier was alive or dead. These circumstances understandably “often inhibited mourning, rendering it difficult, if not impossible for many bereaved Americans to move through the stages of grief” (144).

In his poem “The Watchers,” John Greenleaf Whittier acknowledges war’s violence briefly, in the opening tercets:

Beside a stricken field I stood;  
On the torn turf, on grass and wood,  
Hung heavily the dew of blood.

Still in their fresh mounds lay the slain,  
But all the air was quick with pain  
And gusty sighs and tearful rain.

But the imagery merely sets the scene for the reported conversation, which constitutes the bulk of the poem, between “Two angels, each with drooping / And folded wings and noiseless tread.” The first angel to speak, “weeping, on her olive wand,” whose feminine voice the speaker recognizes as that of “Peace,” cries out “‘When shall the hopeless quarrel cease?’” The other

angel, the manly “Freedom,” with “brows [...] scarred and knit” and “hands for battle-gauntlets fit,” makes reply, “sternly”:

“Why wait we long, mocked, betrayed,  
By open foes, or those afraid  
To speed thy coming through my aid?

“Why watch to see who win or fall?  
I shake the dust against them all,  
I leave them to their senseless brawl.”

These lines make somewhat more explicit the partisan affiliation of the poem. The condition that must be met in order for Peace to exercise her womanly healing is man’s victory in the fight for Freedom from the bonds of slavery. And so, after brief debate, Peace dutifully submits to Freedom’s decision that it is now “Too late” to “watch” and “wait,” and, with a “rustling as of wings in flight” and an “upward gleam of lessening white” (in correlation to their loss of virtue), “so passe[s] the vision.” It is unclear why Whittier has cast these as angels, inasmuch as they are precisely *not* the messengers who deliver God’s tidings of hope; perhaps the “vision” is actually a projection of the speaker’s own disappointment, a disappointment so great that he accuses the Union forces of cowardice.

From a literary perspective, we see Whittier aligning himself with the frequently-political poetry of John Milton. By an allusion to Milton (in their own reported words), the angels reject his statement in Sonnet XVI, which bears a sense of both calm resolution and a sublimated supplication, that though “Thousands at [God’s] bidding speed / And post o’er land and ocean without rest,” still “They also serve who only stand and wait” (84). Unlike the speaker in Milton’s sonnet, these anthropomorphic angels at least have the ability to “watch.” Whittier devotes most of the poem to this abandonment of confidence and hope in human possibility, a view that is not even shared by Milton, a Puritan, no less. They may most fairly be read as an

example of the permeability of the categories noted above within the ranks of the party of Memory. Here, an expression of frustration and disgust appears within the ranks of the party of Hope. Nevertheless, these feelings are ostensibly dispatched with God's assurance: it is possible that a miracle that will snatch optimism from the jaws of despair. The speaker's consciousness re-enters the poem to report words from another voice, a "sweet voice" that surrounds the speaker, "like silver bell / Rung down the listening sky to tell / Of holy help":

"Still hope and trust," it sang; "the rod  
Must fall, the wine-press must be trod,  
But all is possible with God!"

Thus can be seen the extent of the hopefulness of the Emersonian strain; in Whittier's version, it waits expectantly for a miraculous rescue from a situation that has even been abandoned by angels of Peace and Freedom (Whittier 335-336).

This poem gives us an example of the dissociation from Weil's "Truth [that] is on the side of death." The "dew of blood" and "fresh mounds" simply provide the traction for the poem's vault into layers of abstraction, first in the flawed allegorical figures of Peace and Freedom, and then in the certainty (which is belied by experience) that "all is possible with God!" Walt Whitman, by contrast, encounters and portrays Weil's Truth in "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown.," first published in 1865 (305-306). The speaker, one among a "sullen remnant" in retreat, marches in darkness "through a heavy wood with muffled steps." It is "after midnight" when they come upon "a large old church at the crossing roads" which serves as "an impromptu hospital." Inside, the speaker "see[s] a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made." Whitman renders the scene, as both a sensory and psychic experience, in lines of extraordinary acuity and emotional depth:

Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps,  
And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke,  
By these, crowds, groups of forms vaguely I see on the floor, some in the pews laid down,  
At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is shot in  
the abdomen,)

I stanch the blood temporarily, (the youngster's face is white as a lily,)  
Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene fain to absorb it all,  
Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead,  
Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood,  
The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd,  
Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating,  
An occasional scream or cry, the doctor's shouted orders or calls,  
The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches,  
These I resume as I chant, I see again the forms, I smell the odor,  
Then hear outside the orders given, *Fall in, my men, fall in;*  
But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile gives he me,  
Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to the darkness,  
Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks,  
The unknown road still marching.

The poem's details accord well with the accounts of hospital scenes that Faust records in *Republic of Suffering*, and this realism is one thing that makes it a more interesting poem than Whittier's. But the fact that the speaker does not identify the affiliation of his army which has been "foil'd with loss severe," or of the soldiers and doctors in the church, is an indication of how the poem carries the kind of "truth" that includes but is not limited to realism, that consists in a fidelity to human experience.<sup>28</sup> The syntax of the poem contributes to this fidelity by separating the successions of clauses with only the brief pauses of commas, thus presenting the experience in its temporal continuity, without attempting to organize it with other punctuation or with hypotactic transitions, except for the semi-colon that indicates the speaker's pause, before "falling in," to provide the boy with a human presence as he dies. Furthermore, in "The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms," in the death of innocence of the boy whose "face is white as a lily," and in the hasty resumption of "marching, ever in darkness marching"—the last line

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<sup>28</sup> This sort of truth is similar to that found in *The Red Badge of Courage*, despite the fact that Stephen Crane had had no experience of the Civil War, or even combat at all, when he wrote that work.

suggesting that even the “unknown road” itself is “still marching”—we understand again Weil’s statement that “truth is on the side of death.”

But as Warren points out there is in Melville an emphasis on recognition of “mystery” as a paradoxical component of this truth. This awareness is also at the heart of the quality Warren talks about when she describes Melville as a poet who “accepts mystery” (103). The existence of this epistemological wall paradoxically means that any idea of “truth” is illusory because it is shrouded in “mystery.”<sup>29</sup> As the narrator says in *Clarel*, scientific explanation of a phenomenon “[b]ides no less / The true, innate mysteriousness” (1.28.108-9). However, the paradox is resolved when one is aware of the illusion.<sup>30</sup> It is better to acknowledge unknowability than to depict it falsely. Warren cites as examples of the representation of this “mystery” in Melville’s poems the “veil” that covers the head of John Brown; God’s silence in “Conflict of Convictions”; the smeared ink of the news and death-list in “Donelson”; the varieties of violence in “House-Top”; and the inability to see in the burned woods in “Armies of the Wilderness” (103). As Goldman says with respect to *Clarel* “[t]he narrator’s response to the mysterious manifestation of the Lord—the phosphorescent ocean seen as the Shekinah or the indwelling of God’s Glory on earth often represented as radiance—is first to recognize the ‘mystery,’ then

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<sup>29</sup> This line of reasoning also leads to the conclusion that we cannot even be certain of the existence of the epistemological wall.

<sup>30</sup> Again, we see a deep resonance in Dickinson. Her poetry not only “accepts mystery” but takes it on the primary levels of subject matter (for example, the inability to see God, the uncertainty of knowledge, the inherent ambiguity of language) and form (the incomplete rhyme, the flexibility of line and stanza within the individual poem), as well as the elements that are somewhere in between, such as the dashes and semantic omissions that in many ways serve as formal elements. With respect to Melville’s rhyme, Warren recalls the phrase “entangled rhyme” which Melville uses in “Armies” (“Obscure as the wood, the entangled rhyme / But hints at the maze of war”) as a metaphor for a condition of a forest, a physical element of nature. The phrase certainly seems apt for Melville. (But compare his “plain be the verse / yet apt the rhyme.”) Dickinson’s poetry however does not have this “entangled” quality. It is more spare, and perhaps has the quality of “white” in the “chill and stupor” sense that the color often has in Melville and Dickinson. Like Melville, Dickinson “brav[es] the inner depth” (Warren), unafraid to “peep over [the] parapet,” but once again, differently from Melville. It is perhaps a matter of Melville’s Mahler compared to Dickinson’s Webern.

acknowledge the ‘Wonder and glory’ of God” (139). In addition to these examples, we can note Melville’s intense interest in the “mystery of iniquity,” which gets at the heart of the mystery Warren describes concerning the suffering of war.<sup>31</sup>

Another prominent feature of Melville’s poetry is its interest in the passage from innocence to experience, which Faust noted and which Warren’s father, Robert Penn Warren, also noted. It is especially evident in, for example, “March into Virginia” (110). This may also be described as the process of disillusionment that accompanies the acquisition of experience. Warren finds here, as she does in the other poems, a correspondence between this thematic concern and formal and aural properties of the poem. The alliteration of “*b*” sounds “guides us through the poem like a nerve” (113).<sup>32</sup> However, a change in the sound pattern accompanies the movement from innocence to experience: the “adversative ‘But’ [...] swings the poem from Bacchus to Moloch, [...] from life to death,” as “the *bs* surrender to a new but insistent pattern of sound,” the *sh* of ‘shall,’ ‘perish,’ [etc.] (115). The shift from the plosive to the susurrus has its analog in vitality’s inevitable expiration. Warren rightly observes that “[o]nly poetry of the highest order weaves its strands of sound so complexly into its semantic and syntactic orders, converting the arbitrary into the provisionally significant” (115). This, we may take it, is a criterion in addition to “struggle” which helps to determine poetic importance.

The “*sh*” sound also bears this significance, and in a similarly prominent way, in “Shiloh.” Robert Penn Warren well expresses the profundity of this moment: “The hush with which Melville concludes his poem, in the mysterious, prolonged syllables of Shiloh (where dwelt the house of the Lord for the kingless and divided Israelites in Judges 18), grants tragic

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<sup>31</sup> The phrase, from II Thessalonians 2.7, appears prominently in *Clarel* at 2.35.23-34.

<sup>32</sup> The pattern also gives rise to a phrase such as “Turbid ardors” which “can scarcely be imagined in James Russell Lowell” (113).

silence and recognition, but not absolution. In his refusal of facile comfort, Melville shows how art points the way to the life of conscience, however fitfully illuminated” (121). Warren, I think, is describing a moral imperative of poetry to “point the way” to (and thus not didactically to prescribe) this “life of conscience.” But it is perhaps more accurate to say that this poetry expresses a moral *complexity*, and points the way without intention, as it were, and provides an example for those willing to see it. We may speak of Dickinson similarly, in the ways in which her philosophical and religious searching gives an exemplary case of the work of speculative thought. In this respect, their poetry therefore differs from, say, the superficiality that we see in that of Lowell and Whittier.

Like Virginia Jackson, Warren is particularly interested in “*The Portent*,”<sup>33</sup> but Warren concentrates on how the more strictly formal elements of meter and alliteration participate in the poem’s recognition of mystery. She notes the “startling” effect of Melville’s “elimination of unstress syllables in the penultimate line of each stanza: ‘(*Lo, John Brown*).’” This metrical effect gives emphasis to the name of the subject of the poem, but this naming first occurs only in its sixth line, and then only parenthetically. These features, Warren observes, “like the poem as a whole, simultaneously conceal and reveal the heart of the matter” (106).

Warren’s close reading of the poem (in the manner of reading a lyric, and thus in contrast to Jackson’s) reveals a number of other telling features that demonstrate a wide range of reference and contribute to the ways the poem deals with “the heart of the matter.” The parenthetical “(*such the law*)” suggests simultaneously the laws of gravity (which are an element of execution by hanging), the legal system of the United States government which has decreed the hanging, and the meter of the poem in which this is depicted. By the prominence of the

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<sup>33</sup> I continue here Jackson’s replication of the italics in accordance with the typography of the early editions of the poem, including in my quotations of Warren, though Warren does not do so.

alliterated *g*, the conditions of “starvation and death” associated with word “*Gaunt*” come into “colli[sion] with the fertility implicit in ‘*green*.’” It will also be noted that the fertility of “*green*” also contrasts with the aridity suggested by the subject’s own name. And the “*shadow*” (which, incidentally, rhymes in an entangled way with “*Shenandoah*”) is not the swaying corpse itself, “but its projection, its dark two-dimensional image” (107).

Warren notes that Melville’s use of the word “weird” to describe John Brown brings in the word’s associations with control of fate or destiny (from the OED). We see the relevance of these associations as Brown’s beard, as “*meteor of war*,” forecasts the fate of the nation and renders Brown’s body “a heavenly body of terrifying scale, motion and power” (109). The rhyme of “*meteor*” and “*metaphor*” in this context undergirds the weirdness of the scene. Then, as Warren notes, Brown’s “role as portent” is reduced to its essence in “the last, fatal monosyllable: *war*” (109). Warren concludes that this poem shows how Melville’s poetry is “a concentrated, elliptical art [that] instead of delivering a ready-made judgment, forces readers to participate in the chiaroscuro process of arriving at judgment.” By “*chiaroscuro*” Warren apparently refers to the necessity in the legal system for the binary opposition of “*guilty*” and “*not guilty*.” This process of arriving at judgment (especially in the legal sense of the word) by its very nature involves the struggle she has described with respect to Melville’s poetry. The relevance of this opposition is especially pronounced here because of the moral dilemma that Brown posed for abolitionists (which implicated Dickinson’s friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson). But she also employs the more literal sense of the term as she notes the poetry’s use of “*isolated visual details and shadows*” instead of “*direct description*” (109-110).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> What R.W.B. Lewis says about fictional narrative is equally relevant to poetry: it “deals with experiences, not with propositions” (3). Though poetry “deals with experiences” in ways different from prose narrative, neither is at its best when it “deals with [...] propositions.”

William Spengemann's reading of "*The Portent*" is also concerned with the issue of the speaker. He speculates on a speaker viewing the scenario retrospectively, perhaps in an illustration. In this case, says Spengemann, "the poem has less to do with the Civil War and Brown's relation to it than with the speaker's ironic realization that historical events become prophetic only in retrospect, too late to be of much use" (586).

CHAPTER 3  
THE POETICS OF *CLAREL*

In 1960 Walter Bezanson published a fully annotated edition of the Herman Melville's *Clarel*, complete with notes identifying the many obscure references in the poem, a "critical index" of the characters, and a map and chronology of the journey recounted in it. This work has made the poem somewhat less forbidding, and it is included (with an updating by Herschel Parker) in the Northwestern-Newberry standard edition. Building on Bezanson's groundwork, numerous scholars have devoted books and articles solely to *Clarel* in recent decades. In *Herman Melville's Clarel: A Spiritual Autobiography*, Vincent Kenny summarized the focus of critics thus far:

[V]irtually all modern critics raise [the] issue of faith-despair and of *Clarel* as a key to understanding Melville's final theological and philosophical beliefs. Some of them read the poem as a kind of positive resolution: all the sound and fury of life do not 'signify nothing' as much as attest to human integrity. Others understand *Clarel* as a continuation of Melville's cynicism, struck with force first in *Pierre* and *The Confidence Man* and carried on thereafter through *Billy Budd* [...] The lines drawn between these two general views are not always sharp, an effect consistent with Melville's belief that life itself ends in ambiguity. (389)

We may refer to the split Kenny refers to as between “positive resolution” and “cynicism” more broadly as a difference between readings of *Clarel*’s ultimate claim—affirmation or rejection—about the possibility of quality and meaning in human existence.

The most prominent of the affirmative views of *Clarel* is that of Stan Goldman as propounded in his 1993 book *Melville’s Protest Theism*. It is a “theology of hope” for which he uses the term “protest theism,” a “paradoxical combination and coalescence of both protest and love based on the need that the unsatisfied heart has for God” that attempts to discover how “faith is possible and life endures and has meaning” (6, 4). Goldman emphasizes that this theology is “not atheistic, nihilistic, nor agnostic, but a biblically rooted, nonsectarian, nondogmatic faith that empowers human beings to protest and to lament human fate but nevertheless to give the human heart in love to God” (4). He calls this protest theism “a response to God,” in that it “allows the human to protest against the physical and spiritual limits imposed upon the human by the divine: undeserved suffering, death, divine self-concealment [*Deus absconditus*], and the presence of doubt” (131). This view is theistic, he notes, because it would not occur—there would be no basis for protest—“if God were presumed to be dead or nonexistent.” Human questioning “does not indicate a crisis of faith, but [...] a crisis of understanding born in the desire to know a God whose purpose is unfathomable and whose face cannot be seen” (53).

In a 1981 article, Joseph Flibbert presents another version of the affirmative view. He says that Melville approaches the central problem of *Clarel*, “that of religious faith,” as a matter of epistemology, leading to the questions “How [...] do we know about God? What do we know about God? And what is the relationship between human knowledge and ultimate spiritual truth?” (129). Flibbert finds that *Clarel* responds to the epistemological problem by means of the

main character's experiences of a "dream that sustains," a dream or intimation of at least the possibility of, for example, love, or authentic faith. As shown by the experience of Clarel, the experience is "preceded and augmented by confrontation and affirmation," and recognition of "inner realities," especially "the reality of suffering." However, the response of several characters, among them Mortmain and Unger, to "become obsessed with suffering," is flawed, "for [suffering] isn't the only reality" (135-136). Each person also has "the capacity to hope and to transcend affliction," a potentiality that can be fulfilled in "the dream that sustains" (135-136).

Among critics of the "rejection" camp is Stanley Brodwin in his 1971 article in which he stresses the poem's expression of existential angst. Although he relates this to his reading of *Clarel* as a "'fifth' gospel" having a "consistent [unifying] pattern of star-Magi imagery," it is not "good news" (in the etymological and conventionally Christian sense) but rather a depiction of a bleakly existential condition, "the abyss into which 'modern' man finds himself peering, an eternal abyss defined by the ontological reality of death, man's finiteness, and its consequences to man's quest for religious and psychological security in a world where teleological values are lost, and where absolutes have broken down or lost all meaning" (375).

Thus, says Brodwin, Melville's "existential gospel" is characterized by themes of "isolation and alienation, the failure of reason, the agonized freedom to choose from among a welter of conflicting and paradoxical faiths, the death of God, and, above all, death's stamp of limitation on man" (384).

It is my view that this split (however imprecise its definition) presents a false dichotomy because it mistakenly arises out of the view of *Clarel* as primarily a vehicle for various theological or philosophical points of view. This "vehicle" view is stated with particular clarity

and in various ways by Goldman. He maintains that in *Clarel* Melville “clearly resists the notion of one truth, of one voice, of one integrative, centered self throughout the poem,” and that this “dialogical” quality indicates “that all the voices combine to represent Melville’s larger thematic concerns” (6, 15). Further, says Goldman, the “limitation on the omniscience of the intrusive voice, the unidentified speakers, and the delayed identification of characters” are elements that “demonstrate the unconvincing authority of character as the main indicator of meaning in *Clarel*” (110). Thus, in summary, *Clarel* “is not so much a dramatic poem with original characters as a poem of ideas given primarily by the various narrative voices” (111).

Similar statements may be found throughout the criticism on *Clarel*. However, I propose that it is properly read foremost as a poem, a work of art, a site of the experience of various and intersecting emotional and intellectual conditions. Therefore, for example, the poem may at times locate itself in the emotional states of certain characters, such as the hopelessness of Mortmain or the blithe confidence of Derwent, and at other times have its *locus* in a particular instance of human interaction, for example in the moment when Clarel feels a surge of desire for Vine, which Vine rebuffs. Its essence as an aesthetic work is not subsumed by its rhetoric.

Before exploring these matters further, it will be helpful to review some of the history of *Clarel*’s publication, a description of such plot as there is, and features of the main characters.

The most recent scholarship concerning the dating of *Clarel* is that of Parker in *The Making of the Poet*, where he concludes with confidence that Melville wrote *Clarel* “between early 1870 and the first half of 1875” (135), a period of five and a half years. Since no manuscript is known to exist, “the only authoritative text” is the first edition, which G.P. Putnam’s Sons published June 3, 1876 (Bezanson, Note 532; Parker, Historical Supplement 677). The occasion of the publication seems to have been a great relief to all concerned, coming

only after what Mrs. Melville described in a letter to Herman's cousin Kate Lansing "a series of the most vexatious delays" (qtd. in Bezanson, Note 540). This publication date is only around a year after its completion, but given that it appeared in a limited edition of twenty-five copies, paid for by Herman's uncle Peter Gansvoort, Mrs. Melville's anxiety is understandable, especially since he had been working on it for several years.

*Clarel's* origins go back to Melville's "lowest period in physical health, earning power, and mental condition" in the mid-1850's (Kenny, "Clarel" 375). In October 1856, Melville set off on five-month journey, traveling mostly by himself around the Mediterranean, visiting Constantinople, Cairo and Alexandria as well as the Holy Land (see generally Bezanson, Note 508-515). Funded by his father-in-law, the eminent jurist Lemuel Shaw, it was to be a "therapeutic vacation" to relieve what his family feared was Melville's dangerously fragile mental and physical state (Kenny, "Clarel" 376). At the first stage of the trip, a stop in Liverpool, Melville visited with his former neighbor Nathaniel Hawthorne, then serving as consul in Liverpool. Hawthorne's journal entry concerning part of the visit is well known, but it is even more remarkably insightful and seemingly prescient when read from the perspective of *Clarel*, written twenty years later, and is therefore worth quoting at length:

[Melville presented himself] much as he used to do (a little paler, and perhaps a little sadder), in a rough outside coat, and with his characteristic gravity and reserve of manner....Melville has not been well, of late; he has been affected with neuralgic complaints in his head and limbs, and no doubt has suffered from too constant literary occupation, pursued without much success, latterly; and his writings, for a long while past, have indicated a morbid state of mind. [...] we took a pretty long walk together, and sat down in a hollow among the sand hills [...] Melville, as he always does, began to

reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated”; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us. (qtd. in Bezanson, Note 511)

In this passage we see many of the elements that will appear in the characters that inhabit *Clarel*: sadness, gravity, morbidity, ruminations on “Providence and futurity,” belief, unbelief, nobility of character, immortality.

Although Melville spent only eight days in the environs of Jerusalem (January 7-17, 1857), his journal account of the experience was to serve as an important source for *Clarel*. But the journal is not of interest solely as a source for *Clarel*; it also corroborates Hawthorne’s description of Melville in its demonstrations of, as Kenny aptly describes them, “bleakness, impatience, and bursts of anger,” in which “any anticipation of transcendent signs was dashed” (Kenny, “Clarel” 376). Kenny also finds evidence for Melville’s “fragmented state of mind” in a contemporaneous annotation from his reading of *Don Quixote*. Beside a passage where the hero laments that “a knight-errant without a mistress is like a tree without leaves, a building without cement, a shadow without a body that causes it” (from Part II, chapter 32), Melville wrote: “or as Confucius said ‘a dog without a master,’ or to drop both Cervantes & Confucius parables—a

god-like mind w/o a God” (qtd. in Kenny, “Clarel” 376; emphasis supplied). Melville’s version (in addition to including the complication of the simile-within-a-simile) wrenches the context considerably and disturbingly away from the knight-errant and his lady, as he envisions the human mind created in the image of God, but now, like Bartleby, utterly alone in the universe, without a god either to praise or to protest to.

In addition to Melville’s personal circumstances, as Bezanson has noted, during the twenty-five year period that separated the publication of *Moby Dick* and *Clarel* (as well as the twenty years between Melville’s travel and the publication of *Clarel*), “profound changes [had taken] place in the American democratic process,” during the experience of the Civil War and as it “forsook its humanitarian traditions in a brutal Reconstruction.” *Clarel* was published in the midst of the Gilded Age, which Bezanson plausibly describes as having seemed to Melville “an orgy of economic self-exploitation,” where brazen corruption thrived in an environment of “unregulated capitalism,” and the nation had become “a might machine for production and, at worst, exploitation. (Bezanson, Note 606-607) At the same time, Melville was experiencing “psychic exhaustion” and an ensuing “long period of depression,” which thus concurred with this “American historical cycle” (Bezanson, Note 607).

Kenny identifies four major sources for the work (Kenny, “Clarel” 380). As always with Melville, and as established in Nathalia Wright’s *Melville’s Use of the Bible*, one important source was the Bible, which was not simply “a source of quotations” but also “a guide book of geography and theology” (Kenny, “Clarel” 380). Melville also drew on his journal from the trip, as discussed above. *Clarel* is only remotely autobiographical, and outside reference works Melville is likely to have consulted include John Murray’s *A Handbook for Travellers in Spain and Palestine*, described by Bezanson as “excellent” and rich in Biblical allusions, and Arthur

Penrhyn Stanley's *Sinai and Palestine in Connection with Their History* (1856), written with Stanley's characteristic "judicial temperament, breadth of learning, and incisive style" (Bezanson, Note 533).<sup>35</sup>

However, it is unlikely that these were the only books Melville would have consulted, for books about travel in the Holy Land were enormously popular among Americans in Melville's day, and constituted a genre in their own right. Hilton Obenzinger's *American Palestine* is currently the most extensive study of *Clarel* in the context of this cultural phenomenon of nineteenth century American interest in the Holy Land.<sup>36</sup> What he refers to as the genre of "American Holy Land literature" consists of "hundreds of books and an extensive array of newspaper and magazine articles," together with numerous kinds of "non-literary representations," including elaborate public panoramas, landscape paintings (including a series by Frederic Church), and photographs (3).<sup>37</sup> A complex combination of cultural factors, and especially political and religious factors, contributed to the fascination with the Holy Land. As Obenzinger describes it, with expanded opportunities to travel to Palestine, Americans were able "to reimagine—and even to reenact—religio-national myths," which in turn made it possible "to displace the biblical Holy Land with the American New Jerusalem." Protestant "millennialist eschatologies" also played a significant role by providing "originary models for America's narratives of continuing settlement and expansion," for "if the elect though cursed *ur*-nation of

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<sup>35</sup> Stanley was also a biographer of Matthew Arnold's father; his book, in addition to being a travel account, included "critical commentaries based on the entire available literature of the Levant, documenting and sifting evidence with a masters hand" (Bezanson, Note 531).

<sup>36</sup> In addition to Obenzinger, see Brian Yothers, *The Romance of the Holy Land in American Travel Writing, 1790-1876*, 109-138.

<sup>37</sup> The "non-literary representations" represented a slightly later development, however. John Davis, in his study of American Holy Land art, notes that as the "number of American books on the subject leapt into the hundreds during the decades surrounding the Civil War," it turned out that "the Holy Land had been textualized long before it was experienced as painted or photographed" (41). On nineteenth-century photography in the Holy Land, see Yeshayahu Nir, *The Bible and the Image*, and Kathleen Stewart Howe's essay "Revealing the Holy Land." On Church's Holy Land travel and paintings, see John Howat's *Frederic Church* 133-145.

Israel could be restored, so too could fallen Anglo-America, the typological new Jews, be ‘restored’ as a racialized chosen people” (5).<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, as John Davis points out, the idea of the Holy Land also allowed a reconfiguration and extension of the American idea of westward expansion, in which the originary east was located in the more pure landscape of “the Mediterranean Bible,” rather than in the sites of the corrupted “northern European origins of the [actual] earliest settlers” (4).

Thus, as Bezanson describes it, Melville’s trip and the literary work that came out of it were part of a “literary-religious pattern of contemporary culture.” The popularity of the genre was in full force when Melville’s arrived in coastal Jaffa in early 1857. Given this cultural phenomenon, Melville must have been “well aware” that “the natural outcome of the trip [...] was a prose travel account” (Bezanson, Note 529) Indeed Melville’s uncle, Peter Gansevoort, who was later to finance the private publication of *Clarel*, expressed surprise in an 1857 letter that “he has not made his travels the subject of a Lecture, to be hereafter woven into a Book” (qtd. in Bezanson, Note 529).

Among the most well-known Holy Land travel books was Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad*, which appeared in 1867, ten years after Melville’s trip. Although there is no record of any written contact between Melville and Twain, it is “impossible” (as William Shurr puts it) that Melville was not aware of the book. Shurr finds that *Innocents Abroad* served as a “catalyst” for *Clarel* by “suggest[ing] the possibilities for the precise attitude which Melville took toward the Holy Land materials,” to build on the ideas “which had already begun to crystallize in the journal he kept during the trip” (79-80). One feature of the Holy Land travel genre that *Innocents*

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<sup>38</sup> John Davis provides a similar description: “The land that had given birth to the Book [*Palestine*] and the land that was its fulfillment [*America*] merged in an associational equation of biblical incident and national aspiration. The actual landscape of Palestine and Syria was invoked as a validation, not only of the authenticity of the Bible, but also of the notion a of America as heir to the sacred topography.”

*Abroad* represents quite clearly is the continual commentary on the physical desolation of the sites associated with divine events. These are some of Mark Twain's remarks: "No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye than that which bounds the approaches to Jerusalem. The one difference between the roads and the surrounding country, perhaps, is that there are rather more rocks in the roads than in the surrounding country" (555). "Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies" (607). "Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise? Can the *curse* of the Deity beautify a land?" (608). Mark Twain is not writing satirically here, as his remarks differ very little from those of numerous other writers (including Melville).

In discussing the poetics of *Clarel*, it is appropriate to address formal aspects of the poem at the outset. One of the most often noted (and objected-to) features of the poem is its unrelenting rhymed iambic tetrameter. It is clear from Melville's earlier poetry that he was capable of writing in a variety of forms,<sup>39</sup> so it is reasonable to ask why he chose this form for this poem. Perhaps the most obvious response is that it is appropriate for the subject matter. Bezanson says that "[i]t is an essential part of the poem that the verse form is constricting and bounded, that the basic movements are tight, hard, constrained," which is certainly the effect imparted by Melville's choice of meter and rhyme (Note 568). He continues: "Pentameter—especially blank verse—was too ample and flowing for his present mood and theme. The tragedy of modern man, as Melville now viewed it, was one of constriction" (569). There are a number of highly regarded precedents for Melville's use of iambic tetrameter, but most notable among them in this context is Matthew Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse," which Melville is known to have read and which,

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<sup>39</sup> Melville's awareness of metrical nuance is also shown by Virginia Jackson in her discussion of his use of popular verse genres in "*The Portent*." She sees a reference to "the common tetrameter-trimeter alternating patterns of popular verse" as he "turn[s] sixes and eights to fives and sevens punctuated by threes and fours, all symmetrically arranged in their odd variations" (185). The tetrameter-trimeter pattern in quatrains is, of course, also the "hymn stanza" form that is usually described as the metrical foundation of Dickinson's poetry.

according to Bezanson, may have been the most specific influence that Arnold made on Melville, judging by the ways that it “anticipate[s] *Clarel* in general theme, kinds of events, typical vocabulary, technical devices, and rhythmic pattern” (Bezanson, “Arnold” 390). Certainly the match of the meter to the subject of the extreme asceticism of the monks in that poem is echoed in the similar use of the meter in *Clarel*.<sup>40</sup>

It should also be noted that Melville was able to impart nuance to this constricted meter. Here are some lines of description from a canto titled “The Shepherds’ Dale,” in which the narrator compares a pastoral scene in Bethlehem to an awe-inspiring experience at sea:

So, oft in mid-watch on that sea  
Where the ridged Andes of Peru  
Are far seen by the coasting crew—  
Waves, sails and sailors in accord  
Illumed are in a mystery,  
Wonder and glory of the Lord,  
Though manifest in aspect minor—  
Phosphoric ocean in shekinah. (4.9.39-46)<sup>41</sup>

This is poetry of remarkable beauty, appropriately for the subject that is its context. The meter is varied subtly by stresses on initial syllables in each of the lines beginning with the letter W (“Where,” “Waves,” and “Wonder”), as well as in the last line. The “sea” and “mystery” rhyme is muted by their distance from each other and by the weak stress-ending of “mystery.” The final two lines end with an extra, unstressed syllable, and the rhyme is somewhat slant (although it might depend on regional variations in pronunciations).

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<sup>40</sup> A favorable review in the 19 August 1876 *London Academy* suggests that at least some of Melville’s contemporaries were attuned to Melville’s ideas concerning the form of *Clarel*: “[*Clarel*] is a book of very great interest, and poetry of no mean order. The form is subordinate to the matter, and a rugged inattention to niceties of rhyme and metre here and there seems rather deliberate than careless.” The review also took notice of “the musical verse where the writer chooses to be musical” (qtd. in Norberg 53-54).

<sup>41</sup> Bezanson’s note explains that the shekinah “in Jewish theology is the radiance surrounding the divine presence” (826).

This passage may be profitably compared and contrasted with these lines describing the view of Jerusalem presented to the pilgrims as they return:

The valley slept—  
Obscure, in monitory dream  
Oppressive, roofed with awful skies  
Whose stars like silver nail-heads gleam  
Which stud some lid over lifeless eyes. (4.29.148-152)

The verse is tight, emphasizing the image of the coffin in the heavens—God’s death—described in the last two lines. The effect is heightened by the similar “O” sounds that begin adjacent lines, the enjambment after “dream” and “skies,” the pounding regularity of the line that contains “nail-heads,” offset by the slight bump of an extra syllable in the following line, and the pervasively alliterated “S” sounds—the sound of expiring breath, perhaps—as the sentence ends.

With respect to the subject matter of *Clarel*, it is useful to view it, as recommended by Bezanson, in terms of the phrase “complex passion” (1.5.217), which for Bezanson “signif[ies] the total historical, theological, and psychological dilemma” that permeates the poem (Bezanson, Note 564). It is not a work for everyone; in an 1884 letter to a young Englishman who had expressed an interest in his publications, Melville remarked only that *Clarel* was “a metrical affair, a pilgrimage or what not, of several thousand lines, eminently adapted for unpopularity. --- The notification to you here is ambidexter, as it were: it may intimidate or allure” (483). It is as an experience of a “complex passion” that *Clarel* should be read, not as a philosophical or theological treatise.

As an account of a “pilgrimage,” the work recalls Chaucer, but when the pilgrims set forth from Jerusalem at the beginning of Part 2, the narrator contrasts them with the group that departed from “brave Chaucer’s Tabard Inn”: “Another age, and other men, / And life an unfulfilled romance” (2.1.7, 13-14). This trip is circular, a ten-day round trip that corresponds

with certain dates of the liturgical year (which is itself cyclical): Clarel arrives in Jerusalem around the day of Epiphany; the “pilgrims” set out on Candlemas (celebrated February 2, to commemorate the Purification of Mary and the Presentation at the Temple) and return to Jerusalem on Ash Wednesday (which would mean that the journey began on a Sunday), where Clarel remains throughout Lent, until Easter, which in the year of Clarel’s fictitious trip occurred on the same day in the calendars of both the Eastern and Western churches.<sup>42</sup>

Events do occur in the narrative, and characters respond to them, but primarily the poem is “obsessively dialogical” in its talk about such weighty matters as religion, science, politics and history (Goldman 6). Appropriately for a pilgrimage that goes in a circle, the narrative is linear only in the sense that time passes as characters move from one location to another and in certain cases join or leave the group.<sup>43</sup> The narrative voice in the poem participates in the dialogism; as Goldman says, it is notable for its “inconsistent omniscience” (108).<sup>44</sup> Similarly to Goldman, Flibbert maintains that though the characters in *Clarel* “are vividly drawn and in some cases highly individualized, they are primarily vehicles for ideas, dramatized embodiments of an inner pilgrimage.” This “inner pilgrimage,” Flibbert says, is a “journey of Melville’s own mind working toward the resolution of [the problem] of religious faith.” (129). Though I do not agree that the characters are “*primarily* vehicles for ideas,” for the most part they certainly do represent discrete points of view, and so a description of this sort can provide a useful entry point into the poem itself.

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<sup>42</sup> It appears from consulting a perpetual calendar that the Easter dates concurred in seventeen different years in the second half of the nineteenth century, one of which was 1876, the year of *Clarel*’s publication (“Perpetual”).

<sup>43</sup> This in some degree sheds light on the peculiarity of the work’s subtitle: “A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land.” First of all, it should be noted in light of the argument I present here that it is first and foremost a “Poem.” The peculiarity is with the “Pilgrimage *in* the Holy Land.” Although to call it a journey *to* the Holy Land would be inaccurate, it is also not accurate to refer to a pilgrimage “*in*” a particular place, since the whole idea of “pilgrimage” is to travel from an ordinary place to a very special place.

<sup>44</sup> Given the circumstances of this work and the characteristics of this author, it is very likely that the narrative voice is male.

Bezanson groups them into “three clusters” (not including Clarel himself or the narrator). The first consists of Rolfe and Vine, whom he describes as “rational and imaginative observers of the common plight.” Although Bezanson does not include Clarel in this group, it is with these figures that Clarel most closely identifies and who are culturally similar to him.<sup>45</sup> The second consists of “the ominous sequence of monomaniacs: Celio-Mortmain-Agath-Ungar.” About these figures Bezanson remarks: “Bitter outpourings at intervals reveal their inner rage. They are beyond compromise or peace. Their best hope is not adjustment to the complex passion (as with Rolfe, Vine, and someday, perhaps Clarel) but sheer survival beneath the weight of it.” As for the third group, comprised of Nehemiah and Derwent, “there is no theological crisis for either of them.” (Bezanson, Note 572-573).

Among the topics discussed in this dialogical poem is change and progress, and an examination of some of the characters with respect to this topic can help to focus our inquiry into the poetics of Melville’s treatment of them. We might first look at two characters not included in Bezanson’s grouping. The first, Margoth, is culturally Jewish but has adopted a completely scientific/materialist world view. Rolfe observes that this has involved a “conversion” very much like a religious experience: “...An Israelite, say, Hegelized— / Convert to science, for but see / The hammer: yes, geology.” (2.19.53-55). Rolfe dismisses him as “a kangaroo of science.” (2.21.10). The other character, Don Hannibal, an old friend of Derwent who has lost an arm and

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<sup>45</sup> There are various theories about the meaning of “Clarel,” none of them conclusive. Goldman’s emphasis is on its use in the title of the work:

The first word of the title refers not only to the poem’s main character but also to the sense of clarity (ironically) combined with the Hebrew word *el*. *El* means God in Hebrew and was also the name for the God of gods of the Canaanite pantheon. Characters are often given the epithet “El,” a favorite Melvillean pun in *Clarel* that conflates old age with God. The idea of clarity combined with *el* suggests a semantic compound in the name ‘Clarel’ and implies a quest for the clarity of God. (3)

Shurr notes that one of de Tocqueville’s middle names is Clarel; translated editions of *Democracy in America* had been available since 1835, though there is no evidence that Melville ever read it. Shurr says, “It is pure conjecture, but not impossible, that Melville may have seen some similarity between de Tocqueville’s encyclopedic attempt to portray the civilization of America in all its complexity and his own attempt to portray the complex life of the mind in the 19th century” (Shurr 265-266 n.12).

a leg fighting for Mexican independence, has disavowed the ideals of “progress” and reform. He is searching but cannot find a place compatible with his views: “everywhere that I removed / this cursed *Progress* still would greet. / Ah where (thout I) in Old World view / Some blest asylum from the New!” (4.19.40). The only thing that’s “in this Democracy” is “Eternal hacking”: “She lopped these limbs, Democracy” (4.19.40-44, 117-110).

A major character who is profoundly affected by political change is called Mortmain (“his name, or so in whim / Some moral wit had christened him” (2.1.188-189)), who brings in ideas derived from his experiences with recent political events in Europe. His background story is recounted by Rolfe: a Swede of illegitimate birth, unloved by his parents, he moved to Paris and was a participant in the revolutionary atmosphere of Europe around 1848, when (in Rolfe’s words, addressed to Derwent) “Europe was in a decade dim: / Upon the future’s trembling rim / The comet hovered” (2.4.40-42). Rolfe’s commentary on Mortmain and on the revolutionary spirit is revealing as an aspect of the “manysidedness” of both Rolfe and the poem itself: “The uncreated Good / He sought, whose absence is the cause / Of creed and Atheists, mobs and laws” (2.4.49-51). In this complex statement, Rolfe attributes the lack of an “uncreated Good” (God? A sovereignty of justice and truth?) to the existence of *both* (religious) creed and Atheism, and *both* anarchy and the establishment of law. The line may be read as a chiasm which posits the equivalence of “Atheists” and “mobs” and of “creed” and “laws,” although this assumes that atheism, as for instance in the case of Margoth, who the narrator describes as a “convert to science,” is not itself a “creed” in the eyes of Rolfe. More broadly, in terms of the argument I present here, the possibilities afforded by a close reading of these lines are indicators of how the aesthetic qualities of the poem may become more interesting than the ideologies that its characters espouse.

Although he achieved success through his efforts (“...much his theory could tell; / And he expounded it so well, / Disciples came. He took his stand” (2.4.37-39)), Mortmain’s fervor waned as he considered the long-term implications of his efforts (again, as described by Rolfe):

Tho’ even shouldst thou triumph, see,  
Prose overtakes the victor’s songs:  
Victor’s right may need redress:  
No failure like a harsh success.  
Yea, ponder well the historic page:  
Of all who, fired with noble rage,  
Have warred for right without reprieve  
How many spanned the wings immense  
Of Satan’s muster...? (2.4.78-86)

Thus is seen the appropriateness of his name, which evokes the legal concept of the “dead hand” control of real estate in perpetuity. He has decided to remove himself from the processes and work of social reform, and “...under ban / Of strange repentance and last dearth, / Roved the gray places of the earth” (2.4.128-130). However, according to Rolfe, and as is borne out in Mortmain’s own words later,

...what seemed most his heart to wring  
Was some unrenderable thing:  
‘Twas not his bastardy, nor bale  
Medean in his mother pale,  
Nor thwarted aims of high design;  
But deeper—deep as nature’s mine. (2.4.131-136)

This “unrenderable thing” I take to be an essential melancholy, a bleak view of the world that is innate, not the psychological effect of his upbringing or what he has felt to be the ultimate futility of his political action. The verse itself is nearly similarly “unrenderable,” with the thickness of series such as “heart,” “wring,” “unrenderable,” “thing”; and “bastardy,” “bale,” “Medean,” “mother,” “pale.” Melville’s poetic sensitivity should also be noted in the last two lines of the passage, where the abstraction of “high design” is opposed to the concrete image in the simile

“deep as nature’s mine.” It is in these depths of his human nature that the “unrenderable thing” resides.

The background information conveyed by Rolfe sheds light on Mortmain’s first extended speech in canto 2.3, which includes these lines:

“Be some who with the god will sup,  
Happy to share his paschal wine.  
‘Tis well. But the ensuing cup,  
The bitter cup?”...  
...  
“...The Christian plea—  
What basis has it, but that here  
Man is not happy, nor can be?  
There it confirms philosophy:  
The compensation of its cheer  
Is reason why the grass survives  
Of verdurous Christianity...” (2.3.117-120, 127-133).

Mortmain has experienced “the ensuing cup, / the bitter cup,” and it has confirmed for him the “basis” of “the Christian plea”: though “man” cannot be “happy,” presumably by the effect of original sin, Christianity serves to provide the psychological “compensation of its cheer” in the life to come.

Mortmain expounds on the condition of unhappiness and develops the idea of “wickedness” in his lengthy monologue in the gothic, disturbingly dark canto 2.36, titled “SODOM.” It has been preceded, in canto 2.35, by a reference to man’s “penetrialia of retreat-- / The heart, with labyrinths replete,” likened to “Paul’s ‘mystery of iniquity’” (2.35.20-22,24).<sup>46</sup> The effect is heightened by Melville’s carefully modulated entrance of Mortmain’s own

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<sup>46</sup> The image of “penetrialia of retreat” comes from the first verse paragraph of the canto, which treats of “Interiors measurelessly strange” in a set of engravings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-78) entitled *Carceri (Prisons)*. They are “technically superb, monumental views of imagined colossal arches and gigantic stairways in fantastic prisons peopled with dreamlike figures” (Bezanson, Note 789-91). Shurr states that Melville was an “avid print collector” although it is not known exactly what prints he owned; there were a number of sources from which Melville could have known of Piranesi pictures (Shurr 113 n.8). The set is reproduced in a 1970 Dover edition and make for fascinating viewing.

speech—a slow penetration into the “mystery of iniquity.” The narrator sets the scene for canto 36; the “lake” referred to is the Dead Sea:

Full night. The moon has yet to rise;  
The air oppresses, and the skies  
Reveal beyond the lake afar  
One solitary tawny star—  
Complexioned so by vapors dim,  
Whereof some hang above the brim  
Nearer waters of the lake,  
Whose bubbling air-beads mount and break  
As charged with breath of things alive. (2.36.1-9)

It is fully night, moonless, illuminated by a “solitary star” that is obscured to a sickeningly brownish “tawny” hue by the lake’s “vapors.” God’s presence is only dimly perceivable. In the nether regions, “air-beads mount and break” on the lake’s surface, indicating dark deep forces below, “things alive” in the Dead Sea, the “penetralia of retreat.” Mortmain has recently rejoined the group after a night spent alone near an “evil Summit” in the area of Elisha’s Spring (2.15.76). Upon his arrival at the Dead Sea, he cries out, “as possessed” with the fire of prophecy, “Repent! Repent in every land / Or hell’s hot kingdom is at hand!...” (2.34.63-64), and then leans down to drink from the Dead Sea’s water—“madly tried the gall” (2.34.67). Together now with the pilgrim party as they “linger late” by the lake, he sits on “a camel’s skull, late dragged / From forth the wave, the eye-pits slagged / With crusted salt” (2.36.11, 15-17). He asks a question—“What star is yon”—and after two inconclusive responses answers it himself: “It is the star / Called Wormwood. Some hearts die in thrall / Of water which yon star makes gall” (2.36.17, 22-24), and of which, as we have seen, he himself has just drunk. Up to this point, Mortmain has spoken very little (especially in relation to many of the other characters). He now begins to speak at great length on the subject of “wickedness,” but even now his words come indirectly, mediated by the narrator:

...[he] made review  
 Of what that wickedness might be  
 Which down on these ill precincts drew  
 The flood, the fire; ...  
 Urged that those malefactors stood  
 Guilty of sins scarce scored as crimes  
 In any statute known, or code—[:]  
 ...  
 Things hard to prove: decorum's wile,  
 Malice discreet, judicious guile;  
 Good done with ill intent—reversed:  
 Best deeds designed to serve the worst;  
 And hate which under life's fair hue  
 Prowls like the shark in sunned Pacific blue. (2.36.25-32)

Though the syntax is difficult (and it should be recalled that this is not Mortmain's direct speech), it seems that the point is that true "wickedness" is the "reverse" of what legal rules explicitly prohibit. In other words, real wickedness consists in apparently good deeds done with bad motives that often do not violate the letter of the law: "Best deeds designed to serve the worst; And hate which [prowls] under life's fair hue." This is the kind of "wickedness" which "drew / The flood, the fire." It seems here that Mortmain has retained some of his revolutionary spirit against the misdeeds of privileged classes.

He now begins to speak directly, bowed "under stress," with "hands enlocked across the brow" (2.36.41), in an apostrophe to the lake. He elaborates on the idea of wickedness expressed above:

"Nay, nay, thou sea,  
 'Twas not all carnal harlotry,  
 But sins refined, crimes of the spirit,  
 Helped earn that doom ye here inherit:  
 Doom well imposed, though sharp and dread,  
 In some god's reign, some god long fled.— (2.36.43-47)

For Mortmain, any "carnal harlotry" that went on in Sodom was relatively innocent compared to the "sins refined, crimes of the spirit." Concerning passages such as these, Goldman argues that

“[i]f God were presumed to be dead or nonexistent, why would Melville bother lament at all? [...] The presence of questions does not indicate a crisis of faith, but a crisis of knowledge of the universe and of a hidden God [...]” (53). However, from this passage it seems clear that, though Mortmain still maintains allegiance to the ideals of justice that might deal with the “sins refined,” in his present state of mind he feels that any god who might administer it—as Yahweh did with Sodom—has “long fled.”

Mortmain then, having gained some momentum, becomes nearly verbose as he shifts to a Jeremiad against the sinners personally:

‘Tis *thou* who servedst Mammon’s hate  
Or greed through forms which holy are--  
Black slaver steering by a star,  
'Tis *thou*—and all like thee in state. (2.36.74-77)

Lamentably, the sins which these sinners are guilty of are not easily detected by the people:

But how the manifold may tell?  
And sins there be inscrutable,  
Unutterable.” (2.36.83-85)

For sins that are “inscrutable, / Unutterable,” it is difficult for the ordinary person to “tell,” either in the sense of seeing that they exist or in reporting their existence to others.

When he has finished speaking, Mortmain looks around and notices that, one by one, each of his fellows has left, and that he is alone. Canto 36 ends with a weird conversation between “two spirits, hovering in remove” from which the narrator withdraws after introducing them. The first asks “...may a sinless nature win / Those deeps he knows?” (2.36.120-121). The other is assured of the purity of Mortmain:

Innocent be the heart and true—  
Howe'er it feed on bitter bread—  
That, venturous through the Evil led,  
Moves as along the ocean's bed  
Amid the dragon's staring crew." (2.36.124-128)

Mortmain may be monomaniacal, but he is no Ahab.

The following day (Day 4 of their pilgrimage), the group travels from the Siddim Plain up into the Judah Mountains and arrive at the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba in the evening. As they prepare to leave on Day 7, just before dawn, bound for Bethlehem, Mortmain is not with them. He is found dead on a ledge, his "his filmed orbs fixed upon the Tree" (3.32.29), the Palm which according to legend had been planted by St. Saba himself "a thousand years ago" (3.25.63-64). Rolfe is moved to utter an "invocation":

"Holy Morning,  
What blessed lore reservest thou,  
Withheld from man, that evermore  
Without surprise,  
But, rather, with a hurtles scorning  
In thy placid eyes,  
Thou viewest all events alike?  
Oh, tell me, do thy bright beams strike  
The healing hills of Gilead now?" (3.32.57-62)

It will be noticed that this is an instance (there are several others) where Melville introduces a relatively more complex stanza and line structure as compared with the usual rhymed tetrameter. In this case, the structure is appropriate to the more formal and stylized diction of prayer, as well as an ironic counterpoint to its content.

Mortmain's death in this remote mountainous region recalls Bezanson's reading of Mortmain as an Empedocles figure, in particular as depicted in Matthew Arnold's poem "Empedocles on Etna" (Bezanson, Note 627). Empedocles has, in essence, outlived his usefulness and decides that his only remaining option is to throw himself into the volcanic Mt.

Etna. Thus the comparison to Mortmain is apt. In the Preface to his 1853 *Poems*, Arnold discussed his exclusion from that volume of “Empedocles,” which had appeared only a year earlier. Melville’s markings from his reading of the Preface in 1862 (some ten years before writing *Clarel*) show his particular interest in Arnold’s views on “Empedocles,” as expressed in this paragraph from the Preface:

What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also. (204)

As Bezanson points out, this “kind of poetry [...] is precisely applicable to *Clarel*,” and it is especially applicable to the figure of Mortmain, whose suffering certainly “finds no vent in action” (Bezanson, “Arnold” 369). It was not until 1871, when Melville was writing *Clarel*, that Melville actually read “Empedocles.” Bezanson, finds, however, that he read it with an “intensity” that was not in “any way mitigated by” Arnold’s own views on it. Bezanson speculates that “[t]he young Arnold who wrote ‘Empedocles’” (around 1850, when Arnold was not yet 30 years old) and “the middle-aged Melville who read it” (in 1871, when Melville was past 50) must have “felt a comparable emotional stasis,” for which the cathartic principle that Arnold espouses in the Preface was “only an idea” (369). Bezanson here seems to posit a necessary correspondence between the emotional states of poet and poetic subject; it is perhaps

safer to say, while still recognizing the gist of Bezanson's point, that the two poets had comparably favorable attitudes toward a condition of "emotional stasis" as a poetic subject.

Another figure whose representation illustrates Melville's aesthetic achievement in *Clarel* is Ungar, who appears in section 4 of the poem. His story is recounted in Canto 5: One of his forefathers, a Roman Catholic refugee from England, was an early settler in the Chesapeake area, and "in the Indian glade / He wedded with a wigwam maid" (4.5.133-134). It will be noted that Ungar resembles Mortmain in having a "wrong" kind of parentage, bastardy in the case of one, miscegenation in the other. Ungar himself, with his "Anglo brain, but Indian heart" felt in his heart "That holding slaves was aye a grief / The system an iniquity" (4.5.148-149). Nevertheless, when the Civil War broke out, he felt duty-bound to serve in the Confederate Army. Embittered by his experience, he is now "self-exiled" (4.5.154) and working as a mercenary. Unlike Mortmain, who has been disillusioned by his inability to effect lasting social progress, Ungar laments an irrecoverable past. Christianity's golden age of piety has lapsed; Christians now lag behind Muslims, who so much more "openly" proclaim their faith:

... "let all avow  
As openly faith's loyal heart.  
By Christians too was God confessed  
How frankly! in those days that come  
No more to misnamed Christendom!" (4.10.84-88)

The Roman Catholic Ungar declares that pre-Reformation Christians were "not lettered, but had sense / Beyond the mean intelligence" (4.10.100). Reform generally comes to no good, in Ungar's view:

"[The] word *reform*:  
What meaning's to that word assigned?  
From Luther's great initial down,  
Through all the series following on,  
The impetus augments—the blind  
Precipitation: blind, for tell

Whitherward does the surge impel?  
The end, the aim? 'Tis mystery. (4.20.19-26)

Ungar is particularly exercised about such contemporary religious trends as Transcendentalism:

“Reactions from the Christian plan  
bear others further. Quite they shun  
a god to name, or cite a man  
save Greek, heroical a Don:  
'Tis Plato's aristocratic tone.  
All recognition they forego  
Of Evil; supercilious skim  
With spurious wing of seraphim  
The last abyss.” (4.20.95)

His religious views naturally spill over into the political. Characterizing “the Paris mob of Eighty-nine” as “Transcended rebel angels!”, he cries “Woe / To us; without a God, 'tis woe!” (4.20.115, 132). “In the Dark Ages of Democracy,” he says, lie the “Dead level of rank commonplace” (4.21.139,4.21.136). Overall, the complexity of his passion centers on the fallenness of humanity, of the tragedy of “Man disennobled—brutalized / by popular science—Atheized / Into a smatterer----” (4.21.131-133).

Cantos 20 and 21 of Part 4, the source of most of the above quotations, have been called “the American Cantos” by Goldman because of their “powerful dialog on and critique of America” (40). Here is Ungar's prophecy on the fate of America:

“Whatever happen in the end,  
be sure 'twill yield to one and all  
New confirmation of the fall  
Of Adam (4.21.122)

For C. Vann Woodward, in *The Burden of Southern History*, Ungar is a representative of “A Southern Critique for the Gilded Age” (the title of his chapter 6). He says that “it remained for *Northern* writers to acknowledge the relevance of the Southern tradition and bring to bear that point of view in their critique of American society” (110; emphasis in original). It is important to

note, however, that with respect to *Clarel*, Woodward is aware that “social criticism is only an incidental and belatedly introduced theme” (111-112). Woodward points out that as a Southerner with Native American blood, Ungar “is an American who has suffered two rejections, two defeats, and a double estrangement from his native land” (113). One might also that his Roman Catholicism marginalizes him even as a Southerner. Quoting most of lines 104 through 139 of Canto 21 (from which the above Canto 21 quotations also come), Woodward calls the passage probably “the blackest commentary on the future of his country ever written by an American in the nineteenth century” (116).<sup>47</sup>

*Clarel* ends with an “Epilogue” which exhorts to Clarel to remember that there may be some possibility of resurrection, and the meter expands to iambic pentameter. However, it is far from a decisive close, and strikes the reader as yet another voice and poetry in this vast work of art.

As mentioned previously, Melville was very much aware that *Clarel* was “eminently unsuited for popularity,” and indeed it continues to be among the least-liked of Melville’s poetry, which still generally must be argued for. A representative detractor is Alan Shucard, who aligns himself with the “prevalent view” that *Clarel* is “hopelessly flawed, at best narcotic, at worst punishing.” Nevertheless, he says, it is “as hard to ignore as a 300-pound figure hulking at the dinner table” (100). Shucard finds three sets of “flaws” in the work that, he says, “in justice, cannot be overlooked.” The first of these flaws is that Melville delays introducing the character of Rolfe “far too long,” it being that character “from which the poem draws much of its energy.” The second is the problem of the last section, which is often read a jarring shift to (in Shucard’s

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<sup>47</sup> It must be noted that Woodward misses the mark with respect to another character in *Clarel*: “One of the most attractive and persuasive characters in the entourage is Derwent, an Anglican priest, a gentleman, and a thoroughly articulate Christian” (112). Most readers of *Clarel* would agree that Derwent is a caricature of a type of wishy-washy, Latitudinarian Anglicanism.

words) “images of renewal.” The third is *Clarel*’s “bad verse,” which turned “many a reader’s good intentions [...] to exasperation” (101).

The first and second issues seem to me to be relatively local concerns, and even if Shucard is correct in calling them flaws they are not a sufficient basis on which to dismiss the work in its entirety. I have taken up the second (the epilogue) and third (“bad verse”) issues elsewhere in this chapter. With respect to the first, the belated appearance of Rolfe, Shucard offers neither context nor interpretation. The more interesting questions that this raises concern Melville’s handling of narrative, inasmuch as in the respect *Clarel* at least on its face resembles Melville’s prose more than it does his other poetry, which is often closer to the genre of lyric (as that term is conventionally used). Now the question as it concerns Rolfe is why he appears when he does, and whether then whether any available explanations are interesting, whether they have sufficient explanatory power. A further, and even more substantial question concerns the narrative itself and the genre of the work. It is, as discussed earlier, readily classifiable in the genre of Holy Land narrative, of which (as also discussed earlier) *Innocents Abroad* is a well-known, though uncharacteristic example. This feature suggests that it ought not be read as if it were a fictional story, like, for example, *Moby-Dick*, with the traditional elements of conflict and character development. And indeed one element that is noticeably absent from *Clarel* is an active evil force that can give linear movement to a story. I wish to call this the “Empedocles issue”: as we have seen, Melville admired Matthew Arnold’s poem “Empedocles on Etna,” in which Empedocles laments his misfortunes (which occurred prior to the beginning of the events of the poem) and then throws himself into the volcanic cauldron of Mount Etna.

In this light we can see that Shucard’s dislike for the timing of Rolfe’s appearance is of relatively little concern, and probably irrelevant, because it presupposes that *Clarel* is the kind of

narrative in which such a question matters. That it is not such a narrative is strongly supported by the evidence, first, that while fiction it is classifiable as travel narrative (which reports events, instead of inventing them), and, second, that Melville's concept of how to depict characters in poetry was fundamentally different from textbook definitions of what needs to occur in fictional narrative. It is a commonplace among critics that the work is to be judged on its own terms, for what it aims to be, not on the critics' terms of what the critic thinks it ought to aim to be. *Clarel* is different from *Moby-Dick* as narrative and "*The Portent*" as short "lyric," and should not be judged as if it were of either genre.

## CHAPTER 4

### RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES OF MELVILLE AND DICKINSON

Connections between the theological attitudes of Dickinson and Melville have been only occasionally noticed, and have not been treated of at length to my knowledge. Historians seem to have made the connection more often than literary scholars. At the outset we may notice that as compared with Whitman, Dickinson and Melville are vastly more interested in and grapple much more extensively and urgently with Christianity, the Bible, and the nineteenth-century faith/doubt problem.

Mark Noll, in *America's God*, his 2002 history of American evangelical Protestantism from Jonathan Edwards through the Civil War, finds that in the period leading up to the Civil War, the success of an "evangelical juggernaut" left "tragic" literary figures such as Dickinson and Melville (in addition to, and "supremely," Abraham Lincoln), wondering whether "the energetic God of the Protestant evangelicals" could adequately account for "the complexities of the universe or the turmoils of their own souls," a situation that may have "pushed" them "into post-Protestant, even post-Christian theism" (438). It is important to note here that Noll rightly recognizes that Melville and Dickinson retain a "theism"; the similarities of their respective brands of theism are sufficiently interesting that I propose that there is a Dickinson-Melville component of nineteenth-century American poetry that is of equal stature with the literature of Transcendentalism and the poetry of Whitman. Garry Wills has claimed that Noll's term "post-Christian theism" is equivalent to the thought of Transcendentalists, whom he credits for

maintaining Enlightenment ideals in the strain of “Enlightened religion” in America that he follows to the present day (333).<sup>48</sup> However, as the preceding discussions of Lewis and New should make clear, it is inaccurate, if not irresponsible, to lump Dickinson and Melville into the Transcendentalist camp.

Although death is an *ur*-subject of lyric poetry, it holds a special place in the poetry of Dickinson and Melville. Both experienced a number of deaths within their families and circles of acquaintances. Furthermore, as we have seen, the Civil War had a profound effect on Americans’ response to death generally. Drew Gilpin Faust links Melville and Dickinson in her only extended discussion of any poets (hers being primarily a work of historical scholarship). “At the heart,” she says, of Melville’s *Battle-Pieces*, rests ““the riddle of death”” (201), and she describes Melville’s “struggle[] to over come his doubts about Christian doctrine in order to find a plausible foundation for reassuring faith in immortality” (202). Drawing on the scholarship that corrects a long-held idea that Dickinson was isolated from the events and effects of the war, Faust finds that Dickinson, like Melville, was, for example, acutely aware of the “dark enlightenment” that arises from the fact of the “incommensurability of victory and its human cost” (203-204). Also like Melville, “[i]n the face of doubt, she searched [...] for firm foundations for belief, for signs of immortality to relive her deep uncertainty” (206). Although I find this to be an overly loose generalization, Faust’s claim here does effectively link Dickinson with Melville and identify at least the subject matter of their theological inquiry.

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<sup>48</sup> Wills’s characterization of his distinction between “Enlightened” and “popular” religion, and the relative value he places on them, is illustrated by his statement that “in the first half of the nineteenth century, while Transcendentalism was arching over the country like a high and beautiful rainbow, the other American religion was roaring through the land like a gulley washer” (287). The “gulley washer” Wills refers to is what he identifies as the Second Great Awakening. Noll describes this phenomenon much less pejoratively with his above-quoted term “Evangelical juggernaut.”

Marilynne Robinson has written persuasively in an effort to rehabilitate and correct the record on the theological insights of John Calvin, most thoroughly in her book *The Death of Adam*. In a 1999 interview, discussing influences of Calvinism and Puritanism on a number of nineteenth-century American writers, she is quite explicit about the common ground between Dickinson, whom she links directly to Calvinism, and Melville, whom she sees as relatively “agnostic” (51). With reference to the “religious vision” of John Calvin, she says that it “is neither mysticism nor metaphysics, but mysticism as a method of rigorous inquiry and metaphysics as an impassioned flight of the soul.” She finds this vision to be “still very present in writers like Melville and Dickinson” (58). Robinson also refers to the condition of “that famished I, the I stripped to its marrow” (68):

[T]his I is a discipline, a kind of ecstatic discipline, and [...] its absolute character is openness.[...] Intelligence of the high human sort could be translated as defenselessness, because we can know many things that are very hard to bear. It’s that fierce humanness of feeling, the character of feeling, that is sought out by people like Dickinson and Melville. (68-69)

What Robinson observes and describes here is, I think, an important similarity of epistemological and theological sets of attitudes as between Dickinson and Melville. Literary critics have been remarkably little attuned to this affinity. Among the few commentaries on this issue, Walter Bezanson notes, inaccurately in my view, that in *Clarel* Melville “dramatized the Victorian suspicion that science was the confirmed enemy of revealed religion and the prime antagonist in the struggle,” which was “the same problem that Clough, Arnold, and Tennyson wrote into many of their poems, that underlay Lowell’s lament in ‘The Cathedral’ (1869), and that motivated scores of Dickinson’s brilliant, fractured inquiries” (Note 611-613). But

Dickinson and Melville are essentially different from these other poets. One reason, in the case of the British poets, is their essentially different American-ness; Clough, Arnold and Tennyson fit more within the far different context of the Oxford movement (which Melville caricatures in the figure of Derwent in *Clarel*). Melville was intensely interested in Arnold's criticism, but he read Arnold for his ideas on poetics, not on religion.<sup>49</sup> The American James Russell Lowell, as discussed at greater length below, is too far given over to the party of Hope to be likened to Melville and Dickinson.

Two other scholars should be mentioned in reviewing this area of criticism. Writing in 1950, Richard Chase ended his introduction to a collection of stories and poems of Melville with the opinion that there was a "profound mind at work" in the poems, acting "in vigorous motion," something that "can be said of only one other American poet of the time, Emily Dickinson" (xix). (His omission of Whitman is curious.) However, though his assessment is unusual in noting the similarity of temperament, he addresses the merits of their poetry rather than their theological views. Maurice Lee brings together the two poets in a conference presentation published in 1999, but his discussion is brief and leaves much in question. His focus is on them as poets and as singular American literary figures who wrote "through" the Civil War, by which he means, as I read him, they achieved a success by adopting a skepticism about Union rhetoric of a holy war. His premise, which is not necessarily wrong, but which is unstated and unsupported, is that such a Union rhetoric was wrong, and that the writers he mentions who adopted it, such as Stowe and Douglass, were misguided. He is on better logical ground when he identifies what is specifically different about Dickinson's and Melville's attitudes, namely their sober assessments of the human suffering that was at the heart of the war, ordained by God or not.

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<sup>49</sup> See Walter Bezanson's "Melville's Reading of Arnold's Poetry."

Before addressing the specifics of the two poets' religious outlooks, I turn again to Elisa New, this time to assist in presenting a right understanding of how to read religious poetry. New identifies two obstacles to this understanding: the preference for theory over "the poem"; and skepticism about religious expression in poetry. New observes that Emersonianism as poetic theory has not proven to be fruitful for the practice of poetry. Even in the case of Emerson's own poetry, his theory "does not find its natural illustration in his poetic work." Or, more frankly, she distinguishes between "theoretical" and "poetic" discourses, but wonders how Emerson, with a "'poetics' as sophisticated as [his]," could not "write a better poem" (8). She acknowledges the legitimacy of contemporary literary theorists' challenges to the New Critical attitude of "the poem as archgenre—Logos even—of the body of literature." This and other "suspicions" of the lyric have had the effect of granting to "various theories now going under the name of 'poetics'" the kind of the attention that was once granted to poems" (8). She likens this from a shift of attention from *parole* to *langue* (8).<sup>50</sup>

New, however, argues for a renewal of interest in poems themselves, in "what [poems might] do that theory can't account for," and in particular the poem's "power" of "voice," for "it is the scattering of voice that gives the poem its ironic power, the odd wonder of a ventriloquized performance no one speaker owns" (8). Theory asks legitimate questions about this voice, particularly about its "coherence" as against "the exigencies of the various systems" external to it. Nevertheless, there is value in the fact "that poems are written *as if* such coherence might obtain, as if the choice of a word, of *parole*, makes virtual the chooser" (8).<sup>51</sup> Thus, even if

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<sup>50</sup> See Virginia Jackson's "Who Reads Poetry?" for evidence of the continued vitality of the question. Though there is perhaps a surge of interest at the popular level, there is confusion in the academy about whether or not this is a good thing: Is theory in danger of being overrun by the benighted masses of poetry lovers? Or will this help advance the cause of the study of literature in literary studies?

<sup>51</sup> New's "as if" suppositions assume an element of free will that has potential relevance to the religious aspects of the poetry she discusses that it does not appear she explores. See, however, her discussion of Edward Taylor on

poems cannot *prove* these things, still “the lyric does not exist save where the existence of the speaking self is seriously entertained” (9). Though New calls this “an article of faith,” it is perhaps better to think of it as a suspension of disbelief rather than a “faith” that the skeptic might not be willing to adopt (9).

This receptiveness toward the lyric generally leads to an apologia for reading the religious lyric specifically. The poems she discusses are, “as opposed to the negative [...] and deterministic quality of our theoretical climate [...], to put it as simply as possible, religious” (9). They are “driven [...] by what William James called ‘the will to believe.’” New rightly asks that the religious lyric be read “in good faith.” To do so, she maintains, “does not require piety,” just “a certain suspension of disbelief, at least for the space of the poem” (9). This “good faith” requires that the reader understand that it is “belief rather than disbelief” that is “operative and vital in the constitution of the poem” (9). New thus responds eloquently to the deconstructionist critique:

When a contingent structure is made divine there is surely warrant for deconstruction.

This does not imply, however, that such warrant should hold reciprocally, that structures of divinity or faith require reduction to material designs. But one result of the poststructural reaction against illegitimate immaterializing of the contingent and material has been just this: a reactive materializing of the immaterial. To wit: God in the text is equated with the textual or actual orders he is suffered to prop; piety with love of dominance of domination; contemplation of Time to a denial of history. We run out of ways to credit poetics of faith with intrinsic sense or interest. (10)

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speech itself as a demonstration of the human separation from God. In the present discussion, however, poetry’s demonstration of the possibility of “the existence of the speaking self” (9) is discussed as a positive value.

Christopher Ricks makes a related point in connection with Bob Dylan's "Christian songs" in response to those who treat them as a "personal affront." He remarks that "to trust that [they] ask to be believed is quite different from concluding that if you don't share or don't come to share their beliefs, then there's nothing really in them for you" (37). Art, he says, gives us "sympathetic access to systems of belief that are not our own," and it is thus "our responsibility [...] to learn how to entertain beliefs" (377). As an atheist himself, Ricks says that he feels the kind of "delight" in the songs that "can arise from finding (to your surprise and not chagrin) that your own system of beliefs doesn't have a monopoly of intuition, sensitivity, scruple, and concern" (378-379).

Northrop Frye is more prescriptive about the critic's function with respect to religious art, and approaches the issue from the other direction, in response to criticism (his example is that of Coleridge) that attempts to construe literature in terms of a particular theological point of view. The critic, Frye says, is "compelled to treat every religion in the same way that religions treat each other, as though it were a human hypothesis, whatever else he may in other contexts believe it to be" (126). Literary criticism, says Frye, by its very nature cannot associate itself with whatever religious affiliation the literature itself may profess to have, inasmuch as "the study of literature belongs to the 'humanities,' and the humanities, as their name indicates, can take only the human view of the superhuman" (126).

One way to enter into the religious environment that Dickinson and Melville lived is to look at a more conventional religious poem of the time. James Russell Lowell's "The Cathedral" (1869) provides what we might call an American version of Arnoldian or Tennysonian poetry of faith and doubt (Lowell 349-360). It provides a contrasting example to the religious perspectives expressed in the poetry of Melville and Dickinson. In Lowell's poem, the speaker visits the

cathedral at Chartres and meditates on the faith of those who constructed the cathedral, as compared to the attitudes of contemporary skepticism: On the one hand he wonders whether “all this [Gothic] grandeur” is “but anachronism / A shell divorced of its informing life,” but he is troubled by his thoughts, by the idea that there is “no corner safe from peeping Doubt” in “This age that blots out life with question-marks, / This nineteenth century with its knife and glass / That make thought physical [...]” (lines 326-27, 334, 375-77). But he goes on to express an conviction of some sort of presence of the divine, in terms derivative, or that at least echo other writers. In terms echoing Wordsworth, the speaker says that in order to save life from being “brutish” we should “sometimes / Have intimation clear of wider scope, / Hints of occasion infinite,” but at this point (approximately halfway through this 813-line poem) he has not experienced such an “intimation” that is not occluded by doubt.

Perhaps the deeper faith that is to come  
Will see God rather in the strenuous doubt,  
Than in the creed held as an infant's hand  
Holds purposeless whatso is placed therein.

Much of the problem the speaker somehow attributes to a personified Democracy, the “Of earth's anarchic children latest born,” who will profane “the ark, / Or holy of holies” with “his unscrupulous curiosity / That handles everything as if to buy.” (527-28, 557-569). The speaker summons his own resistance to this “brown-fisted rough”; his “breast dilates / With ampler manhood, I front both worlds, / Of sense and spirit, [...] / To shape and then reshape them as I will.” (581, 586-590). With this he feels an optimism that at some point even this new “self-maker [...], / This creature disenchanting of respect” must at some point “catch the Voice that wanders earth, / With spiritual summons” and “divine” that “strength” that is “Not cognizable of sense” and “o'er sense supreme” (lines 604-605, 611, 619, 621). He is

[...] sustained by sure belief  
That man still rises level with the height  
Of noblest opportunities, or makes  
Such, if the time supply not, I can wait. (lines 694-697)

Though he walks away from the cathedral “saddened; for all thought is sad,” it is not the sadness expressed by the loss of faith in Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” For at the end of the poem he is able to pray with the conviction of the Emerson in his essay “Nature” to that “Power, more near my life than life itself”:

Even as the roots, shut in the darksome earth,  
Share in the tree-top’s joyance, and conceive  
Of sunshine and wide air and winged things  
By sympathy of nature, so I  
Have evidence of Thee so far above,  
Yet in and of me! (lines 790, 792-796)

Though some may search for other evidence of the existence of this “Power,” “My would shall not be taken in their snare, / To change her inward surety for their doubt / Muffled from sight in formal robes of proof” (805-807).

It can be seen in this extended reading of the poem that while Lowell acknowledges the problem of doubt and of science’s challenge to faith, he is not vexed. This genteel poetry that partakes of Transcendentalist optimism is far from the troubled searching of Melville and Dickinson. Its content is different in a number of respects. Lowell’s connection of religion with social and political elites marks a great difference from the searching of Melville and Dickinson. The formal and stylistic characteristics of the poetries are an element of this difference; the highly polished blank verse of Lowell could not (in the context of its time) be more different from Dickinson’s embrace of irregularity and Melville’s much more clotted and chunked diction. In this respect the fluency of Whitman’s long lines is closer to Lowell than to either Dickinson or Melville.

## *Melville*

With respect to Melville, it is perhaps easiest to begin with a discussion of what are *not* his religious views. They are not a reaction to an upbringing in an oppressive Calvinist environment imposed by his mother's sternly imposed Dutch Reformed views, as is sometimes assumed to have been the case.<sup>52</sup> Such is not to be found in Herschel Parker's exhaustive standard biography or in any of the other scholarly biographies. Elizabeth Hardwick's biographical essay on Melville is the only study I have seen that specifically addresses this misconception. She notes that Melville's father was Unitarian, as were the Shaws, family friends of the Melvilles, and that Melville was married in the Unitarian Church (his wife being the daughter of Judge Lemuel Shaw (121-122). Hardwick is properly emphatic on this point:

[I]nsofar as the Melville household is concerned, biographies do not find the family forever at prayer, enduring a pious and meekly reverent life [...] August, M's sister, seems to have been churchly but that does not appear dominant with his brothers Gansevoort and Alan. One thing is certain: Maria Melville had nothing to teach Herman about the innate depravity of mankind. (122)

To the degree that Melville was convinced of humankind's "innate depravity," the conviction came to him, as Hardwick correctly suggests, from his own life experience and the "metaphysical puzzling" stemming from his "restless curiosity" (122).

It is also safe to say that Melville was not a Transcendentalist. In this respect he is similar to Hawthorne, who, despite his close acquaintance with the leading Transcendentalists, never

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<sup>52</sup> For example, Walter Herbert claims, without biographical evidence, that in using elements of Calvinist theology in *Moby-Dick* Melville drew on "the theology of the Dutch Reformed Church in which he was reared" (1613) and that this "early religious training exposed him to Calvin's interpretation of King Ahab" (1616). Similarly, Walter Bezanson maintains that Melville early in his life had "rebelled against the stern Calvinism in which he had been reared" (Historical and Critical Note 612).

warmed up to it himself. As a neighbor of Hawthorne, Melville had met and befriended him, and even dedicated *Moby-Dick* to him, and in Hawthorne, as Hardwick puts it, had found “another struck by the terror and the dark indifference of the universe” (67). The kinship of the religious views is suggested by parts of Melville’s review of *Hawthorne and his Mosses*:

[S]pite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side--like the dark half of the physical sphere--is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black. But this darkness but gives more effect to the evermoving dawn, that forever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world. Whether Hawthorne has simply availed himself of this mystical blackness as a means to the wondrous effects he makes it to produce in his lights and shades; or whether there really lurks in him, perhaps unknown to himself, a touch of Puritanic gloom,--this, I cannot altogether tell. Certain it is, however, that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance. [...] Now it is that blackness in Hawthorne, of which I have spoken, that so fixes and fascinates me.

This is Melville speaking about Hawthorne anonymously in 1850 (though Hawthorne did later discover that Melville had written it). The Liverpool journal entry from a few years later is Hawthorne speaking about Melville in the privacy of his journal. This sympathetic vibration between the two men strongly indicates the quality of Melville’s (as well as Hawthorne’s) their religious temperaments.

Melville speaks of “that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations [...] no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free.” Marilynne Robinson offers a fresh perspective on this “Calvinist sense.” As a thinking person’s Calvinist, she writes that the “doctrine of total depravity [...] was directed against casuistical enumerations of sins,” that is, “the attempt to assign them different degree of seriousness.” To avoid such “casuistical enumerations” Calvinism’s “total depravity” deems all people to be “absolutely,” and therefore “equally,” “unworthy of, and dependent upon, the free intervention of grace” (155). Because “life makes goodness much easier for some people than for others,” which can lead to varieties of “self-righteousness,” the idea that we are all equally sinners “gives us excellent grounds for forgiveness and self-forgiveness.” Robinson finds this idea to be “kindlier than any expectation that we might be saints, even while it affirms the standards all of us fail to attain.” In this way one is helped to maintain a psychological and spiritual equilibrium: “A Puritan confronted by failure and ambivalence could find his faith justified by the experience,” inasmuch as “the world had answered his expectations” (156).

Melville’s idea of the “power of blackness” is evident throughout his poetry, often placed in chiaroscuro relief against a positive value. The victorious naval officer depicted in “Commemorative of a Naval Victory” is “In social halls a favored guest / In years that follow victory won” and his accomplishment “sheds a light from storied days.” But, as is so often the case in the poems, victory has had its dark price:

But seldom the laurel wreath is seen  
Unmixed with pensive pansies dark;  
There's a light and a shadow on every man  
Who at last attains his lifted mark--  
Nursing through night the ethereal spark.  
Elate he can never be;  
He feels that spirits which glad had hailed his worth,  
Sleep in oblivion.—The shark  
Glides white through the phosphorous sea.

The reference to the “laurel wreath” brings poetry itself within the purview of this assessment.

In an early (1943) study of *Clarel*,<sup>53</sup> Henry Wells found “striking similarities” in the diction of Melville’s poetry with that of Emerson and Thoreau, with its “economy of expression” that is “more natural to his frugal and puritanical countrymen,” language that is “economical, virile, and rough” (80). Wells did find in *Clarel* evidence of “the same metaphysical-mindedness which produced Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson” (85). But he went on to refer to the “transcendental idealism under which Melville [...] chafed severely but from which he never escaped” and to say that “[o]f all the transcendentalists he is the shrewdest critic of human society and its most malignant ills” (86). Though Wells cannot remove Melville from Transcendentalism altogether, he does give indications about why this would be appropriate: his affinities with Dickinson and Hawthorne and his criticisms of transcendentalist and what he saw as its refusal properly to deal with the “malignant ills” of the world.

Melville discusses Emerson in an 1849 letter to Evert Duyckinck. He calls Emerson “more than a brilliant fellow” and an “uncommon man.” He says, however, that after hearing Emerson lecture, he perceived “a gaping flaw”—“the insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions”; people with this sort of thinking “are all cracked right across the brow” (121-122). One of the characters in *The*

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<sup>53</sup> At that stage in the history of Melville scholarship, the only extended study of *Clarel* that Wells could identify was a German dissertation.

*Confidence Man*, published in 1857, is generally agreed to be a portrayal of Emerson. Named “Mark Winsome,” the character carries on a long conversation in Chapter 36<sup>54</sup> with the malefic Confidence Man without recognizing who he is, declaring upon first meeting him that “yours, sir, if I mistake not, must be a beautiful soul—one full of all love and truth; for where beauty is, there must those be.” The Confidence Man of course agrees, and, elaborating, says that he is “so eccentric as to have confidence in the latent benignity of that beautiful creature, the rattle-snake,” a creature whose symbolism is self-evident (191).

What one can say about Melville’s religious attitudes, based on his writings and his life, is that he was extraordinarily well read in and influenced by the Bible, as Nathalia Wright showed many years ago in *Melville’s Use of the Bible*. As the above discussion of Melville’s responses to Emerson, it is clear that he also took very seriously the problem of evil along with possibility of an absent or uncaring God, and, like many writers in the nineteenth century, in the challenges to belief raised by science. Hawthorne’s famous comments entered into his journal after his meeting with Melville in Liverpool, which have been quoted previously (page 69) must be considered in any discussion of Melville’s religious attitudes. As Hardwick puts it, this journal entry “haunt[s] M studies very much in the manner of a confession overheard in prison and passed on to the authorities” (120). Hardwick takes issue with some of what Hawthorne says here, and still finds in him the possibility of “a melancholy atheism” (124). As Hardwick reads the passage, Hawthorne thinks that Melville “could benefit from coming to belief,” which Hardwick sees as “an idle wish [on Hawthorne’s part that] M’s defiant nature could not easily honor.” However, it is not at all clear that the passage states that Hawthorne hopes that Melville will “come to belief.”

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<sup>54</sup> The chapter’s subtitle is “IN WHICH THE COSMOPOLITAN [the Confidence Man] IS ACCOSTED BY A MYSTIC [Winsome], WHEREUPON ENSUES PRETTY MUCH SUCH TALK AS MIGHT BE EXPECTED” (190).

Hardwick's other comment about the passage is that the phrase "he had made up his mind to be annihilated" could indicate "a rejection of the Resurrection and life eternal" (123). This reading also is problematic, at least in support of Hardwick's "melancholy atheism" idea, because as phrased by Hawthorne ("he has made up his mind...") Melville is talking about something that one can choose. If by deciding to be "annihilated" Melville here is choosing to reject "life eternal," that decision in itself assumes the existence of the thing rejected. Hawthorne certainly describes a condition melancholy (perhaps even clinical depression), and Hawthorne's other assessments are plausible especially in light of *Clarel*, the work that arose out of this trip (albeit twenty years later). One would not expect that Hawthorne would be reluctant to call an atheist an atheist, especially in his journal, but in Melville he does not see an atheism but a "inability to either believe or not believe." It also does not seem that Melville—unable to find comfort in either belief or unbelief—was settled into an agnosticism which would simply end speculation with a recognition that surety is impossible.

Chapter 85 of *Moby-Dick* ("The Fountain") ends with Ishmael's final thoughts on the nature of the whale's spout:

[...] through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye.

(482)

It is difficult to know exactly what Ishmael means to say here. He counts himself among the believers here, for he does not hesitate to say that the "intuitions" are "divine," or to "thank God"

for them. He is thankful, he says, because, though everyone “doubts” and many people “deny” God’s existence, “few” among them “have intuitions.” It may be asked, however, how or why *any* of those who “deny” would have such intuitions, unless it is assumed that they refuse to acknowledge them for what they are. But the next sentence is even more puzzling. The person described has “doubts of all things earthly” together with “intuitions of some things heavenly.” The “doubts of all things earthly” would suggest that such a person is metaphysically-minded, especially with the divine “intuitions.” But Ishmael claims that “this combination” of characteristics “makes neither believer nor infidel”; rather, it causes a person to equate (by “regarding them both with an equal eye”) the believer and the atheist. This passage is incoherent, inasmuch as Ishmael has apparently described himself as believer in the previous sentence, unless the phrase in the last sentence is read to mean “doubts borne of all things earthly.” In his commentary on *Moby-Dick*, Harold Beaver reads the last sentence as referring to agnosticism (“to forestall T.H. Huxley by some eighteen years”), but a careful reading of the text does not easily support this. What one can say from this passage is that Melville has a strong attachment to Ishmael, the narrator of this immense work, who himself has a strong interest in the continuum that ranges from belief through doubt to unbelief.

One thing we may reasonably conclude about Melville’s religious views is that he is in some manner theistic. As Goldman puts it, Melville’s “assumption [...] is that any transcendent or immanent God—Allah, Christ, Yahweh—is better than no God” (142-143). Or, more succinctly, any God is better than no God at all. Goldman finds that Melville’s thought may be considered a nonsectarian “protest theism” that is “rooted in Melville’s biblical imagination and in the intertextual relationship between *Clarel* and biblical texts, not in Unitarianism or

Calvinism or Transcendentalism” (169).<sup>55</sup> Goldman defines “protest theism” as “a response to God that allows the human to protest against the physical and spiritual limits imposed upon the human by the divine: undeserved suffering, death, divine self-concealment, and the presence of doubt” (131). Thus, though for Goldman it is ultimately a “theology of hope,” it is acutely aware of sorrow (6). At the end of Chapter 58 of *Moby-Dick* (“Brit”), Ishmael sees such a fragile possibility of hope, a “Tahiti” of the soul, within every person: “[C]onsider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies on insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, though canst never return!” (381).

Goldman’s reference to “any transcendent or immanent God” leads us to Robert Penn Warren’s description of a duality in Melville’s religious thought that we may see as a version of the divide between materialism and metaphysics. This links him to the outlook of Dickinson that I discuss in Chapter --. Using terms from the “The Haglets,” Warren describes these realms as “abysm” and “star”; they are “two sorts of peace”—and, as Warren describes them, two sorts of “wisdom”—that are “possible” for humans. “Abysm” is “death, blankness, ending” but it is also “a peace,” a peace that “inculcates its own kind of wisdom [...], the wisdom of man’s acceptance of his place in nature as his peace. “Star” makes possible “the wisdom of accepting [...] the need for the formulation of an idea, the need for a set of values by which he may regard himself, the need for a significant role in the universe” (70-71). But these are not alternative possibilities. As Warren has said with regard to the images of Billy Budd “aloft” and “alow,” “we must not think of one image as canceling out the other, [...] nor think of one as provisional and the other final in

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<sup>55</sup> Though Goldman’s discussion centers on Melville’s thought as represented in *Clarel*, I find that much of Goldman’s ideas apply to Melville’s religious outlook generally. Thus I present them here without necessarily including the references to *Clarel* that indicate Goldman’s immediate context.

any chronological sense”; rather, we must see them as “both ever-present and ever-significant [...]” (70). A similar effect occurs in “The Haglets,” giving expression to the human yearning for “more than a mingling” but for “a unifying,” where it is in “the depth of the ‘wizard sea’” that “the magic of reconciliation of our conflicting needs may be found,” where one encounters “The rays that blend in dream / The abyss and the star” (71).

“The Haglets” also gives a good example of the un-Emersonian strain in Melville’s poetry. Though it was first published in 1888 in the *John Marr* collection, its origins are much earlier. In his 1856-57 journal of his Mediterranean travels (the Holy Land portion of which was the basis for *Clarel*), he records an incident during a stop at Thessalonica on December 7, 1856 (a Sunday). After an excursion “ashore” with the ship’s captain, they returned to the ship and “dined aboard.” Later in the evening the “Captain told a story about the heap of arms affecting the compass” (*Journals* 56-57).

It was in 1860 that Melville voyaged from New York around Cape Horn to San Francisco on board *The Meteor*, of which brother Tom was the captain. We have seen that the idea of the “heap of arms affecting the compass” caught Melville’s attention in 1856, and that Melville wrote a poem using that subject in 1860. However, details in the later versions—specifically, the haglets and the meteor—can be traced to Melville’s journal during the *Meteor* voyage. On Sunday, July 8, Melville wrote that a comet that had appeared “the other night” was still visible.<sup>56</sup> In addition to the reference to the meteor, in a journal entry two weeks later, dated

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<sup>56</sup> And indeed a contemporary astronomer published a description of a meteor that appeared June 19, 1860, and was visible for eight weeks in both hemispheres (Horsford & Horth 530). This connects with another of Melville’s poems, “*The Portent*,” with its description of John Brown’s beard as “meteor of the war.” Virginia Jackson interestingly links the 1859 hanging with this meteor, but the interconnections are even more intriguing when it is recalled that at the time of the meteor’s appearance and Melville’s journal entry Melville was removing himself from the outbreak of war on a ship called *The Meteor*.

“Sunday, July 21” (although Sunday would have been July 22 in 1860), Melville notes the appearance of “speckled haglets and other birds about” (*Journals* 133).<sup>57</sup>

The conflict depicted in “The Haglets” is “between the English and the great Spanish Plate Fleet transporting its cargo of American gold and silver across the Atlantic waters” (Horsford & Horth 531). It is a narrative of a shipwreck, but unlike *Moby-Dick* and *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, no one has lived to tell the tale. The note goes on to say that “the birds appear as prominently ominous portents of disaster”—though it is open to question whether they are “portents” or causes of the disaster (531). In “The Haglets” there is no indication that the captain actually sees the haglets; but the “ghost” of the captain who is telling the story is aware that they were present. We are presented with the kind of “weird” lyric subjectivity that Jackson describes in “Who Reads Poetry?”

The poem is a narrative of an English admiral who is returning from taking Spanish treasure ships bound from the Americas to Spain. But the enemy officers’ swords are stowed near the ship’s compass, causing it to give wildly inaccurate readings. The ship runs aground and breaks up. All aboard are drowned, including the admiral. The three haglets that had followed the ship are in some close way associated with the disaster and death. Though a biographical connection could be drawn with Melville’s own writing career, the poem also belies the Emersonian optative spirit. It begins long after the events narrated, with the speaker standing outside a “chapel bare” where he sees a neglected “memorial stone” that depicts the “form recumbent” of the admiral, “decayed and coral-mossed.” The speaker invokes the “ghost” of the

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<sup>57</sup> A haglet is a “small species of sea-gull” (*OED*). “Speckled haglets” also make an appearance in “Sketch Third” of *The Enchanted Isles*. Melville describes climbing a stone “tower,” Rock Rodondo, of which he knows of no better place to “study the natural history of strange sea-fowl.” “It is the aviary of ocean.” As his group ascends, they observe the “grey albatross, [...] an unsightly, unpoetic bird, unlike its storied kinsman, which is the snow-white ghost of the haunted Capes of Hope and Horn.” Continuing the ascent, they “find the tenants of the tower serially disposed in order of their magnitude: gannets, black and speckled haglets, jays, sea hens, sperm-whale birds, gulls of all varieties -- thrones, pryncedoms, powers, dominating one above another in senatorial array [...]” (21-22).

“neglected fane,” to “tell the cenotaph’s intent” to explain why the memorial has been created.<sup>58</sup> The admiral having drowned, the body of course is not there. The remainder of the poem is apparently a combination of the speaker’s and the ghost’s voice.

The poem is in eighteen-line stanzas, subdivided by indentations into three six-line sections. The last line of each section is in iambic pentameter; the remainder is written in iambic tetrameter. A number of elements look back at literary tradition—the three weird sisters of *Macbeth*, the albatross, phosphorus, and wholesale death of “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Spenser is invoked, too, by the “red-cross” flag that “over the Admiral floats,” and by the stanza structure, with one of Melville’s stanzas being exactly twice as long as a Spenserian stanza; and the additional foot in the ninth line of the Spenserian stanza (forming a hexameter line) corresponds with Melville’s added foot in every sixth line (forming a pentameter line). The reductions of the Spenserian form indicate possibly an homage and humility to the achievement of his epic *Faerie Queen*. Melville’s form creates a triple counter-rhythm that plays against the idea of a duple meter of two Spenserian stanzas.

The Admiral’s story contrasts with Spenser too. Instead of the Red-Cross knight’s heroic successes on behalf of Queen Elizabeth, the Admiral in “The Haglets” is defeated by the effect of the enemy swords, the very emblems of his victory. God is not on his side. Or, rather, God was on his side at first and then has turned on him. Or, God did not even take sides. This last idea, as we have seen, is a theme that runs throughout the poems of *Battle-Pieces*.<sup>59</sup> The haglets, “whose hearts none know” (55), had followed the Spanish flag-ship, and as it sank, “long / Above her gurgling grave, shrill held / With screams their wheeling rites” (57-59).

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<sup>58</sup> These quotations are from the first ten lines of the poem. The following discussion cites line numbers. The poem itself is at pages 305-314 of Warren’s *Selected Poems*.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, “Commemorative of a Naval Victory” (152) and “The Conflict of Convictions” (93-95).

At this point, as “Acclaiming seas the advancing conqueror greet,” the poem gets to the heart of the question of the “mystery of iniquity” (the quotation from Paul that is so prominently used in *Clarel*): “But who a flattering tide may trust, / Or favoring breeze, or aught in end?—” (67-68). Doom is as likely as glory—and, to drive home the point, accordingly heavy weather sets in, as “behind is bred / A livid storm-bow, like a rainbow dead” (71-72). The ship weathers the storm. It is near midnight of a Saturday New Year’s Eve, the end of “day and week and month and year / A fourfold imminent flickering time”: “The Old Year fades, the Old Year dies at sea”—the Old Year, as well, of the Admiral’s victory. The compass reveals its unreliability due to the “brag of arms” as it “starts disturbed, a quiverer.” The helmsman notices, “but lets the trembling portent pass.” John Brown’s beard it will be recalled, had been a “portent,” “The meteor of the war.”

The “unflagging” haglets follow, in silence (109-111). As the Admiral dozes in his privacy, the taken swords “Pervert[] overhead the magnet’s Polar will,” and haglets “follow, follow fast in wake” (both in the ship’s wake and in wake-ful contrast to the dozing Admiral) [cite]. Of a sudden, the ship runs aground, and the crew feels “betrayed,” having thought they had “tacked from land” (207). The ship goes down, with the Admiral, overseen by haglets:

Like shuttles hurrying in the looms  
Aloft through rigging frayed they ply--  
Cross and recross—weave and inweave,  
Then lock the web with clinching cry  
Over the seas on seas that clasp  
the weltering wreck where gurgling ends the gasp. (223-228)

The final sixteen lines of the poem comprise two eight-line stanzas, and line lengths are shortened to trimeters. “Meteor” is explicitly mentioned in the final lines:

On nights when meteors play  
And light the breakers' dance,  
The Oreads from the caves  
With silvery elves advance;  
And up from ocean stream,  
And down from heaven far,  
The rays that blend in dream  
The abyss and the star. (243-250)

This is a poem of experience, not transcendentalist expectation. It looks back—to poetic tradition and to Edwards's awareness of human helplessness before God's immensity, the fallacy of salvation by works. As the lines ending "The Conflict of Convictions" put it, alluding to God's response to Job:

YEA AND NAY—  
EACH HATH HIS SAY;  
BUT GOD HE KEEPS THE MIDDLE WAY.  
NONE WAS BY  
WHEN HE SPREAD THE SKY;  
WISDOM IS VAIN, AND PROPHECY. (95)

No one has lived to tell the tale of the Haglets and no body has been recovered. Only the Admiral's "ghost," the "neglected fane," has survived (7).

### *Dickinson*

Dickinson's religious stance differs from Melville's in many ways but perhaps most fundamentally in her close connection with the Congregationalist Calvinism of the Connecticut Valley region of Massachusetts where she lived and her much more clearly identifiable status as a "religious poet." Her work is firmly rooted in, and is consistently responsive to, particular strains of Christian tradition. Dickinson was affected by the historical circumstances of Calvinist New England, as in many respects she emerges directly from the Puritan culture of Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet. The religious poems considered individually show great commitment to the particular religious attitudes they are concerned with. But they also reveal a

process of ever-shifting commitments, unwilling to commit to any one of them in particular for the long term, a fact that on the next order of abstraction more significantly reveals a commitment to religious uncertainty.

Unlike Melville's poems, there is an unmistakable sense of Christian piety in several of Dickinson's poems. For instance, in "Unto Me"? I do not know you –" (Fr825A), the speaker, apparently at the moment of her death, "[did] not know" Jesus.<sup>60</sup> She now, however, confronts Jesus and asks where his "House" is, and he tells her that it is "now" in "Paradise." The poem does not indicate the sort of foreboding or ambivalence about Paradise that is, for example, shown in Dickinson's letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, where she seeks to "escape Enchantment." (L319). Jesus advises the speaker to "Trust Omnipotence," but she nevertheless maintains her unworthiness, as one "spotted" and "small." Jesus's response again, as it does often in the Gospels, assures her that among occupants of his "House" worldly hierarchies are reversed: "The Least / Is esteemed in Heaven the Chiefest -." The Divine in this poem is gentle and inviting, not at all the overpowering presence of many of her other poems.

On the other hand, Dickinson also depicts an absence of God in many poems, but always with a sense of regret. Often Dickinson this is appears in the context of a God that once existed but is now absent. This is one well-known example:

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  
That no illume at all – (Fr1581)

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<sup>60</sup> She uses "Jesus," the human name, rather than "Christ," the indicator of his divine status as Savior, although the poem overall represents him as the latter.

God has been disfigured in this poem, and, though presumably God was never ultimately locatable, now God is entirely absent, and “cannot be found at all.” The poem lays blame for this, however, on humankind, who have “abdicat[ed]” belief and presumably have done the amputating. Regrettably, this renders human conduct “small.” Even an “ignis fatuus,” the mysterious nighttime glow over grass marshlands, would be better for humanity than no God at all. Despite the regret, the poem’s premise is that the question of God’s existence is a function of human power—it is the “abdication of Belief” that troubles. God’s power in this poem is dependent upon human attitude towards it.

There has been no lack of interest in Dickinson and religion in Dickinson scholarship. However, this scholarship often neglects Elisa New’s *The Regenerate Lyric*, which I consider to be among the most compelling treatments of the subject in this field. I thus discuss her views at some length here. New’s aim is to trace how the poems work through “a religious attitude neither conventional nor antinomian, but rather intrepidly speculative and theological, meditative, and at times nearly mystical.” She further wants to focus on “the tension between poetic seeing and that idolatry Reformed Christianity reviles,” for Dickinson attaches great “value [...] to a blind and wandering language [...] as spiritual instrument” (6). Dickinson “presses boundaries precisely to find that place where God marks his domain as the absence of humanly intelligible.” (153) At the “circumference” Dickinson “cultivates bluntness and abnegation, blind sight and dumb tongues; she practices, in essence, an emptying the articulate self for the sake of discerning the Other who needs not a Word.” (153). Dickinson’s poetry reflects “an arduous and lifelong pursuit of a speech fitting to God” (153). Dickinson’s “theological thinking [is] characteristically extracultural, metaphysical, and, at its most practiced, virtually mystical.” (153). Her interest, similar to Taylor’s, in “divine Unnameability” brings her “outside her transcendental times”

(153). Reviving “the Puritan’s concern for the warping of Revelation by blunt and corrupt human senses,” Dickinson deals with the “problem” of idolatry by practicing, unlike Emerson, “humility” (153).

New finds what she considers “early” poems often to reflect an early, not-yet-mature theological understanding. Thus, for example, New says that “I never lost as much but twice” (F39) is not among Dickinson’s “more considered excursions into theology,” and that “The Bible is an antique volume” (F1577) should not be seen as her “final word on scriptural authority” (154). However, this raises important questions about the idea of tracing a chronological line of development in Dickinson’s poems. Though New acknowledges the vagaries of the dating of Dickinson’s poems, her arguments often appear to be premised on the notion of a chronological progression. However, some poems she cites as less theologically mature have higher Franklin and Johnson numbers, and in some cases are assigned later years of composition by both editors, than others she describes as more mature numbers, than poems she cites as more developed. This does not necessarily discredit New’s argument significantly, for her method of selection also looks for poems that are less well-known than those which are often cited as evidence of, for example, Dickinson’s subversion of and resistance to cultural and religious norms. In the light of such lesser-known poems, it is much less easy to categorize Dickinson as subversive and resistant than would be possible on the evidence of the more popular poems. Thus, though poems written in, say, a single year, might express opposing theological viewpoints, and thus complicate New’s argument and to some degree weaken it, her larger points retain their validity. In fact, it is a characteristic of the body of Dickinson’s work that it does not claim to be consistent. Thus, New’s discussions of tendencies that have not been sufficiently recognized in

the criticism are particularly fruitful as a corrective to what we might call a “unified field” view of the poetry.

Furthermore, New proposes other valid alternatives to an idea of chronological development. Having acknowledged that “one cannot with any certainty trace a development from difficult to more transparent poems, or vice versa,” she proposes a process of “sorting the poems” non-chronologically, which she says may allow one “to detect, if not patterns of chronological development, then at least specific dynamics,” and “to chart, if not a line, then an ellipse on which the poet’s work on a given theme may be said to circulate.” For example, Dickinson’s concepts of “Centre” and “circumference” arrange themselves as such an ellipse, “and their relationship in the poems of Dickinson’s most fertile period provides a key to understanding her religious thought.” (157).

New provides another alternative to the chronological model by characterizing Dickinson as a “wanderer.” It is fairly clear that what New calls Dickinson’s “theological lyrics” are not particularly interested in the “theological culture increasingly rationalizing itself according to Victorian convention.” One finds little evidence that Dickinson was interested in, much less read, for example, Arnold or Tennyson. New maintains that her disinterest is attributable to her desire to “find in a mystical contemplation of the Divine a point outside the genteel exercise of Christianity,” and that this point is located on what Dickinson conceives of as “circumference.” On this point, Dickinson, in New’s view, is able to cast off the easy depictions of God that sometimes appear in the poetry, and to wander in more interesting theological places. Likening Dickinson to the bird of poem J613 [Fr---], who “has but to will / And easy as a Star / Abolish his Captivity,” New places Dickinson as “a charter member of Whitman’s wandering company”

(156). The speaker in Whitman's poem "The Sleepers" (1855) "wander[s] all night in [his] vision" (424). New describes the poem as one

that, harrowing the Passion and the elegy that sustains it, would yet convert the reader to a new faith whose most salient innovation is to offer peace but no security. Mazy indeed is the path of this faith, and suspect indeed its herald [...][T]he poem sustains an ambiguous relationship with orthodox notions of the Holy, commencing first by amending the idea of vision itself—and then the idea of the visionary. Both the vision and the visionary lack a certain coherence. (110-111)

New cites prophets who are reluctant at first but then learn "the new way God has mapped for them": Moses, Amos, Jeremiah, Jonah of the Old Testament; Christian figures such the doubting Thomas, Saul/Paul ("the Augustinian rover whose eyes finally clear for a vision of God's city"); and finally Milton, as "the literary apotheosis of the type."<sup>61</sup> (who, as we have seen, found that). For such figures, "spiritual entropy or bewilderment characteristically giv[es] way to apprehension of significant moral regions, thickly edged." (111). New maintains that "[s]uch 'wandering' is simply not in the repertoire of the visionary commanded, like Ezekiel, to act as God's mouthpiece." To do so would be "to survey space traditionally claimed by the one who violates, corrupts God's regions," namely that Devil who wanders indiscriminately, "gaining his insight not from God, but [...] by his own resources" (112). Dickinson, according to New, seeks a similarly "complex engagement with the Holy liberated from [the] inert predications" that she makes in some poems, such as (in New's formulation) "Burglar, Banker, Father," that "a God worthy of her faith must shed" (156). It might seem more accurate to say that it is the poems, not

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<sup>61</sup> Although, as we have seen, Milton also allowed that "Those also serve who only stand and wait."

God, that must “shed” these “predications.” But New appropriately captures some of Dickinson’s audacity in describing a God that must earn her faith.

Like Melville, Dickinson is not a Transcendentalist or otherwise a member of the party of Hope. New cites prominent critics (such as Denis Donoghue and Sharon Cameron) who “take as axiomatic that Dickinson seeks a kind of timeless transcendental signified,” and thus cast her as a Transcendentalist, “which is another way of saying: an Emersonian” (158). Dickinson was closely familiar with Emerson’s writing, especially his poetry. She does often invoke and evoke a general sense of the transcendent which does not involve Christian belief in poetry that is especially responsive to the awe that can be experienced by the self in the presence of nature, for example in “These are the days when Birds come back” (F122), in its description of a “sacrament of summer days” and a “Last Communion in the Haze.” However, Dickinson does not explicitly connect herself with his thought (unlike Whitman, for example), and her body of work poetry is altogether too conflicted to be categorized as Transcendentalist. Thus Gary Lee Stonum properly counters the Emersonian view of Dickinson by contrasting Dickinson’s imagination of “rivalry and conflicting motives in the soul’s traffic with the divine” with Emerson’s emphasis on “continuity and harmony” (56). Thus, she is mindful that awe can become “awful”:

No man saw awe, nor to his house  
Admitted he a man  
Though by his awful residence  
Has human nature been.

Not deeming of his dread abode  
Till laboring to flee  
A grasp on comprehension laid  
Detained vitality.

Returning is a different route  
The Spirit could not show  
For breathing is the only work  
To be enacted now.

“Am not consumed,” old Moses wrote,  
“Yet saw Him face to face” -  
That very physiognomy  
I am convinced was this (F1342)

The poem depicts an experience in the proximity of “awe” itself—not actually within sight of awe, much less inside the temple of awe’s “house”—but near “by.” It is not until one “labor[s] to flee” this encounter that one realizes the extent to which “awe” has “laid” its “grasp on comprehension” and has “detained vitality.” This state of suspended and uncomprehending “vitality” is evident in the aural density of the monosyllables of the poem’s first line, and of the quasi-anagram of “saw” and “awe.” The “returning” from this experience is by some unknown “route,” for which “the Spirit” can be no guide since it is occupied with the physical, essential “work” of “breathing.” The speaker is certain that this “awe” is that very face of God that Moses saw on Mt. Horeb and, “not consumed,” lived to tell the tale. Thus, though Dickinson often seems to share the Transcendentalists’ enthusiasm for intimations of divinity in the world, she, unlike, for example, the Emerson of “Nature,” finds the power of such divinity far too great for the mere human to bear.

New similarly rejects the idea of Dickinson’s Transcendentalism:

[Dickinson's] apprehension of [...] an 'original relation to the universe' [...] is attained in a region dangerously far from the conventional 'origin,' the tree of life in the garden. It is gained at more peril in a region not only outside the walls of the conventional paradise, and even outside the sanctum of the Romantic self, but outside the poet's own competence, the boundaries of her religious experience, and the verse conventions that experience habitually employs. (158)

For Dickinson "the center is not so much absent as renounced, the logos not so much inaccessible as inadmissible." Dickinson thus seeks to "write if not beyond, then athwart the quest for absolute knowledge," yet at the same time avoiding "the nihilism of the Devils' realm" (158-159).

Thus comes Dickinson's development of "a third alternative to both Romanticism and nihilism," that of "a theologically answerable doubt." New explains this doubt in the context of the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, its "ablest theorist," who provides a "vocabulary" in which to talk about "the mediate states of anticipation and dread, longing and uncertainty, that are Dickinson's staple fare" (159).<sup>62</sup> Kierkegaard, says New, presents "the unique case of a religious thinker whose answer to a dogmatic Christianity is a *lyrical* Christianity" (159; italics in original). Though New is not specific about what she means by the term "lyrical Christianity," she describes Kierkegaard's characteristic "distinctive and self-conscious preference for lyrical over logical or theoretical argument" and an awareness that "in the work of the poets [...] is revealed the essential lyricism of faith itself." She suggests that Dickinson's poetry is especially suitable for discussion in terms of "lyrical Christianity" in the way it is so "essentially hospitable

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<sup>62</sup> New's quotations of Kierkegaard (from a number of different works) are so thoroughly woven into her own prose—she truly adopts his writing as a "vocabulary"—that that I have indicated them only by interior quotation marks, without independent citations. The points I wish to make here concern New's reading of Dickinson, not her readings of Kierkegaard.

[...] to theological speculation” (159). (It must be said, however, that Dickinson’s are hardly the only poems that demonstrate such hospitality.) New also connects Kierkegaard’s theology with poetry by describing a phenomenon of “the clarification and even realization of theological meaning held in a lyric suspension,” as opposed to a poetics “founded on resistance to Ends.” Thus, poems “can imagine, in Kierkegaard’s terms, not only the aesthetic contours of faith, but its internal timbre” and “can give form to a species of faith inexpressible in discursive philosophy.” (159). This is a variety of faith that “is quite simply no longer able to conceive God sanguinely, as essentially ‘centered,’” a kind of faith, as we have seen, that she also identifies with Dickinson (160).

New finds Kierkegaard more specifically to Dickinson in laying a groundwork for dealing with the party of Hope by “adumbrat[ing] the Christianity of queasy precariousness that [Edward] Taylor and Jonathan Edwards knew: a Christianity that reattaches to Emerson’s self-reliance its due quotient of solitary terror.” Kierkegaard can explain how Dickinson “repels the transcendental alternative” despite the “peril of losing, first center, then identity, and finally all coherence whatever.” (159).

One can see Dickinson’s “third alternative” in the following poem (dated 1862), which New describes as one of the first products of her “theological maturity” (160):

This World is not conclusion.  
A Species stands beyond -  
Invisible, as Music -  
But positive, as Sound -  
It beckons, and it baffles -  
Philosophy, dont 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 – (Fr373)

As New reads this poem, it sets up an opposition between “a theology confident that God’s center guarantees ours” (that of “Strong Hallelujahs”) and “a theology enjoying no such guarantees” (that of “philosophy” and “sagacity”). New continues, in a reading of the poem that is worthy of extended quotation:

The progress of Dickinson’s images is toward a kind of whiteout of all those human compassings by which the Unknown is organized for the sake of human apprehension. Thus, music’s stabilization in the black and white of notation, and even its suspension in the ear or the air for the interval of the playing, is destabilized by ‘invisible’ while its existence is assured in ‘positive.’ That the world to which she points exists is affirmed more rather than less true by its ineffability. The synesthetic baffling of the aural in ‘invisible’ suggests the way music belongs not to eye or ear or heart or mind but to some realm in between all these: ultimately ‘positive’ as sound, it outwits the detection of any one sensor. With the substitution of ‘positive’ for ‘invisible,’ the poet educates us to an

insensate knowledge, habituates us to belief in a substratum athwart the senses. [God] partakes of this same paradoxically weightless ubiquity. Without discernible contour, He nevertheless exists, the proof of His existence strengthened rather than weakened by that indiscernibility. (160)

For both Dickinson and Kierkegaard, it is fundamental to the religious experience that we “yield up our sense of God as centered in our world” and “yield up the knit of ‘Reason’ that makes God’s order explicable through Revelation,” and look outward to the “‘unknown,’ a limit distinctly outside the boundaries of what we can grasp” (161).<sup>63</sup> Here is Kierkegaard’s description of this limit:

‘The paradoxical passion of the Reason thus comes repeatedly into collision with the unknown, which does indeed exist, but is unknown, and insofar does not exist. The Reason cannot advance beyond this point, and yet it cannot refrain in its paradoxicalness from arriving at this limit and occupying itself therewith.... But what then is the unknown....To say that it is the unknown because it cannot be known, it could not be expressed, does not satisfy the demands of passion, though it correctly interprets the unknown as a limit; but a limit is precisely a torment for the passion, though it also serves as an incitement.’ (qtd. in New 161; New’s ellipses)

In New’s reading, “Kierkegaard here displaces God from the center of the world, severing the identity between human reason and God, the identity on which Emerson’s transcendental confidence and all Romanticism depends.” What is left is for God to encounter “man on a ‘limit’ which is of a character necessarily veiled or unknown and which does not submit to human

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<sup>63</sup> In Melville’s terms, we can think of this experience as possessed of “a quality of Grasp,” a constant reaching for an ultimately unreachable unknown.

knowledge, human organization.” It is on “this very ‘limit,’ a limit traced round in Dickinson’s poetics by circumference, [that] she comes to situate her encounter with God” (161).

New finds that Dickinson’s interest in the “center” ceases as “she comes to see first the center and then the circumference *that centers*” as constructions where, at the center, she finds “the certainty of doctrine” in the place of “the hard questions God asks,” and, at the circumference, “the blasphemy of the Devil’s ‘nots,’” (the negative pole of the yes-or-no response the centered doctrine calls for), instead of “doubt” (a mode of response to the “hard questions”) (161; italics in original). For the poet this means that, “[i]f center substitutes poetic hubris, static self-reliance, and finally idolatry for these hard questions, circumference can ally the poet with Satan himself” (161). Dickinson’s rejection of “center” and “circumference” contributes to her characteristically diffuse and opaque poetic language. The result for Dickinson is that the circumference and center that are often of such interest to critics are actually “displaced in Dickinson’s work by a ‘limit’ beyond circumference,” the “limit” described by Kierkegaard, “a limit represented in spatial metaphors of disorientation.” Dickinson’s “[a]pprehension of this limit generates some of [her] most original yet least described poetic language, language that seeks God through evisceration of centered systems of reference.” In this way, Dickinson “is less an Emersonian idealist [...] than she is the most confirmed kind of Protestant, everywhere apprehending her own ‘limit,’ finding in each Emersonian circle of adequacy but another center to be dissolved” (161-162). New seems here to be speaking here of circumference as merely a necessary component of center, and as thus conceived, the ‘limit’ has nothing to do with the geometrical metaphor of circumference. New finds that Dickinson ultimately rejects the concepts of center and circumference. This in turn gives adjusts our understanding of her 1860’s (that is, in what New might call her maturity) statement that her

“business is circumference.” New observes that Dickinson’s poems have “a sense of human limitation that does not hope to see God face to face.” Thus, “[i]n Kierkegaard’s terms, what Dickinson pursues is a ‘faith’ subject to all the shared exigencies of existence, subject to all those conditions of ignorance and painful doubt under which religious life is lived.” The experience of a world with “an ontology that is God’s and so inscrutable” and “an epistemology that is human and so unreliable” leads Dickinson “further and further from center, from Reason and thus from the stylistic unity that preserves our sense of center. (162).

New criticizes Dickinson’s tendency to take a simplistically rebellious approach that tries to get around the need for serious spiritual inquiry. The poems that New objects to in this respect are some of Dickinson’s most well-known. One mode of Dickinson’s rebellion consists in getting rid of what Emerson called the “rags and relics” of the past. In “I dwell in Possibility,” for example, “to build her ‘Cedar’ roof the poet must tear down God’s sturdy house” (163). Similarly, elsewhere, “[f]ar from embarking on a pilgrimage of taxing spiritual inquiry – or paradox – the poet chooses in numerous poems simply, stalwartly, to plant her two rebellious feet” (163). For example, in “A little East of Jordan” (F 145), Jacob, “the bewildered Gymnast,” has “worsted God.” And, New says, “[i]n many of the late poems the poet’s rancor has deepened;” “The Bible is an Antique Volume” (F1577) is a “summary indictment of the whole Bible” and “a defiant championing of the pagan alternative in Orpheus” (163). In that poem, she says, “one can’t help feeling [...] that that poet has an easy time of it here. The tactic is reductive, prosaic. What she sets up in such cut-out, flimsy personae as ‘Satan – the Brigadier’ and ‘David – the Troubadour’ are straw men too readily knocked flat” (164). In “She staked her feathers – gained an arc” (F853), “circumference” is rendered meaningless by being “reduced

with such facility to a sparrow's feathered nest," and in any case "the tone here is so markedly off that one scarcely want to claim the poem" (164-165).

New finds that the "challenge" for Dickinson is "to accomplish something new without sinning in the old ways," because it is necessary to sin, "originally, or by implication," in order to find redemption, "regeneration's lyric spring" (166). In New's account, Dickinson's way of sinning originally is, paradoxically, to re-enact Adam's sin by seeking knowledge of God. New attempts to trace the path of Dickinson's spiritual self-scrutiny as one that "leads her to question and systematically cancel her own premises, premise by premise, verity by verity, center by center, and finally circumference by circumference" (166). New's analysis arrives at a "negative way of 'possibility.'" As opposed, presumably, to what had been the positive way of "dwelling in Possibility," this is "a possibility refigured as doubt, attained not by hope or belief but by hard wandering [and] a surrender to Edwardsean instability" (166). New, however, is not clear about how this wandering and surrender will constitute the achievement or awareness of the kind of sin that is redemptive. New goes on to describe this negative way as "a kind of negation that rejects universal, transcendental categories [...] to pursue its 'Fairer house than prose.'" As Dickinson works through this scrutiny, "all lineaments of the conventional House—the struts of a prosaic theology, the structures of an orthodox poetry—are whited out, and the Temple, the Poetry, the Paradise are reached by a poet who has wandered and wandered blind" (166). New here makes an interesting link between Dickinson's theology and her poetic practice, and apparently posits a causal connection: the spiritual wandering and surrender have led her to an unorthodoxy both theological and poetic.

New detects a key moment in Dickinson's searching in this poem:

On a Columnar self --  
How ample to rely  
In Tumult – or Extremity -  
How good the Certainty

That Lever cannot pry –  
And Wedge cannot divide  
Conviction – that Granitic Base-  
Though None be on our Side –

Suffice Us – for a Crowd –  
Ourselves – and Rectitude -  
And that Assembly – not far off  
From furthest Spirit – God –

Her reading locates an unexpected degree of ambiguity and irony in a poem so rich in “Certainty” and “Rectitude.” New finds that “these are double lines, lines that both claim and shrink from the privileges of the columnar self in an extremely complicated way: now claiming them as a stay against the pressures of an unsympathetic society; now ironizing them in words like ‘granitic,’ suggesting just how much the rigidity of opposition resembles the rigidity of doctrine.” Finally, she says, the poem “recoil[s] from the realm whose boundaries the poet is loathe to cross” (167). New here maintains that in the end the poet does not need the affirmation of “Rectitude” that comes after death, that the poem seeks a theological affirmation that doesn’t require one to die in order to be sure of. The knowledge possessed by the “Columnar Self” is inadequate and unsatisfactory. In this poem there is “a first apprehension of that transgressive space of death it is the fate of circumference’s champion to invade” (167)—which is to say, to invade that space during life. This is where Dickinson achieves her sin of knowledge—a knowledge not of Good and Evil, but the Faustian knowledge of Death and Life.

And indeed it is Faust, as interpreted by Kierkegaard, whom New refers to in this respect. Kierkegaard considered Faust’s “precise sin” to be “his renunciation of limitation, the fact that he is not willing to ‘attire himself in himself’” (167). What Faust fails to do—his “precise sin”—

is to forego “displacements of a ‘columnar stance’ or pronoun, without the security of a self-description, or justification, however antinomian: ‘Faith is this paradox; and the individual absolutely cannot make himself intelligible to anybody’” (167-168). In Dickinson’s case, “[t]he search for ‘circumference,’ or a theological position with whose aid the poet might encircle, or compass between ‘her narrow hands – Paradise,’ must cut itself off without pose, imitation, without the comforts of Emersonian authorization” (168). Thus, “the poet who would spread ‘wide her narrow hands’ to apprehend God” must now seek out “the ‘limit’—which is God—by finding first her own limit,” with full awareness that “both limits, insofar as they are genuine, [are] ‘unknown,’ unrecognizable” (168). In her “progress toward God,” she is called on to “shrug off the persona or questing agent” while at the same time “preserve[ing] the quest itself”; this is a “most paradoxical encounter, [...] which even as it doubts the Self must by means of that Self go on” (168).

In Dickinson’s response to this paradox “[a] language of disorientation figures the search for desubstantialized self,” and “the language of wandering replaces the earlier language of a braggadocio ‘circumference’” (168). This poem is an example of such a response:

Escaping backward to perceive  
The Sea upon our place -  
Escaping forward, to confront  
His glittering Embrace –  
  
Retreating up, a Billow’s height  
Retreating blinded down  
Our undermining feet to meet  
Instructs to the Divine. (F969)

Dickinson here gives up “both assertive ‘I’ of maverick opposition and ‘she’ of coy displacement.” She is “now full of doubt” and “[t]he feet are now ‘undermining.’” The persona is now that of “the poet as escapee moving in a vertigo of ‘forward and backward,’ paradoxically

rising and falling.” She “is no longer centering her ‘circumference,’ hardening in ‘granitic’ certainties the conditions of her exile.” She has made the leap of faith: “No long confined by, or borrowing the privileges of, self-reliance, she has in Kierkegaard’s terms, ‘let go.’” (169).

But there are “terrors” associated with the “gesture of renunciation.” In “’Twas Like a Malestrom, with a Notch,” (F425), Dickinson “anatomizes the affective state of letting go, offering an Edwardsean demonstration of how the leap of faith is experience, how it *feels* to the religious subject. It feels like a graphically literal reprise of the Fall” (169). New reads the metaphor as “that interval before sleep when consciousness trips and the waking self grapples for foothold” (169). Following are the first two of its six stanzas:

’Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,  
That nearer, every Day,  
Kept narrowing its boiling Wheel  
Until the Agony

Toyed Coolly with the final inch  
Of your delirious hem --  
And you dropt, lost,  
When something broke --  
And let you from a Dream – (F425)

In New’s reading of this Poe-like image, the terror of the ‘narrowing’ wheel of the maelstrom comes “because there is no way of telling where its center is in relation to the circumference’s ‘hem,’” although the poem seems to indicate that the center is where the “you” is located, as the maelstrom (unlike the meteorological phenomenon) closes in, inducing claustrophobia. New’s reading continues plausibly, finding that, by metaphorical association, the way “the self meets the world” is in the experience of the “anticipatory dread” of “their imminent collision” (170). Oddly, “the uncanny unpredictability of the experience is its best religious affirmation” (170). At the end of the poem, the speaker does not know ‘Which anguish was the utterest – then -- / To Perish, or to Live,’ but this alternative is, as it was for Jonathan Edwards, “only the point of

departure for a harrowing simulation through sensate metaphors of our true spiritual instability” (170). The spiritual merit of this experience is the sensory immediacy of dread, as the “chasm” between life and death is “fully felt as a drop in the stomach” (170).

New finds the spiritual inquiry extending even further in this poem:

I saw no Way – The Heavens were stitched --  
I felt the Columns close --  
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres --  
I touched the Universe --  
  
And back it slid – and I alone --  
A Speck upon a Ball --  
Went out upon Circumference --  
Beyond the Dip of Bell -- (F633)

Here, says New, Dickinson’s “Circumference” is not a “safe harbor” but a place “of nothingness virtualized and yawning.” It “ventures far out where music yields to sound and sound to mere slippery contour. Metaphors of sight and sound lack the elasticity, the simple relevance, to cover what the poet finds” (170). This poem’s “nearly surreal quality makes us want to call it modern, or existential, but the isolation its images render is the Calvinist’s normative state,” and, one might add, the images are remarkably similar to Edwards’s spider’s thread (171). In New’s reading, the ‘Dip of Bell’ indicates both an “arrival at a kind of religious outpost, a place where bells herald an arrival,” and the outpost as a “metaphor for its distance from religious security,” although this reading is problematic because the poem is located “Beyond” the “Dip of Bell” (171). Again this is not a major difficulty, as New’s point is that “this double, reflexive movement” is “essentially pious,” and “delivers Dickinson into the only ‘originality’ she will find, that invented by Adam.” New’s point, is problematic, though, since in Adam’s case it was gaining knowledge of evil, and for Dickinson it is only the attempt and presumption to gain knowledge of that which is unknowable, namely Death, which was the result of Adam’s sin but

not its goal. However, New has made the point earlier that it is through the awareness of one's sinfulness that redemption is possible, and such seems to be the case here, regardless of whether the means of accomplishing it precisely duplicate the Adamic offense. Considered in this way, New's continuing remarks are instructive, as she describes the sense of "dread" that the speaker experiences, "all too conscious of the sin of knowledge that drove her from center." This, says New, is precisely the condition of Kierkegaard's "dizziness of freedom," the state that "tempers heightened knowledge with a sense of sin or transgression," as it is this freedom that transforms the experience into a "recapitulation of the Fall." But this "poet as dreading subject" experiences additional anxiety due to her isolation, having become "A Speck," cut off from humanity. Thus, Dickinson's subject in the outer darkness of "circumference" faces the terror of "the intensified confrontation with sin," exacerbated by the awareness that she is alone in the universe (171). We can see how this sort of dread may, when the emotional cost of this experience is felt in its aftermath, make one uneasy about the prospect of Paradise and perhaps even frustrated that such an inquiry is necessary. Thus, Dickinson in several moments expresses a distaste for the idea of Paradise, as in the relatively whimsical poem "I never felt at Home – Below" (F437). It may be also that the recoil from this experience of dread contributes to Dickinson's attraction to the world of materiality, as is explored in the following chapter.

As in her reading of "On a columnar self" (F740), New reads a "It always felt to me – a wrong" (F521) as entirely ironic. It is ostensibly a jibe—"My justice bleeds – for Thee!"— at Yahweh's refusal to allow Moses to accompany "the Tribes" of Israel into "the Canaan." Placing all her bets on irony, New reads it as an expression of the threat of hagiography, "the lure of spiritual heroism" in a "a figure whose symbolic conductivity allows the sinner vicarious redemption from her own sins, the less glamorous sins of the faithless Israel" (173). Here, New

says, Dickinson's critique is of "the Romanticization of the spurned hero," a critique that includes views of Christ, not only as "buoyant hero 'risen' at the center" but also as "the type of tempted Moses, driven to the circumference without succor" (173).

Here and throughout, New depicts Dickinson's "theological program," in New's own terms, as austere, "flexed and lean, martial and unsparing" as it rejects "the hardened 'granitic,' or objectified 'centre' as idolatrous" and "the martyrology or Faustian imitations of 'circumference' as similar travesties" (174). This depiction carries with it the suggestion of spiritual heroism. As New continues, the experience begins to sound like a Zen state: ultimately Dickinson must "sacrifice" both "center" and "the circumference that centers" in this "final phase of [her] search for an objectless spiritual state, a Paradise with no center" (174). The result in any case is an "aesthetic of the ascetic" (174).

New's concept of the change in Dickinson's idea of circumference is that it transforms from an outer limit—one that would "fix, limit, or 'centre' itself in its own however commodious forms"—into yet another boundary to cross (173). As represented in the following poem, as read by New, in this changed idea circumference is something that "would limit or 'Engross'" what Dickinson calls 'Finity'" (173).

Time feels so vast that were it not  
For an Eternity –  
I fear me this Circumference  
Engross my Finity –

To His exclusion, who prepare  
By Processes of Size  
For the Stupendous Vision  
Of His diameters – (F858)

New describes this poem as “the characteristically difficult work of Dickinson’s most mature theological period of 1858-64.”<sup>64</sup> In a strained, if not impossible, reading, New invites us to “suppose [...] that what the poet ‘fears’ is that Circumference will be engrossed *by* the poet’s own Finity. She continues: “Reading thus, we see an ‘engrossing,’ or fixation, of Circumference by ‘Finity.’” (176). Circumference then becomes a “spatial metaphor for the ‘Time’ whose increments are nodes where God and man meet, but in a false relation, a relation determined by human finity or human Reason” (176). However, in this “spatialization” and “visualization” of “the invisible,” “the thing [is] defrauded.” (176). This allows one to read ‘To His exclusion’ “as an acceptance of God’s exclusion, and of a kind of epistemological exile” that “only increases the hardships endured in that region beyond the ‘Dip of Bell,’” for now the subject is doubly isolated, “cut off from both intelligibility to man and intelligence of God” (177). For New, “a whole history of Dickinson’s renunciations culminates” in the phrase “To His Exclusion” (177). The “narcissism of ‘centre,’ ‘finity,’ and [...] circumference” are yielded, the “personae – Jacob, Moses, the Devil—[are] renounced,” and “now the poet resigns herself to a simultaneous anonymity among the ‘tribes”” (177). By the phrase “To His exclusion,” Dickinson accepts “a theological existence” that is stripped of the possibility of “stabilizing vision” or of “any absolute understanding of God” (177). This, finally, is the essence of what New means by anti-Emersonianism. It is also the true condition of the “wanderer.”

This poem, as New reads it, represents for her a “prolegomenon to a poetics of doubt,” a variety of poetics that is “only gained by an ‘infinitely resigned’ believer who cuts herself off from her finity, and thus from her own power of vision of sight, who accepts circumference she cannot grasp conceptually” (177). Dickinson’s poems that are “informed by such intense

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<sup>64</sup> All the poems New reads, including those she reads as theological immature, come from this period, in both Johnson’s and Franklin’s datings. Writing in 1993, before Franklin’s edition was published, New has used Johnson’s numbering and dating.

resignation” are among her “least understood” yet “most ambitious” poems in the way they extend the “burden of spiritual exercise beyond the limits of circumference” (177). They have the marked austerity of “stripped, vertiginous texts” that “systematically deprive the speaker of deliverance [and] telos” (177). The deprivation extends further, in New’s analysis, to include “organizing images,” a re-emergence of the problem of “[t]he proper confrontation of God in poetry [...] that taxed and so subdued earlier Puritan poets” (177). Though Dickinson’s poetry, New says, is “straying” and “heretical,” it is still “remarkably orthodox” in the way it “takes mediation, its enabling images, for idolatry” (177). But it is precisely this, and the lengths to which Dickinson takes it in her “steadily widening sense of what is image or idol” and in the “discovery of the ‘columnar’ in its widest conception,” that gives the poetry its “rigor” (178). In short, its “uncompromising piety” empowers the poetry to avoid any hint of deification of “its own mental process.”

At this point of the spiritual progress New is mapping out, now that Dickinson has experienced “the reciprocally constricting possibilities of both center and circumference,” she is led even further, to “renounce” even “‘Eternity’”:

You constituted Time --  
 I deemed Eternity  
 A Revelation of Yourself --  
 ’Twas therefore Deity

The Absolute – removed  
 The Relative away --  
 That I unto Himself adjust  
 My slow idolatry –

(F488)<sup>65</sup>

The key indicator of such renunciation is the “deemed” which proclaims that, in New’s reading, “every statement about God,” including “Eternity,” is merely an element of the poet’s “repertoire

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<sup>65</sup> Johnson’s number for this poem is 765, which again indicates the problem of chronological progression that, despite New’s disclaimer early in her discussion of Dickinson, is unavoidably linked to her notion of Dickinson’s spiritual maturation.

of constraints.” The attempt to describe God as “Eternal” is to “freeze” or “petrify” “Eternity,” and thus to “Deify,” and thus to engage in the sin of “idolatry” that ends the poem (178). The structure of the poem highlights this by juxtaposing “Deity” and “idolatry” (with lower-case “i”) as the last line of both stanzas. However, this poem does not arrive at the renunciation New describes; the poem reports on an insight that has already been experienced. In the first line the speaker has already recognized her error, by acknowledging that God “constituted Time,” since the past tense usage of “constituted” suggests a range of meanings, including, for example, the idea of God as the creator of Time, though the more obvious sense of God “consisting” in Time is made problematic by the past tense usage, since Time is by definition ongoing. Perhaps one interpretation could be that the past-ness refers to the speaker’s own earlier belief. A parallel statement is made in the second stanza: in New’s reading, to have “deemed” is to have “the ‘Absolute’ leveled to the status of the ‘Relative’” (178). New’s insight that in this poem “God’s proportion reduces all human knowledge to equivalences” (178) modifies the idea that “Absolute” is “leveled to the status” of “Relative” and suggests that this is a difference that God transcends, as such categories are irrelevant—the concept of Absolute is “removed” and the concept of Relative is cast “away.” New’s subsequent elaboration of the idea is even further refined: “as ontological categories, categories belonging to God’s vision, both the ‘Absolute’ and ‘Relative’ are here affirmed even as they are resigned; as epistemological [...] categories, on the other hand, they are banished” (178-179). Or, stated more clearly: “by naming or ‘deeming,’ the speaker turns God’s ontology of unity to idolatrous duplicity. Her very description of the absolute must falsify God’s absolutes in order to reveal, to utter, itself” (179).

The problem faced here (and perhaps in all religious poetry) is brought to an acute level: if any act of naming can only falsify, or be idolatry, how can the poet speak? New seems to

respond this way: For the poet who “has now not only yielded hope of the way, but also hope of seeing [...] [t]he only way is the way is the way unseen, the way stumbled upon, and stumbled upon not by a maverick or a hero in ‘Pentateuchal Robes’ but by an invisible, anonymous member of the tribes, infinitely resigned to earn no recognition” (179). Presumably, it is in this “infinite resignation” that one’s only hope of redemption lies. New seems to find a resolution, of sorts, in this poem:

From Blank to Blank –  
A Threadless Way  
I pushed Mechanic feet –  
To stop – or perish – or advance –  
Alike indifferent –

If end I gained  
It ends beyond  
Indefinite disclosed –  
I shut my eyes – and groped as well  
'Twas lighter – to be Blind – (F484)

Here New finds what is perhaps the exemplar of the “‘infinitely resigned’ faithful wanderer,” whose spiritual quest is “in every respect absurd” and ultimately futile: “The teleology of ‘Paradise,’ and ‘end,’ is forsworn,” and “the theological, or poetic journey toward an encounter with a God of known terms is ‘blanked’ out” (180). In New’s reading,

[t]hese poems tell us it is better to be blind than, by the compass of our narrow hands, to ‘deify.’ In blindness, in the groping unchartered poem that forgoes not only the ‘centre’ but also the ‘circumference,’ not only the Romantic persona but also the ‘Pentateuchal robes’ that would salvage that persona as martyr, divinity avails itself as ‘possibility,’ albeit a possibility never to be claimed in stable image or expression. (181)

Or, stated in yet another way, this poetry reveals tragic reversals: the “Possibility” where the poet had dwelt is “turned inside out” and “becomes the absurd faith,” just as “hope” becomes, “in a

fallen world,” its opposite, “dread.” Then, New finds “Doubt” taking the place of Emersonian “compensation” (182):

A Doubt if it be Us  
Assists the staggering Mind  
In an extremer Anguish  
Until it footing find –

An Unreality is lent,  
A merciful Mirage  
That makes the living possible  
While it suspends the lives. (F903)

New finds that the “Doubt” of this poem, “this poignantly human disorientation,” is where Dickinson’s “most mature theological inquiry arrives” (182). Both “Transcendental ‘possibility’” and “Emersonian struggle” are, in New’s view “ceded to a precarious and existential ‘living’ that purges itself of both the certainty of center and circumference” (182). Though the poet skirts “virtual heresy in moments of recognition, or blind revelation,” she is able to avoid it “when she cancels her own terms,” recognizing them as “idolatry” (182). In the end, “the poetic and theological movement that risks this heresy by circumnavigating the unknown, finds beyond circumference, in doubt and in the forms doubt vacates, piety” (182). It is only this kind of doubt that “holds promises of ‘footing’”; and it is only the “‘mirage’ toward which the poet wanders” that can afford the prospect of “The stupendous / Vision / Of his Diameters” (182).

## CHAPTER 5

### TEXTUAL SCRUPLES AND DICKINSON'S "UNCERTAIN CERTAINTY"

*She got a mortgage on my body, now,  
and a lien on my soul*

--Robert Johnson  
"Traveling Riverside Blues"

At the end of an 1866 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, musing on the death of her dog and acknowledging Higginson's condolences, Emily Dickinson famously wrote:

You mention Immortality.

That is the Flood subject. I was told that the Bank was the safest place for a Finless Mind. I explore but little since my mute Confederate, yet the "infinite Beauty" - of which you speak comes too near to seek.

To escape enchantment, one must always flee.

Paradise is of the option -  
Whosoever will  
Own in Eden notwithstanding  
Adam, and Repeal. (L319; Fr1125B)<sup>66</sup>

"Immortality," "the Flood subject," is a matter of ultimate concern in Dickinson's poetry and thinking.<sup>67</sup> In this letter Dickinson transfers the very real and worldly danger of a flood to the

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<sup>66</sup> The citation includes a reference to a poem to reflect my lineation of the ending passage (from "Paradise" to the end) as Franklin gives them in his poem 1125B. Johnson presents the words as a prose passage in his edition of the letters. This representation aims not at textual fidelity but at highlighting the textual incongruities that I detail in the proceeding discussion.

<sup>67</sup> The phrase "ultimate concern" is from Paul Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith*, where he defines "faith" as "the state of being ultimately concerned," toward which "[m]an is driven [...] by his awareness of the infinite to which he belongs" (1, 10). Søren Kierkegaard similarly refers to one who "has God [...] by virtue of the infinite passion of

idea of “Paradise” or “enchantment” as “Immortality,” and alludes also to the great punishing flood of Genesis that, though ultimately purifying, wrought death and destruction. She seems to equate “infinite beauty” (apparently Higginson’s phrase) with both “Immortality” and “Paradise,” and as a flood it is so “near” that in order to “escape” one’s only recourse is to discipline the will, to “flee,” as if from the Sirens’ songs.<sup>68</sup> The final lines of the letter accordingly recite a recognizably Arminian view of the role of free will in working out one’s salvation: “Paradise” is an “option” attainable by the exercise of the “will,” “notwithstanding / Adam[’s]” original sin.<sup>69</sup> But Dickinson’s swerve into the idea that one may wish “To escape enchantment” announces her dubiety about the merits of an eternity in Paradise. She retains an attachment to the world and a readiness to accept bodily death as the end of all life.

The portion of the above passage lineated as poetry (from “Paradise” to “Repeal”) also presents a set of curious textual issues. It appears, with some variations, in two manuscripts. Thomas H. Johnson and R. W. Franklin render it as a poem in their variorum editions (J1069; Fr1125).<sup>70</sup> The manuscript that Franklin identifies as earlier is written on notepaper and apparently lineated as a poem. Franklin gives it as his A representation:

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inwardness” (127). Jane Eberwein rightly refers to religion as a “centering concern” of Dickinson’s (70). In this respect, at least, one may say that Dickinson was a person of faith. But, as I will discuss, Dickinson’s poetics involves a synthesis of this faith with an equal concern about the materiality of the world.

<sup>68</sup> She speaks similarly in the poem “No man saw awe, nor to his house” of “human nature” “laboring to flee” the “dread abode” of divine “awe” (Fr1342).

<sup>69</sup> Mid-nineteenth century Congregationalism displayed Arminian tendencies in its acceptance of the role of free will in overcoming the original sin of Adam’s “Repeal” of “Paradise” (Eberwein 85-86). On the history of Arminianism in American Protestantism, see Gerald McCullough’s “The Influence of Arminius on American Theology.” On Dickinson’s particular relation to Arminianism, see Richard Brantley’s *Experience and Faith*, especially pages eighteen to twenty. The debate about Arminianism is still current in American evangelical Christianity. See, for example, Kevin J. Vanhoozer (17-34).

<sup>70</sup> There are some fundamental differences in the editorial practices of the two editors that should be noted at this point. Johnson gives a principal representation for each numbered poem, which is generally “the earliest fair copy” of the poem (Notes on the Present Text lxi). Franklin gives a chronological sequence of readings, without a principal representation (Introduction, *Variorum Edition* 29). However, he does select a single version for his reading edition, which is presumably how many students and the reading public will encounter the poems. His general rule for

Paradise is of the option.  
Whosoever will  
Dwell in Eden notwithstanding  
Adam and Repeal – (Fr1125A)

In that manuscript, “Own in” is interlined above “Dwell in” in line three. The later manuscript is the letter to Higginson. The later manuscript is the letter to Higginson, a part of which is presented above. Johnson’s edition of the letter lineates the text in this way:

Paradise is of the option.  
Whosoever will Own in Eden notwithstanding Adam and Repeal. (L319)

This is Johnson’s copy text for his poem J1069, which he says is “exactly rendered” as presented in the letter, “except” that in the letter the text comprises “two sentences” that “are arranged each as a paragraph” (756). Franklin, however, sees neither sentences nor paragraphs, finding instead that Dickinson “incorporated the lines as verse into her letter” (978). Franklin’s apparatus for his B version (presented above with the Higginson letter) indicates the following lineation and variant in the Higginson letter:

Paradise is of the  
Option –  
Whosoever will  
Own in Eden                      Own] Dwell  
notwithstanding  
Adam, and Repeal.

Franklin also notes that “[b]efore posting, [Dickinson] added in pencil the comma and period in the final line” (978).<sup>71</sup>

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selection there is, unlike Johnson’s, “to choose the latest version of the entire poem, thereby giving to the poet, rather than the editor, the ownership of change” (Introduction, *Reading Edition* 6).

<sup>71</sup> Between the words “notwithstanding” and “Adam,” Franklin indicates his symbol for “page or column breaks” (45); he does not specify which kind of break occurs in this case. As it does not bear on the present discussion, I have not attempted to represent it here. Also, above the first line (beginning with “Paradise”), Franklin gives the sentence “To escape Enchantment, one must always flee,” presumably to indicate where the passage that follows occurs in the letter. But it is worth noting that this sentence scans as a line of iambic pentameter (not Dickinson’s usual metrical form). Its opening anapestic motion propels the idea about how “to escape Enchantment.”

My opening representation of the excerpt of the letter is a hybrid, using Johnson's edition of the letter except for that portion represented by Franklin's B version of the poem. This hybrid reading suggests in microcosm the swirl of the textual issues that dominate current Dickinson scholarship. Here, both editors agree that the earlier manuscript was lineated as poetry, a conclusion which apparently supports the idea of this text as worthy of representation as a poem. However, that manuscript was superseded by the text's inclusion in the later manuscript of the Higginson letter, where it looked to one experienced editor (Johnson) like sentences and prose paragraphs. Also, the period that Dickinson added in the letter manuscript (after "Repeal") is uncharacteristic of Dickinson's poems and is some evidence in favor of a prose reading. And although "Own in" was interlineated above "Dwell in" in the first manuscript, "Dwell" is reintroduced as a variant in the second manuscript, indicating that Dickinson was not so certain about the revision as it had appeared in the first manuscript. Overall, after working through the details, one realizes that one cannot precisely locate among Dickinson's manuscripts the poem that serves as Johnson's principal representation and as the version (1125B) that Franklin gives as the single, and, in effect, "principal" representation in his reading edition. This conundrum introduces a number of issues in Dickinson scholarship; one I wish particularly to notice, and to explore the implications of, is what, in its essence, constitutes a "poem" by Emily Dickinson.

Recalling the theological issues this text, or set of texts, also presents, we see in this example the coincidence of two important areas of Dickinson criticism: the textual and the religious. This coincidence invites speculation about an interconnectedness between textuality and religion that appears not to have been addressed by Dickinson scholars. The manuscript school of Dickinson criticism has focused intently on features of Dickinson's manuscripts (the

“textpage”<sup>72</sup>) but has not taken sufficient account of the abstract notion of what I will refer to as the “Poem”: that component of an artwork that consists in its ideas, apart from the physical materials from which it is constructed and reproduced.<sup>73</sup> This directly relates, I maintain, to the lack of interest in the religious content the poems among many manuscript critics.<sup>74</sup> Conversely, critics interested in religion have not been interested in the importance of the textpage, or in materiality more generally, as an important component of either Dickinson’s art or her religious outlook.<sup>75</sup> In this study, I wish to show that there is a necessary relationship between Dickinson’s

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<sup>72</sup> The term is adopted from Jerome McGann’s influential article “Emily Dickinson’s Visible Language.”

<sup>73</sup> This is the fundamental constituent of “poetry” as conceived of by T. V. F. Brogan. He describes the text as a “manifestation” of the “prior, originary, abstract entity called ‘the poem.’” “The poem” thus has no “ontological precedence.” However, he also describes “the poem” as “a twin thing, a bivalent entity,” which is “brought together only in acts of consciousness, whether aural performance, silent reading, or heard reading” (940). Similarly, Franklin states that his variorum edition “is based on the assumption that a literary work is separable from its artifact” and can have “many manifestations.” Franklin maintains that he has simply altered Dickinson’s manuscript “manifestations” to provide “typographical” versions (Introduction *Variorum Edition* 27). This appears to be what many years earlier he had described as a “Platonic approach to editing” (*Editing* 141). My argument with respect to Dickinson, however, is that the abstract entity and the text comprise an ontological unity, even though it may be “bivalent” when participating in the “acts of consciousness” that Brogan describes. My view is similar to the “Aristotelian approach to criticism” described by Franklin (in opposition to the “Platonic approach to editing”) that sees “pure form without matter as mere abstraction; matter without form as simple potentiality” (*Editing* 141-42). Franklin posits this opposition as a difference between the work of editor and that of critic, which is understandable but would not seem to be inevitable.

<sup>74</sup> Susan Howe describes Dickinson’s manuscript style as a continuation of the tradition, originating with Anne Hutchinson, of New England antinomianism and “lawlessness,” but her focus is not on Dickinson’s own religious views (1).

<sup>75</sup> For example, in his excellent 2000 book on Dickinson’s religious imagination, James McIntosh dispenses with the issue in his prefatory “Note on the Text”: while it is important to “get as close as possible while reading to the scene of her writing,” Johnson’s editions of the poems and letters “supply the appropriate texts available to me for a commentary concerned with Dickinson’s thought and poetic sensibility” (xi-xii). (McIntosh notes that Franklin’s 1998 variorum edition did not appear in time for him to use it.) At one point, however, he begins to describe a connection between Dickinson’s textual practice and her religious views. He says that what he has called Dickinson’s “dialectic between faith and doubt” is evident “even within the form of her texts.” He continues: “Simply on a verbal level her practice of not choosing definitely among alternatives for the words of her poems is itself a form of knowing vacillation.” He goes on briefly to discuss variants in “This World is not conclusion” (Fr373), but he does not concern himself with the manuscripts, here or elsewhere, and does not pursue the point further (32-33). Not surprisingly, Dickinson’s formal practice, especially her metrics and stanza structures, has been related to her religious views. In a 1987 article, A. R. C. Finch argues that Dickinson associated iambic pentameter with “the power of religion and public opinion, with formality, and with stasis” and that her rare use of that meter “demonstrates her attitudes toward that tradition (she resists the meter, approaches it with tentative ambivalence, and sometimes gains power from it)” (166). Dickinson’s use of the hymn stanza is ironic, says Finch: “Hymns belong to a religious orthodoxy that Dickinson undoubtedly identified as ‘masculine’” (169). David Porter also identifies Dickinson’s ironic use of the hymn form as the “base of orthodoxy” against which she “so artfully refracts the personal rebellion . . . , the scandalous love of this world, and the habitual religious skepticism” (*Early Poetry* 74).

religious concerns and her textual practice, and that this relationship is the basis for a poetics that synthesizes philosophical materialism and religious transcendence.<sup>76</sup>

A brief review of the two strands of criticism will give context to this view of her poetics. Manuscript critics bring valuable attention to Dickinson's interest in the physicality of the manuscripts, which they depict as a sort of proto-postmodernism. Susan Howe puts it with her characteristic poetic forcefulness:

Words are only frames. No comfortable conclusion. Letters are scrawls,  
turnabouts, astonishments, strokes, cuts, masks.  
These poems are representations. These manuscripts should be understood as  
visual productions.  
The physical act of copying is a mysterious sensuous expression.  
Wrapped in the mirror of the work. (*The Birth-Mark* 141)

The manuscript school offers intriguing and illuminating readings of the details of the textpage and of the poetry generally. Other critics, however, identify many legitimate shortcomings in this mode of criticism.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, by the fact of their emphasis on the manuscript, strong

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<sup>76</sup>This may incidentally, and to some degree, refute certain of David Porter's critiques of Dickinson: "Dickinson is the only major American poet without a project," a problem which is a "vacancy at the heart of her consciousness"; Dickinson "had no subject because she had no scheme, philosophical or poetical. Thus she had no way to address the world and no entry to experience"; "*There is no ars poetica*" and the "absence of abstract aesthetic musing" is "novel in the extreme" (*Modern Idiom* 152, 153, 184).

<sup>77</sup>Some of these objections may be categorized as follows:

(1) Manuscript criticism inherently promotes readings immoderately weighted toward the subjectivity of the reader's response and is in any case anachronistic

(2) Taken to its logical conclusion, it renders the manuscripts the only standard edition of Dickinson's work, immutable and un-editable, and it requires that criticism be grounded on an unmediated contact with the original manuscripts, which restricts the study of Dickinson to a priesthood of those scholars who can gain access to the originals at Harvard and Amherst College.

(3) As, for example, her correspondence with Susan shows, Dickinson edited her poems and cared about whether one version of a poem was preferable to another.

(4) Dickinson read widely and admired the published literary productions of others, without apparent objection to the fact of their published status. And, as Maria Stewart has shown, she was no *naïf* with regard to literary theory, as demonstrated by her thorough awareness and use of the hermeneutics of Biblical Higher Criticism.

(5) As a matter of textual scholarship, empirical evidence shows fundamental flaws in the premises of manuscript criticism, as Domhnall Mitchell details in *Measures of Possibility*.

manuscript readings (such as Howe's) raise with particular acuity—setting aside for the moment the issue of religion—the question mentioned earlier of what constitutes the essence of a Dickinson “poem”: Is it primarily a material entity (the textpage) with which ideas are then associated, or is it primarily an abstract entity (the “Poem”), consisting of a set of ideas for which the written words and the paper are simply the medium?<sup>78</sup>

Critics interested in Dickinson's religious views have largely focused on what they see as her intense spirituality and the varieties of her agonistic relationship with her received Christianity. There are expressions of a conventional Christian piety in Dickinson's poetry, but they are only occasional. She expresses a sincere Christian devotion in (for example) “Unto Me? I do not know you – ,” where the speaker, though “spotted” and “small,” nonetheless learns of God's grace from Jesus, who says that he is “Now - of Paradise - ” (Fr825). In this poem “Paradise” is good, the Divine gentle and inviting; the ambivalence expressed in the Higginson letter is absent. But her expressions of doubt about Paradise are not limited to the remark in the Higginson letter. In a letter to Louise and Fanny Norcross from Spring 1861(?), Dickinson sees a heartless heaven: “The seeing pain one can't relieve makes a demon of one. If angels have the

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<sup>(6)</sup>The many poems that are not known to exist in a manuscript by Dickinson would presumably be excluded or unnecessarily marginalized if the Dickinson canon is judged primarily to consist in the manuscripts.

<sup>78</sup>Lena Christensen describes the textpage view as a rejection of an “idealist conception of the ‘ideal’ text somehow existing outside the material instantiations of ‘documents.’” Instead, in this view, “[e]ach material text, in handwritten and print instantiations of a work, contributes to the full story of that work” (12). The “Poem” view is expressed in Cristanne Miller's argument that despite the “pleasures of reading Dickinson's words in relation to their manuscript contents,” her “art does not consist primarily or substantively in the visual irregularities of her handwritten texts” (222, 218). Similarly to Miller, Domhnall Mitchell concludes that “the claim that Dickinson's manuscripts have a design element seems unsustainable on the textual evidence,” even if it “cannot absolutely be dismissed on aesthetic grounds” (312). It appears that Mitchell's “aesthetic grounds” refers to a reader-centered mode of criticism, which he finds inferior to a criticism that examines the “textual evidence” of Dickinson's intentions. But Mitchell seems to me to be on surer footing when he argues from the ethical and practical implications of his findings, as, for example, when he says that Franklin's edition best represents “the collective interests of the author, the reader, the researcher, and the teacher” (311). In a similar vein, Steven Monte says that “if we value an ethics of reading, we need to develop [an approach] that maintains respect for the poetry, the poet, and readers who are as interested in the spirit of a poem as in what can be made of its letters” (34). This still, of course, does not resolve the question of what “the poem” is.

heart beneath their silver jackets, I think such things could make them weep, but Heaven is so cold! It will never look kind to me that God, who causes it all, denies such little wishes. It could not hurt His glory, unless it were a lonesome kind. I 'most conclude it is" (L234, vol.2 p.376). Dickinson imputes God's culpability to humankind as well, for one becomes "a demon" merely by witnessing suffering that one can do nothing about.

The heaven of the following poem is similarly unpleasant, this time depicted as something stifling:

I never felt at Home – Below –  
And in the Handsome skies  
I shall not feel at Home – I know –  
I dont like Paradise –

Because it's Sunday – all the time –  
And Recess – never comes –  
And Eden'll be so lonesome  
Bright Wednesday Afternoons –

If God could make a visit –  
Or ever took a Nap –  
So not to see us – but they say  
Himself – a Telescope

Perennial beholds us –  
Myself would run away  
From Him – and Holy Ghost – and all –  
But there's the "Judgment Day"! F437

Though overall the poem deals with the speaker's prospective view of "Paradise," her remark that she has "never felt at Home – Below –" serves as something of a preface and suggests that there is a connection between the "Home" that is "Below" and that which is in "the Handsome skies" of "Paradise." The second stanza particularizes this connection. In the persona of a child the speaker expects heaven to be an eternal succession of church services and classroom sessions in which "Recess – never comes –" and "Bright Wednesday Afternoons –" without playmates. The God of "the Handsome skies," a strict paternal figure, is remote but always "beholds us –"

(and keeps his hold on us) with his “Telescope.” The speaker wants to “run away / From Him –,” not only from the “Home – Below –” that does not feel like home but also from the “Paradise” that will be no improvement. However, here Paradise is not “of the option” as it was in the Higginson letter; here the speaker has enough of a sense of eschatology to notice that there’s no escape from time and from its end in “the ‘Judgment Day.’” Yet the existential problem is ironically voiced from a child’s perspective which makes the problem feel much less threatening than it could otherwise.: the speaker “shall not feel at Home –” when she gets there. And there is no way to “run away” to escape his all-seeing “Telescope,” just as Jonah was unable to do, when he booked passage to Tarshish “to go [...] from the presence of the Lord” (Jonah 1.3); and as the speaker in Psalm 139 says, “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? / If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make bed in hell, behold, thou art there” (verses 7 and 8); and as Yahweh asks through the prophet Jeremiah: “Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord” (Jer. 23.24).<sup>79</sup>

Elsewhere, as discussed above with respect to the Higginson letter, Dickinson wrestles with the latter-day Calvinist theology of her environment, and widens her range of Christian reference to include Roman Catholicism. In the very un-Congregationalist Marian adoration of “Only a Shrine, but Mine - ,” the “Madonna dim” possesses the “Grace” to “heal” “every Wo,” although Dickinson concludes with characteristic fractiousness in the speaker’s address to Mary as the feminine image of the divine—“Thou knowest [my Wo], though, so Why tell thee?” (Fr981). Considered in the context of her entire *oeuvre*, however, the Christian affirmations are

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<sup>79</sup> Father Mapple emphasizes this futility in the “The Sermon” chapter of *Moby-Dick*: “See ye not then, shipmates, that Jonah sought to flee world-wide from God? Miserable man ! Oh! most contemptible and worthy of all scorn [...]” (136).

too sporadic to deem her work as situated in conventional Christian faith.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, although Dickinson imagines or posits a Godless reality, she does so infrequently, and always regretfully. For example, in “Those - dying then,” the “then” to which she harkens is a time of religious certainty, when those who died “Knew where they went - .” She laments the “now,” this time when God’s “Hand is amputated” and “cannot be found,” when “The abdication of Belief / “Makes the Behavior small - (Fr1581).”

Critics have tended toward the view that, when she appears to reject religious orthodoxy, she does so in reaction to Congregationalism, and that her alternative is a version of Emersonian pantheism.<sup>81</sup> While this view is not entirely wrong, there has been no attention that I have found to the possibility of another alternative, namely the question of whether, and if so to what extent, she entertains the idea of philosophical materialism. I propose that there is ample evidence that she does, to an important degree.<sup>82</sup> This question is not exactly the same as the issue of faith

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<sup>80</sup> She is nevertheless represented in Donald Davie’s 1981 *New Oxford Book of Christian Verse* by no fewer than eighteen poems. In his extensive discussion of his criteria for inclusion in the anthology, Davie’s “first definition of Christian poetry” is that which “appeals, either explicitly or by plain implication (and in whatever spirit—rebelliously for instance, or sardonically, as often with Emily Dickinson) to some one or more of the distinctive doctrines of the Christian church” (xx-xxi).

<sup>81</sup> As to her rejection of religious orthodoxy, for example, Dickinson follows the statement “Of Course – I prayed –” with the bitterly rhetorical “And did God care?” (Fr581). Similarly, “Heavenly Father’ - take to thee” is an unflinching indictment of the “iniquity” and “Duplicity” of the Christian God (Fr1500). With respect to Emersonianism, Gary Lee Stonum sees a contrast between Dickinson’s imagination of “rivalry and conflicting motives in the soul’s traffic with the divine” and Emerson’s emphasis on “continuity and harmony” (56). Nevertheless, Dickinson often invokes and evokes a non-Christian sense of the transcendent, especially in response to an awe felt in the presence of nature, as, for example, in “These are the days when Birds come back - ,” with its “sacrament of summer days” and a “Last Communion in the Haze - ”(Fr122). There is a pronounced pantheism in the poem “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –,” where the speaker “keep[s]” the Sabbath “staying at Home,” communing with “Bobolink” and “Orchard” (Fr236). But one way she departs from this sort of Emersonianism is in her mindfulness of the danger of “awe,” as in “No man saw awe, nor to his house,” where the ““face to face”” encounter with the awe of the divine “Detain[s] vitality,” and is far too immense an experience for a mere human to bear (Fr1342).

<sup>82</sup> I use the term “materialism” to refer generally to the philosophical view that “everything [is] matter” (Stoljar). It is associated with the “atomism” of the Pre-Socratic philosophers and in its current form often also referred to as “physicalism” (Stoljar; Popkin 18-20). I intend the meaning to include (but not be limited to) the usage as commonly understood in Dickinson studies, which Suzanne Juhasz relates to “the physicalness or corporeality of her writing” and her “social and historical [...] material contexts” (427). Lena Christensen’s recent book *Editing Emily Dickinson* explores the issue of materiality in Dickinson studies and appropriately calls on critics to “remember that the

versus doubt. James McIntosh describes her approach to her apparent faith/doubt conflict as “nimble believing,” which, as Dickinson’s “stimulus to expression,” involves both a “belie[f] for intense moments in a spiritual life” and a refusal “permanently [to] subscrib[e] to any received system of belief” (1). But in my view McIntosh’s depiction of a vacillation within the realm of spiritual experience does not account for Dickinson’s much broader poetics, which includes both a sense of spirituality and a firm grounding in the secular and material. Furthermore, judging by its context (in a 1882 letter to Judge Otis Lord) Dickinson does not seem even to be discussing religious faith: “On subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say *Beings* - is ‘Phil’ [Judge Lord] a ‘Being’ or a ‘Theme,’ we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred time an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble” (L750). A few sentences later, she says “I do - do want you tenderly. The Air is soft as Italy, but when it touches me, I spurn it with a Sigh, because it is not you.” This is a love letter, not desultory musing on immortality.

In the many instances where she adopts rebellious or post-Christian, apparently Transcendentalist attitudes, she values the world of materiality and the body as much as she does the transcendent realm. For example, Dickinson combines materialism and spirituality in the familiar first stanza of “Because I could not stop for Death - ,” in which both “Death” and “Immortality” accompany the speaker:

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

(Fr479)

Here, the physicality of “Death”—the material transition from body to dust—conjoins with and contrasts to the metaphysics of “Immortality.” Dickinson’s choice of words emphasizes the

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concept of ‘materiality’ is ideologically and indeed politically charged” (75). I do not intend my use of the term to comprehend concepts of historical or dialectical materialism.

contrast by etymologically juxtaposing the concrete, Germanic “Death” with the abstract, Latinate “Immortality.”<sup>83</sup> Dickinson’s use of narrative point of view in this poem expands the range of this juxtaposition: though the speaker delivers the lines after her own death, her willingness to speak to the world about the world attests to her continued engagement with it.<sup>84</sup>

A similar conjunction occurs in “The Spirit lasts – but in what mode - ,” which Dickinson included in a letter she wrote in 1883, not long before her own death, to Charles Clark, concerning the recently deceased Charles Wadsworth. She prefaced it with the remark that “These thoughts disquiet me, and the great friend is gone, who could solace them” and asked “Do they disturb you?” (L872). Introduced with this emphasis on the importance of “[t]hese thoughts,” the poem asserts not simply a co-presence but an interdependence of the material and spiritual registers:

The Spirit lasts - but in what mode -  
Below, the Body speaks,  
But as the Spirit furnishes -  
Apart, it never talks -  
.....  
The Spirit lurks within the Flesh  
Like Tides within the Sea  
That make the Water live, estranged  
What would the Either be?  
.....

(Fr1627)

The life of “the Body” in the world “Below” depends on the presence of the animating “Spirit.” And although that Spirit “lasts” in a reality “Apart” after the “Body’s” death, its “mode” of existence is impaired. It is the heterodoxy of “these thoughts” about the interdependence of “Body” and “Spirit” that “disquiet[s]” her, and she finds the “thoughts” sufficiently compelling

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<sup>83</sup> On this blended diction as characteristic of Dickinson, see Brita Lindberg-Seyersted (89). In his discussion of this poem, Alan Tate notes the tendency in English generally to use “the Latin for ideas and the Saxon for perceptions” (296).

<sup>84</sup> One example of this engagement is the speaker’s reference to the temporality of the “Centuries” that have passed.

to shift the burden of proof to reasons for their untruth.<sup>85</sup> Dickinson's questioning here along with the reluctance she expresses in the letter to Higginson demonstrate her unwillingness to forsake the world for the apparent attractions of "Paradise" and "Immortality."

A tremendously popular book that dealt with responses to grief in the domestic sphere of those who waited at home was Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*, published in 1869. It presents detailed and reassuring speculations about what heaven is, which I discuss in greater detail in my treatment of Dickinson's views on immortality. Here I want to focus on the depiction of grief that appears early in the book. It is cast as a series of journal entries by a woman named Mary; she is unmarried, both her parents have died, and her only sibling, her brother Roy, is off at war. But after getting news of Roy's death, Mary records her crisis of faith that comes in the days and weeks that follow: "Death and Heaven could not seem very different to a Pagan from what they seem to me" (9). Roy, who "was all there was," has been "snatched away in an instant by a dread God" (8-9). Phelps's depiction of Mary's grief is startlingly realistic (though one wonders why it does not seem that there have been any other war deaths in Mary's community). A visitor "has been very kind" to offer her condolences, but, Mary writes, "she does not know," "[s]he does not understand" (12). About her minister, Dr. Bland, he of the "old dry bones of metaphysics and theology," Mary writes: "He is a very good man, but I am afraid of him, and I am glad that he has not come again [after his first visit]" (108). A church deacon tells Mary that it is her Christian duty "to be resigned," to which she finally tells him, "I am *not* resigned. I pray the dear Lord with all my heart to make me so, but I will not say that I am, until I am,--if ever that time comes" (15-16). However, a turning point comes in the person of Aunt Winifred, whose patience and sensitivity, along with a view of heaven that gives hope to

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<sup>85</sup> As Christopher Benfey puts it, for Dickinson, "[t]o think the spirit without the body turns out to be as difficult as thinking the body without the spirit" (98).

Mary, lead her not to resignation but to acceptance. Winifred's thoughts on what heaven will be like, though they have been derided as hopelessly, sentimentally Victorian, in fact draw on a sophisticated understanding of then-contemporary theological developments, including the German Higher Criticism of the Bible as promulgated most prominently (and notoriously) by David Friedrich Strauss.<sup>86</sup>

With respect to the apparently dissimilar areas of manuscript criticism and religious outlook, we may now rhetorically ask, with Dickinson, "estranged / What would the Either be?" The Poem (as spirit) allows the textpage (as "Body") to "speak[ ]," and the textpage (as a material existent) gives embodiment to and fulfills the Poem. Insofar as literary works are composed, preserved, and transmitted in our culture by visual representations of words, there is always a dialectic between a textual artifact and its aesthetic properties. Dickinson's poetics links this dialectic of text and Poem with that of world and God. She thus creates a meta-dialectic that encompasses artifact/world/death and God/aesthetic entity/immortality. Dickinson's materialism is drawn to, and draws the reader to, the materiality of the textpage, as marks of pen or pencil on paper, as verbal-visual productions. Dickinson's recognition of the transcendent brings with it, and invites the reader join, an awareness of the Poem as an abstract entity with an existence apart from its manifestation in pen and paper.<sup>87</sup>

James Longenbach approaches such an awareness of Dickinson's poetics, though without discussing any religious or philosophical implications, in his recent book *The Art of the Poetic*

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<sup>86</sup> On *The Gates Ajar* generally, see Gail Smith, "From the Seminary to the Parlor." On possible connections between Dickinson and *The Gates Ajar*, with a highly unfavorable view of the novel, see Barton Levi St. Armand, "Paradise Deferred." Drew Gilpin Faust discusses Phelps at pages 185-187.

<sup>87</sup> I wish to emphasize that my view of Dickinson's poetics is meant to be comprehensively applicable (as a theory ought to be) to all of her work, which would include poems that do not have an explicitly religious content. Nonetheless, I do not claim an equation of God and Poem that is applicable universally in the realm of all poetry or of all art. I offer my claims in the unique conditions presented by Dickinson, in distinguishing the Poem as idea from the poem as artifact. For example, an atheist can acknowledge the existence of aesthetic abstractions such as, for instance, Truth and Beauty, without conceding the issue of the existence of God.

*Line*. Examining how “different lineations alter the patterns of stress created by the play between meter, rhyme, syntax, and line,” he reads lineations of “Experience is the Angled Road” (Fr899) both from the manuscript and from the “regular stanzas” as rendered in “all available editions” (78-80). He finds aesthetic value in each of the versions’ lineations, and he does not attempt to decide which is better, noting that: “one doesn’t know exactly how to choose [between the versions]. The dilemma is part of Dickinson’s power, and it won’t ever be solved because Dickinson’s power is bound up with the endlessly equivocal nature of line. What matters most is the dilemma itself, not any particular solution” (80). Longenbach’s recognition of the power of Dickinson’s equivocation resembles the kind of interdependence I am attempting to describe.

To illustrate Dickinson’s poetics, I have selected three poems that have religious subject matter (and frequent Christian allusions) but differing textual origins. In “A word made Flesh is seldom,” Dickinson employs specifically Johannine terminology. No manuscript for it is known to exist:

A word made Flesh is seldom  
And tremblingly partook  
Nor then perhaps reported  
But have I not mistook  
Each one of us has tasted  
With ecstasies of stealth  
The very food debated  
To our specific strength -

A word that breathes distinctly  
Has not the power to die  
Cohesive as the Spirit  
It may expire if He -

“Made Flesh and dwelt among us”  
Could condescension be  
Like this consent of Language  
This loved Philology

(Fr1715)

Editors have been unable to date this poem, and it was unpublished until Johnson included it in his 1955 edition (J1651). Franklin's and Johnson's copy-text is a transcript written out by Susan Dickinson; though this probably accounts for the conspicuous lack of the characteristic dashes in the print editions, we cannot otherwise know what changes, if any, she made to Dickinson's manuscript.<sup>88</sup> There are only slight differences between Franklin's and Johnson's (J1651) editions: Johnson has "Word" in line one instead of "word," no stanza break between lines twelve and thirteen, and no closing quotation mark in line thirteen. Franklin's closing quotation mark is marked as an emendation, so presumably it is absent in the manuscript. Franklin's notes report that on the page on which Susan wrote the transcription, the "poem is preceded . . . by five lines—Susan transcribed them as verse—that are related to the poem, though separated from it by a drawn line" (1490). Though his remarks indicate that he believes Dickinson to have written them as prose, Franklin presents the lines thusly:

The import of that Paragraph  
"The word made Flesh"  
Had he the faintest intimation  
Who broached it yesterday!

"Made Flesh and dwelt among us"

Johnson's edition does not mention the existence of these lines. As will be seen, the problem of these lines contributes to the disembodiment of the poem.

Despite the absence of a manuscript in Dickinson's hand, the work has joined the canon of Dickinson's poetry by virtue of its inclusion in Franklin's and Johnson's editions. But as a text that is "estranged" from its manuscript, it is now *merely* a Poem. Its content further bears this out. While many critics read the poem in terms of the acquisition of poetic power, it also investigates the possibility and efficacy of the consubstantiation of the human and divine that is

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<sup>88</sup> Monte has noted that light punctuation is characteristic of Susan's transcriptions (37).

at the heart of Dickinson's poetics.<sup>89</sup> It does this with elements that set up conflicting themes of union and separation. Dickinson's switch of a definite article for an indefinite article in the Biblical allusion (from "The Word" to "A word") dilutes an otherwise commanding allusion to *logos* in line one.<sup>90</sup> Point of view in the poem shifts in a similarly less specific direction in line five, where the first-person "I" becomes "us" as the speaker describes a communal spiritual experience.<sup>91</sup>

The editions present the first eight lines without a stanza break. Franklin reads the final eight lines as two quatrains, whereas Johnson gives them without a break. (I will refer to the two eight-line sections as A and B, respectively.) In either case, but more noticeably in Franklin's quatrains, the B section seems distinctly bifurcated from the A section. Though thematically related, and apparently considered by Susan to be part of one poem, the B section is of such pronounced difference in the complexity of its syntax and range of ideas that it could stand as a poem on its own. The diction in B marks out a stark separation between the human and the divine. It begins with an echo of line one ("A word"), but here "word" is spatially separated (by four lines) from "Flesh" and is excluded wholly from the Biblical quotation in line thirteen.<sup>92</sup> Johnson's omission of a closing quotation mark in line thirteen furthers this attenuation. In addition, the subject of death appears for the first time in the B section, as Dickinson suggests that the power to "expire" (which includes the physical cessation of breath) would have been

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<sup>89</sup> See Monte (35-37). As he points out, the phrase "not power to die" also appears in "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -" as "Without - the power to die -" (Fr764), where it is often read as an "allegory about poetry" (50). Here, however, my focus is on the theological import of the idea.

<sup>90</sup> Franklin's reading of a lowercase "word" is a further indication of this shift.

<sup>91</sup> This secular version of the sacrament that "each one of us has tasted" (it will be recalled that she was never a communicating member of her family's church) echoes other such references, such as the "sacrament of summer days" and the "Last Communion in the Haze -" in "These are the days when Birds come back -" (Fr122) and the "unobtrusive Mass" in "Further in Summer than the Birds -" (Fr895).

<sup>92</sup> See John: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." (1.14).

possible “if” God, through the word “Made Flesh” that “dwelt among us” for a time, had truly “condescen[ded]” to a permanent descent that joined Him to the world, instead of the brief descent followed by the resurrection. Here, as in the Higginson letter, Dickinson expresses the view that the “Immortality” that is thrust upon one is a condition to be “escape[d]” from, which would be possible if one truly had “the power to die.”

Instead of God’s “condescension” in “word made Flesh,” it is human “Language” that “consent[s]” to “dwel[l] among us” so fully and permanently that it becomes the subject of our “loved Philology.” The etymological contrast of “Language” and “word” recalls the similar contrast discussed earlier between “Death” and “Immortality.” The inclusion of “loved Philology” alters the etymological balance in favor of the human over the divine with the exuberant synonymic superfluity of “Language” (Latin) and “loved [Germanic] Philology [Greek].” In these ways the poem (especially the B section) is about a radical divide between a divine “word” and the “Flesh” and “Language” of the world. Though the “word” may be alive, acting tangibly and even somatically when it “breathes,” it nevertheless breathes “distinctly,” independent of and separate from a human body, without “the power to die.” With this latter phrase, the poem laments a paradoxical impotency, as it is death, not immortality, that Dickinson imagines. This “word,” animate yet untethered to a human body and linked with the metaphysical “Spirit” (line eleven), is “Cohesive”—stuck, as it were, in immortality.

The textual circumstances particular to this poem are of a piece with its ideas about the disjunction between human and divine, and give one response to Dickinson’s question “estranged / What would the Either be?” As Poem and “word,” the poem attains a version of immortality by Susan Dickinson’s transcription and its subsequent inclusion in the canon. But the absence of the “Flesh” of the manuscript disembodies and finally diminishes the Poem, as shown by both the problematic relationship between its A and B sections and the problem of the

prefatory five lines that exist in a sort of limbo in the editions. Susan unwittingly sapped its lifeblood by her act of transcription.

A short, late poem, “Of Paradise’ Existence” (Fr1421), demonstrates how Dickinson’s poetics of co-presence can be, in a positive sense, highly ambiguous . Franklin dates it from about 1877, which was after Dickinson’s fascicle-making period, so it is not included in the *Manuscript Books*. Franklin’s apparatus indicates nine text rows in Dickinson’s manuscript, with unique punctuation in the first:<sup>93</sup>

Of Paradis’e  
existence  
All we know  
Is the uncertain  
certainty -  
But it’s vicinity,  
infer,  
By it’s Bisecting  
Messenger -

Reading the textpage lineations as poetic lines amplifies the poem’s emphasis on the separation between the human and the divine. The placement of key abstract nouns (“existence,” “certainty - ,” “Messenger -”) in independent lines gives semantic emphasis to them while fragmenting larger syntactic units. Though Domhnall Mitchell finds that Dickinson’s practice was to mark the commencement of a metrical lines with a capital letter (81, 204-205), in the case of this poem we may nevertheless derive legitimate insights from reading the manuscript lineation. For instance, we may draw on Brita Lindberg-Seyersted’s suggestion that for Dickinson it may be that “the line does not have the preeminent importance it has in much other poetry [compare to

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<sup>93</sup> Franklin indicates Dickinson’s lineations by noting what he refers to as line “divisions” in the manuscript copy-text. This is his practice for all relevant poems, that is, those in which the ends of text rows in the manuscript do not correspond with his readings of poetic lines. It should also be noted that Franklin does not give details on the position of the rows in relation to the edges of the paper on which it is written, so there is no way to speculate on how this might relate to the “divisions” (See Mitchell 311). On a different note, it is indicative of the fluidity of critics’ concepts of Dickinson’s manuscripts that in the apparatus to this poem Franklin refers to the manuscript as “a fair copy,” but calls it a “draft” in his note on the first manuscript version of “March is the Month of Expectation” (Fr1422A), which exists on the verso of the manuscript of “Of Paradise’ existence.”

Longenbach], but that her verse is built on smaller rhythmic figurations, containing two stresses, with one or more unstressed syllables” (138). Here, “certainty - ” and “Messenger - ” arguably represent such “rhythmic figurations.” Further, by the separation of nouns and modifiers, the modifiers gain a prominence of placement as line endings. This effect highlights the “uncertain[ty]” that qualifies the “certainty - ” at the literal center of the poem; it is this “uncertain certainty” that I take to be Dickinson’s statement of religious faith.<sup>94</sup> By separating the words, the artifact of the manuscript emphasizes the content of the definition. The lines that are above the center lines (literally and as if upwards toward heaven) give a statement about how much we can “know,” which I read as a way of knowing through the operation of faith, and which includes “uncertainty.” As the poem descends, as if into the world (lines six through nine), knowledge accordingly becomes more mundane, a matter of what we “infer” from the premise of the physical fact of death. The diction here becomes somewhat more concrete with the references to “Bisect[ion]” and “vicinity,” as if to confine “Paradis’e” to time and space. Nevertheless, the poem acknowledges the workings of the divine by reference to the “Messenger -” angel, the agent of death.

Noticing these effects of the manuscript’s scriptural lineation encourages us to also notice the fragmentation in the poem that, despite its lack of tangible imagery, serves to ground it in the material by partaking in the separateness of the world, the domain of the “many” as compared to the “unity” of the transcendent. As “Poem,” as an abstract entity associated with the metaphysical, however, it is less sure of its ontological status. Johnson’s and Franklin’s versions

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<sup>94</sup> In a very late (1884) letter to Susan, Dickinson says “Faith is *Doubt*” (L912). Both of these statements indicate the sophistication of her theology and are remarkably similar to views of major Protestant thinkers. Paul Tillich viewed doubt as inherent to faith: “Faith is certain in so far as it is an experience of the holy. But faith is uncertain in so far as the infinite to which it is related is received by a finite being . . . If faith is understood as being ultimately concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it” (20-21). And, similarly, Kierkegaard (whom it can be safely assumed Dickinson had not read) claims that “[f]aith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual’s inwardness and the objective uncertainty” (129).

are similar, differing most significantly in their lineation of the last words of the poem. Johnson has it in six lines:

Of Paradise' existence  
All we know  
Is the uncertain certainty -  
But it's vicinity infer,  
By it's Bisecting  
Messenger -

(J1411)

Both Johnson and Franklin depart from the manuscript version by joining the syntactic units of "Paradise' existence" and "uncertain certainty -" in lines one and three. This lineation in line one expresses greater assurance about the idea of the "existence" of "Paradise'" than does the manuscript, while line three contrarily expresses less "certainty" by more closely linking the word with "uncertain." In Johnson's six-line reading, the hinge at lines three and four demarcates a separation of the realms of immortality (addressed in lines one through three) and death (lines four through six), but at the same time their formal parallelism marks out an equivocal balance, which suggests an analogous balance between the material and the transcendent.<sup>95</sup>

Johnson's reading of the last word of the poem ("Messenger - ") as a single line provides metrical congruence with line two ("All we know") and heightens the contrast of uncertain certainty about Paradise with the empirical knowledge of death. Johnson's version also has the effect of a dying poetic utterance as the syllables wither away in the last three lines, from eight to five to three, giving further effect to the line break after "Bisecting" (as Dickinson wrote it in the manuscript) as a sort of catch in the throat before the final is spoken.<sup>96</sup> By ending the poem with

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<sup>95</sup> Each is eight-syllable iambic tetrameter; each has four words, two monosyllabic and one each of two- and three-syllables; and there is a concentration of aural repetition among the third and fourth words of the lines.

<sup>96</sup> Here is an instance where it is not at all implausible to imagine Dickinson taking particular notice of the fracture of the phrase in the manuscript.

an emphasis on the assurance of death's material reality, this mimetic effect destabilizes both the poem's symmetry and its sense of confidence about "Paradise".

Franklin differs with Johnson with respect to the final two words, and the former presenting a five-line poem that ends with "By it's Bisecting Messenger -" as a single line. Franklin's linkage of "Messenger" with its modifier is consistent with the renderings of lines one and three, but one cannot be certain about this lineation because of Dickinson's usual practice of capitalizing the initial letter when beginning a new poetic line.<sup>97</sup> Thus, Franklin may be inadvertently imposing the type of uniformity on the poem that so plagued pre-1955 editions of Dickinson. At any rate, Franklin's reading centers the poem at the single line proclaiming the paradox of "uncertain certainty -" (line three). Appropriately, it is enveloped by the opposition of knowledge by faith (line two) and rational inference (line four). However, the meter of Franklin's last line now joins the congruence of lines three and four, and the relative metrical prominence that Johnson's version imparts to "infer"—and thus its semantic prominence—is deflected by the metrical rhyme of the words "certainty" and "Messenger" at the ends of lines three and five. The effect is to foreground the metaphor that links "certainty" (in this context referring to Paradise) and the "Messenger"-angel.<sup>98</sup> The alliterated *b*'s and the internal "*bi*" rhymes of the last line subtly promote the poem's theme of the duality of death and immortality.

The abstract Poem has intimations of immortality and acknowledges the possibility of "Paradise' existence," in the way of the "uncertain certainty - ." Similarly, in the letter to Higginson which began this essay, Dickinson's characterization of "Paradise" as at least an

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<sup>97</sup> The possibility of both versions is paradoxically supported by part of Domhnall Mitchell's conclusion, noted earlier, which is part of his overall argument in opposition to the manuscript school, that a lowercase letter at the beginning of a row of text indicates that it is to be joined to the preceding row to form a poetic line (81).

<sup>98</sup> Johnson's version, while it does not provide this metrical pattern, emphasizes the singularity of death in allowing "Messenger -" a line of its own. By contrast, in the first stanza of "Because I could not Stop for Death -" (Fr479), the first and last lines refer to "Death" and "Immortality," respectively. This poem, begins with "Paradise" and ends with death's "Messenger -," subtly augmenting the "uncertain[ty]" of the "certainty."

“Option” necessarily presupposes its existence. The Poem remains emphatic about the physical operation of the “Bisecting Messenger - .” Nonetheless, the greater stanzaic and linear elegance of the Poem as perceived by the editors suggests an attraction to the perfection of Paradise that was not present in “A word made Flesh.” The aphoristic brevity of “Of Paradise’ existence,” its absence from the manuscript corpus of the fascicles, the fragmentation of the lines in the manuscript, the editorial reconstructions, the minimal concrete imagery—all of these factors work with its content to represent the condition of “uncertain certainty - ” about God and the world, “Poem” and “poem.”

As compared with the two poems just considered, “No Crowd that has occurred” (Fr653) is the most amenable to textpage criticism because, as the first poem of Fascicle 30, its manuscript is reproduced in the *Manuscript Books*. As it happens, the poem also presents most clearly the idea of the coexistence of the material and the abstract. Though any number of poems from the *Manuscript Books* could be used to show this, “No Crowd that has occurred” is particularly apt because it appears in 1863, during the period when Dickinson was devoting her greatest attention to the textpage, and because it deals explicitly and vividly with death and the “Flood Subject.”

With respect to the correlations among the variant words and phrases marked with crosses, it is reasonable to adopt Franklin’s and Johnson’s practice of associating them according to their order of appearance, as this ordinarily matches them metrically and syntactically.<sup>99</sup> It remains an open question whether either of the alternatives is to be preferred in an editorial reading. Franklin indicates the variants in the apparatus, and he replicates the manuscript in the poem by presenting the words as Dickinson probably first wrote it out (for example, Franklin

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<sup>99</sup> For example, “Absorbed - Numb” corresponds to “Resistless - dumb” in its stress pattern, syllable count (reading “absorbed” with three syllables), number of words, and parts of speech (two adjectives).

reads “restricted” in line six presumably on the grounds that Dickinson had not shown a clear preference for the variant).<sup>100</sup> One may also, however, read the poem with *all* the words she has supplied, treating them as co-operators, to be read, insofar as it is possible, as temporally and spatially simultaneous. As Sharon Cameron puts it, this approach renders the variants as “*integral* to the poem” rather than “*outside* the poem” and in most cases expands the signification of the poem in fruitful ways (5).<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, this view is consistent with Dickinson’s poetics of the material and metaphysical, in that it demonstrates how she worked out the material representation on the textpage of words whose associated ideas (their signifieds) coexist in the Poem.

As noted earlier, Franklin’s version of the poem makes it clear that his reproduction centers on what he believes Dickinson’s original words were:

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<sup>100</sup> Notably, the 1929 *Further poems of Emily Dickinson* (which presents the poem as its number 111) does adopt all the variants except that for line eighteen, which seems to be an anomaly (semantically, “scenery” makes no sense as a variant for “Parallel”). Arguably, this approach is supported by the Greg-Bowers theory of copy-text, if the additional words are later-added substantives to which the theory would give priority. However, since the original words are not cancelled, it not at all clear that these were “revisions.” In this case, the variants do seem to be added later, as some look as if they were squeezed in after the line separating this poem from the next was drawn.

<sup>101</sup> Cameron’s word “amplification” describes this well (58), but in my view the term grants too much priority to the word in the line, inasmuch as “amplification” occurs in response to an originating phenomenon, thereby giving the amplification itself an unequal (either greater or lesser) importance. Susan Howe notes that some nineteenth-century books indicated variant readings by cross marks. She decides (rather anachronistically) that “Dickinson had enough humor to read these variants as found poems” (152).

No Crowd that has occurred  
Exhibit - I suppose  
That General Attendance  
That Resurrection - does -

Circumference be full -  
The long restricted<sup>+</sup> Grave  
Assert her vital Privilege<sup>+</sup> -  
The Dust – connect<sup>+</sup> - and live -

]subjected  
]His Primogeniture  
]adjust -

On Atoms - features place -  
All Multitudes that were  
Efface in the Comparison -  
As Suns – dissolve<sup>+</sup> a star -

]annul

Solemnity - prevail -  
It's Individual Doom  
Possess each - separate Consciousness -  
August - Absorbed - Numb<sup>+</sup> -

]Resistless - dumb

What Duplicate - exist -  
What Parallel<sup>+</sup> can be -  
Of the Significance<sup>+</sup> of This -  
To Universe - and Me?

]scenery  
]stupendousness

(Fr653)

This presentation makes only one change from Dickinson's manuscript in the lineation, where Franklin includes the complete word "Consciousness" in line fifteen. Also, a page break in the manuscript separates the final four lines and the variants from the remainder of the poem.

Though Franklin's edition indicates the variant words, it does not include the cross-marks that are represented here as an approximation of Dickinson's indications of variants in the manuscript. The conspicuousness of her marks give much greater prominence to the variants than does the print edition.

Generally speaking, this poem's concern with resurrection can be read in terms both of Christ's individual resurrection and of the Christian eschatology of the general resurrection. In either case, the poem as textpage and as Poem expresses an affirmation of material existence as strongly as it acknowledges the awesomeness and inevitability of immortality. Christopher

Benfey describes this outlook by emphasizing the importance of cognition in the formulation of Dickinson's ideas about the unknown: "[She] is less interested in the possibility of resurrection than in what Shelley [in his "Notes on Queen Mab"] calls its 'mystery.' For her the 'mystery' lies not in the evasion of scientific laws but rather in the sheer difficulty of *thinking* the separation of mind and body. The resurrection is for her the richest repository of thinking about this separation" (97). Dickinson's interest in the resurrection is likely also part of a broader trend in the American culture of her time. In her recent book, Drew Gilpin Faust connects nineteenth-century views on resurrection with the experience of the Civil War: "The traditional notion that corporeal resurrection and restoration would accompany the Day of Judgment seemed increasingly implausible to many Americans who had seen the maiming and disfigurement inflicted by this war" (xvi).<sup>102</sup>

The ideas of individual and general resurrection are evident in both the co-presence of the abstract "Crowd" and the embodied "I," and in the linkage of the "Universe - and Me" in the encounter with immortality. The individual appears first as the singular "I" (line two), that conspicuous word in English that is formed by a columnar single grapheme, as if a hieroglyph of the "Columnar Self" (Fr740), and that so pervades Dickinson's poetry. Her individuality has a counterpart only in the singular grave and its (presumably) solitary occupant, though the speaker maintains a distance from the "Crowd" that "has occurred" and from the events described. This "Crowd" threatens to overwhelm the narrating "I," however. Crowdedness is heard and felt in the remarkably intricate repetitions of the cluster of consonants *c*, *r*, and *d* (in "Crowd," "occurred," and "Resurrection - does - ") in lines one and four. Sounds from the first stanza

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<sup>102</sup> Faust goes on to note the "horror" with which witnesses "commented [...] on the piles of limbs lying near the surgeon's table, dissociated from the bodies to which they had belonged" (xvi). Recalling the poem "Those - dying then" (Fr1581), discussed earlier, Faust's comments help us imagine the associations that the reference to "amputation" may have had for Dickinson, especially in such a vividly anthropomorphic image as the amputation of God's hand.

continue and resound in the second—hard *c*'s continue in lines five, six and eight, and the *er* sounds from “occurred” (line one) and “Resurrection” (line four) resound in “Circumference” (line five) and “her” (line seven). The etymological differences in word choices further convey the idea of the “Crowd.” Here, rather than emphasizing semantic difference (as with immortality and death), the difference is more like that seen in “A word made Flesh” because it emphasizes semantic likeness and inclusiveness with the collective nouns “Multitudes” (line ten) and “Crowd.” However, as the narrative continues, this collective “Crowd,” which had begun to subsume the “I,” becomes disassociated, “Efface[d]” and “annul[led]” by the concreteness of “Dust” and “Atoms,” diffused just as the light of a singular “star” is “dissolve[d]” by the intense light of plural “Suns.”

Despite the apparent impact of the words “Resurrection - does - ” as the culmination of the first stanza and the abstractions of “Crowd” and “Multitudes,” the poem tenaciously roots itself in the world. The co-operating variants in the second stanza emphasize Dickinson’s personification of a “Grave,” possessed of gender, and thus of a bodily existence. Both female and male, the burial site performs the birth experience of resurrection. As female, the grave has the belly’s “full” “Circumference” (line five) near the end of a “long-restricted” and “long subjected” lying-in period of pregnancy, and prepares to exercise her “Privilege” of bringing forth new life, a new “Vital[ity].” As male, the grave is a patriarch (note the capitalized “His”) who “Assert[s]” a “Primogeniture.” In both cases, the resurrection is depicted, not in terms of the soul’s transference to heaven, but as the advent of a new life in the physical world of bodily, gendered existence. The process of “connect[ing]” the “Dust” both looks forward to the general

resurrection and looks back to Yahweh's molding of Adam out of dust, as anthropomorphic "features" are imparted to the "Atoms" of the material world.<sup>103</sup>

Nevertheless, the poem also manages to maintain a view of resurrection as a metaphysical reality and to keep it equally at the forefront of the speaker's and onlookers' awareness. Though the crowd diffuses into "separate" individuals—distinct inhabitants of the world—"each - separate Consciousness - " founders in "Numb" "Solemnity," and is rendered speechless and "dumb" in the face of the impending "Individual Doom." The manuscript lineation is expressive here, as the break of "Con- / sciousness" separates the prefix *con-* (its "withness," as it were) from the knowledge denoted by its root ( the Latin *scire*, "to know"), which in turn highlights the interlinear rhyme of "[\_]sciousness" and "Possess," which then in turn highlights the active work of "Doom" in taking "Possess[ion]" of the "Individual" "consciousness." Although Benfey argues that for Dickinson the idea of the resurrection of the body is "scandalous" (108), it nonetheless remains a paramount concern for her.

The rhetorical question of the last stanza asserts that "the Significance of This - ," a resurrection event in the Christian history of salvation (whether of Christ or at the end-time), has no "Duplicate" or "Parallel" from the perspective of either the "Universe" or "Me." The purported uniqueness is reflected by the effect of the page break in setting the stanza apart from the rest of the poem, as if to signify some new beginning in the narrative of history. However, in

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<sup>103</sup> See Genesis: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (2.7). Dickinson's use of the terms "Dust" and "Atoms" suggests not only the general resurrection of humanity but also the resurrection of all creation. For Christians, this derives scripturally from Paul's letter to the Romans: "the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (8.21-22). Dickinson's knowledge of Christian theology makes it likely that she was familiar with this doctrine. Furthermore, her family's library included a three-volume *Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, and in a letter to Higginson, Dickinson professes to have great esteem for Browne. (Capps 67; L261). Browne seems specifically intrigued by the doctrine, declaring in his *Religio Medici*: "I believe that our estranged and divided ashes shall unite againe, that our separated dust after so many pilgrimages and transformations in the parts of minerals, Plants, Animals, Elements, shall at the voice of God returne into their primitive shapes" (45). *Religio Medici* was one of only two works in the Dickinson library's Browne volumes with cut pages (Capps 67).

the context of the poem, this apparent grandiosity is an ironic deflation. The context and tone of the first explicit mention of resurrection, at the end of the first stanza, convey a sense of the ordinary: the implied periphrastic construction of “Resurrection - does [exhibit]” suggests an event that has occurred in the past and is simply being replayed as a routine public spectacle. Similarly, at the end of the poem, elements of lines seventeen and eighteen emphasize the ideas of “Duplicate” and “Parallel” to oppose the literal supposition that the “Significance of This - ” is unparalleled. The lines themselves are “Duplicate” by virtue of their syntactic and semantic equivalence and their matching succession of consonants (*p*, *l*, and hard *c*). Especially if one considers the gravity of the words “Doom” and the “Numb - ” in the previous stanza, it becomes apparent evident that the duplications flatten the tone to ironize the supposition that the “Significance of This - ” is unprecedented. This nuance completes the poem’s expression of attachment to the world of “Dust” and “Atoms” in their fallen, pre-Resurrection state, and marks its accompanying skepticism about the merits of Paradise. The statement of the unparalleled “Significance” of the “Resurrection,” it turns out, is a lament for the body’s exit from the world. The poem expresses the emotional condition of one who can both treat “Resurrection” as inevitable and also equate it with “Doom.” This idea also serves as a metaphor for Dickinson’s poetics. As we have seen, the identity of the poem is linked in part to the artifact of the manuscript, in the prominence it gives to the variants, and especially in its representation of two breaking points, one that cleaves the unified “Consciousness - ,” and one that purports to begin history anew. However, that artifact will not last forever (the pages, for example, will disintegrate), and the print editions, while not immortal, render a Poem, with its traces of material existence in facsimile copies and textual apparatus, that has a much longer lifespan.

Dickinson’s philosophical, religious, and literary imagination ranges expansively. The word “Circumference” appears in “No Crowd that has Occurred” somewhat innocuously, but

that word along with images and ideas of circles and circumference pervade Dickinson's thinking and writing. Similarly, her poetics partakes in a radical inclusiveness, as adumbrated, for example, in the way her metaphor of immortality as the "Flood subject" dramatically encompasses both a metaphysical question and a dangerous phenomenon of the material world. Described in terms of circle and circumference, her poetics consists in a circle that is ever-expanding, an unfixed circumference always growing in all directions simultaneously from a center that is equidistant from the infinitude of points that comprise the circumference, an infinitude itself expanding with the expansion of the circumference. This geometrical figure aptly describes Dickinson's synthesis of the material and the metaphysical, as it reaches out toward the finality or fixedness of immortality while at the same time fulfilling the materialist imperative (at once Biblical and Darwinian) to "be fruitful and multiply" in the world. In this way, Dickinson maintains her devotion to and reverence for human bodily existence and the manuscript, and at the same time she retains a belief in and sense of awe toward the spirit and the Poem. Her Poems and manuscripts hospitably invite us, her posterity, to join in their reach toward a synthesis of the ideality of Poem and materiality of textpage, soul and body, *logos* and flesh.

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