Chapter 3

Dickinson’s “Nimble Believing”

Emily Dickinson’s poetry as a whole may be regarded as “a running notation on her life” according to Richard Chase (243). Basically she was a religious poet whose concern with the fundamental issues of death, pain, love, and immortality occasioned her finest lyrics. From our vantage point more than a century later, she stands as one of the major religious thinkers of her age. Roger Lundin considers her poetry to be an “art of belief” that demanded practice and skill. We find therefore that “her poetry is in large measure about belief – about the objects of belief and its comforts, as well as belief’s great uncertainties. With daring tenacity, she explored the full range of human experience in her reflections upon subjects as God, the Bible, suffering, and immortality” (3). However hard it was to fashion and sustain, belief was essential to Dickinson:

To lose one’s faith – surpass
The loss of an Estate –
Because Estates can be
Replenished – faith cannot –

Inherited with Life –
Belief – but once – can be –
Annihilate a single clause –
And being’s Beggary – (Poem 377)
One can make whatever case one wants about Dickinson’s beliefs or disbelief by selecting individual poems, letters, or even lines, but the way to reach insight is to look for long-term patterns in her religious references. For as Jane Donahue Eberwein points out in “‘Is Immortality True?’ Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals,” “Despite variations in tone and imagery, religion remained a centering concern for Dickinson from her first valentine with its comic references to Eden [. . .] to her last letter ‘Little Cousins, / Called back. / Emily.’(L 1046)” (Pollak 70). The whole of Emily Dickinson’s life was consumed by a struggle with God and a search for answers on issues relating to faith, and her poems and letters show her vacillating between the innumerable points along the continuum from belief to disbelief. Lundin neatly sums up her struggle thus:

On several occasions, in adolescence and young adulthood, she agonizingly approached the threshold of conversion but never passed over it; and throughout her adult life, in her poems and letters, she brilliantly meditated upon the great perennial questions of God, suffering, the problem of evil, death, and her “Flood subject,” immortality. Though she never joined the church – and quit attending it at all around the age of thirty – she wrestled with God all her life. Only months before she died, she called herself ‘Pugilist and Poet.’ Like Jacob, who told the angel, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me,” Dickinson would not let go of God. (3-4)
It is difficult to say at what points along the continuum, one may draw the lines of separation between the various stages of development in the life and art of a poet. Though stages of development have their relevance, in most cases such a division would be inappropriate, and sometimes even do great violence to the work itself. It is so with regard to Emily Dickinson’s life – with its emotional upheavals and intense spiritual struggles – and with regard to the practice of her art. We cannot divide her work as a poet into periods, for there were no dramatic breaks in her actual development, such as for instance, between doubt and belief and new ways of seeking. The growth and development of her consciousness was far deeper and more complex than any such schematic imposition could cope with. However, for the sake of convenience this study envisages three broad divisions into which her life and works fall.

One is the ‘early’, relatively conventional Dickinson consisting of her earliest surviving poems and continuing into 1859 (Poems 1 – 152). Then there is the ‘middle’ Dickinson of passionately intense investigation and productivity until 1865 (Poems 153 – 1067). Finally there is a ‘late’ Dickinson bringing forth poems of fixed irony right up to the early 1880s (Poems 1068 – 1648). A reading of several of her critics, who have stated so implicitly or explicitly, validates this tripartite view. Alongside of this, the challenges to Christian belief that arose in her time, causing what Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls the generational “drift away from God [. . .] the phenomenon of an increasingly secular America” (451), and their influence on her will be considered in tracing Dickinson’s spiritual journey.
The Child's faith is new –
Whole – like His Principle –
Wide – like the sunrise
On fresh Eyes –
Never had a Doubt –
Laughs – at a Scruple –
Believes all sham
But Paradise –

Credits the World –
Deems His Dominion
Broadest of Sovereignties –
And Caesar – mean –
In the Comparison –
Baseless Emperor –
Ruler of nought,
Yet swaying all –

Grown bye and bye
To hold mistaken
His pretty estimates
Of Prickly Things
He gains the skill
Sorrowful – as certain –
Men – to anticipate
Instead of Kings – (Poem 637)
This poem depicts the innocence of a child who, with unassuming faith looks at the world with “fresh Eyes.” Soon, however, the “grown” child acquires the “skill” that is “Sorrowful” when she understands that she was “mistaken” in taking “pretty estimates / Of Prickly Things.” Thus with the coming of consciousness the child’s romantic vision is seen in tension with the realistic apprehension of things as they are. This poem throws light on Dickinson’s “peculiar burden,” as Albert Gelpi points out in “Two Notes on Denise Levertov and the Romantic Tradition,” which was “to be a Romantic poet with a Calvinist’s sense of things: to know transitory ecstasy in a world tragically fallen and doomed” (91).

Emily’s childhood was not very different from that of many New England girls of her period and station. She was reared in keeping with the nineteenth-century ideal of American womanhood. However, her education gave her critical knowledge of the great transformations in nineteenth-century thought, and equipped her in ways not anticipated by her parents. They nurtured expectations that she would be a Christian, attend to household duties, enjoy culture and education in a limited way, and devote herself finally to the role of wife and homemaker – expectations that were frustrated by the originality of her soul. For, “in choosing to devote herself to the pursuit of great art, she challenged and rejected the psychic and social stereotyped images of the woman of her era” (Ferlazzo 28).

It was Benjamin F. Newton who introduced Emily to the world of thought and writing while she was attending Mt. Holyoke Seminary, and encouraged her to dream of a poetic career. With the untimely death of this
young man who was the first to recognize her remarkable verbal dexterity, she lost one of the most encouraging critics she would ever have. She was greatly indebted to this early master, or “Preceptor,” as she called him, particularly for introducing her to Emerson. It was from the writings of Emerson that “Dickinson found the liberating notion of self-reliance, the stress on personal experience over tradition, and the concept of poet as “seer” – all of which stirred her poetic ambitions and gave her the support and encouragement she needed to lead the rigorously lonely life she chose” (Ferlazzo 26).

At Mount Holyoke, Dickinson suffered a serious religious crisis, when after much anguish and soul-searching she reached a decision not to be converted. Her resistance was not a sign of unbelief, though, but “involved her experience of revivals, her natural diffidence, and her complex relationship to her family back home” (Lundin 43). Her letters from this time reveal Dickinson’s ambivalence, her uncertainty about the deepest subjects of the spirit. She felt guilty about resisting conversion, and was filled with self-recrimination about the opportunities she had missed. In a letter to her friend Abiah Root she confides, “I regret that […] I did not give up and become a Christian” (Letters 67). Despite the attraction of conversion, some combination of things held her back. The reason she gave Abiah, “it is hard for me to give up the world” (Letters 67), seems ironic in the light of her eventual choice of a nearly conventual hidden life. In a letter to Jane Humphrey, she differentiates herself from her friends who have professed Christ –“I am standing alone in rebellion” (Letters 94).
On her return to Amherst, Emily encountered another season of grace in the 1850 revival that drew her father, sister, and Sue (who would become her sister-in-law) into the church, and later her brother Austin. Her letters to her friends during these years after she left Mt. Holyoke reveal great emotional turmoil. She moves gradually from a feeling of being lost, to analyzing her resistance to conformity, to feeling confirmed in her wickedness, intoxication with her spiritual recklessness, and a readiness to accept her lost condition and even risk damnation. In a harsh letter to Sue she goes so far as to write: “[. . .] though [. . .] I shall remain alone, and though in that last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me – there is a darker spirit will not disown its child” (Letters 306).

A final fragment the poet left behind at death sums up the mystery of childhood and memory for the adult poet according to Lundin, when she remarks that “memory drapes her lips” (Letters 928-929). He finds the image Dickinson employs to describe her adult memory of a lost childhood revealing, for she frequently employed images of dumb silence to depict God, nature and the dead (22). The great divine and natural forces arrayed against her often seemed mute. God often appeared to her to be remote and taciturn like her father, and one of her poems reports:

I know that He exists.

Somewhere – in Silence –

He has hid his rare life

From our gross eyes. (Poem 338)
Emily identified the patriarchal God with her own father, assigning Him the attributes of coldness and forbiddingness. This made Him far more powerful a figure and also increased her sense of helplessness and torment, for both had failed and injured her. In a memorable line hinting at a relation in her subconscious between her father on earth and in heaven, she addresses God as “Burglar! Banker – Father!” (Poem 49). With her dismissal of this distant God in her decision not to join the church, Emily knew she was spurning a heavenly Father – “Papa above” (Poem 61) – who resembled her earthly one in his shrouded loneliness. However, her opinion at that time was not that settled. So we find her concluding Poem 70 with the “hope” that “the Father in the skies / Will lift his little girl [. . .] / Over the stile of “Pearl”.” But we see in another poem written in the same year 1859, a totally different attitude to God, wherein she considers that agony was the price of transport, to be paid to an exacting deity, who meticulously kept his ledgers:

For each ecstatic instant

We must in anguish pay

In keen and quivering ratio

To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour

Sharp pittances of years –

Bitter contested farthings –

And coffers heaped with Tears! (Poem 125)
Some of her earliest poems also speak of the shocks of deception and disappointment. A verse from 1859 reads “the days when Birds come back –” as signs of God’s treachery as he employs nature to fool us in the beauty of “the days when skies resume / The old – old sophistries of June –” (Poem130).

From Dickinson’s letters we learn that her anxieties about faith preceded awareness of romantic and scientific challenges to faith. If we judge by her letters before 1858, the year she began systematically recording her poems, she was already distancing herself from certain aspects of religion while intensifying her focus on others. Dickinson sensed that her critical consciousness had shut her out from the innocence of childhood and had somehow made the assurances of Christian belief unavailable to her in the conventional form. Ferlazzo offers a great insight when he remarks,

Emily began her adult life, therefore, with the conscience and heart of a Christian but without the faith and hopes that sustained other Christians when they were faced with the suffering and complexity of living. In refusing to “give up the world,” she paradoxically withdrew from the world around her; and she began searching for another which she found, finally in her own poetic creations. (28)

However, as Henry W. Wells notes in Introduction to Emily Dickinson, she never forgot the God whom as a child she came to know from her elders. She read the Bible often and with enthusiasm. Religion appealed to her, but she acknowledged no leader. No preacher or doctrine won her allegiance
To use her own metaphor, on the seas of life and religion, which at times seemed to her virtually one, she embarked in her little boat alone. Emily was not in communion with the spirit of Calvin, in whose religious persuasions God was feared as a judge, a deity that wreaked vengeance on man for his misdeeds, that over-shadowed man with a sense of doom that haunted his happiness with the accusation of guilt. She therefore “resisted the threats implicit in her religious heritage,” going by what Mary James Power writes in her book *In the Name of the Bee: The Significance of Emily Dickinson* (10).

Here she was reflecting the tendencies of her time that were the effects of the Great Awakening that had brought the division of churches within most Protestant denominations. For even as the need for conversion was stressed and revivals encouraged by the Congregationalists who gained prominence in Emily’s early years, stern Calvinistic doctrines were gradually modified to accommodate nineteenth-century romantic sensibilities and emerging scientific perspectives. This progressive religious tradition rooted in Puritanism stressed the revelation of scripture and that of nature. Private interpretation of the Bible by lay people was encouraged, and this “antique Volume – / Written by faded Men / At the suggestion of Holy Spectres” (Poem 1545) was being read increasingly as a literary work. That Emily Dickinson “could imagine fresh renderings and even reached the point of referring to the Bible narratives as myth [. . .] reflected the tendencies of her time [. . .]” (Pollak 83).
In addition, new scientific evidence demolished biblical chronologies by proving from evidence of earth itself that this planet must be millions of years old rather than six thousand. Thus “Nature [. . .] manifested the Creator’s glory in ways that bridged Enlightenment with romantic modes of understanding” (Pollak 83). This fresh approach looked at science as reinforcing the Bible. That Emily was influenced by the new developments in science may be seen in poems such as the following:

A science – so the Savans say,

“Comparative Anatomy” –

By which a single bone –

Is made a secret to unfold

Of some rare tenant of the mold,

Else perished in the stone –

So to the eye prospective led,

This meekest flower of the mead

Upon a winter’s day,

Stands representative in gold

Of Rose and Lily, manifold,

And countless Butterfly! (Poem 100)

Dickinson began writing poetry in earnest in her mid-twenties. From the very beginning of her poetic career, we notice in her an intense fascination with death and immortality and the evanescence of delight – something she acquired through her personal experiences as well as her
immersion in contemporary culture. Her early encounters with death as a child and an adolescent overwhelmed her with the pain of life and shaped her responses to death that would remain with her throughout her adulthood. The death of Benjamin Newton was particularly harrowing, and was the first of many that would make her passionately protective of those she loved and jealous of the God who stole them from her. Over the years, starting with the death of Newton, Emily came to doubt the character of God. In a poem written only a few years after Newton’s death we find her responding to the loss and suffering with resignation and supplication:

Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels – twice descending
Reimbursed my store -
Burglar! Banker! Father!
I am poor once more! (Poem 49)

It was the inevitability of death that made life unbearable and heaven necessary for the adult Dickinson, who was consumed by the sense that finitude was the fundamental human dilemma. William R. Sherwood remarks in Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson that the “sense of discrepancy between the appearance of an object and the meaning of it was for Emily Dickinson at no time more graphically and grotesquely apparent than in the presence of death” (43). We find her ironically contrasting human grief with the joy of those who have assumed
the perspective of eternity sometimes, and at others comparing human
corruption with the incorruptibility for which corruption was the
prerequisite. “She was mute from transport – / I – from agony – ” (Poem 27).
However, as we examine all of Dickinson’s poetry of the early years, we find
that “irony represented for her a momentary respite from her vacillations
between hope and despair, rather than a stratagem consciously chosen to
provide her with a vantage point from which to dominate and to fuse the
contradictions she perceived and felt in her experience” (Sherwood 44).
Though death is the subject of some poems and a part of the content of many
of them during this period, it is never in itself the centre of interest. Either
“Death [is] but our rapt attention / To Immortality” (Poem 7), or death is
examined as a possible mode of response to the pressures and restrictions of
living.

Dickinson’s longing to believe in eternal life is characterized in one of
her early poems “These are the days when Birds come back” in which the
bright beauty of an Autumn day almost entices the speaker to believe that
it’s June, and that she could be part of an eternal summer. But, as a leaf
drops, the poem swings wistfully between belief and unbelief.

These are the days when Birds come back –
A very few – a Bird or two –
To take a backward look.
These are the days when skies resume
The old – old sophistries of June –
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee –
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief.

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear –
And softly thro’ the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf.

Oh Sacrament of the summer days,
Oh Last Communion of the Haze –
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake –
Thy consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine! (Poem130)

Two of Dickinson’s early poems express her sense and her uncertainty that the poet’s eye and the flight of his imagination are the only means by which life, death and the mystery beyond may be penetrated.

Once more, my now bewildered Dove
Bestirs her puzzled wings
Once more her mistress, on the deep
Her troubled question flings –
Thrice to the floating casement
The Patriarch’s bird returned,
Courage! My brave Columbia!
There may yet be Land! (Poem 48)

Here she uses, as she often does, the sea to symbolize the flux of time within which the living and dead sail, and the land to symbolize the destination on the other side.

Whether my bark went down at sea –
Whether she met with gales –
Whether to isles enchanted
She bent her docile sails –

By what mystic mooring
She is held today –
This is the errand of the eye
Out upon the Bay. (Poem 52)

We also see a prevailing sense of helplessness and dependence in the young poet that is expressed by the way she assumes the roles of the pilgrim, the beggar and the child during this early period before she recognized that her art was the mode through which she would triumph over conditions of living: “Nobody knows this little Rose – / It might a pilgrim be” (Poem 35); “Twice have I stood a beggar / Before the door of God!” (Poem 49) “Papa above!” (Poem 61) The roles assumed reveal images of helplessness, poverty of resources, and of dependence. Though she had
not yet “made the formal renunciation, the reticence, the sense of isolation, the mistrust of the outside world, the feelings at once of exclusiveness and helplessness are already evident in the poetry of these early years of her career” (Sherwood 66). Dickinson’s gradual assumption of solitude coincided closely with the discovery of her poetic calling. Her feelings at once of isolation, defenselessness, superiority, resentfulness and uniqueness were probably generated by “the circumstances of her family life and the sense simultaneously of exclusiveness and ostracism generated by her poetic ambitions [. . .]” (Sherwood 21). It was by writing poetry that she gradually learned to convert her defeats into victories and her deprivations into abundance.

One of the most anthologized of Emily Dickinson’s poems, and one that is generally held to be representative of her best work and her characteristic attitude is Poem 67 written in 1859.

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed,
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory
As he defeated – dying -

On whose forbidden ear

The distant strains of triumph

Burst agonized and clear.

The poem affirms that the consciousness learns best from negative example and that a life of renunciation and deprivation is one to be chosen because it is dedicated to understanding rather than reward. Here suffering exists not to demonstrate God’s superiority or to prepare us to appreciate His future benevolence by contrast, but to increase our comprehension of experience. In this way Emily Dickinson explains and justifies suffering and raises it from being a state of humiliation, to an act of dignity. This poem shows very clearly her belief that “all that could be known at all was known by antithesis” (Whicher 301).

This was Emily’s way of coping with life, of surviving, for it made submission to suffering and deprivation “a choice of the intelligence rather than an act of abnegation and an admission of helplessness” (Sherwood 62). It preserved and reinforced that sense of exclusiveness and uniqueness that she had revealed in 1849 when she refused to profess membership in the Congregational Church. As Sherwood observes,

To use consciousness, for which the evidence was clearly identifiable, rather than grace as the criterion for membership in an “elect” must have appealed to this woman who had scrutinized the skies and flowers of Amherst [. . .] for evidence
of the immortality that a staunchly Congregationalist community was always ready to assure her existed. (63)

For she believed that attainment is realised not through acquisition, but through consciousness, and that knowledge is taught not by experiences, but by what experience fails to provide –

Water is taught by thirst.

Land – by the Oceans passed.

Transport – by throe –

Peace – by its battles told –

Love, by Memorial Mold –

Birds, by the Snow. (Poem135)

Dickinson found herself unsuited to the calling of a missionary, a teacher, or a wife and homemaker – options that were open to young women of her time and age. In the choices she made and refused as a young adult, she set herself on a course that would lead her away from these options and into solitude. We see her gradually turning her back on the church or the ordered world of orthodoxy, and her face toward poetry, the world of infinite aesthetic possibilities. As Lundin observes:

To remain viable, orthodox faith needed the support of history, science, and the suspension of critical belief, while poetry demanded only an unassailable belief in the unimpeachable self. [. . .] The life of conventional faith and practice called for assent to a body of doctrine and active participation in the life
of the church, but the poetic imagination demanded nothing more than a spirit of reverie. (61)

So we find this young woman who was born and bred in the then stable belief system of Calvinist Christianity gradually withdrawing from Sunday meetings as her letters document. As one of her later poems would declare: “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church – / I keep it, staying at home” (Poem 324).

Emily Dickinson’s faith of the early years was fragile and the poetry expresses a desperate need for faith. As Sherwood sees it, for Emily Dickinson, the writing of the poetry of the early years is an act of pride, “a pitting of the resources of human consciousness against the obscurantism of God” (45). Here is an illustration:

Just lost, when I was saved!
Just felt the world go by!
Just girt me with the onset for Eternity,
When breath blew back,
And on the other side
I heard recede the disappointed tide!

Therefore, as one returned, I feel
Odd secrets of the line to tell!
Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores -
Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
Before the Seal!
Next time to stay!

Next time the things to see

By Ear unheard,

Unscrutinized by the Eye –

Next time to tarry,

While the Ages steal –

Slow tramp the Centuries,

And the Cycles wheel! (Poem 160)

Since Dickinson knew no want at home and did not have to worry about her own sustenance, she was able to embark on a journey of self-definition that would carry her ever deeper into herself, a journey that would last a life-time, with her choice to remain at home. ‘Home’ for her, was a safe haven and she maintained an active social life in the beginning. We find that as she approached the age of thirty, “having laid one after another of her intense relationships into her ‘box of Phantoms [. . .] unto the Resurrection,’ Emily Dickinson slowly retreated to the confines of the Homestead and the precincts of her own consciousness” (Lundin 98), crafting poems that are a testament to the ability of the human consciousness “to distill a plenitude of riches from which would seem to be a paucity of experience” and that illuminate “how the imagination can enrich and surmount the conditions of a drastically circumscribed life” (Sherwood 66). Thus at the end of the first phase of Dickinson’s life and work, we find that “by forsaking the social world and its allotted roles for the sake of the
infinite possibilities of the inner life,” she has “set out to map the uncharted territories of consciousness” (Lundin 74).

Dare you see a Soul at the ‘White Heat’?

Then crouch within the door –

Red – is the Fire’s common tint –

But when the vivid Ore

Has vanquished Flame’s condition –

It quivers from the Forge

Without a color, but the light

Of unanointed blaze – (Poem 365)

The second phase finds Dickinson the poet sequestered at home, “a Soul at the ‘White Heat,’ ” crafting, “through the medium of the written and printed word [. . .] a means of securing the sheltered stability of home while also enjoying the exquisite liberty of inner exploration” (Lundin 65). She successfully lived out her calling as a poet over the last thirty years of her life without any access to the outside world, save that which her reading and correspondence provided. While others roamed the world in search of volcanoes “in Sicily and South America” she wrote,

A lava step at any time

Am I inclined to climb –

A crater I may contemplate

Vesuvius at Home. (Poem 1705)
Dickinson reached a peak of productivity in her early thirties, when she wrote more than 350 poems in a single year, 1862. She had put an end to her social life and had become a recluse by 1860 when the Civil War was about to begin. The period from 1858 to 1862 proved as trying to her personally as it was to be for the nation politically, for it was a time of personal trauma, theological upheaval and great national peril. Her letters from this period make repeated references to pain and serve as the best source of information about her life during her most prolific years. “Much has occurred, dear Uncle, since my writing you,” she wrote to Joseph Sweetser in the summer of 1858, “– so much – that I stagger as I write, in its sharp remembrance. [. . .] Today has been so glad without, and yet so grieved within – I cannot always see the light – please tell me if it shines” (Letters 335). Commenting on this traumatic period in her life Lundin remarks:

In these wrenching years, Emily Dickinson’s “grand theater of the mind” played out its acts against the colossal backdrop of the Civil War. In the period when Dickinson was experiencing an unspecified “terror” of disappointment and “a woe that made me tremble,” and while she was forging hundreds of poems in the “white heat” of anguish, the war was searing the nation’s consciousness and devouring its sons. (121)

Across the country, the horrors of war fostered doubts about divine mercy. The four years of slaughter evoked crises of faith that prompted widespread rejection of Calvinistic beliefs. On occasion, the shock of battle registered
itself upon Dickinson in her Amherst seclusion, as when her brother’s dear friend Frazer Stearns was killed. However the war was not her most pressing concern at the time and when she did refer to the conflict, it was often for the purpose of using it as a metaphor for a more primary grief as the following poem illustrates:

The Battle fought between the Soul
And no Man – is the One
Of all the Battles prevalent –
By far the Greater One – (Poem 594)

The war mostly served to give her fresh images to describe “The Battle fought between the Soul / And no Man.” As Pickard observes, “Her own suffering taught her that pain and deprivation, rather than happiness constituted the essence of life. She eschewed the conventional supports of home, society, and religion to fight alone on life’s hardest battleground – within the human soul. Unflinchingly she faced the inner challenges and struggled to wrest spiritual victory from emotional defeat” (122).

In the search for the reasons behind Dickinson’s reticence and her need for privacy, leading to retreat, Sherwood offers an insight:

For Emily Dickinson the self can only endure in a world with which it cannot, except through art, find meaningful connection. She affirms life but not living. “To be alive – is Power” (Poem 384) but to live is to suffer, and the way to stay alive is to endure and to hide one’s suffering from the world that caused it, lest vitality be compromised. (53)
Very early in her life as a poet, Emily had come to look upon pain as the proof of her vocation. In the pursuit of her vocation, she chose a life of renunciation and retreat by refusing to marry or publish. In this manner she could indulge in possibilities and develop her work, hidden from the sight of the public’s eye. Solitude, however, exacted a heavy price and her pain was intense. As she writes in Poem 772, the “Essential Oils” of her poetry had to be “wrung” from her pain, because “The Attar from the Rose / Be not expressed by Suns – alone – / It is the gift of screws –” The following poem clearly shows Emily’s strategy for enduring in the face of suffering and her view of consciousness:

No rack can torture me –
My Soul – at Liberty –
Behind this mortal Bone
There knits a bolder One –
You cannot prick with saw –
Nor pierce with Scimitar –
Two Bodies – therefore be –
Bind One – The Other fly –
The Eagle of his Nest
No easier divest –
And gain the Sky
Than mayest Thou –
Except Thyself may be
Thine Enemy –
Captivity is Consciousness –
So’s Liberty. (Poem 384)

From the period – 1858 to 1865 – more than 125 letters have survived including the three “Master” letters. Taken together, they provide a picture of Dickinson’s passion and pain at this harried time. Whatever its sources, sorrow staggered her repeatedly in these years. Critics and biographers have tried to pinpoint what specific trauma assailed her and have reached different conclusions. Ultimately, it seems pointless to attempt to locate the specific traumas that initiated the desolation and radical freedom that gave rise to the self-creation of her poems. What we need to do, according to Gregory Orr in “Poetry as Survival,” is to recognize that the poet's trauma initiates “the struggle of transformation that leads to the richly proliferating and glorious incarnations of the poems” (1). Though it is not clear what hurt Emily Dickinson so, we do know that something hurt her with enormous force, again and again:

   It struck me – every Day –
   The Lightning was as new
   As if the Cloud that instant slit
   And let the Fire through –
   It burned me – in the Night–
   It Blistered to My Dream –
It sickened fresh upon my sight –

With every Morn that came –

I thought that Storm – was brief –

The Maddest – quickest by –

But Nature lost the Date of This –

And left it in the Sky – (Poem 362)

We know too that she responded bravely, that she loved to “buffet the sea!” What she meant was an inner sea: the sea of subjectivity, of the rise and fall, the ebb and flow and wild, wave-torn storms of the emotional life. Some of her poems articulate despair and fear of madness:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

And Mourners to and fro

Kept treading – treading – till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,

A Service, like a Drum –

Kept beating – beating – till I thought

My Mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box

And creak across my Soul

With those same Boots of Lead, again,

Then Space – began to toll,
As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then – (Poem 280)

Some poems speak of desolation and agony:
The Heart asks Pleasure – first –
And then – Excuse from Pain –
And then – those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering –

And then – to go to sleep –
And then – if it should be

The will of its Inquisitor

The privilege to die – (Poem 536)

Emily Dickinson’s poetry is one of survival, of the stabilizing of self through poetic ordering. As Gregory Orr says, “[. . .] subjectivity is so rampant and intense for Dickinson [. . .] that subjectivity itself could be said to constitute her trauma,” so excruciatingly volatile was her emotional life and so deep
her solitude (1). And she responds to this curious threat with the defiant free will of creativity exemplified by the writing of poems:

> They shut me up in Prose –
> As when a little Girl
> They put me in the Closet –
> Because they liked me "still" –

> Still! Could themself have peeped –
> And seen my Brain – go round –
> They might as wise have lodged a Bird
> For Treason – in the Pound –

> Himself has but to will
> And easy as a Star
> Abolish his Captivity –
> And laugh – No more have I – (Poem 613)

With intense creativity, Dickinson probed the character of God in numerous poems written during the Civil War. Borrowing freely from the biblical imagery and the hymn tradition of the Christian faith, she composed poems that alternate in tone between irony and devotion. Read selectively, these poems could support any conceivable claim about her beliefs. However, taken in their entirety, they project Dickinson as a great thinker who had a keen sense of the peculiar ambiguities of belief in her time. Many of these poems reveal that she had moments in which she felt distanced from God. In “I know that He exists” (Poem 338) her belief in God’s
existence seems clouded by a belief in His possible treacherous qualities. In “I meant to have but modest needs” (Poem 476) the speaker blames herself even more for having once shown a “childish “ faith than she blames God for having promptly rejected her. Though Dickinson often despairs that access to God is possible, at the heart of her poetry and her prayer is her desire to know God. She has a little poem that is a definition of prayer that “sums up the Apparatus / Comprised in Prayer – ”:

Prayer is the little implement
Through which Men reach
Where presence – is denied them.
They fling their Speech

By means of it – in God’s Ear –
If then He hear –
This sums up the Apparatus
Comprised in Prayer – (Poem 438)

In the poems from this period as Lundin points out, “the hiddenness of God becomes a form of absence, and the absence a source of pain. […] For most devotional poets, prayer reveals the presence of God; in Dickinson’s poems, it often discloses his absence” (148). Her frustration with the uncertainty of prayer finds voice in several of the twenty poems or more she wrote on prayer in the early 1860s, making God seem a colossal hypocrite, a supernatural swindler who instructs men to pray without any intentions of answering them.
Of course – I – prayed –

And did God Care?

He cared as much as on the Air

A Bird – had stamped her foot –

And cried “Give Me” –

My Reason – Life –

I had not had – but for Yourself –

’Twere better Charity

To leave me in the Atom’s Tomb –

Merry, and Nought, and Gay, and numb –

Than this smart misery. (Poem 376)

This poem reveals how distant Emily felt herself to be from the comfort of formal prayer. She stands on the precipice of despair, suffering the anguish of God’s cold shoulder. Abandoned and scorned, she even prefers nonexistence: “ ’Twere better Charity / To leave me in the Atom’s Tomb – / [. . .] / Than this smart misery.” There is no more authentic prayer than that of a wounded soul and in this poem, Emily’s frustration is her prayer. For as John Delli Carpini observes in *Poetry as Prayer: Emily Dickinson*, “The desolation we sometimes experience when we feel God’s absence is, ironically, the powerful desire for God’s presence” (92). Her doubt is expressed in the second quatrain, “If then He hear –”, and in the somewhat futile gesture of “flinging.” God’s deafness did not stop her, though; it made her to shout the louder. In spite of her doubts, and despite God’s remoteness and seemingly unfeeling nature, she yearned for Him.
Dickinson had little understanding of prayer as a personal communication with God. She often conceived of prayer as a desperate human attempt to reach into the silence. So prayer is not so much communication, as a fumbling human effort to establish at least a one way line of address to a God who seems silent – seems not to speak. However, she has a great poem that describes an instance of awe that is not confined by religion, or by church, but is something more than both of those.

My period had come for Prayer –
No other art – would do –
My Tactics missed a rudiment –
Creator – Was it you?”

God grows above – so those who pray
Horizons must – ascend –
And so I stepped upon the North
To see this Curious Friend –

His House was not – no sign had He –
By Chimney – nor by Door
Could I infer his Residence –
Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler –
Were all that I could see –
Infinitude – Had’st Thou no Face

That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended –

Creation stopped – for Me –

But awed beyond my errand –

I worshipped – did not “pray” – (Poem 564)

This is a perfect Dickinson poem on prayer. It begins with the desire to pray and ends with abandonment of prayer and the replacement of prayer by worship. Dickinson begins by making an attempt at prayer as a way of finding God. But she cannot get her quarry, she cannot find God, by her own lights: “His House was not – no sign had He – /By Chimney – nor by Door – Could I infer his residence –” This leads to a sense of frustration and she speaks to God: “Infinitude – Had’st Thou no Face/That I might look on Thee?” But here the tension yields an unexpected boon, a gift, for instead of the poet finding God, God finds her. “The silence condescended – /Creation stopped – for me –” And she is overtaken by something that is much bigger, more natural, more elemental: “I worshipped – did not ‘pray.’ Praying – at least in this poem – is a piece of religion while worship transcends religion.

Some of the poems of this period express a stoic patience when God does not answer; others are the screeches of a child when she does not hear what she expects. Her poetic mission was to express the truth she suffered painfully to discover and her poems bear the mark of her mental agony, the spiritual anguish she endured while attempting to find a clue to the mystery
of life. Though her human fear of loss, abandonment, loneliness, and death shook her faith in a providential and benevolent God, this, however, did not prevent her from praying: “The Martyr Poets – did not tell – /But wrought their Pang in syllable –” (Poem 544). “Somehow, prayer fixed in her a moment of clarity at the center of life’s agitation, or as Frost defines a poem, ‘a momentary stay against confusion.’ Whenever Emily found this kind of faith, she discovered a valuable treasure” (Carpini 41). Dickinson also prayed for others, as she mentions in several letters, and she would often slip a line or two of comforting verse, if those she wrote to were ill or experiencing pain of some kind. Carpini observes that “many of her poems are prayers [. . .] the record of her ongoing dialogue with God,” and that reading her poems “is eavesdropping on her holy conversation” (6).

As the years passed, her approach to the deity toned down, becoming simpler and less cerebral. Christ’s Incarnation in particular appealed to her sensibility. His agreeing to take on human form, made her see him as more accessible than God the Father. In Jesus of Nazareth, the poet found some of the warmth, personality, closeness, and compassion that she could not find in the Creator, the Father, the first person of the Godhead. Though Dickinson wrestled with God the Father, and wrote many poems expressing doubt or anger at Him, she was drawn irresistibly to Jesus the Son. While she questioned God the Father’s presence and justice though not his existence, to the end of her life, Dickinson rarely wavered in her expressions of love for this “Tender Pioneer” (Poem 698). She was drawn to Jesus, to the humanity of this one who was “acquainted with Grief” (Letters 837). In the
suffering of Jesus she detected a truth that she could believe without a
doubt. “I like a look of Agony, / Because I know it’s true – ”(Poem 241). As
Lundin writes: “If God the Father was often her foe, God the Son was her
trustworthy friend” (318).

There are several poems in which Emily addresses Jesus. She
“reserved a unique place for Jesus in her affections” and “apprehended him
most fully in the singular intensity of human suffering” (Lundin 172). Often
during her most prolific years and in times of difficulty, she detected
parallels between the crucifixion of Jesus who renounced heaven and took
suffering upon himself, and her own renunciation of marriage and public
life. Jesus for her was a divine “Preceptor” who she believed, knew her pain:
the loss of friends in death and her struggle to believe.

At least – to pray – is left

Oh Jesus – in the Air –

I know not which thy chamber is –

I’m knocking – everywhere – (Poem 502).

Dickinson’s poems not only reflect her journey to discover God, they
also speak to us. “Where Thou art – that – is Home –” (Poem 725) is one such
poem where unusually for her, she asks no questions, makes no demands,
but simply enjoys the pleasure of being “at home” with God. “I scarce
esteam Location’s Name” she writes, for “Home” is not a place. Home is
where God is. Knowing how important the concept of “home “ was to
Dickinson, representing sanctuary, acceptance and security in the
unpredictable world of “Bondage,” “Imprisonment,” and “Sentence,” the
poem reveals her belief that security and contentment are to be found in God.

Knapp captures Emily Dickinson’s approach to God in a telling manner:

We find that Dickinson’s view of God [. . .] was neither complacent nor confident. On the contrary, it was marked with contention, defiance, and continuous oscillation. Nevertheless, her thoughts, her life, and breath - her very being - were deeply imbued in biblical utterances, hymns and the prayers of her day, which found their way into her poems in words of love, anger, or irony toward God. (128)

In the second and most productive phase of Dickinson’s life as a poet we see that religion continued to be a centring concern for her despite the variations in tone and imagery. “Vexed by a distant and forbidding Father-God, heartened by his pioneering Son, and comforted by the Spirit whose presence became palpable for her in the play of words, Dickinson poured her life into poetry in these years” (Lundin 181). We also recognize that ambivalence was more than a poetic strategy for Dickinson, for it went to the heart of her uncertainty about life. As Lundin observes:

Emily Dickinson’s seclusion freed her to explore and endure the full range of her ambivalence about a number of weighty matters. For every poem of hers that questions the nature or existence of God, another affirms the goodness of the Divine character and power. For every lyric that celebrates the eternity
of art, another sees poetry as merely one more mortal creation.

[. . .] Dickinson [is] engaged in [. . .] shuttling “a hundred times
an Hour” between belief and disbelief, between infinite
possibilities and tragic realities [. . .] (139)

After surviving the physical and emotional harrowing of the Civil
War period, Emily Dickinson spent the better part of a decade trying to
restore order to her emotional life.

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 –
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
A Wooden way
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 – (Poem 341)

Exhausted by the ordeals of the previous years, she entered a period of
relative silence and inactivity. Though she wrote almost a thousand poems
in the five years from 1860 to 1865, she composed only a hundred or so
between 1865 and 1870, and little is known of her activities during these years. So much so that some critics have gone so far as to say she was psychologically dormant. Further, as a consequence of her inner turmoil, Dickinson’s poetic production and letter writing slackened significantly after 1865. The letters from the decade between 1865 and 1875 indicate that she spent these years “seeking to experience the simple ‘ecstasy of living’ that she considered ‘joy enough.’ In her normal round of activities, she savoured ‘the Happiness / That too competes with heaven –’ [. . .] simple pleasures brought the poet contentment in these quiet years” (Lundin 222). Such was her savouring of everyday life that she could plead, “Oh Sumptuous moment / Slower go / That I may gloat on thee –” (Poem 1125), and could even wonder if heaven were necessary:

Immortal is an ample word

When what we need is by

But when it leaves us for a time

‘Tis a necessity.

Of heaven above the firmest proof

We fundamental know

Except for its marauding Hand

It had been Heaven below. (Poem 1205)

However, the equilibrium that Dickinson had reestablished by the mid 1870s was soon shattered, beginning with the death of her father in 1874. We find death taking an enormous toll on her emotional and physical
resources in the final years of her life. Two of the contenders for the recipient of the “master” letters, Samuel Bowles, one of Dickinson’s most distinguished male friends, and the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, “her dearest earthly friend” (Letters 764), died in 1878 and 1882 respectively. The death of her mother in 1882 sapped her of emotional strength. She lost her nephew Gilbert in 1883, the only man she ever seriously considered marrying, Otis Phillips Lord, in 1884 and her beloved friend Helen Hunt Jackson in 1885. The “Dyings” as she called them, “struck her hard, and their cumulative effect was to drain and dishearten her in a way that no other suffering had done” (Lundin 224). Although Dickinson never came to accept death whose territory she had traversed so often, she was beginning to grow accustomed to it. With her letters that affirmed the promises of the Christian faith she comforted those who lost their dear ones, even as she lamented her own losses. In reassuring them, she strengthened herself, for as Lundin observes, “in assuring others” of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, “she steadied her own wavering faith” (236).

In 1884, she fell ill, exhibiting all the symptoms of a nervous breakdown. Vivian R. Pollak and Marianne Noble remark that whether she died of Bright’s disease, or of heart disease and hypertension, “Dickinson’s final years were riven by their elegiac tenor” (Pollak 53). Other such observations made by critics about her last days are a striking revelation of where Dickinson stands with regard to faith at the close of her life. “Even less than the earlier periods of her life were these last years a time of serenity” observes Chase. “If her last years display some of the qualities of a
ripe fruition, they display as many of an exacerbated and terrifying anxiety” (301). According to Knapp, “Having suffered through the demise of so many members of her family, Dickinson at the end of her days divested herself of all expectations concerning any future hopes for a blissful state in an eventual reuniting with God” (129). Lundin succinctly sums up her situation. “She remained, as she styled herself in a letter only a month before she died, both a “Pugilist and Poet,” one who wrestled with God and who continued to write in his shadow until the very end” (243).

Dickinson’s struggle with God was connected to the many challenges that arose to Christian belief in her lifetime. Hers was a struggle to salvage faith in an age of upheavals. The little Emily who grew up with constant reinforcement of church teachings at home, in school and in peer relationships and was taught to rely “wholly upon the arm of God” (Letters 31) went on to write that God’s “Hand is amputated”:

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 a Belief

Makes the behavior small –

Better an ignis fatuus

Than no illume at all – (Poem 1551)
The power in the poem is not just in its confession that God seems absent, or disabled, but in its awareness of how tragic that is, of how much is lost in a world where God’s hand is amputated. “The abdication of Belief/Makes the behavior small –” And then, to drive the point still deeper, she says that even an elusive faith – an ignis fatuus, something like a will-o-the-wisp – is better, “than no illume at all.” Biographers and critics read this poem as Dickinson’s response to losses she shared with others of her time. According to Wells, she “embodies in a heightened form the fatality of her age, wherein religion became less a normal function of the human soul than an agonizing problem” (144). Throughout the civilized world, the foundations of faith were shaken. Most thinking men and women vacillated with considerable spiritual discomfort between moods of zealous belief, ardent disbelief, and worst of all, skepticism, confusion and dismay. Emily expressed all these moods repeatedly and with unique poignancy.

What, then, caused this ebbing, this “Abdication of Belief”? Who, or what lopped that saving arm of God? Eberwein offers an answer:

Culprits usually arraigned include romanticism in both its Transcendental and sentimental manifestations, a scientific revolution spurred by Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, and theological rethinking unleashed by the European biblical scholarship known as the Higher Criticism. Another crisis unsettling belief was the Civil War. [. . .] In her childhood, belief seemed all but inevitable; by the time she died in 1886, agnosticism and even atheism had become easier positions to
justify intellectually. If Dickinson were to cling to faith, it had to be in a wounded God. (Pollak 68-69)

Dickinson’s attitude to this dilemma and the uncertainty it entailed varied as she coped with a disposition that could neither believe nor be comfortable in unbelief. At times she could be playful, “on subjects of which we know nothing [. . .] we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble” (Letters 728). Then in desperation she could write a poem that treats the soul’s relationship with God as a “fond Ambush” – a cruel game of hide-and-seek (Poem 338). At another time she says that Jesus has “Wrung me – with Anguish – / But I never doubted him –” and she pledges devotion even while she is tormented by Jesus (Poem 497). Her poems articulate dramatically varying and ephemeral moods and accommodate statements that range from “I know that he exists” (Poem 338) and “My Faith is larger than the hills” (Poem 766), to “He strained my faith” (Poem 497), and “Where is Jesus gone?” (Poem 158). At turns, for Dickinson, God seemed to have an “amputated hand,” (Poem 1551) or be a “distant, stately lover” (Poem 357) but then would “condescend” (Poem 564) unbidden to startle her into awestruck worship. Even a single four-line poem could accommodate her ambivalent attitude:

My Maker – let me be

Enamored most of thee –

But nearer this

I more should miss – (Poem 1403)
Dickinson’s biographies show that she had many moments in which she felt cut off from support or comfort from God or her friends. She apparently has such a moment, her faith obviously at a very low point as she writes a poem on the duplicity of God’s actions. We find her angrily speaking to God in a challenging, aggressive tone:

“Heavenly Father” – take to thee
The supreme iniquity
Fashioned by thy candid hand
In a moment contraband –
Though to trust us – seem to us
More respectful – “We are Dust” –
We apologize to thee
For thine own Duplicity - (Poem 1461)

Many of her poems express similar thoughts. In the “Bible is an antique Volume” (Poem 1545) she questions the effectiveness of God’s word. The word “God” itself is not used in many such poems but there are some poems that are more direct. “Of God we ask one favor” (Poem 1601) holds a bitter complaint about a harsh and unforgiving God; in the short poem “God is indeed a jealous God –” (Poem 1719) she attributes a traditionally human vice to His character; in “Apparently with no surprise” (Poem 1624) she sees not only indifference, but maliciousness in God’s treatment of one of her beloved flowers. In each of these poems she makes a statement about her religious disillusion, while at the same time appearing to have accepted this condition. Dickinson struggled mightily with the idea of God. It was not so
much that she doubted God’s existence as that she lamented God’s distance, His absence, and apparent lack of interest in humankind.

Dickinson’s writing thus brilliantly expresses tensions between doubt and faith in the nineteenth-century Western world that was subjected to unsettling intellectual and cultural pressures that eventually brought about “America’s transition from the pietistic fervor of the Second Great Awakening to post-Darwinian skepticism” (Pollak 70). She was one of “the first to trace the trajectory of God’s decline” throughout the Western world like her contemporaries Fyodor Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche (Lundin 4).

It is obvious from her poetry that Dickinson was very much at odds with conventional Christianity – and with its God. She wondered a great deal about God, and it was generally a dark wondering. She referred to God once as an “eclipse” whom others referred to as “Father” (Letters 404). As Wells observes, “Emily was neither an ordinary woman nor a docile believer. Like no one else, either man or woman, she stuck pins in God” (145). “God”, as a word in the poetry, is a rather unsavoury character. He is a burglar, a banker, a rival, and an assassin. He is sometimes a stately lover and sometimes a tormentor who just fumbles at your spirit. Sometimes he is simply death. There are poems that express a more conventional view of God, but they are certainly in the minority. Dickinson’s notions with regard to God evolved continuously throughout her life. Although during her early twenties and thirties she was antagonistic to the rigid Congregationalism of Amherst and the powerful conversion movement to which it gave rise, she
never denied or even doubted the existence of God. As Murray Bodo wrote to me in an email interview, “With Emily Dickinson, as with Levertov, I believe the skepticism is over religion more than over God and God’s existence” (see Appendix). In fact, she strained always to experience God’s existence as through this simile:

I never saw a Moor –

I never saw the Sea –

Yet I know how the Heather looks

And what the Billow be.

I never spoke with God

Nor visited in Heaven –

Yet certain I am about the spot

As if the Checks were given – (Poem 1052)

Dickinson could not accept certain aspects of Christian dogma such as Original sin, the Resurrection, the notion of a loving God, and the efficacy of prayer. Primary among them was the notion of a caring and loving God. One of the major frustrations of Emily, according to Wells, was her inability really to love God. The personal God was unavailable to “this heir of Calvin who found the Calvinistic God so unlovable”. As a puritan she felt the loss of this estrangement from an approachable divinity. Her poetry testifies to this loss and its consequences. “With an almost shocking boldness, she applied to her lover the terms and sentiments commonly ascribed to Jesus. Her father […] became an analogue for God the Father […] And for Emily, as for Blake, the Holy Spirit commonly became art” (82).
Untouched by the transcendentalist assumption of sympathy, even of identity between God and man, she retained from the Puritan conception of life a sharp sense of the struggle between Divine will and human pride. And as a child of her time she resented deeply the tyranny of an absolute God. Independence and autonomy were of prime importance to her – these she refused to yield, even to divinity. Therefore she found it impossible to drown her sorrows, like many of her friends did, in complete submersion in the Godhead, which would entail giving up what she prized most.

The whole instruction of the Church displeased Dickinson and she finds the God of the Old Testament particularly revolting. She discovers the Bible to be “an antique volume” (Poem 1545) full of lies, and “Faith,” she observes, “is a fine invention for gentlemen who see” (Poem 185). She prefers, rather, the microscope of truthful private observation. Another thing she found unacceptable was Christ’s promise of renewal and love, since suffering and sickness were rampant in the world she knew. Neither could she accept the efficacy of prayer. As Knapp observes, “The pledges given in both the Old and New Testaments were viewed by Dickinson as corruptive and brutal deceptions. For these reasons, and because God the Father was impassible and remote, she felt abandoned by him” (128). The doctrine of Original sin, and the total depravity of man, that was at the heart of Calvinism was something she could not subscribe to and her writings reveal little consciousness of sin. Eberwein cites her non-acceptance of the fundamental premise of the fall as one of the reasons why she proved resistant to conversion pressures (Pollak 78).
However, Dickinson has written some beautiful poems about the person and life of Christ that present a view of Jesus the Son not so much as sacrificial Lord, but sympathetic example and brave pioneer. She thinks of the example Jesus set in expressing terror, joy and suffering, and finds courage in that. Her understanding of Jesus has something to do with the Cross – but not so much the Cross as an act in the divine economy of salvation, but rather, of the cross as a supreme example of human compassion and possibly divine compassion. She struggled to believe that in the Crucifixion something beautiful and powerful was going on in the very heart and mind of God and in the dynamics of the eternal relationship between God and humanity and she made an effort to apprehend God through the sufferings of Jesus. In “Emily Dickinson: Jesus, the Tender Pioneer” a sermon preached at Plymouth Congregational Church, the Rev. James Gertmenian points out:

Emily Dickinson’s life spanned the time when Charles Darwin was publishing his seismic discoveries and Biblical scholars were developing the historical-critical method that pulled the rug out from under a literal reading of scripture. It was a time when the faith of many was being shaken. In such a time, Jesus became, for Dickinson, the one who, alone, could make sense of belief.

Poem 1433 illustrates this by showing how Jesus lived in the same condition we do, having to cross the same bridge, with many of the same temptations of doubt. If the higher criticism of the Bible and evolutionary theory had
created chasms for her faith, Jesus himself had nonetheless in his faithfulness, even to death, made it across and “pronounced [the bridge] firm”.

How brittle are the Piers
On which our Faith doth tread –
No Bridge below doth totter so –
Yet none hath such a Crowd.
It is as old as God –
Indeed –’twas built by him –
He sent His Son to test the Plank –
And he pronounced it firm. (Poem 1433)

This Jesus that Emily presents does not go through death for us, or instead of us, but ahead of us, to show the way and to keep our hearts steady, and to give us courage so we can venture out into life and into death. In a sense, then, in the true fashion of Emerson, Dickinson describes a Jesus who does not save us by virtue of his unique divinity but who saves us by exciting in us our own divinity. “To a significant extent, she followed the lead of Ralph Waldo Emerson and others as they sought to feed the life of the spirit by drawing from the fathomless depths of the self” observes Lundin. “In dwelling so exclusively on the humanity of Jesus, however, Dickinson also exposed the limits of the romantic turn in theology and culture.” For though in her most expansive moods she saw those inner resources as more than sufficient to nourish the soul, when suffering scorched her life and parched her spirit, “Dickinson learned the true poverty of human divinity” (4).
It is easy to work when the soul is at play –
But when the soul is in pain –
The hearing him put his playthings up
Makes work difficult – then – (Poem 244)

“The Soul should always stand ajar,” Dickinson wrote in Poem 1055, and she was without doubt one attuned to the spiritual world and open to its meaning. Her life, her work and her prayer were a response to these intimations:

The Only News I know
Is Bulletins all Day
From Immortality.

The Only Shows I see –
Tomorrow and Today –
Perchance Eternity –

The Only One I meet
Is God – The Only Street –
Existence – This traversed

If Other News there be –
Or Admirable Show –
I’ll tell it You – (Poem 827)

As we have seen earlier, Dickinson’s desire for intellectual assurance that was independently achieved kept her back from a commitment to Christ. Similarly, her nature poems refuse what would be unconfirmed
though comfortable assertions. Emily Dickinson has written more than 500 poems on the subject of nature. In some of them she shares with her romantic and transcendental contemporaries and predecessors the belief that a mystical bond exists between man and nature and that nature reveals to man things about mankind and the universe. The common widespread view is that the transcendental doctrines did not satisfy her deepest level of questioning concerning nature (as with religious belief), and her struggle to define nature in transcendental terms is not altogether a successful one. In others she declares that a separation exists between man and nature and that nature is at the core indifferent toward the life and interests of mankind (mirroring her experience of God). There is a third category of nature poems where she affirms the sheer joy and the appreciation she feels in the variety and spectacle of nature. However, “Unlike other nature poets who might permit their feelings to lead to their faith, Dickinson never abandoned her clear-eyed observation aided by reason” (Ferlazzo 99).

In “Dew - is the Freshest in the Grass” (1097) she uses the analogy of a travelling circus to express the idea that we live outside of nature and are permitted to observe, experience, and enjoy it. We are not allowed to enter into its secret, though. In “What mystery pervades a well!” (Poem 1400) Dickinson states the idea that as much as we may wish to enter and learn of nature from behind the scenes, we cannot gain admittance. Man and nature are strangers. In the final stanza, she suggests what it is about nature that makes it awesome and unknowable:
To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get (Poem 1400)

She was aware that the real mystery of nature is the mystery of existence itself. While nature may give her occasional joys, in the last analysis it reminded her of the impermanence of things and of her own mortality. For Dickinson, when an individual became a part of nature, when he entered the “haunted house,” he was going to meet his death. Ferlazzo contrasts this attitude with that of Walt Whitman who perceived a merge with nature in optimistic terms as part of the gentle and orderly process of life:

His corpse, placed in the ground enters the process of nature and becomes renewed: he grows again as grass. Whitman affirms this relationship between nature and death, and he finds unity and immortality awaiting him. Dickinson, on the other hand, is unsure of immortality and suspicious of nature, and is unwilling to believe and affirm what she cannot test for certain. She will allow herself, at best, only cool skepticism.

(102)

All through her life and in major portions of her poetry, Emily Dickinson wrestled with the twin themes – death and immortality. Beginning with the loss of Ben Newton, death frequently intruded on her family and her circle of friends, and when the Civil War erupted, she had regularly to take account of human fragility and mortality. The losses were
personal and deep for Dickinson. It was here that Jesus became the “Tender Pioneer” (Poem 698) who makes possible a passage that would otherwise cause us to shrink in fear. In an 1862 letter, she reported to her preceptor, Thomas Higginson: “I had a terror – since September – I could tell to none – and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground – because I am afraid” (Letters 404). And when the fear came over her – as it often did – Dickinson wrote about immortality as a way of coping:

Surrounded by death, by darkness, writing poetry became for her an act of courage meant to affirm her fragile life. With her great creative spirit, she transformed human frailty, fear, and anxiety into the highest levels of art: and she wrote away a measure of her terror by facing it squarely. (Ferlazzo 42)

Speculation about immortality is Dickinson’s point of departure for many of her most intense deliberations on Belief. The ‘Glimmering Frontier’ (Poem 696) and what lay beyond it was a subject that constantly occupied her. And it isn’t to say that her position was one without a struggle. She says, “The Soul has bandaged moments – / When too afraid to stir – / She feels some ghastly Fright come up / and look at her” (Poem 512). And she struggles in the poetry with this ever-present sense of death without personal afterlife. According to Lundin, “Of all the articles of the Christian creed, the one she most fervently longed to believe was that of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting […]” (236).

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –

Untouched by Morning –
And untouched by Noon –
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection –
Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone!

Grand go the Years – in the Crescent – above them –
Worlds scoop their Arcs –
And Firmaments – row –
Diadems – drop – and Doges – surrender –
Soundless as dots – on a Disc of Snow – (Poem 216)

This seems to capture so much of both her Belief and her Unbelief. The position of the dead awaiting their resurrection is placed in the new context of the newly discovered geological time. For by 1859 when she wrote this poem, geological discoveries had made geological time seem far more vast and extensive than it had ever seemed before. And in this poem, Dickinson imagines those who have died and await the resurrection, not as being denied that resurrection but as having to wait – as having to be patient.

Dickinson understands the to-ing and fro-ing of Belief and Doubt in religious experience. It is this flexible faith, which keeps guessing, keeps refusing to be pinned down, that resonates in Dickinson’s writing as a poetics of “wonder”, or “nimble believing.” Wonder is the moment of knowing one’s ignorance – of knowing that one does not know: “Wonder – is not precisely Knowing / And not precisely Knowing not – “(Poem 1331).

In Poem 1434 written in her later years she says, “Go not too near a house of
rose/ Nor try to tie the butterfly/ Nor climb the burrows of ecstasy/ For in insecurity to lie/ Is joy’s ensuring quality.” Writing was certainly Dickinson’s way of keeping alive that sense of wonder, or nimble believing, and a means of surviving crises.

Emily Dickinson’s “nimble believing” is firmly rooted in the here and now, rather than the “beyond.” Dickinson lived with enormous intensity, “a Soul at the White Heat” (Poem 365). She was deeply engaged in this world, embracing a belief in ‘secular holiness’, rubbing together the sticks of belief and unbelief, confidence and doubt, hope and resignation, to produce the spark, the kindling, the flame, the blaze, the white heat of faith. Spirituality is often thought of as ‘high’ and ‘sublime’ rather than ‘deep’. What we find in Emily Dickinson is the expression of a deep spirituality. As the Rev. James Gertmenian remarks in “Emily Dickinson: Jesus, the Tender Pioneer,” “certainty about God’s presence and care eluded her, so she lived in the “white heat” of the questions all through her life.” He goes on to say that this “condition of ‘white heat,’ – the tension between certainty and doubt – while not the most comfortable circumstance in which to live, is, in fact, the true territory of faith.” As she said, “Too much of proof affronts Belief” (Poem 1228).

In Dickinson’s world of “secular holiness”, the language of conventional Christianity often works alongside a romantic spirituality. This allows her to indulge her pagan slant on Belief. “The Bible is an antique Volume –” has, as its final stanza: “Had but the Tale a warbling Teller – / All the Boys would come – / Orpheus’ Sermon captivated – / It did not
condemn –” (Poem 1545). Orpheus, a pagan, was a singer who charmed the world. The pagan religions are able to see the sacredness and the spiritual in every single dimension of life, without exception. It is interesting to note here, that Emily Dickinson called herself “pagan” on several occasions. Part of the paganism is to appreciate the complexities and contradictions in life, and to be able to find a place for all of these things. And this is clearly an integral part of Emily Dickinson’s creed.

A question often raised in Dickinson studies is one regarding Calvinist piety in her poetry. In answer, every conceivable type of tentative conclusion has been suggested. On the one hand, according to Sherwood, in 1862, the Calvinist God chastened Dickinson, imbued her with grace, and received in return her “poetic oaths of fidelity and declarations of love” (191). He therefore attempts to establish all of the poems from 1862 on as demonstrations of Calvinist piety. At the other extreme, we have Hyatt Howe Waggoner who contends, “Emily began by not being certain she could believe the dogmas and ended (in 1859) by being certain that she couldn’t” (85). Between these extremes there is a wide middle ground.

So too, resolving the question regarding Emily Dickinson’s faith is problematical. Several Dickinson scholars have made strong arguments for the likelihood that she did actually experience the kind of conversion her culture had prepared her to expect, basing their case on close readings of groups of poems. William R. Sherwood, strongly influenced by Thomas Johnson’s chronology for the poems, locates her conversion in 1862, the year Johnson thought to be the poet’s most productive. “In 1862,” he argues,
“Emily Dickinson did not have a crack-up [. . .] but a conversion, and [. . .] it was precisely the variety of conversion that both her inclinations and her traditions had prepared her for and against which she had fought so vigorously at [. . .] Mt. Holyoke in 1848” (138). Dorothy F. Oberhaus reads Fascicle 40 (dated 1864) as “a three-part meditation” that reveals itself as “a simple conversion narrative” confirming the poet’s developing relationship with Jesus (4, 14). Cynthia Griffin Wolff organizes her critical biography around the motif of Dickinson as a Jacob figure wrestling with God. However, she finds evidence of midlife experience validating early flickers of hope. “By the mid-1860s or early 1870s,” Wolff declares, “well before Father’s death, a new poetry of faith had emerged” (504). While most other scholars are content to rest in uncertainty, Eberwein states, “she underwent a transforming experience of artistic empowerment in the 1850s that paralleled the religious experiences of her companions.” Finding significance in the fact that the year she began arranging her poems in fascicles was 1858, the last great revival year across the United States before the Civil War, she goes on to say that “Dickinson dispensed with the life-defining ritual of conversion in any way her neighbors would recognize, yet she somehow distilled from cultural convention a visionary and life-renewing creative energy” (Pollak 78).

Thus we find that on the one hand we have a number of plausible arguments put forth by critics like Oberhaus who infers that Fascicle 40 is a “simple conversion narrative” that relates how Emily “gives in” to Jesus (14, 19), or Sherwood who concludes, “After 1862,” the year of her supposed
conversion, she “was pledged to God, her loyalties and assumptions fixed” (179). At the other extreme we have Gary Sloan who uses strong language to denounce this “Pagan Sphinx” as he calls her in “Emily Dickinson: Pagan Sphinx”: “Dickinson’s enigmatic nature shrouds her evolution from Christian manqué to pagan. She had histrionic propensities that obscure the line between her true beliefs and those she feigned. [. . .] she struck poses and adopted personas. [. . .] My guess is she died an agnostic.” A few years before she died, Dickinson herself wrote thus: “On subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say Beings, we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble” (Letters 750). It is this letter that helps us best in understanding her final position regarding faith. For as James McIntosh declares,

‘Nimble Believing,’ that is believing for intense moments in a spiritual life without permanently subscribing to any received system of belief, is a key experience, an obsessive subject, and a stimulus to expression for Dickinson [. . .] Dickinson’s Christian education affected her profoundly, and her desire for a humane intuitive faith motivates and enlivens her poetry. (1)

Whatever the truth may be, the middle ground chosen by the majority of Dickinson scholars seems to be the only possible conclusion to be drawn in the absence of solid evidence either for or against the case. As Wells rightly says, “No fundamental position can be found in her poetry concerning the faith” (145). For Dickinson’s art of “nimble believing” poses more questions than it affirms. As she once wrote, “my business is
circumference” (Letters 268). We can only try to follow her as she goes about her “business”, and discover as we follow, that there is no fixed position towards Belief for us to rest on. Because for Emily Dickinson, the intellect never reaches “conclusion”: it moves unceasingly towards the Unknown – in human nature, in the natural world, and in the Divine. There is something beyond, she asserts, even through her fear and though she couldn't quite believe in the “Heaven further on” (Poem 388), despite opiate assurances from the pulpit:

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

Strong Hallelujahs roll –

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth

That nibbles at the soul – (Poem 501)