Chapter 4

Levertov and Dickinson: The Dialectics of Faith

In Denise Levertov and Emily Dickinson we have two poets characterized above all by the integrity of their hearts. Dickinson showed, to use Capps’ words, “unabashed directness and honesty in spiritual matters,” though of course (and perhaps because) she did not have an immediate audience to contend with (46). She was modern in that she dared to question “the faith of her fathers”, unable to emulate her neighbours’ easy acceptance of the patterns of traditional faith. Her integrity is revealed in her refusal to accept the easy, facile answers provided by orthodox theology.

Similarly, Levertov was exemplary as Lorrie Smith writes in “Songs of Experience: Denise Levertov’s Political Poetry,” in her “courage to speak from a clear and ideological position when much American poetry remain[ed] hermetic and socially disengaged” (232). The late 20th century was a sceptical time, with God’s Nietzschean death having been noted a long time ago. Living and writing in such a time, Levertov believed that “the basis of every work of art” as Rilke says, is to “keep our inward conscience clear and to know whether we can take responsibility for our own creative experiences just as they stand in all their truthfulness and absoluteness (NSE 237). Convinced that the “sense of spiritual hunger” was a “counterforce or unconscious reaction” to the “technological euphoria” and “rationalist optimism of the 20th century”, she wrote explicitly Christian poems even at the risk of losing part of her readership, as she tells Nicholas O’Connell in a
final interview in 1997 just before her death (344). Emily’s remark to Sue
holds good for both these poets: “To be singular under plural circumstances
is a becoming heroism –” (*Letters* 651).

Critics have encountered difficulties in classifying both Levertov and
Dickinson and in trying to define their exact religious position. The
evolutionary, metamorphic quality of Levertov’s work made it difficult to
categorize. Until around 1988, her politics and a stance, which embraced no
specific religious doctrine or set of religious observance, confused the issue.
For instance, Margaret Randall, in her review of *Breathing the Water* in 1988
says, “Recently, one critic termed her “Christian” (with a capital C). I
disagree” (Wagner-Martin 52). The tumult over Levertov’s political work in
the 1960s and 1970s obscured the cohesiveness and integrity of her work.
What has unified her work from the beginning is a profound sense of the
mystical, of life as a spiritual quest. Perhaps her search has always looked
like an aesthetic rather than a religious quest, though from the beginning she
has spoken of God and never seemed to be unwilling to label her own
journey as spiritual. As Diane Wakoski says in “Song of Herself,” “What
becomes apparent in *Breathing the Water* is that a distinct mystical religious
vision has informed the poetry from the every beginning, and a struggle to
understand God’s meaning for the world” (Wagner-Martin 55). The last four
volumes include more poems with religious elements, such as Biblical
references and themes, allusions to the numinous and so forth. In spite of
this apparent change in direction, neither her theory nor her practice is
radically altered as she creates what Anne Colclough Little calls “her song of agony and doubt, praise and hope” (10).

With Emily Dickinson, however, there is no consensus of opinion at all because of what Donald E. Thackrey calls her “amazing inconsistency of intellectual position (Sewall 51). The situation was also made complex by the “many mysteries of incompatibility, of absent centres, which we encounter in her” and the “absence of strategy, the [. . .] lack of guiding purpose [. . .] in her poetry” as John Robinson puts it in his book Emily Dickinson: Looking to Canaan (69). Unlike Levertov the activist whose work is a “testimony of lived life,” Dickinson the recluse guarded secrets so well that it is almost impossible to recreate the life out of which her poetry was made. Was her poetry the expression of life lived or life repressed? Does she tell of experience or wish? What made her suffer and rejoice so, and who is it she loved with such intensity? She seems to adopt a variety of masks. While speaking of “our belated recognition that the “real” Emily Dickinson can never be fully located,” Vivian R. Pollak and Marianne Noble in their brief biography of Dickinson observe that “‘It is finished’ can never be said of us” (Letters 613), so long as we recognize that some Emily Dickinsons are more real than others (Pollak 54). Also Dickinson’s was a poetry of craftsmanship rather than that of confession. To make a coherent pattern out of her poems is therefore very difficult. Though her exact religious position is difficult to define – at times she appears as believer, sceptic, agnostic, or heretic – we find that her poetry is haunted by religious metaphors and religious themes.
This difficulty may be partly overcome by an examination of the etymologies of certain key words in this study such as ‘doubt’ and ‘scepticism’, ‘faith’ and ‘belief,’ which would facilitate a deeper understanding of the religious positions of Levertov and Dickinson as revealed in their works. ‘Doubt’ from the Latin ‘dubitare’ means to ‘hesitate, waver in opinion’ (related to ‘dubius’ ‘uncertain’), originally ‘to have to choose between two things.’ ‘Sceptic’ from Latin ‘scepticus’, literally means, ‘inquiring, reflective.’ The word has now come to mean ‘one who instinctively or habitually doubts, questions, or disagrees with assertions or generally accepted conclusions.’ There are numerous moments of doubt in the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson, revealed as a wavering of opinion or belief, a lack of conviction, of trust or confidence, or an uncertainty in certain matters of traditional religion. Dickinson’s poems also show her often as a sceptic, as one who habitually doubts, questions, or suspends judgment upon generally accepted religious doctrines, and Levertov’s poems reveal her struggle between faith and doubt as she moves “from a regretful skepticism [...] to a position of Christian belief” (NSE 241).

The Hebrew word for ‘faith’ is ‘pistis’ which connotes confidence, fidelity, guarantee and loyalty. One meaning of faith is the Latin word, ‘assensus’ which means ‘assent’: faith as believing something to be true, as giving one’s mental assent to something. The opposite of faith as belief is doubt, and in its stronger form disbelief. Within this understanding of faith, if one has doubts, one does not have much faith. A second meaning of faith
and one that has rich meaning for our time is the Latin word ‘fidelitas’ or ‘fidelity’: faith as faithfulness to a relationship. In a religious context, it means faith as faithfulness to a relationship with God, which has very little to do with beliefs but goes deeper. The third meaning of faith is the Latin word ‘fiducia’ or ‘trust’; faith as a radical trust in God, which is not very much concerned with beliefs at all. The opposite of faith as trust is mistrust or, as the teachings of Jesus makes clear, ‘anxiety’ or ‘worry’. In a famous passage (Matt 6 / Luke 12), Jesus says, “Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. [. . .] Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.” In these metaphors Jesus invites his hearers to see reality as characterized by a cosmic generosity. Calling them “you of little faith” he exhorts them not to worry. Here we see that little faith and anxiety go together. The rich meanings of these words and the fine distinctions that arise between them help to qualify the drama of faith and doubt that unfolds in the works of Dickinson and Levertov and to explain the nuances of the despair and pain they experience.

The Latin word ‘credo’ from which we get the word ‘creed’ is translated into English, as ‘I believe.’ The meaning of the Latin word ‘credo’ is ‘I give my heart to.’ So saying the Apostles’ Creed means giving one’s heart to God and entering into a relationship of personal allegiance, not to the statements, but to the one about whom these statements are made. The
English word ‘belief’ comes from the West Germanic word ‘ga-laubon’ meaning ‘dear, esteemed.’ Belief used to mean ‘trust in God,’ while faith merely meant ‘loyalty to a person based on promise or duty’ (a sense preserved in ‘keep one’s faith’ and in the common usage of ‘faithful,’ ‘faithless,’ which contain no notion of divinity). Faith, gradually took on the religious sense, and belief has today become limited to ‘mental acceptance.’

Within this understanding of belief, Levertov’s commitment in the Catholic Church and acceptance of the creeds in the last years of her life (in spite of certain misgivings/points of contention) may be interpreted as the giving of her heart to a God whom she trusted and held dear, in a relationship of personal allegiance. Such a happy confluence is not seen in Dickinson, but that is not to undermine her faith. Dickinson’s inability to accept the creeds of the Calvinist tradition can be seen as her inability to believe (in the sense of giving her mental assent to the statements), and not necessarily a repudiation of the person about whom the statements are made. Consider her prayer: “If Blame be my side – forfeit Me – / But doom me not to forfeit Thee –” (Poem 775). She never repudiated God. As Levertov observes, “The doubts of a wholly secular mind and its life-experience have no context, no ground, no substantial referents. Belief has to accompany doubt for doubt to be serious” (NSE 16). The honest expression of Dickinson’s doubts, in fact, gives credence to her faith. She was constantly wary of beliefs in as much as beliefs represent rationalizations of the mysteries of life. “Too much proof,” she wrote, “affronts belief” (Poem 1228),
and she was little convinced either by doctrine or by theological reasoning. As Power sees it, “she left the traditional church of New England, not in the spirit of the moderns because she lost the faith, but because she wanted to preserve it” (39). So also Robinson notes, “the tradition had captured her imagination but not her assent [. . .] Her sense is of the traditions inadequacies but she still needs its supports” (84).

Levertov’s poem “The Tide” implies a difference between belief, an intellectual assent, and faith, an imaginative assent. The poem in its final section argues that faith and poetry are linked.

Faith’s a tide, it seems, ebbs and flows responsive
to action and inaction. Remain in stasis,
blown sand stings your face, anemones
shrivel in rock pools no wave renews.
Clean the littered beach, clear
the lines of a forming poem,
the waters flood inward.
Dull stones again fulfill
their glowing destinies, and emptiness
is a cup, and holds
the ocean. (ET 118)

Faith is not willed into existence any more than the tide is willed onto the shore: faith reveals itself through chosen acts, just as a poem’s form reveals itself through content. Cleaning the beach and clearing the lines of a poem
are acts of faith and of imagination. Such acts of faith reveal the inner glow of a dull stone, the joy overflowing a cup of emptiness. In her essay “Work that Enfaiths” (NSE 247) Levertov notes that this distinction between belief and faith is the basis of “Flickering Mind”:

I stop
to think about you, and my mind
at once
like a minnow darts away,
[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]
How can I focus my flickering, perceive
at the fountain’s heart
the sapphire I know is there? (DH 64)

Every poem, then, is an act of faith. According to Levertov, “Every work of art [. . .] enters a stage of improvisation as soon as the artist moves from thinking about it to beginning to form its concrete reality. That step [. . .] resembles moving from intellectual assent to opening the acts of daily life to permeation by religious faith,” to what Dickinson means by “The Soul should always stand ajar” (Poem 1055). And Levertov sees that “such permeation is ‘faith that works’” (NSE 249).

The understanding thus gained from an etymological analysis may be augmented by a theological analysis. Karl Rahner in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* puts forward a few theological presuppositions regarding the way to faith. An analysis of the poetry of Levertov and
Dickinson on the basis of these presuppositions brings into sharp relief certain distinctions in their faith experience. To begin with Rahner says,

As a result of God’s universal salvific will and the offer of the supernatural grace of faith as an abiding feature of man’s mode of existence as a person, every human being is always (even previous to the explicit preaching of the Christian message) potentially a believer and already in possession [. . .] of what he is to believe: God’s direct self – communication in Christ. (310)

Levertov has a similar thought attributed to Pascal, as the subtitle of her poem “For the Asking” in her posthumous collection: “You would not seek Me if you did not already possess Me” (GU 4). Coming to the faith, then, is “the endeavour to develop this already existing faith into its full Christological and ecclesiastical, explicit, social, consciously professed form. This endeavour can and should link up with all the elements of faith already present” (Rahner 310). As far as Levertov and Dickinson are concerned, the richness of their familial heritage and religious legacy were to all appearances most conducive to a flowering of faith in its fullness as outlined above. Blessed, in addition, with great powers of imagination and poetic talent, the undercurrents of their personal destinies showed promise of carrying them to a fruition of faith in the God whom they so ardently pursued all their lives as evidenced in their writing.
In Levertov’s poetry we have a clear reflection of the various factors that eventually led her to faith. Even in the midst of the “anger abroad in the world” in which she lived “because of God’s silence,” she was able all through her life to discern God’s “holy voice” that “utters its woe and glory in myriad musics, in signs and portents.” Her poems were for her, “a way to ask and to answer” (GU 52). And having accepted “as guest, as brother, / the Word” (GU 18), we find her with her final commitment to the Catholic Church, blossoming “out of [herself], giving / nothing imperfect, withholding nothing!” (GU 12) In Dickinson’s poetry however, and in the little we know of her life, the contributing factors are not followed through to their resolution in a conversion in the traditional sense. In other words, we do not find a resolution of her faith in its “full Christological and ecclesiastical, explicit, social, consciously professed form”(Rahner 310). Rather, she seems to work in the opposite direction, first moving out from the Congregational church, and so from a faith that is socially professed, and then diligently applying herself to a life long struggle with doubt and faith. She tells us that though she did not “keep the Sabbath going to church” she did hear “God [preach]” and “so instead of getting to Heaven, at last,” she was “going, all along” (Poem 324). Conversely, in another poem she states that she “left the Place with all [her] might” and “threw [her] prayer away” having “grown shrewder” (Poem 476). She appears to have lived out her days in the “Sweet Skepticism of the Heart / That knows – and does not know” (Poem 1413).
The second presupposition Rahner puts forward is that “Conversion to faith is always a process with many stages” (310). This is true in Levertov’s case. Her poetry clearly reflects the various phases in the process of her conversion to Christian faith. As we have already seen, at the beginning of her poetic career, we have her exploring daily experience and the mystery behind things in her search for the authentic. Her encounter with truth leads to her affirmation of joy. This is the period of her scepticism bordering on pantheism, which slowly gives way to agnosticism, where she perceives merely the truths of change and coherence and places faith in joy. There is no mention of God or religion, though she reveals a sense of otherness. In the next stage, she suffers a loss of authenticity, poetic vision and power. She struggles and grows to experience a new peace and hope. The seed of change is seen clearly in Life in the Forest, where her encounter with death assails her with doubt. In this period of transition, she moves from the recognition of a spiritual presence to a mystical belief in a God within herself. The greatest shift in her career comes with the collection Candles in Babylon, where the “experience of writing the poem” on “doubting Thomas” was for Levertov, “also a conversion process” (NSE 250). The collections from this one onwards offer her poetry of belief, with every succeeding collection bringing her a step closer to faith. From “mere shaky belief” (NSE 255), her faith develops into its Christological form with her recognition of Christ in the Incarnation. Gradually we find her surmounting her doubts, moving to a new stage of illumination in Sands of the Well where, as Murray
Bodo says in his article for *Image* titled “Denise Levertov: A Memoir and Appreciation,” the “closing series of poems shade gracefully into prayer”.

No such linear growth or evolution of faith marked by stages can be traced in Dickinson’s work. The only divisions into which her work falls has nothing whatsoever to do with her faith – we have the poetry of her early years, then the middle period of greatest productivity concentrated in a few years, and finally the last stage of continued creative work that spanned two decades. Occasionally her desire for affirmation, her imaginative power, and her heritage from a phenomenally sensitive childhood enabled her to write in full confirmation of Christian attitudes and beliefs. Such poems culled from across thirty years of creative output only serve to show isolated moments of spiritual insight. In contrast, there are a greater number of poems that reveal myriads of moods that range from playful scepticism to utmost despair. It is therefore difficult to distinguish periods or stages of spiritual change or achievement. The greatest impediment is that there is no sure evidence to confirm her spiritual conversion at any point. As Rahner sees it, “Faith is never awakened by someone having something committed to him purely from outside, addressed solely to his naked understanding as such” (311). The truth of this statement is seen in Dickinson’s life. The many converting influences on her, particularly at Mount Holyoke and at the time of the Revival of 1950 could not convince her. Neither could all the fiery sermons she heard:
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –

Strong Hallelujahs roll –

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth

That nibbles at the soul – (Poem 501)

It was the independence of mind she maintained that made her resist all importuning to join the church. However, a sense of anxiety over her spiritual intransigence remained and as Charles R. Anderson opines in *Emily Dickinson’s Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*, “of all the Dickinson family, she is the only one whose entire career was devoted to a quest for religious truth” (259). As we have already seen, several Dickinson scholars like Sherwood, Oberhaus and Wolff have made strong arguments for the likelihood that she did experience a conversion, and Eberwein argues for a transforming experience of artistic empowerment that paralleled religious experience. Lundin’s words of caution are wisely given: “[…] while no single poem of Dickinson can or should be read as though it were a straight transcription of her mind, the poems should not be read, either separately or in the aggregate, as though they offered scant clues as to the beliefs and doubts of this woman […]” (293). In other words, we can never be sure with regard to her actual spiritual stance at any given point.

A third presupposition regarding the way to faith that Rahner offers follows.

An approach to faith presupposes that a human being who is to be led to faith already has a starting point and that from it
and from the very nature of that starting point, there exists a transition to the further reality of faith in whole or in part. The implication: that the realities and truths of faith are interconnected, and that there is therefore a connection also between what is always a prior datum and what has to be believed anew and expressly. (Rahner 310-311)

The starting point for Levertov is her Russian Jewish ancestry and the Hasidic and Anglican spiritual traditions from where she brings a concern with the spiritual, the ritual, and the religious element of living, and which are the sources of her fascination with the mysteriousness of the material world. As for the connection between “a prior datum and what has to be believed anew,” we are able to discern four major threads running simultaneously and persistently through all of Levertov’s collections that trace her “transition to the further reality of faith” – a celebration of mystery, a search for the authentic, her belief in the power of the imagination, and her political engagement.

An acknowledgment and celebration of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme of Levertov’s poetry from its very beginnings. Levertov explores the mystery of experience and finds the spiritual to be an intensification of the daily event. Her poems are “rites moving around an experience, with the insight of words granting it significance, even holiness” (Juhasz 61). In “A Poet’s View” Levertov admits, “the experience, as a poet,
of being at times a channel for something beyond my own limitations was [. . .] an open door to specifically religious experience (NSE 242).

“God is only known as God when he is known as the incomprehensible and is acknowledged in his incomprehensibility. [. . .] This incomprehensibility is essential and permanent and stems from the nature of God himself who is the absolute mystery” (Rahner 16). Levertov’s path to a knowledge and experience of God who is the absolute mystery can be seen as the natural consequence of her peculiar response to mystery as articulated in her poem “The Novices”. Here a man and a boy go into the forest in responsiveness to a call to perform something without understanding it, as a duty: they are to tug out of the earth a great iron chain which is attached at the other end to an oak tree. The tutelary spirit of the place appears and tells them not to perform the strenuous task but to “look about them / and see [. . .] and not ask what that chain was.”

To leave the open fields

and enter the forest,

that was the rite.

Knowing there was mystery, they could go.

Go back now! And he receded

Among the multitude of forms,

The twists and shadows they saw now, listening

To the hum of the world’s wood. (OTS 57)

Such was Levertov’s response, her assent to the mystery of Christianity.
Much of Levertov’s work in the last two decades of her life was inspired by a Christian imagination responding to the paradox of Incarnation in contrapuntal voices of faith, assurance and doubt. In her insightful and comprehensive examination of Levertov’s “poetry of incarnation,” Denise E. Lynch points out that the Jesuit “Teilhard de Chardin’s paradoxical belief that human imperfection can enter into communion with divine perfection” informs much of Levertov’s later poetry (5). Levertov’s understanding of the Incarnation and its meaning for salvation gives her faith in a divinity both transcendent and immanent.

“Faith is man’s comprehensive ‘Yes’ to God revealing himself as man’s saviour in Christ. [. . .] To be a Christian is to accept the truth of the mystery of Christ (the death and resurrection of the Son of God) and its meaning for salvation,” says theologian Juan Alfaro (Rahner 313-314). Faith is a fundamental human choice, a decision wherein man submits to God’s salvific love revealed in the Incarnation of Jesus. “On the Mystery of the Incarnation” (DH 50) reveals the depth of Levertov’s probing of this mystery. “Annunciation” (DH 86), offers an interesting insight to Mary’s “Yes” to God: “But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions / courage [. . .] She was free / to accept or to refuse, choice / integral to humanness.” And when called to this momentous destiny to be the mother of God, “she did not quail” but perceived the astounding ministry she was offered “to carry [. . .] nine months of Eternity” and “Bravest of all humans, [. . .] Consent, / courage unparalleled, / opened her utterly” (DH 86). Thus
we see how from her exploration of the mystery of experience in her earliest poetry, Levertov proceeds to exploring the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Resurrection, till it leads to her acknowledgment of God the absolute mystery in his incomprehensibility. It ultimately takes her into the fold of the Church where she feels “nourished” by the “Catholic liturgy and mystical tradition” (Conversations 180). Embracing Christianity is a natural evolution for Levertov, since her exploration of the mystery of experience leads to a conviction that the spiritual is the intensification of the daily event and that the values of Christianity are not incompatible with the values that she has always sought.

Likewise, Levertov’s search for the authentic, “Marvelous Truth” (JL 62) can be traced to its smooth and natural resolution. In her early collections she explores every aspect of her daily experience of the world in her search for the truth. She believes here as throughout her career that every experience relates in some way to the truth. As an agnostic she perceives merely the truths of change and coherence, and in the recreating and renewing power of Nature, which for her is truth. In the second stage of her transition, she encounters darkness and doubt, and struggles and grows to attain a new peace and hope, and begins to see the truth of a God within herself. The third stage that offers her poetry of belief shows her coming gradually to a position of belief in “the truth” of Christ (John 14:6).

With regard to the third thread, that of Levertov’s belief in the power of the imagination, we find that her “poems have been addressing doubts
and hopes rather than proclaiming certainties” and her readers are let into the process as she is engaged in building up her own belief step by step. She remarks thus: “They are poems written on the road to an imagined destination of faith. That imagination of faith acts as yeast in my life as a writer” (NSE 257). While endeavouring to decipher daily experience she “emphasizes the incapacity of reason alone [. . .] to comprehend experience, and considers Imagination the chief of human faculties” (NSE 246). This is significant where her movement to faith is concerned, for as the theologian Jorg Splett says,

The act of religious knowledge is a “decision” and a “leap”, so unheralded that no justification of it can be given, nor can it be explained in any rational way. The element of knowledge in the religious act is referred to a special faculty not reducible to any other, a “feeling” and experience which are described in various ways, but which do not include intellect, argument and justification but are expressly opposed to them. (Rahner 15)

Speaking of her move from scepticism to faith, Levertov has no rational explanation to give: “it seems somewhat exaggerated to call “intellectual” either my previous doubts [. . .] or my more recent sense of their irrelevance. I have not solved by a reasoning process the problems which had always stood in my way” (NSE 242).
“God is not an object among other objects of experience which under certain circumstances one may fail to discover, but is necessarily affirmed in the accomplishment of man’s intellectual and moral activity, even if he is explicitly denied, or not named, or is met with under quite conceptual modes of expression” (Rahner 311). As an artist Levertov had always believed that she was “in the service of the transcendent” (NSE 143). As we have already seen, she held “Imagination” to be “the chief of human faculties.” She believed that it must therefore be “by the exercise of that faculty that one moves towards faith” and that “the imagination, which synergizes intellect, emotion and instinct, is the perceptive organ through which it is possible [. . .] to experience God” (NSE 246). And as she followed the “road of imagination,” in “the decisions of the day” as well as in the “decisions of a poem in the making,” she began “to see certain analogies [. . .] between the journey of art and the journey of faith” (NSE 248).

As already noted, while writing the poem “A Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus” (CB 108), she was changed from agnostic to believer. “The experience of writing the poem – that long swim through waters of unknown depth – had also been a conversion process” (NSE 250). The rest of her life from this point onwards was spent exploring a radical Christian unorthodoxy and the tenuous ligament between belief, doubt and grace. For instance, as she confesses in “Work that Enfaiths,” writing a libretto about El Salvador where she dwelt on the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero helped her to stop making a fuss in her mind about various points of doubt, and so
engage in a Pascalian wager that paid off. So too, it was through the creative process that she “worked through to a theological explanation” of a “substantial stumbling block, the suffering of the innocent and the consequent question of God’s nonintervention” (NSE 250-251). There are several such instances of “the interaction of artistic labor and incipient faith” as in the writing of “Standoff,” “The Annunciation,” “On the Parables of the Mustard Seed,” “The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich,” “St. Thomas Didymus” and several other poems featured in a collection of her religious poems, The Stream and the Sapphire. Levertov confesses: “The writing of each of these poems has brought me a little bit closer to faith as distinct from mere shaky belief. Thus for me the subject is really reversed: not “faith that works” but “work that enfaiths” (NSE 255).

In his book Poetry as Prayer: Denise Levertov, Murray Bodo describes Levertov’s journey to God as two fold. “It is a journey by way of metaphors drawn from nature, drawn from the complexity of the human heart with its propensity for good and evil, its conflicts and failures and triumphs, as well as a journey through the social and political triumphs and calamities of her time” (99). This brings us to the fourth thread that runs through her poetry – that of her political engagement. Having been born into a socially conscious family with a literary bend, she was as involved in politics as she was in poetry, bringing the same energy and passion to both. The obligation of social conscience and the circumstances of her life forced her into the politics of the anti-war movement and into anti-nuclear, environmental, and social
justice concerns. Major blocks of her poetry vividly present the horror of war, and also reflect her political concerns and her anguish over public policy. The problem of suffering, and the question of God’s nonintervention troubled Levertov not so much in relation to individual instances like we find in Dickinson, as in regard to the global panorama of oppression and violence. Here we see how Levertov’s belief in the power of the imagination lifts her above her pain, helps her overcome despair and articulate a poetry of praise. In ‘Poetry, Prophecy and Survival’ she says, “Affliction is more apt to suffocate the imagination than to stimulate it” (NSE 145). Perhaps this explains the fallow period of Dickinson’s life after the short period of intense creativity. This is substantiated by Lundin’s remark, “As a consequence of her inner turmoil, Dickinson’s poetic production and letter writing slackened significantly after 1865” (221). Levertov however believed that “The action of imagination, if unsmothered, is to lift the crushed mind out from under the weight of affliction. The intellect by itself may point out the source of suffering: but the imagination illuminates it: by that light it becomes more comprehensible” (NSE 145).

To speak of sorrow

works upon it

moves it from its

crouched place barring

the way to and from the soul’s hall – (SD 53).
The angst of seeing and living in a world that seldom meets ideal standards forced Levertov to take stands. Her movement to Christian faith stemmed naturally and inevitably from her humanitarian concerns and her sense of social responsibility. Eventually, we see how her politics, her striving for justice and mercy, leads her to experience the fellowship of belief in the Catholic Church: “The process of moving from agnosticism to belief has been for me profoundly influenced by such people as Archbishop Romero, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and other people [. . .] whose commitment to peace and justice is absolutely outstanding” (Conversations 176). Levertov thus affirms God in the accomplishment of her intellectual and moral activity and her poems continue to give hope to a war-torn and fragmented world:

The gods die every day
but sovereign poems go on breathing
in a counter-rhythm that mocks
the frenzy of weapons, their impudent power. (WE 73)

An analysis of Dickinson’s work based on the third presupposition of Rahner’s with regard to “a starting point,” “a transition to the further reality of faith” and “a connection also between what is always a prior datum and what has to be believed anew and expressly” (Rahner 310-311) shows that the starting point for her is the New England tradition of moral Calvinism that sets a frame for her thought. Unlike Levertov, she neglected her ancestral past, and Lundin points out a curious fact that there is but one
reference to her ancestry in all of her poems and letters. “Neither the
traditions of the church nor the legacies of her ancestors interested her
greatly. Because she had not known them directly, she had no memory of
them. For her, memory meant the recollection of intense experiences or
encounters rather than rituals of general commemoration” (8).

In Poem 285 Dickinson says that she sees ‘New Englandly’. By this
she might have referred to the fact that it was the hymn books of Isaac Watts
which gave her the models for her verse forms or that the descendents of
Calvin had set a frame for her thought. We have already seen in an earlier
chapter that Emily Dickinson was “at the disturbed confluence of two very
powerful cultural traditions – that of New England Puritanism, which was
waning, and that of New England Romanticism” (Robinson 34). The
influence of the Puritan legacy and the Romantic inheritance on her mind
was great. “The preference of intuition or feeling to reason, the mistrust of
explanation, […] the belief in prospects of Nature, the choice of solitude, the
suspicion of society, the belief in organic meaning and veneration of
awesome forces are all signs in her of the workings of a Romantic
inheritance” (Robinson 90). The legacy of Calvinism was to remain with her
all her life. One of its essential principles, which saw mankind as divided
into ‘the Elect’ and the Damned taught that humanity was predestined,
totally in the hands of God. It is no wonder then, that “Puritanism released
the energy of uncertainty” observes Robinson, giving us an explanation for
Emily Dickinson’s ambivalent attitude. “[…] what made Puritanism into a
dynamic system was a double scale of time and a dual sense of place – both of which show powerfully in Emily Dickinson’s poetry” (36).

Coming to maturity at a time when its structure of dogmas was falling into collapse, the theology of Puritanism failed to provide satisfactory answers, and Dickinson’s writing reveals her self-possessed mockery of the terms on which those beliefs were handed down to her. And out of her need to construct a private religion through the poetic imagination, she “struck out on her own road of spiritual pioneering” (Anderson 260). Sacramentum Mundi states that “God is [. . .] necessarily affirmed in the accomplishment of man’s intellectual and moral activity, even if he is explicitly denied, or not named, or is met with under quite conceptual modes of expression” (Rahner 311). There is evidence that Dickinson had epiphanies of direct encounter with the infinite that inspired poems like “Better than Music! / For I – who heard it” (Poem 503). “Although offering no definitive proof of her spiritual condition, such ecstatic experiences support conjecture that Dickinson herself experienced the transition from fallen humanity’s state of natural depravity to a state of grace” (Pollak 75). Oberhaus argues persuasively that Poem 964 is Dickinson’s conversion narrative. This is a succinctly phrased dialogue between the poet and Jesus at the end of which, unusually for Dickinson, there is a resolution in her silent acquiescence denoted by the abrupt end to the conversation with Jesus’ invitation: “Occupy my House.”

“Unto Me?” I do not know you –

Where may be your House?
“I am Jesus – Late of Judea –

Now of Paradise” –

Wagons – have you – to convey me?

This is far from Thence –

“Arms of Mine – sufficient Phaeton –

Trust Omnipotence” –

I am spotted – “I am Pardon” –

I am small – “The least

Is esteemed in Heaven the Chiefest –

Occupy my House” –

However, as Robinson remarks: “If at times – and especially in 1862 – she went down on her knees, she did not stay there for very long” (71). For certain influences of her childhood and adolescent experiences remained to colour the whole of her life. These are revealed as connecting threads linking her poetry written over a span of three decades. For instance, her adolescent responses to death (which was a regular presence at the time) taught her to doubt the character of God, while her education, and in particular her interest in science had a lasting influence in developing her sceptical turn of mind.

In “A Poet’s View,” Levertov says, “To believe, as an artist, in inspiration of the intuitive, to know that without Imagination [. . .] no
amount of acquired craft or scholarship or of brilliant reasoning will suffice, is to live with a door of one’s life open to the transcendent, the numinous. Not every artist, clearly, acknowledges that fact – yet all, in the creative act, experience mystery” (48). Emily believed this too:

The soul should always stand ajar
That if the Heaven inquire
He will not be obliged to wait
Or shy of troubling Her

Depart, before the Host have slid
The Bolt unto the Door –
To search for the accomplished Guest,
Her Visitor, no more – (Poem 1055)

She seems to be speaking here of spiritual vigilance that is so vital to a life of faith and doubt. ‘The Only News I know,” she writes in another poem, “Is bulletins all Day / From Immortality” (Poem 827). Dickinson was always attuned to the spiritual world, open to its meaning and anxious to understand the mystery of God. This is a significant factor in analyzing her spiritual life, for the reality of God and the centrality of Jesus (seeing Jesus as the decisive disclosure of God), are elements central to Christian faith.

The image of the Deity in Dickinson’s poems appears divided and reveals a profound ambivalence towards God. Many of her poems focus on the discrepancy between God’s alleged love, bounty, and omnipotence and her experience of what seems to be his indifference, arbitrariness, and even
malice. Though there are poems that contain childlike statements of faith, the predominant tone in the majority of the poems about God remains one of scepticism, disillusionment and bitterness.

The poet appears to long for certainty of God’s love and goodness, but is too intellectually honest and acutely aware of the contradictions of her own religious experience to be capable of any ‘simple faith.’ In some of these poems she seems to be keenly aware of what she called “the underside of his divinity,” that she was dealing with a “thrifty Deity,” the universe being a “Gambol / Of His authority” (Poem 724). Her strongest denouncement of God is in a poem where she sees Abraha as a flattering sycophant and God as a despot who has to be humoured like an ill-tempered dog, a mastiff (Poem 1317).

During the Civil War period she probes the character of God in numerous poems and her tone alternates between devastating irony and sincere devotion. The God who emerges from these poems is an unrevealed God who does not answer, a God who she knows “exists / Somewhere – in silence” a God who has “hid his rare life / From our gross eyes” (Poem 338). Lundin notes that this “belief in the hiddenness of God was a central part of Dickinson’s Protestant heritage” (147).

What we have in Dickinson’s poems is a record of her struggle to come to terms with this unknown God by confrontation, accusation, questioning and complaint, for she is unable to resolve the contradictions in her image of God. Neither can her readers and critics arrive at any resolution
regarding her religious stance. We can only conclude with Marilyn C. Teichert’s remark in “The Divine Adversary: The Image of God in Three ED Poems,” that in the context of all the religious poems of Dickinson, what expressions of faith there are acquire “the paradoxical character of the outcry of the man in the Gospel (Mark 9:24): “Oh, Lord, I believe! Help Thou mine unbelief!” (21)

Faith as Christian faith means fellowship with the person of, and in the knowledge of Christ, for the revelation of God culminates in Jesus Christ. Dickinson’s divided attitude to God arises from her difficulty in seeing Jesus as the decisive disclosure of God – the compassionate, loving, humble Christ as a revelation of the wrathful, vengeful, jealous God of the Old Testament. This image of the Christian God is profoundly paradoxical. For while Dickinson is unable to relate to God the Father and sees in him an adversary, she turns with confidence to Jesus in whom she sees a trustworthy friend. She is drawn irresistibly to Jesus who is the Word breaking the silence of God. She had a great affection for Christ though it was marked by a cautious ambivalence that emphasized his human rather than divine qualities. She frequently compares her suffering with the suffering of Christ. “In times of trauma, it comforted her to know that her trials had the ‘Flavours of that Old Crucifixion’” (Lundin 173). What sustained her during her moments of trial according to Knapp was “her humanized image of Christ whom she saw as the mediating force between the finite and the infinite” (129). So too when she gropes with doubts
regarding death and immortality, Jesus becomes the divine “Preceptor,” because he has gone before us, the “Tender Pioneer,” who has tested “the Plank” and “pronounced it firm” (Poem 698).

Dickinson’s poems on the person of Christ so often glossed over by critics project her as a pilgrim soul persistently engaged in a struggle for faith. However, for Dickinson the crucifixion is important as an example of suffering love, not as an act of atonement. This is a problem that Lundin identifies in her understanding of Christ, which is also a point of contrast between her and Levertov. The “Emersonian view of Jesus” as the example of human finitude seemed convincing to her at times, which, “by pressing the point of Jesus’ humanity” made him “something less than a God who could forgive sins and raise the dead,” someone “trapped with us in our finitude in a universe of death” (Lundin 176, 239-240).

Levertov on the contrary, understood well the meaning of God’s salvific love revealed in the Incarnation – the paradox of perfection within imperfection, of infinity within finitude. She accepted the significance of the Crucifixion for salvation. In her poems, it is not the enormity of Christ’s pain that is stressed, but his very willingness to suffer, to shoulder the pain of the world. By assuming humankind’s burden, Christ helps us move beyond self-destructive behaviour; teaches the necessity of “sublime acceptance” in facing up to obligations (SS 73). Jesus is the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Significantly, her conversion happens while she is working on the “Agnus Dei” (Lamb of God) section of her “agnostic
mass” (*NSE* 250). So while Dickinson believes that though only “One Crucifixion is recorded,” “As many be / As Persons” (Poem 553), to the question, “Why single out this agony?” Levertov arrives through Julian of Norwich, at an answer: That “among all the tortured / One only is ‘King of Grief’” for “the oneing / with the Godhead opened Him utterly / to the pain of all minds, all bodies” (*SS* 75-76). And though Dickinson was often unable to “[work] through to a theological explanation” of many of her religious doubts, her writing of each of these Christ poems brings her closer to “faith that works” unlike Levertov for whom it is her “work that Enfaiths” (*NSE* 255).

According to Kevin Vanhoozer, “[. . .] it is God’s address to us in Jesus Christ that draws us forward eschatologically towards our destiny as human creatures” (183). Juan Alfaro delineates a faith that is centred in the mystery of Christ thus:

> It looks beyond the world and death in eager anticipation of eternal life in the encounter with the risen Christ. [. . .] Through faith man experiences and possesses himself in a new dimension; his consciousness of being present to himself is now set within the a priori horizon of ordination for eternity. The believer in time, is on a pilgrimage toward eternity [. . .] that is, on the way to meet the Lord.” (Rahner 321)

An examination of the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson in the light of this Christocentric vision of faith reveals their eschatological vision and
consequently their faith as Christians. Eschatology – the doctrine of the last things (‘eschatos’ is the Greek for ‘end’) identified as resurrection, judgement, heaven and hell – is a central Christian doctrine and conditions every other article of faith. Both poets were interested in this “final piece in the jigsaw of Christian belief” (Fergusson 226), though perhaps in Dickinson’s case her interest bordered on obsession, so much so, that the whole focus of her work seems to be on the last things. The “Glimmering Frontier” (Poem 696) and what lay beyond it was a subject that constantly preoccupied her. So much so, that Chase remarks that in her last years “the poet was intoxicated with eternity, if not by God” (308-309).

David Fergusson in an essay titled “Eschatology” in The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine points to an eschatological turn evident in modern theology. “When it distracts from the here and now, or, even worse, is used to license present sufferings it becomes, orally and politically suspect” and raises “fears of a theological rationale for environmental complacency or even exploitation (227). Eschatology generally understood as ‘pie in the sky when you die,’ during the time of Emily Dickinson, had come to be viewed with suspicion by the time of Levertov.

What Levertov does in her poetry of political, social and ecological engagement has analogies with what Fergusson describes as the “task of a responsible eschatology” – “to demonstrate that Christian hope for the future bestows a significance upon the present time and instills a sense of responsibility within the church for the world [. . .] and enable an effective
and sober Christian witness” (227-228). This is particularly significant at the present time when certain trends have eroded secular confidence in the future such as fears of a nuclear catastrophe, threats to the environment and the politics of the Middle East. All of these are serious concerns in Levertov’s poetry. She understood the obligation of writers, “to acknowledge their potential influence on the lives of others” (NSE 136). In her poetry of the war, she brings in the weight of her moral and spiritual powers, and we find her singing in dark times, amidst suffering and pain as in “Staying Alive” (SA 127).

Dickinson too writes about singing “To keep the Dark away” (Poem 850). And though she never warmed to the subject of war, she concludes a letter to her cousins as they were faced with the fury of war with the plea, “Let’s love better, children, it’s most that’s left to do” (Letters 398). Dickinson was well aware of the task and reach of a poet:

The Martyr Poets – did not tell –
But wrought their pang in syllable –
That when their mortal name be numb –
Their mortal fate – encourage some – (Poem 544).

In Levertov and Dickinson then, we see two poets who have (to borrow Rilke’s words) “worked their way fully into their tasks” (qtd. in NSE 237).

Nevertheless, a great distinction emerges in a comparative study of the two poets with regard to what Marcus Borg calls “a way of seeing.” In his sermon “Faith Not Belief,” Borg, a biblical and Jesus scholar and
Professor of Religion and Culture says that faith is “a way of seeing the whole – a way of seeing the whole of what is.” The “way of seeing” revealed in the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson follows the same pattern observed so far in other matters – resolution and irresolution respectively. Borg shares an exposition by the 20th century American theologian H. Richard Neibuhr who in his book *The Responsible Self* speaks of three ways of seeing the whole. One is to see the whole as hostile and threatening. The second way, and probably the most common secular way of seeing the whole that has emerged in the last 300 years in Western culture, is to see the whole as indifferent. It may be full of wonder, but ultimately the cosmos is indifferent to human life. Yet another way is to see the whole as life giving, nourishing and gracious, as bringing us forth in a quite spectacular way, perhaps in ways we cannot understand. According to Neibuhr, faith is seeing the whole in this manner, even as we are aware of the brutality, the horror and suffering that abound in the world.

Levertov, being temperamentally optimistic, had always believed in the innate order and coherence of things. However the onset of war disturbs her and she struggles to make sense of the chaos around her. God appears to be the author of paradoxes, at once loving yet aloof, benevolent creator of a world filled with misery and pain. As she confronts war and the darkness of human misery, she refuses to be confounded and tries to understand as Lady Julian does, the immensity of God’s love. She tries to see the darkness as a source of rest. She struggles like Julian and Job to understand God in
order to be able to accept contradiction. As Wakoski says, her struggle, and the goal of her vision have been “to find a God in this intermingling of flesh and spirit” (Wagner-Martin 58). She turns to Julian for faith in which she can rest from the nagging need for explanation; to learn what Julian learned in one of her “showings”: “that there is a divine plan, both temporal and transcendent, which will account for the unchecked miseries of the world, a plan which our finite minds are incapable of grasping. God informs her [. . .] that ‘All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well’” (NSE 252). We see here in Levertov, the truth of Fergusson’s statement:

Confidence in the future is not a particular esoteric insight. It is a function of faith in God – Father, Son and Spirit – and a way of expressing the significance of that faith for the future of the world. Amidst the presence of injustice, suffering and death, Christian faith [. . .] must take the form of hope for the future. Such a hopeful conviction about the end of the world and its people is demanded by belief in creation’s continuing status as loved by God, redeemed by Christ and brought to fulfillment by the Spirit. It is a belief properly expressed not in unwarranted speculation but in prayer, praise and Christian service. (242)

Levertov thus comes to see the whole in the way Neibuhr advocates, “as life giving, nourishing and gracious, as bringing us forth in a quite spectacular way” as testified by the collections of her poems written over a
period of fifty years. They trace her journey to order and revisioning, as she gradually moves from the rancour and bitterness of her early poetry of engagement to affirmation, and tranquility, enabled at last to articulate the celebratory and life-affirming values that shine through in her religious poems. Her endeavour all along is to

try to redeem

the human vision

from cesspits where human hands

have thrown it [. . .] (LF 59)

As a young adult, Dickinson seems to take comfort in the argument from design and there are a few mediocre poems that are restatements of transcendental notions regarding nature. But this “Child’s faith” is soon lost. Knapp speaks of the “grimness of Dickinson’s vision” (130). Unlike Emerson who viewed the forces of nature as friendly, Dickinson looks upon them as hostile. She considers them agents of Divinity who set up their traps and deceits to lure her into believing in nature’s continuous beneficence. Nature threatens to obliterate the identity of man, and images of violence, engulfment and drowning abound. A minor category of her poems shows belief in a mystical bond existing between man and nature. For the most part, though, nature is inscrutable, and she believes that nature is at the core indifferent towards the life and interests of mankind. Poem 1624 written late in her life speaks of Nature’s cosmic indifference:
Apparently with no surprise,
To any happy Flower
The Frost beheads it at its play –
In accidental power –
The blonde Assassin passes on –
The Sun proceeds unmoved
To measure off another Day
For an approving God.

Further, Nature serves to remind her of the impermanence of things and of her own mortality. As she sees it, “Creation” is merely “the Gambol of [God’s] Authority.”

The Perished Patterns murmur –
But His Perturbless Plan
Proceed – inserting Here – a Sun –
There – leaving out a Man – (Poem 724)

As Ferlazzo perceives it, “Dickinson [. . .] 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).

This cannot however, be taken as a final statement regarding Dickinson’s vision of creation and the future. “Faith – is the Pierless Bridge” she writes, “Supporting what We see / Unto the Scene that We do not – [. . .]
To Our far, vacillating Feet / A first Necessity” (Poem 915). In spite of all her misgivings and uncertainty about the future, Dickinson never abdicated
hope: “I reason – Earth is short – / And Anguish – absolute – / And many hurt, / [. . .] // I reason, that in Heaven – Somehow it will be even – Some new Equation, given –” (Poem 301). She continued to hope for immortality, especially as death’s depredations struck closer and closer. And when her mother died in 1882, she wrote, “I believe we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker – that the One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power still farther to surprise that which He has caused. Beyond that all is silence” (Letters 750). “Like Sisyphus, Dickinson seems reconciled never to know, never to be certain of anything except of death” (Knapp 139).

The peculiarities in the faith of Levertov and Dickinson that have emerged so far become clear when we situate them in the religious and intellectual milieu of their times. In his book *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, Lesslie Newbigin delineates the postmodern religious situation. He starts his exposition with St. Thomas Aquinas who “made a sharp distinction between faith and reason [. . .] Thomas accepted a distinction between things that can be known by reason alone (such as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul) and things that could be known only through divine revelation such as the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity” (17). One consequence of the Thomist scheme however, was that it “puts asunder what Augustine had held together, and as a result of this, knowledge is separated from faith [. . .] In Locke’s famous definition, belief is “a persuasion which falls short of knowledge.” This dichotomy has run deep in our culture to this day” (18).
This seems to underline the basic difference in the faith experience of Levertov and Dickinson. While a study of their writing, both poetry and prose, reveals that Levertov’s pilgrimage took her along a path similar to the one delineated by Augustine, Dickinson seems to have taken the route of Thomas. While Levertov took faith as the way to knowledge, corresponding to Augustine’s dictum – “I believe in order to know,” Dickinson took the road of doubt to certainty, though she has left posterity to wonder if she did get there. In her essay, “Affinities of Content” (1991) Levertov quotes Oscar de Lubicz Miloz: “To wait for faith in order to be able to pray is to put the cart before the horse. Our way leads from the physical to the spiritual” (NSE 17). This reminds her of a prayer of St. Anselm which says, “I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand; and what is more, I believe that unless I do believe I shall not understand” (NSE 17). What disparity between Levertov’s “heavy cry”: “Lord, / I believe, / help thou mine unbelief.” (DH 101), and Dickinson’s “’Faith’ bleats – to understand!” (Poem 313).

A second consequence that Newbigin notes, and one that has great significance as far as this study is concerned is that the Thomist scheme creates a “cleavage between two conceptions of God” which is a “dilemma [that] has remained at the heart of Christian thinking in the “developed” world to this day” (18-19). The God whose existence is demonstrable by the methods of philosophical argument is not easily recognizable as the God who encounters us in the Bible. Dickinson had a problem accepting this God
– the “Burglar! Banker – Father!” (Poem 49) of her early years, the “Swindler” (Poem 476), the stingy God (Poem 791) and “A Force Illegible” (Poem 820) of her middle years, or the “Heavenly Father” she accuses of “Duplicity” (Poem 1461), and “the jealous God” (Poem 1719) of her last years. He is certainly not the Trinity of Christian faith. It is almost impossible to conceive that this God could become incarnate in a particular human being. The God Dickinson knows is what Newbigin calls “the God of the Philosophers – more a construct of the human mind – an idol.” For her the God who encounters us in the biblical story seems to be what Newbigin describes as “a primitive anthropomorphic misunderstanding appropriate to an early stage in human development but to be left behind in a more developed society” (19).

On the contrary, Levertov, on the strength of the testimony of her poems, came to know the God who meets us in the Bible as the true and living God, the one who meets us in the person of Jesus Christ. As she acknowledges in “A Poet’s View”, the “unknown began to be defined for me as God, and further, as God revealed in the Incarnation” (NSE 241). There is no stronger argument in this respect than her poem “On the Mystery of the Incarnation”:

It’s when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind’s shell and enters the heart:
not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
to no innocent form but to this creature vainly sure
it and no other is god-like, God
out of compassion for our ugly failure to evolve entrusts,
as guest, as brother,

the Word. (DH 50)

Newbigin identifies a third consequence of the Thomist synthesis. If philosophy has to be called in “to underpin that knowledge of God” which tradition claimed “comes by revelation,” then it is assumed that the “philosophical proofs for the existence of God must be invulnerable. But they are not.” For the “shaking of old and (apparently) secure foundations by the findings of the new science” has resulted in scepticism which became dominant in the intellectual life of the West by the beginning of the 17th century (19). Born into this intellectual climate of the Enlightenment as we have seen in an earlier chapter, in the specific context of a deeply traditional Calvinistic family, Dickinson, in a poem beginning “Going to Heaven” says, “I’m glad I don’t believe it” (Poem 77). Given her situation, Dickinson’s scepticism comes as no surprise:

“Faith” is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see -
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency. (Poem 185)
The 17th and 18th centuries saw a rapid development of the new science. The whole universe could, it seemed, be understood with the clarity of Mathematics. A model of reality was put forward that did not depend on divine revelation or faith, resulting in a renunciation of the authority of religion, something anticipated by Dickinson and accepted as normal by the time of Levertov – a time in which the seemingly assured assumptions inherited from the Enlightenment are being deconstructed. The assumptions of the modern scientific worldview can no longer be taken as secure foundation. According to Newbigin we are in “a world which the Chinese writer Carver Yu has summarized in the phrase “technological optimism and literary despair”(46). On the one hand we witness the unstoppable dynamism of our science-based technology and on the other, the bleak nihilism and hopelessness that is reflected in the literature, art, and drama of our society. He further remarks, “while both faith and critical reason have necessary roles to play in the enterprise of knowing, modern man has renounced the first of these and left himself bereft of the possibility of knowing anything” (48).

Levertov, however, longed for the kind of faith where she could ‘know.’ “On the surface, such a faith may seem a contradiction, for if we know, we have no need for faith. But the knowing underlined here is to know in faith, faith itself gives us knowledge of that which we cannot know without it” (Bodo 104). And Sands of the Well and This Great Unknowing provide ample proof that she did ‘know’ her Redeemer in her last years.
That faith and doubt is a daunting and confusing topic in its breadth and complexity, and in the intensity with which it is experienced goes without saying. The study so far has proved that it is also a topic concerning confusion. Therefore in approaching faith, one needs a certain method or style of thinking to foster greater clarity and deeper understanding. It is here that the Kierkegaardian and Hegelian matrices facilitate a dialectical understanding of faith and doubt in Levertov and Dickinson. The undialectical understanding of faith and doubt conceives them as two separate entities. Dialectically understood, there is only the unity of faith and doubt – with either one of them dominating. The unity of faith and its other – doubt. We can therefore speak of faith where doubt predominates or faith where faith predominates. What follows is an analysis of the poetry of Levertov and Dickinson using the Kierkegaardian matrix as outlined in William McDonald’s article on Søren Kierkegaard in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

The evolution of Denise Levertov’s faith follows a pattern that resembles the dialectical progression of existential stages that we find in Kierkegaard’s doctrine of the three stages on the way of life: “The first is the aesthetic, which gives way to the ethical, which gives way to the religious” (McDonald, par. 3). Thus it is possible to find analogues between the three hierarchical levels of individual existence recognized by Kierkegaard and the three stages in the evolution of Levertov’s faith that this study identifies. Kierkegaard describes the transition from one stage to the other as a crisis, as
a breach of continuity. In *Something About Kierkegaard*, David F. Swenson explains what Kierkegaard means by the breach of continuity between the stages:

1) The values in each stage are determined by specific passions or enthusiasms, qualitatively different. 2) A personality whose life is in the one sphere cannot by a mere process of reflection transport himself into the other; for this a passionate resolution of the will is necessary. 3) The change from one sphere to the other is never necessary, but always contingent; if it presents itself as possible, it also presents itself as possible of non-realization” (162-163).

Levertov’s early poetry up to the collection *To Stay Alive* can be seen as roughly corresponding to the aesthetic stage. For Kierkegaard, living in the immediate moment is what characterizes an aesthetic life” (McDonald, par. 3). In the first three collections of her poems we have what Ralph J. Mills calls her “poetry of the immediate” (*Contemporary Literary Criticism* vol. 2, 243). Here she devotes attention to the balanced savouring and seeing of life in poems that explore domestic spaces and imagined territories. It is significant that Levertov’s first volume is titled *Here and Now*. The aesthetic stage of existence is characterized by “immersion in sensuous experience” (McDonald, par. 3). This characteristic marks her first five American volumes, where “the celebration of life is obvious in the sensual imagery that often focuses on light and energy,” as Anne Colclough Little says in her
article “Old Impulses, New Expressions” (1). The speaker feels “an idiot joy” (HN 17), “a shiver, a delight / that what is passing / is here” (OTS 39), and a voice overheard expresses exuberance as it says, “You know, I’m telling you, what I love best / is life. I love life!” (WE 31). Another characteristic feature of the aesthetic perspective is that it “transforms quotidian dullness into a richly poetic world by whatever means it can” (McDonald par. 3). The prime motive for the aesthete is the transformation of the boring into the interesting. Such a transformation of quotidian dullness is noted by Mills in “Denise Levertov: The Poetry of the Immediate”: “The quotidian reality [. . .] Denise Levertov revels in, carves and hammers into lyric poems of precise beauty. As celebrations and rituals lifted from the midst of contemporary life in its actual concreteness, her poems are unsurpassed [. . .] (243).

Levertov’s reference to her early period of “regretful skepticism” in an essay (NSE 241) is noteworthy, for scepticism is a chief feature typical to the aesthetic sphere. There are many degrees of aesthetic experience according to Kierkegaard. At the limits of this type of existence, there is immense pain and despair and sometimes a consciousness that life is meaningless and has no purpose (McDonald par. 3). We have seen how the war casts a shadow over Levertov, resulting in a loss of authenticity, a loss of poetic vision and poetic power. She writes, “[. . .] the blinds are down over my windows, / my doors are shut” (SD 62). In some poems we notice how the ineffective struggle against the war brings desolation, and emptiness. Hopelessness echoes throughout Relearning the Alphabet.
Mersmann comments on the effects of war on Levertov: “[. . .] vision is clouded, form is broken, balance is impossible, and the psyche is unable to throw off its illness and sorrow” (85-86). In To Stay Alive, the last collection of the period that corresponds to the aesthetic stage, Levertov is, according to Marie Borroff in The Yale Review, “disturbed by the knowledge that an unassimilable evil exists which must be hated and which must be fought on the level of action” (243).

This is significant with regard to Levertov’s transition to the second level of existence in Kierkegaard’s way of life – the ethical. This sphere is where for him, an individual begins to take on a true direction in life and begins to assert an awareness of good and evil. Levertov sees war as the ultimate disorder. The feeling flowing out of her poems on war in her period of transition to the threshold of belief reveals that she has encountered evil in a way it had not been encountered before. She wonders that man can feel nothing more than “mere regret” about “the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk / runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies, / transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments” (SD 80).

“In order to raise oneself beyond the merely aesthetic life which is a drifting in imagination, possibility and sensation, one needs to make a commitment. That is, the aesthete needs to choose the ethical, which entails a commitment to communication and decision procedures” (McDonald par. 4). For society, this level of existence begins when one takes on the greater obligations of marriage and other social duties. According to Kierkegaard,
one’s actions at this ethical level of existence have a consistency and coherence that they lacked in the previous sphere of existence. Levertov believes that the artist’s involvement with public affairs is part of a total commitment with the life he lives and the world in which he lives it. *Footprints* contains statements of the poet’s convictions and in *Life in the Forest* Levertov implements her poetic rationale “that parts of a life have a necessary and tolerable coherence” (Costello 199).

For Kierkegaard, the ethical is supremely important and it calls individuals to take account of their lives and to scrutinize their actions in terms of universal and absolute demands. These demands are made in such a way that each individual must respond – to be authentic – in a truly committed, passionate consciousness. Levertov was always aware of her mentor Rilke’s “emphasis on “experience,” on living one’s life with attention, [...] balanced by an equal emphasis on the doing of one’s art work, a zeal for the doing of it [...]” (NSE 235). Further, as Richard Pevear notes, there was also “an awareness of the essential relationship between the struggle for a more authentic vision and the struggle for a more authentic world” behind Levertov’s choice of materials in *Footprints* (293). *The Freeing of the Dust* contains poems of a way of life that have never before been met in her work. She explores the need to look outward to the world to know another, and inward to comprehend and accept the self. In line with Kierkegaard’s view, the meaning of her life comes down to living out her beliefs in an honest, passionate, and devoted way. *Life in the Forest*, the last
volume of this period of transition, finds Levertov strongly possessing “that sense of so much being ‘in bud’ – so many things being in the beginning of growth, the first shoots of some different consciousness, of moral evolution, [. . .] the deep hope implied in the words, ‘With God all things are possible’ “ (Conversations 151). This is quite in tune with Kierkegaard’s conviction that “without a religious intervention and background, the realization of the ethical ideal is [. . .] impossible. It then becomes the function of ethics to develop a receptivity for religion, a sense of need for it, while religion is for its part a means of restoring to the personality the integrity of its ethical consciousness” (Swenson 166).

The period of Levertov’s poetry of belief, beginning with Candles in Babylon corresponds to the religious sphere of Kierkegaard, which is the highest stage in human existence. The theologian Jorg Splett says, “The act of religious knowledge is a ‘decision’ and a ‘leap’ [. . .]” (Rahner 15). Kierkegaard refers to it as “the leap par excellence by which the religious passion which in Christianity is called faith, emerges” (Swenson 163). This “leap” that Levertov makes in the course of her writing of the poem “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus” gives her a faith that will not deny doubt. Of the two types of religiousness Kierkegaard distinguishes within this stage, Levertov’s corresponds to the type characterized by the realization that the individual is sinful. Through revelation and in direct relationship with the paradox that is Jesus Christ in time, she begins to see that her eternal salvation rests on a paradox – God, the transcendent, coming
into time in human form to redeem human beings. For Kierkegaard, the very notion of this occurring was scandalous to human reason for “we must believe by virtue of the absurd” (McDonald, par. 5). In her essay “A Poet’s View,” Levertov says how she began to see the “stumbling blocks” that stood in her way to faith “as absurd.” She wondered if by beginning “to act as if [she] did believe,” faith would follow, and with it “some way to deal intellectually with the troublesome mysteries and paradoxes” (NSE 242).

Faith is a miracle, a gift from God. And Eternal Truth enters time in the instant Levertov recognises “a shivering God” in “a wisp of damp wool” – the Lamb of God (CB 114-115). The condition for realizing truth for the Christian is a gift from God, but its realization is a task which must be repeatedly performed by the individual believer. Levertov understands the necessity of action well. As she tells Smith in an interview, the incarnation implies “the cooperation of man” (Conversations 141). The poem ends with the affirmation that we must bear the responsibility for the suffering of the world, and make the light of Christ stronger: “Let’s try / if something human still / can shield you, / spark / of remote light” (CB 115).

For Kierkegaard, faith is a matter of lived experience, of constant striving within an individual’s existence. Levertov’s collections from Oblique Prayer to This Great Unknowing are undoubtedly “testimonies of lived life” (NSE 21). The faith presented in the “Mass” as a faint glimmer of light surrounded by infinite darkness grows with her striving. In Breathing the Water, what seemed tentative in “Mass” is confirmed, bringing about her
conversion to a more orthodox Christianity. In “St. Thomas Didymus” (DH 107), an understanding of the Resurrection helps her to make sense of suffering. A Door in the Hive and Evening Train take her to a new stage of illumination.

According to Kierkegaard, the aesthetic and the ethical are both annulled and preserved in their synthesis in the religious stage. As far as the aesthetic stage of existence is concerned what is preserved in the higher religious stage is the sense of infinite possibility made available through the imagination. The unfolding of this “infinite possibility” is what we witness in Levertov’s final collections Sands of the Well and This Great Unknowing. As Kathleen Norris says in her essay “Denise Levertov: Work that Enfaiths,” “Levertov, in both her life and work, epitomizes the poet’s path to religious formation. [. . .] even when she remained in doubt as to the truth of the Christian vision, she had faith in what Keats called the work of the imagination. And in her long apprentice as a poet she came to see that the one discipline prepared her for the other” (1).

Even though Dickinson’s work does not reveal such a linear progression of spiritual evolution or a pattern that corresponds to the stages on the way of life represented by Kierkegaard, a few observations made on the basis of this matrix are revealing. One characteristic of the aesthetic stage according to Kierkegaard is the “valorization of possibility over actuality” (McDonald, par. 3). There are as already mentioned, many degrees of aesthetic existence at the limits of which is a consciousness that life is
meaningless and has no purpose. The person lives simply for possibilities – and arranges his or her life around a rich fantasy life, at the same time, however, there is immense pain and despair. Dickinson “roamed the regions of boundless possibilities” as Lundin observes (21), or as she herself puts it, “I dwell in Possibility” (Poem 657). And her words, “Safe Despair it is that raves – / Agony is frugal” (Poem 1243) speak for themselves of the immense pain and despair that marked her life. In Kierkegaard’s opinion, the aesthete uses artifice, arbitrariness, irony, and wilful imagination to recreate the world in his own image. All these are applicable to Dickinson’s art.

What Swenson states with regard to the aesthetic stage is noteworthy.

Whoever finds the meaning of life in the aesthetic, is bound to postulate an external or uncertain condition, as for example, prosperity or good fortune, success, etc., a condition [. . .] beyond his control. Or if he seeks the meaning of life in something within the personality, as in the unfolding of a talent then he still posts a condition which is relatively external, since the condition is not given in and through his own will merely. (167-168)

It is interesting to speculate what place success and fame had for Dickinson, whose life was set apart for her poetic vocation, for certainly they eluded her in her lifetime. She did not publish her poems but believed that “Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man” (Poem 709) and that “Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne’er succeed. / To comprehend a nectar /
Requires sorest need” (Poem 67). However, the careful way in which she gathered her poems together in fascicles seems to denote a desire to secure recognition after death. It is worth mentioning a point that Lundin notes in this regard: “Fame was much on Dickinson’s mind in early adulthood. The deeper her solitude became, the more she dwelt upon the topic. It provided the vital links connecting her renunciation of the world, her poetic endeavours, and her longing for [...] immortality” (109).

Also for one like Emily Dickinson, a multiple personality almost, who defies understanding, who lived out her life in seclusion to pursue her poetic talent and who knew pain and despair so intensely, the following statements seem to assume some significance. The aesthetic sphere also includes among others, those who “seek the meaning of life in the successful development of [...] a poetic talent,” those who “seek to enjoy the power to dispense with enjoyment, who throw away the opportunities for pleasure in order to enjoy this freedom,” those who choose “the plain and simple pleasure of the plain and simple life, as offering the greatest promise of security,” and “the highly complicated personality who perceives the vanity of life and enjoys a reflection upon his own despair” (Swenson 167-168). A type of aestheticism is also criticized from the point of view of ethics. It is seen to be emptily self-serving and escapist. It is a despairing means of avoiding commitment and communal existence.

We have already seen that for Kierkegaard, “The change from one sphere to the other is never necessary, but always contingent; if it presents
itself as possible, it also presents itself as possible of non-realization” (Swenson 163). We find such a “non-realization” in Dickinson, and Kierkegaard’s dialectic provides pointers to the reasons behind this. We do not find an awareness of good and evil in Dickinson; nor do we find the consistency and coherence of actions that are characteristic of the ethical stage. Neither does she take on the greater obligations of marriage and other social duties. Also, for Kierkegaard,

In order to raise oneself beyond the merely aesthetic life which is a drifting in imagination, possibility and sensation, one needs to make a commitment. That is, the aesthete needs to choose the ethical, which entails a commitment to communication and decision procedures. (McDonald, par. 4)

The necessary conditions of making a commitment and choosing in this sense were impediments Dickinson seemingly could not surmount, just as she could not make a commitment to Christ while at Mount Holyoke, and as she could not commit herself to the publication of her work, for whatever reasons. Even in the writing of her poems, she had the “habit of depositing throughout her manuscripts alternate words or phrases without an indication of a final choice” as Lundin points out, and “choosing not to choose,” shuttled between “infinite possibilities and tragic realities” (140).

Dickinson would surely have agreed with Kierkegaard that Christian faith is not a matter of regurgitating church dogma but a matter of individual subjective passion, which cannot be mediated by the clergy or by
human artefacts. Kierkegaard also believed that “Faith is the most important task to be achieved by a human being, because only on the basis of faith does an individual have a chance to become a true self. This self is the life-work which God judges for eternity” (McDonald, par. 5). The individual is thereby subject to an enormous burden of responsibility, for upon one’s existential choices hangs ones eternal salvation or damnation. “Anxiety or dread (Angst) is the presentiment of this terrible responsibility when the individual stands at the threshold of momentous existential choice” (McDonald, par. 5). Anxiety is a two-sided emotion: on one side is the dread burden of choosing for eternity; on the other side is the exhilaration of freedom in choosing oneself. For Kierkegaard, choice occurs in the instant, which is the point at which time and eternity intersect – for the individual creates through temporal choice a self which will be judged for eternity. And “[. . .] unless this self acknowledges a ‘power which constituted it,’ it falls into a despair which undoes its selfhood.” (McDonald par. 5). A question that arises is whether Dickinson’s apparent inability to choose (in spite of the fact that she was consumed by ‘Eternity’) is the reason behind much of her despair. That her deliberation on the question of conversion caused great anxiety and that she regretted her inability to make a commitment we have already seen. “Remorse is cureless” she writes, “the disease / Not even God – can heal” (Poem 744).

Christian dogma, according to Kierkegaard, embodies paradoxes which are offensive to reason. The central paradox is the assertion that the
eternal, infinite, transcendent God simultaneously became incarnated as a
temporal, finite, human being (Jesus). There are two possible attitudes we
can adopt to this assertion, viz. we can have faith, or we can take offense.
What we cannot do, according to Kierkegaard, is believe by virtue of reason.
If we choose faith we must suspend our reason in order to believe in
something higher than reason.

What Dickinson’s response was is open to conjecture. Wolff firmly
believes, “Emily Dickinson finally came into an estate of faith, not by virtue
of the Resurrection, but of the Incarnation” (265), and Marcus K. Billson says
that it is possible to see her dialectic as “a ‘movement’ in the Kierkegaardian
sense, a gesture toward accepting the irrational,” for while she “continually
faces the absurd with bravery,” she “does not shy away from the awful
uncertainty of doubt” (84). On the other hand, Lundin says that her
emphasis on “the humanity of Jesus seems on the verge of eliminating any
sense we might have of his divinity” (177) and Donna Dickenson observes,
“Redemption through Christ is one component of Dickinson’s belief [. . .] but
it is vitiated by scepticism” (93). Once again we are stymied by Dickinson’s
ambivalence and the disparate views presented by critics and biographers.

While Dickinson would doubtless have believed with Kierkegaard
that the impulse towards an awareness of a transcendent power in the
universe is what religion is supposed to stand for, she would not have
subscribed to his principle that religion has a social and an individual (not
just personal) dimension and that it begins with the individual and his or
her awareness of sinfulness. Perhaps this was the greatest impediment for Dickinson. Lundin points to “the sense she shared with her Enlightenment and romantic predecessors that finitude rather than sin was the fundamental human dilemma” (29). And two years before her death in 1884, she wrote: “Of God we ask one favor, / That we may be forgiven – / For what, he is presumed to know - / The Crime, from us, is hidden –” (Poem 1601).

Kierkegaard saw scientific knowledge as the greatest obstacle to human redemption. The possibility that this could have proved an impediment for Dickinson cannot be ruled out, for in Lundin’s view, “the natural sciences” had the most lasting influence in “developing her skeptical turn of mind” (31). In Dickinson’s words, “‘Faith’ is a fine invention” indeed, “But microscopes are prudent / In an Emergency” (Poem 185).

The question remains, what then is to be made of all those poems that speak of her struggle “To mend each tattered Faith” (Poem 1442) in a “religion / That doubts as fervently as it believes” (Poem 1144)? What of her claim that she was “Given in Marriage unto [the] Celestial Host – / Bride of the Father and the Son / Bride of the Holy Ghost” (Poem 817)? There are many who like Anderson believe, “The final direction of her poetry, and the pressures that created it, can only be described as religious, using that word in its ‘dimension of depth’” (283). For Kierkegaard, the true meaning of Christianity is the individual standing alone before and in the presence of a transcendent God. Even if Dickinson was unable to effect the transition to the higher levels of existence, in a manner that is observable in her poetry,
she appears to have lived always in the presence of God, whose “triple Lenses” (Poem 895) she could never escape. The one possible conclusion is that articulated by Teichert: “The only resolution for her lies in the very persistence with which she remains engaged in the spiritual struggle” (26).

If Kierkegaard considers scientific knowledge as the greatest obstacle to human redemption, Hegelianism promises absolute knowledge that is available by virtue of a science of knowledge. Accordingly, anyone capable of following the dialectical progression of the concepts of Hegel’s logic would have access to the mind of God. Though Levertov and Dickinson did not follow such a logic, the focus of their lives was on ‘knowing’ God. Lawrence Dickey in his essay “Hegel on Religion and Philosophy” explains: “Hegel claimed that “the substance” of the Christian religion and his philosophy were “the same.” The only difference was that the truth of the relationship between man and God was being expressed in two different “languages” – one the language of “feeling and piety” that registered the deep need of mankind in general for religion, and the other, that of “scientific cognition” which sought the “scientific ascertainment of [religious] truth,” raising faith to the level of knowledge (309).

In an essay titled “Hegel’s Dialectical Method” Michael Forster says that one function of Hegel’s dialectical method is “the task of leading the individual from his uneducated standpoint to knowledge” and that Hegel refers to the course of his discipline as “a pathway of doubt, or more precisely, [...] that of despair” for the individual educated (Forster 134). The
life and work of Levertov and Dickinson proceed along such a pathway of doubt and despair. Analyses of the development of thought in their works as they engage themselves in a search for God and for the truths of religion reveal some resemblance to the Hegelian matrix because of the dialectic through which their belief works. It is envisaged therefore, that the understanding and application of the dialectical process outlined by Hegel would aid a comparative study of the dialectics of faith in Levertov and Dickinson, though by dialectic no sharply defined Hegelian matrix is intended. What is meant rather, is that mental process which can accept uncertainties and live with them, that operation of the mind, which allows for movement and constant change and a possibility of growth.

Two basic ideas of Hegel’s thought are the primacy of the mind or Spirit and the dialectical movement. The mind or the Spirit is posited as the absolute primary basis and everything else as its own developing moments or appearances. It is therefore at the root of becoming. The dialectical process – a process that involves the three stages of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis, lays out the path that the becoming must follow. One’s thinking must follow this dialectical path in order to attain the absolute truth.

The thesis is the undeveloped quiet beginning of the process; anti-thesis, which is its negation is already hidden in the thesis and sets the latter in motion; the synthesis leads the two contradictions to a deeper unity. This movement is an endless process because every synthesis appears on a higher plane as a thesis. In this process the lower form is negated in the higher; but
it is also preserved in it, since it has been carried over to the higher form. This dialectical process goes on until the oppositions are overcome and reconciled in a higher form. The transcended parts constitute the stages of evolution.

Hegel’s basic insight is that in the world of experience, the mind meets with various types of differences, oppositions and contradictions: as a result it proceeds to seek to construct a unified whole. Opposition presents itself at different times. In whatever way or ways the problem may present itself, the fundamental concern of reason is the same, namely, to overcome the broken harmony of life and to attain a unified synthesis of reality.

What makes Dickinson’s faith dynamic is her constant vacillation. She refuses to settle for facile answers and lives always poised between hope and despair. Her movement is not progressive in the Hegelian sense. More often than not, as belief is confronted by doubt, there is no resolution in a synthesis. Rather what we have, as thesis confronts antithesis, is an impasse. This is a characteristic of certain Dickinson poems where the movement is “from belief to questioning and disjunction” (Porter 91). Concerning Dickinson’s wavering, Albert Gelpi notes that she “could not be certain when to believe and when to pull back. The poems and letters shift from statement to counterstatement to restatement with a restlessness that would allow her only fleeting ease” (53-54). She is thus unable “to attain a unified synthesis of reality” in the Hegelian sense, at least not in a way that is immediately evident from her poems.
In his article “Drama of Doubt, Dialectics of Faith” Marcus K. Billson remarks, “What is immediately apparent in Dickinson’s poetry is the inability of faith to preclude doubt. Emily Dickinson’s faith is forever tempered by doubt and her unbelief threaded with belief. Such a paradoxical and inconsistent state of mind is the essence of her spiritual dilemma, and its tension provides the substance for her dialectics of faith” (83).

As one reads all the poems of Emily Dickinson, one can witness her ever-present preoccupation with doubt, and experience the suspense of her mind as it meets with various types of differences, oppositions and contradictions, and as it challenges the mysteries of the universe. She is never settled and secure in her belief and this trait is often confusing to the reader. A close chronological study of her poems reveals that her views of God, faith, suffering, death, heaven, immortality, eternity, etc., are constantly shifting to the very end. The movement though not conspicuously progressive in the Hegelian sense resembles it in its oscillation, its continuous fluctuation. As Whicher observes:

In examining the complex pattern of Emily Dickinson’s thought we must guard ourselves from attributing to her an undue consistency or an undue solemnity. Her states of mind were not progressive, but approximately simultaneous. She did not move in a systematic fashion from one intellectual position to another, nor set herself to defend a single point of
view. Her delight was to test all conceivable points of view in turn. [. . .] A mood of faith that possessed her in the morning might become a matter of delicate mockery in the afternoon; a piercing grief could be sublimated overnight into a rapture of spiritual purgation [. . .] Hence a reader who looks to her for a simple attitude invariably finds her inconsistent. (305)

An examination of Dickinson’s poems on God, would illustrate this. What strikes us is the coexistence of belief and doubt, contradiction, reverence and scoffing throughout her work. In the early period (till 1861), we find poems where she cries out like a beggar to God, “Burglar! Banker – Father!” to reimburse her store (Poem 49), and requests “Papa above!” to reserve a “Mansion” for her in his kingdom (Poem 61), that she may stand “At that grand ‘Right Hand!’” (Poem 168). There is an awareness of a clash between her will and God’s: “Grant me, Oh Lord, a sunny mind – / Thy windy will to bear!” (Poem 131); “I omit to pray “Father, thy will be done” today / For my will goes the other way” (Poem 103). She also points out the silence of God – “I have a King, who does not speak” (Poem 103) and the death of children reveals His callousness – “Sparrows, unnoticed by the Father” (Poem 141). Her suffering is already evident before an exacting Deity: “For each ecstatic instant / We must an anguish pay” (Poem 125).

In her most prolific years from 1862 to 1865, we have one of her best poems on prayer – “My period had come for Prayer” where she says, “[. . .] awed beyond my errand / I worshipped – did not “pray” – ” (Poem 565).
She is “the Soul that hath a Guest” (Poem 674), and as “Bride of the Father and the Son / Bride of the Holy Ghost” (Poem 817) she says “The Soul should always stand ajar” for the “accomplished Guest” (Poem 1055). In contrast to such poems of affirmation we find a number conceived in a purely sceptical mood. She says, “Of course – I prayed / And did God Care?” (Poem 376) But soon “grown shrewder” from having been swindled, she “scans the Skies / With suspicious Air” (Poem 476) for she has lost the “Child’s faith” that “Never had a Doubt” and learnt “Men – to anticipate / Instead of Kings –” (Poem 637). God, the “distant – stately Lover” (Poem 357), the Soul’s “Guest” is simultaneously “A Force illegible” (Poem 820), “Adamant,” “a God of Flint” (Poem 1076).

As Dickinson continues to write in the next decades till her death, she prays “My Maker – let me be / Enamored most of thee” (Poem 1403). Soon however, a sense of dishonesty and double-dealing produced her most contemptuously rebellious poem of all – “Heavenly Father” (Poem 1461). The withering sarcasm of some of her earlier poems is to be found in 1884 in “Apparently with no surprise” (Poem 1624), which speaks of the indifference of a Deity casually, bureaucratically carrying out his pet schemes. “Yet” as Teichert remarks, “for all her defiance and bitterness over God’s seeming indifference, the poet remains God’s child” (25). We find that there is no final word but ambivalence to characterize Emily Dickinson’s relationship to God. As Whicher says, “she was able to be both doubter and devotee in a fashion that puzzles more single-minded readers” (292). She contradicts
God, and she insults him; she imputes base motives to His actions and accuses Him, but still she does not turn away. Her predicament is like that of Peter who says, “Master, to whom else shall we go? You have the message of eternal life” (John 6:68). Citing her earliest poem addressing God where she calls Him “Burglar! Banker – Father!” (Poem 49), Sherwood observes:

The multiple and contradictory aspects of God revealed in this poem anticipate the difficulty Emily Dickinson would have in arriving at a fixed and consistent conception of God and of her attitude toward Him. If much of Emily Dickinson’s early poetry is understood as the expression of successive attempts and failures to construct such a position, and if the resentment that underlies so many of her early poems of devotion to God and the suspicion, fear and skepticism behind those which joyously affirm and exult in immortality are kept in mind, her vacillations and apparent contradictions become more comprehensible. (57)

“Faith” is for Dickinson’s “vacillating feet,” “A first Necessity” (Poem 915). Dickinson’s many poems on faith substantiate this, with the exception of the earliest, written in 1860, the oft quoted “‘Faith’ is a fine invention” (Poem 185). In 1862, she uses her motif of reversals to say: “‘Faith’ bleats – to understand”(Poem 313). Only in doubt can she know the sweet possibilities of faith. A poem that reveals how much she valued faith is Poem 377 – “To lose one’s faith – surpass / The loss of an Estate [...] Belief –
but once – can be – Annihilate a single clause – And Being’s – Beggary –” In 1863 she declares: “My faith is larger than the hills” (Poem 766).

Dickinson’s dictum is explained in a poem written in 1872: “Too much of Proof affronts Belief” (Poem 1228). Lundin notes that this explains her unfavourable treatment of Thomas in her poetry. His faith was dependent on evidence. As she sees it, “Thomas’ faith in Anatomy was stronger than his faith in faith” (Letters 373). That a heavy-handed analysis of mystical matters very often destroys the subject is the theme of an earlier poem on “Sceptic Thomas” beginning, “Split the Lark – and you’ll find the Music” (Poem 861). If Dickinson finds no merit in Thomas’ faith, she rates even lower Abraham’s simple unproblematic faith, his obedience and blind loyalty in “Abraham to kill him” (Poem 1317). A third biblical character who underwent trials of faith like Thomas and Abraham is Peter. Peter was capable of the greatest statements of faith followed by the most appalling acts of disbelief. Dickinson finds his inconsistency reassuring (Poem 193). Peter doubted while walking on the water. He denied Christ in a cowardly manner though he had ample proof about Christ. This is what makes his faith meritorious. “Could I do aught else – to Thee?” Emily asks in Poem 203. In honestly expressing her doubt like Peter, she gives greater credence to her faith.

Dickinson found Revelation 2:10 too business-like to accept: “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” For her true faith serves without the incentive of reward and she criticizes the
verse from revelation on that basis in “‘Faithful to the end’ Amended” (Poem 1357).

Dickinson’s stance regarding religious matters is beautifully captured in this poem written in 1877.

Sweet Skepticism of the heart –
That knows – and does not know –
And tosses like a Fleet of balm –
Affronted by the snow –
Invites and then retards the Truth
Lest Certainty be sere
Compared with the delicious throe
Of transport thrilled with Fear – (Poem 1413).

Though she could not accept conventional religion, Dickinson retained an unshakable trust in God’s actual reality. She continually reexamined older, fundamental concepts like death, resurrection, heaven and immortality, but was unable to come to a resolution. Dickinson finds dubious the Christian explanation of death and the need of a heaven. The idea of sin she finds nonsensical:

Is Heaven an Exchequer?
They speak of what we owe –
But that negotiation
I’m not a Party to – (Poem 1270)
Her stance in this poem written in 1872, has not changed from the one in Poem 62 written in 1859: “‘Sown in corruption’! / Not so fast! /Apostle is askew!” she says referring to St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians 1:15. A major omission from her poems is the sense of sin. She is not troubled by guilt. Though the preachers of the Calvinist tradition preached sermons spouting ‘brimstone and fire,’ that gripped her imagination, she doubted its authenticity, and for her, the balance tips away from condemnation toward innocence. In the Calvinist tradition into which Dickinson was born, there is no escape from the past that bequeaths on mankind the sin of Adam, and the focus is on the future with its possibility of Damnation or Bliss. This perhaps is the reason why for Dickinson a major emphasis and orientation is on the future, which is a reference point she steers by.

The future – Eternity – is where for her the deepest reality lies. “Throughout her life the ultimate mystery of immortality perplexed and intrigued her,” remarks Pickard and “Especially in her later years, the problem obsessed her, but she remained a doubter till her death” (36). Death was another problem that puzzled her as evidenced by the large number of poems on the theme. In spite of all her probing she could not solve the problem of finitude. For though at times Jesus’ death and resurrection gave hope that each human may break the bond of mortality, in other moods she felt that in life “All but Death, can be Adjusted.” All else can be “repaired,” “settled,” or “dissolved,” but “Death – unto itself – Exception – / Is exempt from Change –” (Poem 749).
Irresolution is a pattern evident in several individual poems. For instance, in “A Word made Flesh” (Poem 1651), the second stanza does not resolve the question of faith that the poem raises. It merely “reiterates Emily Dickinson’s belief in the strength and dignity of the well-chosen word” (Capps 52). Similarly, Dickinson’s irresoluteness comes through in “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” (Poem 216), which has two versions. One version of the poem concludes with a humanistic view while the other proposes a scientific view, with the result that faith in resurrection is left hanging in the air.

David Porter speaks of a structural shift that characterizes many Dickinson poems. “Poems alter beneath our eyes, slip to a perspective quite different from the disarming ones with which they begin” (89-90). “The World is not Conclusion” (Poem 501), one of her most important poems about belief, begins by offering the hope that there is a world beyond. Then bit-by-bit, her poem inexorably undermines all bases for faith. Commenting on the concluding lines of the poem Helen MacNeil observes:

Dickinson’s in-biting tooth is one of the great poetic images of spiritual torment, comparable in intensity to Herbert’s description of inner conflict in ‘Affliction’ in which he writes, ‘My thoughts are all a case of knives.’ In Herbert’s poem faith finally returns; in Dickinson’s, the last image is of the silent gnawing of doubt. (86)
Dickinson’s own words speak of her predicament: “the Balance /[ . . .] tips so frequent, [ . . .] / It takes me all the while to poise – / And then – it doesn’t stay – (Poem 576). However, as Eberwein points out, “Even if the right arm Christians had earlier relied on for salvation had been amputated, the left one somehow pulled the sluice to release the flow of grace that sustained Emily Dickinson in ‘the Balm of that Religion / That doubts – as fervently as it believes’ ” (Pollak 96).

Denise Levertov’s pilgrimage of faith also proceeds along a “pathway of doubt” as in Hegel’s dialectical method (Forster 134). Her work shows her “walking in doubt” (SS 3) and traces her struggle “to let faith unfold in her life” as Bodo says, “the way a poem unfolds, line by line, image by image” (Bodo 103). Her search for the authentic, which was a main concern in her work during her period of agnosticism, leads her through what in retrospect appears like a dialectical progression towards the absolute truth. The path that her becoming follows is conditioned primarily by the problem of human suffering, and she “drifts [. . .] on murmuring currents of doubt and praise” (SS 4). Anne Colclough Little points to a duality in Levertov – her capacity for joy and her anguish over suffering (1). Her attempt to define the eternal questions that troubled her concerning joy and suffering weaves thematic threads of unity through her work.

Hasidism had given her a sense of the immanence of the divine and wonder and joy in creation. In the early stages of her poetic career, truth and reality – the authentic – are to be encountered in everyday life. “All trivial
parts of / world-about-us speak in their forms / of themselves and their counterparts!” (WE 32). By being sensitive to the other side of experience, to dreams and visions, she is able to relate the two, as the poem teaches her, thereby coming to know “terrible joy.” Thus we find poems that celebrate the world and in which evil is merely good in abeyance.

However one can sense the beginning of the struggle to face the conflict between her innate sense of joy and her awareness of suffering: “Who can be happy while the wind recounts / its long sagas of sorrow?” (CEP 25). With the war, she becomes aware of “the banality of evil” and the inclusion of explicit issues in her later poetry gives concrete shape to the vague sense of social malaise that is evident in her early poems. Aware of both joy and suffering, she asks, “Am I / a monster, to sing / in the wind on this sunny hill / and not taste the dust always, / and not hear / that rending, that retching?” (WE 36) Gradually “she assimilates [. . .] metaphysical anxieties [. . .] into a larger pattern based on faith in the inevitability of joy renewed” (Gilbert 235). The sense of “otherness,” of the common bond of humanity comes through in The Jacob’s Ladder. Seeing her kinship with others who cause pain Levertov says, “I multitude, I tyrant, / I angel, I you, you / world, battlefield” (JL 30). She comes to understand that as a poet who knows happiness yet shares human guilt, it is her task to dispel suffering – “to sing of death as before / and life, [. . .] so no devil may enter” (JL 31).
Soon however, the Vietnam War casts a shadow over her, resulting in a loss of authenticity. *The Sorrow Dance* speaks of sorrow, even in poems that celebrate the natural world, where joy and the awareness of mortality support one another. Levertov finds her poetics of order disturbed and her innate belief in the coherence of things shaken as she perceives the chaos, experiences anguish and terror, and encounters evil and darkness in death. Levertov is helpless as she faces the violence of war, which for her is the ultimate disorder. As seen earlier, “the conflict between her impulse to joy and her impulse to lamentation” continues (Little 3). As she struggles and grows, Levertov learns that joy does not arise from the elimination of the negative forces in the world, but from seeing them truly in their tension with the positive and she embraces grief and delight: “I saw Paradise in the dust of the street” (*SD* 72). She points toward a way of comprehending the violence of war with her new spiritual understanding. It is her spiritual heritage that helps her to bring on the new light in *Relearning the Alphabet*.

The next three volumes reveal the many questions troubling her. The chief of these is the question of the duality of human nature - the capacity for joy and love and the capacity for evil, for she sees humans as “mirrored forms of a God we felt as good” (*SD* 80). Here we identify the beginning of a struggle that she later identifies as a major “barrier” to her crossing “the threshold of faith” (*NSE* 242) – “the suffering of the innocent and the consequent question of God’s nonintervention” especially “in regard to the global panorama of oppression and violence” (*NSE* 251). *The Freeing of the
Dust reveals that Levertov has attained “a more realistic vision which can include fluctuation and polarity without a nostalgic yearning for complete synthesis” (Smith 226). She moves to a clearer understanding of the opposites which pull her, not merely surviving but staying alive in the fullest sense: “To live / beyond survival,” even amidst the devastations of war (FD 35). Life in the Forest speaks of the death of her mother and her struggle with serious doubts and anxieties till she sees some sense of design even in the face of the worst vision of life’s ending. And as she steps across the threshold to belief, she carries with her the ever-present conflict between her innate sense of joy and the awareness of suffering:

I know this happiness
is provisional:

the looming presences –
great suffering, great fear –
withdraw only

into peripheral vision:
but ineluctable this shimmering
of wind in the blue leaves:
this flood of stillness
widening the lake of the sky:
this need to dance,
this need to kneel:
this mystery: (OP 86)
In the 1980s her work shows the dialectical progression of her vision of the mysteries of human experience and the emergence of Christian faith as a defining concern. Even in those poems that are not essentially concerned with issues of belief, she “perceives energies that seem with almost religious power to radiate through and unite experiences” (Marten 162). However, despite her understanding of the relationship of joy and suffering, Levertov still sometimes feels the conflict. The poem “Unresolved,” for example, ends in a failure to resolve the conflict, as she says: “We know no synthesis” (CB 105).

Levertov’s new poetry of belief for an “Age of Terror” is most vividly realised in the sequence “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus” (CB 108). Lorrie Smith describes the sequence as “a contrapuntal exploration of faith and doubt in the nuclear age” and says that “like Christian faith itself, Levertov’s poetic mass assimilates knowledge of evil and counters it with hope and praise. [. . .] The poem succumbs neither to transcendental ecstasy nor to absolute despair, but rests with an acceptance of fluctuating and irreconcilable extremes” (228–229). Here she asks once again how she can reconcile the apparently disparate impulses to celebrate and to grieve for the pain she sees in the world. And she raises more directly the relationship between God and suffering: “the discrepancy between the suffering of the innocent, on the one hand, and the assertions that God is just and merciful on the other” (NSE 242).
“The Mass is an appropriate vehicle through which to seek reconciliation between joy and sorrow because it is an act of remembrance of the suffering of the incarnate Christ and a celebration of the eternal triumph of His spirit” (Little 6). Levertov’s poem – “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus” – therefore, signals the carrying over of a main concern of her poetry so far to a higher stage of evolution with her discovery of the importance of the incarnation to the conflict between joy and suffering (though its full meaning is not yet clear) and her realization of the role human beings play. The conflict also leads her to examine the relationship between the longing for faith and the tendency to doubt. The last poem of the collection “The Many Mansions” confirms that there are places for all manner and degrees of belief in God’s “house” (CB 116).

Levertov carries her struggle against despair into Oblique Prayers where her poetry embraces both anguish and affirmation. “She is at a place in her pilgrimage where she offers up not only continuing visions of our dark time, but the light of language and faith” (Marten 149). In the first poem of the volume, “Decipherings” Levertov asserts her need for a stable moral centre. This gives direction to the rest of the book which progresses towards the religious vision of the final section “Of God and of the Gods” where she floats “into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace” (OP 76). In “St. Peter and the Angel,” Levertov offers a deep insight through Peter’s realization following his deliverance from prison, that he “must be / the key now, to the next door, / the next terrors of freedom and joy” (OP 79). From our
vantage point we see that this is her realization too; this is what she does through her poetry that offers hope in a time of “terror.” In the last poem “Passage,” the speaker addresses a darkness out of which light has broken anew.

In *Breathing the Water* she recognizes this light as the light of Christ. Like the servant-girl at Emmaus she “sees / the light around him / and is sure” (*BW* 66). The significance of Christ’s suffering begins to dawn on her: “Every sorrow and desolation / He saw, and sorrowed in kinship” (*BW* 69). She longs for Simeon’s “certitude” the “depth / of faith he drew on” when he first recognizes the infant Jesus and experiences new life (*BW* 70). Levertov’s struggle to understand God’s meaning and intentions for the world reaches a new plane as she turns to Lady Julian who laughed in a vision because “the very / spirit of evil / the Fiend” was “vanquished,” but her laughter ended with her awareness of Jesus’ “deathly / wounds” and “anguished / heart” which was “the cost / the passion it took to undo / the deeds of malice” (*BW* 79-80). Like Julian she feels “sorrowfully, mournfully, / shaken as men shake / a cloth in the wind” (*BW* 81) and thinks:

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 deeds are done so evil, injuries inflicted
 so great, it seems to us
 impossible any good
 can come of them (*BW* 81)
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Julian serves as example as she “clung to joy” through “tears and sweat,” believing in the “certainty / of infinite mercy” and sure that “Love was [Christ’s] meaning” (*BW* 82). Levertov admires Julian for she was not
plagued by doubt but “clung” to her faith “fiercely” (BW 82). By joining the conflict between celebration and suffering to the issue of faith, Levertov reaches the most satisfying resolution so far. This collection establishes that what appears all along as an aesthetic quest is indeed a religious one. Her search for the authentic leads her to Christ, and she begins to see a spiritual plan, and to realize that in our very restlessness “God’s flight circles us” (BW 83).

Though at first “belief was a joy” she “kept in secret,” Levertov soon finds herself eluding God’s presence, as her “mind [. . .] like a minnow darts away.” With her realization “Lord, not you, / it is I who am absent,” comes the desire – to “focus [her] flickering” (DH 64). A fundamental concern of hers namely, to overcome the broken harmony of life and to attain a unified synthesis of reality, finds a resolution in the poem “St. Thomas Didymus”. Thomas’ doubt serves as a metaphor for Levertov’s struggle. The question of suffering “throbbed like a stealthy cancer” within him and Thomas’ cry when he was told of Jesus’ resurrection was “Lord, / I believe, / help thou mine unbelief” (DH 102). There was a “manifold knot” in him “that willed to possess all knowledge” and when his hand “entered the unhealed wound” of the risen Christ, he felt “light streaming” into him. The knot that bound him unraveled and he witnessed “all things quicken to color, to form,” his question “not answered but given / its part / in a vast unfolding design lit / by a risen sun” (DH 103).
Once more Levertov brings to resolution the two contradictory impulses of pain and celebration as she learns from Thomas that “through suffering comes faith and with faith comes celebration” (Little 9). For Levertov the poet, the resurrection is “metaphor [. . .] grounded in dust, grit, / heavy / carnal clay,” and she opens to the “symbol’s power [. . .] convinced of its ground, / its roots / in bone and blood.” She too needs to “feel / the pulse in the wound / to believe” that “with God all things are possible” (SW115).

Though the inner conflict between faith and doubt finds a new resolution in “The Tide” by joining faith to action, Levertov, like Emily Dickinson, is troubled by the absence and silence of God: “In this emptiness / there seems no Presence” (ET 117). In Sands of the Well though, we see that she has gained a fresh perspective of this silence of God. As she listens to “the sound of rushing waters” and “a dove’s crooning,” she experiences “over the continuo / under the dove’s soliloquy, / [his] hospitable silence” (SW 126). Though her “soul felt darkened, heavy, worthless,” she discovers like Brother Lawrence that God “never abandoned you but walked / at your side” (SW 111). Often she finds herself in God’s “gossamer hammock / that swings by one / elastic thread to thin / twigs that could, that should / break but don’t” (SW 117). She looks at a world gripped by terror and torn by suffering, accusing God for all the misery till, “running out of accusation / we deny [God’s] existence” (SW 117), and she comes to understand “God’s
love for the world” which she describes as a “Vast / flood of mercy / flung on resistance” (SW 127).

For Hegel, the goal towards which the developing absolute progresses, is pure self-consciousness. At the highest stage of the development, the Absolute is pure Spirit, which Hegel characterizes as self-thinking thought (thought that is totally transparent to itself). Interestingly, in the title poem of Sands of the Well, which shows Levertov at the height of her poetic powers she wonders:

Is this
the place where you
are brought in meditation?
Transparency
seen for itself –
as if the quality
were not, after all,
to enable
perception not of itself? (124)

“Surely it is this culminating recognition of the sacred significance of transparency itself, of “being” prior to and beyond all the individual presences, all actions, all responsibilities, that marks Sands of the Well as an important development in Levertov’s spiritual quest,” as Edward Zlotkowski says in his article “Presence and Transparency: A Reading of Levertov’s Sands of the Well” (9).
The posthumous collection has a poem on St. Augustine where Levertov says, “The walls, with each thought, / each feeling, each word he set down, / expanded, unnoticed: the roof / rose, and a skylight opened” (GU 4). These words could very well be applied to Levertov, for throughout her long career “with each thought, / each feeling, each word [she] set down,” the “mean partitions” of her soul were knocked down, and “the oppressive ceilings” raised, thereby enabling her “to welcome […] God.” Hers was truly a “life of steadfast attention” as she “practiced the presence of God” in the writing of her poems (SW 111). “Abba!” is her joyful exclamation in one of the very last poems, and we find her “deeply glad to be found” by God: “Lord, sometimes: / You seek, and I find” (GU 60).

Throughout her career, Levertov’s endeavour as she meets with various types of differences, oppositions and contradictions has been to seek to construct a unified whole. Sometimes the recurrence of these conflicts in poem after poem gives the impression that she is unable to resolve them. However, each time, these oppositions are overcome and reconciled in a higher form as in the Hegelian matrix, enabling us to see the transcended parts as constituting the stages of her spiritual evolution. Though often her question at every stage is “not answered but given / its part / in a vast unfolding design lit / by a risen sun” (DH 103), it is heartening that in a world where “everything is threatened,” Denise Levertov’s search leads her to a place where “absolute transparence / is complete” (SW 124). On the other hand, Emily Dickinson’s quest is more a seeking than a finding, and her question all the time countered with “A bland uncertainty” (Poem 1646).