

‘We Grow Accustomed to the Dark’: Emily Dickinson, Religion and Nineteenth Century Science¹

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Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you. I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity. To think that we must forever live and never cease to be. (L10)²

Emily Dickinson to Abiah Root, 31 January, 1846

Part One

Emily Dickinson’s family were prominent in the First Congregational Church of Amherst. However, Emily Dickinson notoriously refused, from the age of 15, to give up her commitment to the world for a commitment to Christ: ‘I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die’ (L13). She remained the only member of her family and her school to refuse conversion during the revivals that swept New England in the nineteenth century: ‘Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless’ (L35). ‘The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea. I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant

¹ Editors’ Note: This paper was originally presented as one of three keynote addresses at the ‘Dark Side’ conference. We have attempted to maintain its integrity as the transcript of an address rather than as a written piece of prose so as to keep the content as true to the original rhetorical spoken form as possible. As such, overly rigorous referencing and footnoting has not been our priority.

² Dickinson’s letters throughout this paper are marked by ‘L’ followed by the letter number. The numbering system used Dickinson’s letters is the one universally accepted and is found also in the authoritative editions of M.L. Todd (ed.) *Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass. 1962) and T.H.Johnson (ed) *Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Connecticut, 1958).

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waters, and hear the murmuring winds but oh, I love the danger!' (L39). She later wrote of her family, 'They are religious, except me, and address an Eclipse, every morning, whom they call their "Father"' (L261). But was Emily Dickinson as irreligious as this brief sketch might suggest? The answer is no.

Religious questions are central to Dickinson's poetry, but religion in the sense that William James writes of in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he speaks of

the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.¹

He speaks of enchantment, an expansion of the subject's range of life, a vivification of the interior world, and a solemn joy:

If religion is to mean anything to us we ought to take it as meaning this added dimension of emotion, this enthusiastic temper of espousal.²

This is the feeling that Dickinson conveys in Poem #564³ 'My Period had come for Prayer':

God grows above – so those who pray
Horizons must ascend –
And so I stepped upon the North
To see this Curious Friend –
His house was not – no sign had He –
By Chimney – nor by Door
Could I infer his Residence –
Vast Prairies of Air

¹ William James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (Harmondsworth, 1975) p54.

² *Loc cit.*

³ Emily Dickinson: Thomas H. Johnson (ed.) *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, (London, 1970). The numbering and referencing system used throughout this paper for Dickinson's poems is the one universally accepted and is found also in Johnson's authoritative edition.

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Unbroken by a Settler –
Were all that I could see –
Infinite – had'st Thou no Face
That I might look on Thee?
The Silence condescended –
Creation stopped – for Me –
But awed beyond my errand –
I worshipped – did not “pray” -

This is the sense in which Dickinson is religious. Awe, she wrote, ‘is the first hand that is held to us...though there is no course there is boundlessness’(L871). For Dickinson, the Infinite was a constant guest (#1309). It was simply as she wrote to a friend that God's paradise was superfluous:

If roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one below - and if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I have seen - I guess that He would think His paradise superfluous. Don't tell Him, for the world, though, for after all he's said about it, I should like to see what He was building for us, with no hammer, and no stone and no journeyman either. (L185)

As she wrote in Poem #125, ‘Of Heaven above the firmest proof/We fundamental know/Except for its marauding Hand/It had been Heaven below.’ Her aim was in her words, ‘to build the dwelling earthwards whose site was in the skies’ (L50): ‘I was thinking, today - as I noticed, that the “Supernatural,” was only the Natural, disclosed’ (L280). However, there was a darker side to the loss of traditional faith. Dickinson was living at a time when the traditional teachings of the church were being challenged by new discoveries in science. Evolutionary theory in particular seemed to darken human prospects; a universe without God, death without an afterlife, the mind without spirit. However, a number of New Englanders were determined to turn darkness into light and embraced the new faces of God offered by New England Evolutionary Theology, New England Mental Philosophy

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which held that the science of mind was the science of divinity itself, and the late nineteenth century materialists who argued that it was in matter that we could find our immortality, 'The Chemical conviction/ That Nought be lost' (#954).

During the early part of the nineteenth century while theologians were attempting to interpret the religious significance of the discoveries of science, a number of New England scientists (biologists, geologists, mathematicians) took up the cause of reconciling science with theology. Edward Hitchcock was the Professor of Geology and Theology at Amherst College from 1825-1864 and the second president of the College; he was also a family friend and one of Dickinson's teachers. Dickinson attributes to Hitchcock her own understanding of continuity: 'When Flowers annually died and I was a child, I used to read Dr Hitchcock's Book on *The Flowers of North America*. This comforted their Absence - assuring me they lived' (L488). At his inaugural speech, he announced his intention to strengthen and extend the College's mathematics and science departments and declared that the study of these branches of learning, so often viewed as the enemies of revealed religion, were religious studies in themselves and essential to the argument for God. Hitchcock is a benign example of a pre-Darwinian evolutionary theology. Though his work with pre-Adamic fossils in the Connecticut Valley had already challenged the Biblical record, he emphasises in his books the increase in glory that is rightly God's in this context. Hitchcock advances the idea of perpetual change as the grand conservative principle of material things and argues that 'the principle of change, the paradoxical notion that instability is the basis of stability is superior to every other law for giving permanence and security to the universe.' In Dickinson's words, 'That we are permanent temporarily, it is warm to know, though we know no more' (L962) or 'Conclusion is the course of all/At most to be perennial' (#1682).

An optimistic version of theological evolutionism also arose among the Unitarians, a doctrine which stressed, in Herbert Schneider's words, 'progressive salvation through immanent design, evolutionary love, a faith in the natural growth of intelligence, virtue, peace.' One of the first wholehearted preachers of this type of evolution was Minot J. Savage (1841-1918) Unitarian minister in Boston and New York, who

in 1876, published *The Religion of Evolution*, one of the several books in Dickinson's library containing her characteristic pencil marks. From the tenor and idiom of his book it is obvious that Dickinson found in him a sympathetic voice.

In 1860, Asa Gray, professor of botany at Harvard University and occasional lecturer at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary which Dickinson attended, published the first accounts of Darwin's work in the U.S. Gray, who corresponded regularly with Darwin, is largely respectful of Darwin's hypothesis though he wishes to retain a place for divine intervention in the operation of secondary causes. However, in his view, what Darwin has done has given us a theory which makes the whole world kin. Dickinson's writing is informed by and in dialogue with, the debates between science and religion that informed nineteenth century New England. They were the idiom of her culture, the twin studies on which Amherst College was founded, and her work throughout is animated with staged confrontations between God's words and God's works. She was in her own right, a field naturalist; her 'big studies' at Amherst Academy were Geology and Botany, as well as Latin and Mental Philosophy. She was a keen gardener and grew exotic specimens in the conservatorium off the dining room. Her writing from the beginning to the end records the daily joys and predations of life in her garden. There are countless Darwinian parables of bees, birds, worms, sparrows, rocks planets in her work: for example in #328 we read, 'A Bird came down the Walk/ He did not know I saw/He bit an Angeworm in Halves/And ate the fellow, raw', or #1343, 'A single Clover Plank/ Was all that Saved a Bee/ A Bee I personally knew/From sinking in the sky'.

Dickinson's view of nature was neither quiescent nor sentimental. She saw that the operations of nature are largely invisible as well as indifferent to humanity. In #1338 nature's 'tenements of clover' and 'edifices azure' which house bees and humans alike simply and unaccountably vanish; they 'Arise and evanesce/ Without a rhythmic rumor/or an assaulting guess.' Nature remained, 'a Haunted House': 'nature is a stranger yet;/the ones that cite her most/Have never passed her haunted house,/Nor simplified her ghost'(#114). Even when she uses the simplest discourse of nature the poems evoke an inexorable force that is inimical to humans; even the gentlest poems like #140,

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‘An altered look about the hills’ or #318, ‘I’ll tell you how the Sun rose’ tell of change and dissolution, transition and process, days ending, seasons changing, creatures dying. Dickinson’s nature is a mysterious process, ‘a noiseless noise in the Orchard’ (L271). It is to be found in the murmur of insects, the efflorescence of a sunset, the evanescence of spring, the phosphorescence of decaying things. It is characterised by unceasing motion, things constantly breaking down and reforming in a relentless cycle of dissolution and renewal.

In this Dickinson was more akin to Darwin than to his more optimistic New England disciples; like Darwin she was in awe of the fecundity, variety and prolific contingency of nature, and like him she was poignantly aware of the suffering of individual lives, of creatures and of men, and unsure whether traditional conceptions of the divine would suffice. In #301 she writes, ‘I reason, Earth is short/And Anguish – absolute/And many hurt,/But, what of that?’ The poem continues:

I reason, we could die –
The best Vitality
Cannot excel Decay,
But, what of that?
I reason, that in Heaven –
Somehow, it will be even –
Some new Equation, given –
But, what of that?

However, where Darwin characteristically fobbed off invitations to speculate on the relations between religion and science, this was Dickinson’s territory. Her great theme is what might be called the emotional toll of Darwinian theory. It was simply, as she put it, that ‘we thought Darwin had thrown the Redeemer away’ (L750, 1882). However, he did not explain what she referred to as ‘The Thief Ingredient’: ‘Why the Thief Ingredient accompanies all Sweetness Darwin does not tell us.’ (L 359, 1871): She is being disingenuous here, because Darwin did not need to tell her. *Her* topic is the thief ingredient. What is stolen is the promise of eternal individual life. The seasons and species and planets and flowers and creatures will go on

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for a very long time, but the individual inhibitor of those forms will not. That makes each precious moment more precious because it is all there is. 'Because it does not come again is what makes life so sweet.' (#1741) For Dickinson, as for Freud after her, it is impermanence that confers value; it is the fact of death that creates joy. As she writes in a letter: 'The Red Leaves take the Green Leaves place, and the Landscape yields. We go to sleep with the Peach in our Hands and wake with the Stone, but the Stone is the pledge of Summers to come.' (L520) Poem #978 is one of the great meditations on transience and loss:

It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon
The Flower – distinct and Red –
I, passing, thought another Noon
Another in its stead
Will equal glow, and thought no More
But came another Day
To find the Species disappeared –
The Same Locality –
The Sun in place – no other fraud
On Nature's perfect Sum –
Had I but lingered Yesterday –
Was my retrieveless blame –
Much flowers of this and further Zones
Have perished in my hands
For seeking its Resemblance –
But unapproached it stands –
The single Flower of the Earth
That I, in passing by
Unconscious was – Great Nature's Face
Passed infinite by Me -

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Transition to Part II

The new discoveries in science brought the nineteenth century back to the earth with a thud. It was an awakening from what Mary Midgely has called the dark side of the Enlightenment, the championing of individual freedom above a sense of community and connection with each other, with our fellow creatures and with the earth. The new discoveries in science also forced us to look at death in a new way; it made us think about the nature of personal identity, the existence and nature of the soul, as in Dickinson's poem #822:

This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbors and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone
Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men –
How adequate unto itself
Its properties shall be
Itself unto itself and none
Shall make discovery.
Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be –
Attended by a single Hound
Its own identity.

In the next section I want to contextualise the fascination with death in Dickinson's poetry, the talking corpses, the necrophiliac impulse in poems like #449 'I died for Beauty' and #465 'I heard a Fly Buzz - when I died'.

Part Two: Death, Matter and Mind - The Necrophiliac Impulse

Dickinson was imbricated in a scientific/philosophic literary culture that was deeply involved in theorising death in an unprecedented way. There was undoubtedly a kind of crisis of death in the 19thC; the intrusion of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt drive into literal Death. Certainly the newspapers and periodicals that Dickinson read were obsessed with death *qua* death – the skeleton within, burial practices, premature burial, mummies, vaults, ways of committing suicide, cemeteries, graveyards, worms, aphorisms such as ‘Life is an epigram of which death is the point’ and ‘The grave is our only image of repose.’ The loss of the traditional idea of life after death foregrounds death in a particular way, and hence the necrophilic impulse in Dickinson’s poetry,

If I may have it, when it's dead,
I'll be contented - so -
If just as soon as Breath is out
It shall belong to me -
Until they lock it in the Grave,
'Tis Bliss I cannot weigh -
For tho' they lock Thee in the Grave,
Myself - can own the key -
Think of it Lover! I and Thee
Permitted – face to face to be –
After a Life – a Death – We'll say
For Death was That
And this – is Thee -
Forgive me, if the Grave come slow -
For Coveting to look at Thee -
Forgive me, if to stroke thy frost
Outvisions Paradise. (#577)

Here, as elsewhere, Dickinson prefers the material corpse of the beloved, to the immaterial promise of an afterlife. Indeed the corpse has a numinous presence in her work, in poems like #432 ‘Do People moulder equally,/They bury, in the Grave?’, #611 ‘And in the Grave - I

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see Thee best', #467 'We do not play on Graves', (#509) 'If anybody's friend be dead...Lost in the Sepulchre...', (#519), 'Twas warm - at first - like Us'. In the very early poem #88 'As by the dead we love to sit' she is explicit about the charge that proximity to the corpse provides; the dead are luminous by reason of their difference, they are become 'wondrous', 'dear', 'vast', in comparison with our penury (our loss of them and our virginity in regard to death). Poem #856 provides another clue as to the corpse's fascination: 'There is a finished feeling/ Experienced at graves.... A Wilderness of Size':

By Death's bold Exhibition
Preciser what we are
And the Eternal function
Enabled to infer.

In her work, Dickinson signals one of the dominant inquiries of the first half of the nineteenth century - the status of the mind and the soul in presence of death. Dickinson's interest in the corpse and in dying and death was part of a cultural moment. Without the existence of an immortal soul and the guarantee of the survival of personal identity after death, the corpse itself became more interesting, a 'live' site. If there were life after death, the corpse was the clue. Is it dead? Is it alive? Or in what sense is it dead? In what sense is it alive? While some theologians were lamenting the loss of God and the immortal soul, other theologians and many scientists were investigating the premise that it was in the vitality of matter that we might find our immortality (matter, the luminiferous ether that surrounds the globe, energy, heat, electricity, attraction, repulsion). Many exulted that death was not death, that matter, mind and thought were immortal. In this context it was science that provided evidence for the hope that neither the mind nor matter would cease to exist after death.

In 1835, the philosopher John Abercrombie (1780-1844), in *Inquiries Concerning the Intellectual Powers and the Investigation of Truth*, which Dickinson studied at Amherst Academy, argued for the immortality of the mind, based on the analogy of the dissolution of the bodily frame. In 1850, at Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, the philosopher Hubbard Winslow published his *Elements of*

Intellectual Philosophy, devoting an entire chapter to 'The Immortality of the Human Mind'

In 'The Unseen World', published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1876, John Fiske examines the state of current scientific and philosophic thought on the question as to whether the soul is to come to an end or not. He notes that while contemporary theologians seem to believe that the necessary result of modern scientific inquiry must be the destruction of the belief in immortal life, it is not so: scientists, while upholding all the so-called materialistic views of modern science, not only regard the hypothesis of a future life as admissible, but they even go so far as to propound a physical theory as to the nature of existence after death. He cites Charles Babbage, (the originator of the computer and author of the 9th Bridgewater Treatise, a series of works commissioned in the will of the Earl of Bridgewater to illustrate the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God in the Works of Creation), that each particle of existing matter must be a register of all that has happened.

The luminiferous ether that surrounds the globe is organised in such a complex and delicate way as to be like a negative image or counterpart of the world of sensible matter. And from this we may postulate a future state. Every act of consciousness is accompanied by molecular displacements in the brain, and these are of course responded to by movements in the ether-world....

And as there is a continual transfer of energy from the visible world to the ether, the extinction of vital energy which we call death must coincide in some way with the awakening of vital energy in the correlative world; so that the darkening of consciousness here is coincident with its dawning there. In this way death is for the individual but a transfer from one physical state of existence to another; and so, on the largest scale, the death or final loss of energy by the whole visible universe has its counterpart in the acquirement of a maximum of life by the correlative unseen world. By this theory, the putting on of immortality is in no wise the passage from a material to a spiritual state. It is the passage from one kind of materially conditioned state to another.

In this context, Edgar Allan Poe is significant. In 1848 a year before he died at the age of 40, Poe delivered a two hour lecture at the

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Library Society in New York 'On the cosmogony of the universe', which he worked up for publication later that year as *Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe* - in which he affirmed the vitality of matter and the return of all animate being to the primal unity from which it came, the unparticled matter, from which it was first individuated.

Now we will turn to nineteenth century ideas of the brain as matter interpenetrated by spirits of the dead who are not dead...

Spiritualism as a Study of the Mind or Soul

It was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that the language of the soul was displaced by a language of the mind. During the greater part of the nineteenth century, many of the issues which we now think of as associated with psychology were debated within the context of natural theology. Indeed it was not until 1876 that the Metaphysical Society in Britain was disbanded and its residual funds handed over to Alexander Bain who established the journal *Mind*. The journal *Brain* was established two years later. However for a large part of the nineteenth century the two discourses were intertwined. In *From Soul to Mind*, Edward Reed notes that in the 1850s mainstream religious thought found itself hemmed in between two kinds of sacrilege, one materialist, the other a kind of promiscuous and overzealous spiritualism.

It was an age in which the spiritual sciences, dubbed the pseudosciences by their detractors, flourished alongside the theological natural sciences. Séances, talking with the dead, spirit rapping and the like enjoyed immense popularity in the 1850s. The strongest attacks on religious orthodoxy came not from atheists or agnostics but from spiritualists - whose self-proclaimed access to the world of souls undermined the structure of organised belief and worship. Just as the New England natural scientists had evolved a pre-Darwinian evolutionary theology, so the nineteenth century New England mental philosophers developed a curious, pre-Freudian mental philosophy with a distinctive theological bent, part psychology, part theology, and part ghost talk. The study of dreams was inextricably caught up in the study of spiritualism; it was widely believed that both involve the

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interpenetration of the material world by the spiritual world. Though there was an important distinction; at séances, you sought to contact the spirits, whereas in dreams *they* sought to contact you. Thus #670:

One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -
One need not be a House -
The Brain has Corridors - surpassing
Material Place -
Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
External Ghost
Than its interior Confronting -
That Cooler Host.
Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
The Stones a'chase -
Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter -
In lonesome Place -
Ourself behind ourself, concealed -
Should startle most -
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least.
The Body - borrows a Revolver -
He bolts the Door -
O'erlooking a superior spectre -
Or More –

The June 14, 1862 *Springfield Daily Republican* recommends an article on 'Modern Spiritualism in the *Monthly Religious Magazine* which argues for the interpenetration of spirits in the material world. We note that the March 13, 1872 *The Springfield Daily Republican* featured an article by George Sands about the brain and dreams and the soul.

In her search for infinitude, Emily Dickinson embraced those darkneses that troubled her contemporaries and found the faces of God in Nature, Death, and the Mind. She was exhilarated by the sense of expanse brought by scientific discovery and energised by the contemplation of transience, uncertainty and annihilation without

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solace. In the presence of darkness she found great confidence of the power of the mind to adjust, and so we come to poem #419,

We grow accustomed to the Dark –
When Light is put away –
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye –
A Moment – We uncertain step
For newness of the night –
Then – fit our Vision to the Dark –
And meet the Road – erect –
And so of larger – Darknesses –
Those evenings of the Brain –
When not a Moon disclose a sign –
Or Star – come out – within –
The Bravest – grope a little –
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead –
But as they learn to see –
Either the Darkness alters –
Or something in the sign
Adjusts itself to Midnight –
And Life steps almost straight.