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Emily Dickinson on words and the Word of God
The influence of religion on Emily Dickinson's poetry

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Emily Dickinson's religious background is reflected in her imagery and language, rich in theological vocabulary and even references in poems of non-religion related themes, in spite of her ambivalent, unconventional attitude to the Calvinist-Congregationalist religion of her family and her environment. Deeply rooted in her thinking, religious experience reveals itself in a great number of poems, including some of her poems on language. The present essay focuses on the integration of Dickinson's religious and biblical heritage in her work, demonstrated by four of her poems on language.

Emily Dickinson was brought up in the intensely religion-conscious atmosphere of the Second Great Awakening, in a pious, church-going family, where Sunday service, prayer and the Bible formed an integral part of her daily life. The Bible was obviously a primary text in schools, including Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, which she attended. In the latter, the Bible headed the list of textbooks (Miller 1987:132). Quoting from the Bible was common practice in the 19th century. Dickinson also knew the Scripture well, she often cited and referred to it. In her letters there are twenty-seven quotations from the Old Testament and sixty-eight from the New Testament.

Dickinson frequently used biblical language, which she placed in a non-theological context. In "There is a word" (42)¹ she describes the power of language with the help of the "sword" metaphor, well-known from the Bible:

There is a word
 Which bears a sword
 Can pierce an armed man -
 It hurls it's barbed syllables
 And is mute again -
 But where it fell
 The saved will tell
 On patriotic day,
 Some epauletted Brother
 Gave his breath away.

Wherever runs the breathless sun -
 Wherever roams the day -
 There is its noiseless onset -
 There is its victory!
 Behold the keenest marksman -

The most accomplished shot!
 Time's sublimest target
 Is a soul "forgot!"

¹ Citation by poem number in Franklin(1988)

The same metaphor is used for example in The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians in 6:17 and in The Revelation in 1:16, 2:16 and 19:15. In the latter we can read: “And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations”. Similarly, the word of God is compared to a sword in The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”(4:12)

In the poem the “sword” metaphor is extended. Dickinson uses war metaphors all through the text: sword, barbed, pierce, armed, patriotic, epauletted, victory, marksman, shot, target. While in the Bible the sword refers to the word of God, in the poem it can be either a reference to this or to the poetic word, to which special, supernatural power is attributed, comparable to the power of the word of God, thus giving the biblical metaphor a more complex meaning. In either interpretation, the word is linked to God and it has power over man. The line “Where it fell” implies that it has an above position, and kills a person as an act of God. The words “sublimest”, “soul”, “saved” also suggest this connection as they evoke the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. The word has supernatural power: it overcomes both man and nature, that is the sun. One cannot run away from it, as the image of the breathlessly running sun and the roaming day as symbols of the passing time, and the repetition of “wherever” and “there is” imply. The word has the power to kill, it “can pierce” a man armed with traditional, man-made weapons. Similarly, in Paul’s Epistle the word of God is “sharper” than any sword, “piercing” both soul and body. In the first stanza of the poem the destructive power of the word concerns the body, while in the second stanza it reaches the “soul forgot”. The notion of quickness, present in the Bible, is also expressed in the poem: “It hurls it’s barbed syllables / And is mute again –”. The words “mute” and “noiseless” may reflect Dickinson’s preference of using words economically. Although Emily Dickinson knew the Bible well and was a religious or at least a faithful Christian, she did not follow the practices of any church in most of her adult life. Her spirituality was unconventional, still deeply concerned with the questions of immortality and God’s attitude to humans. Dickinson is often quoted calling herself a pagan in L566², which was an expression of her unusual attitude to religious beliefs.

She expressed her feelings of frustration because of an indifferent God, and unanswered prayers also serve as themes for many of her poems, including “I know that He exists (365), “Of course I prayed” (581), “Prayer is the little implement” (623), “There comes an hour where begging stops” (1768).

Dickinson’s church experience is also reflected in her view on creating poetry in “Your thoughts dont have words every day” (1476):

Your thoughts dont have words every day
 They come a single time
 Like signal esoteric sips
 Of the communion Wine
 Which while you taste so native seems
 So easy so to be
 You cannot comprehend it’s price -
 Nor its infrequency

² The following abbreviation is used to refer to Emily Dickinson’s letters: L. Citation by letter number in Johnson, Ward (1965)

The poet establishes a parallel between words and communion. Words are the results of inspiration, as the second line suggests. The simile (“like esoteric sips”) compares the procedure of poetic creation to the mystery of communion. The poet is involved in creation, like God. Even seemingly simple (“native”, “easy”) words are found at the expense of suffering and self-sacrifice, comparable to that of Christ. The opportunity to meet Jesus Christ in the Lord’s Supper is as infrequent as the incarnation of thoughts in words. The difficulties of creative writing reflect Dickinson’s writing practice of choosing the right word from several recorded variants.

The infrequency of communion is based on Dickinson’s own church experience as a child and later a young woman. In the Congregational church practices, the unconverted, Dickinson among them, were barred from the communion service and dismissed before it started. Conversion, in addition, was also a condition of church membership (Eberwein 1996:97-98). In a letter written in 1874, she recalls her experience of being excluded: “When a child and fleeing from Sacrament I could hear the Clergyman saying ‘All who loved the Lord Jesus Christ – were asked to remain –’” (L412).

Emily Dickinson did not convert. She refused conversion even after her family and many of her friends converted, though as a young girl, she gave it serious consideration. In 1848 she wrote to Abiah Root: “I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when the golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world[...] I fear I never can” (L23). Indeed, she never converted, though she expressed her uncomfortable feelings and bad conscience about her unconverted state again and again, for instance, in L35, L36, L39.

Dickinson’s personality, among other factors, may have played an important role in her decision to refuse conversion, which was a public event, a highly emotional experience of testifying the sinner’s psychological transformation into a new Christian. The unconverted sinner was to make a public confession of repentance and willingness to serve God, while later the convert had to take active part in the conversion of the still unconverted family members or even strangers, especially the young ones (Scott 2). Conversions were often accompanied by tears and dramatic outcries. The situation of passionately confessing her faith in public after having discussed her spiritual life with some converted members of the church appears foreign to Dickinson’s personality. It must have been a violation of privacy for her, as she led a secluded life and dreaded publicity both as a person and a poet. According to one of her cousins she said: “I would as soon undress in public, as give my poems to the world” (qtd. in Pollack 1984:228). Her hostile attitude to publicity may have been one of the reasons for her refusal.

Another reason why she did not convert could be her need for isolation. The above poem offers a kind of justification for Dickinson’s seclusion. She needed solitude for creation, to be ready at the “single time” when words come. Owing to her denial of conversion, she was excluded from church membership, which made her feel uncomfortable. However, her increasing withdrawal from the world contributed to her freedom for poetic creation by liberating her from the religious obligations of church community members.

A third reason for not joining the converted could be her inclination for deprivation. (Oberhaus 1995:55) Considering her way of life, we can assume that Emily Dickinson imposed limitations on herself in terms of family life, social life, her career as a poet and similarly, she deprived herself of “institutional” religion. However, according to her concept of deprivation, one can better understand and appreciate something by suffering from its lack than by experiencing it (Pollack 1984:115). This idea is expressed for example in “The Beggar at the door for frame”(1291) and “Success is counted sweetest”(112).

In a letter to T.W.Higginson, she writes: “Best Gains – must have the Losses’ Test – To constitute them – Gains – ” (L280). Deprivation in terms of institutional religion may have helped her find her own God and her own spirituality.

In addition to the above reasons, she may have found the idea of conversion controversial. Jane Donahue Eberwein assumes that for her, as a supposedly “Bible-reading, dutiful” person, the demand of radical change in conversion must have been incomprehensible (Eberwein 2008:13). This was not the case in her young years when she seemed to be impressed by the “rebirth” of Christians: “I presume you have heard from Abby, and know she now believes – she makes a sweet, girl christian, religion makes her face quite different, calmer, but full of radiance, holy, yet very joyful [...] God and Heaven are near, she is certainly very much changed” (L36). Later she probably lost interest in this question or accepted her state. By the time she was 30 she stopped going to church (Oberhaus 1995:3). In 1852 she wrote to her friend and future sister-in-law, Susan Huntington: “They will all go but me, to the usual meetinghouse, to hear the usual sermon [...]” (L77).

Although Dickinson’s non-traditional spirituality followed no religious practices of any church, she still expressed faith in God and hope for immortality in her own way. In her “private” religion it was possible even for the unconverted to partake in the Lord’s Supper, as suggested in “He ate and drank the precious words” (1593):

He ate and drank the precious Words -
His Spirit grew robust -
He knew no more that he was poor,
Nor that his frame was Dust -
He danced along the dingy Days
And this Bequest of Wings
Was but a Book - What Liberty
A loosened Spirit brings –

The persona of the poem experiences communion through the “precious Words” of the Bible, that is, God’s Word, as the metaphors “ate and drank” suggest. Dickinson reverses the lines of the Gospel according to St. John, where the Word, which is God, is “made flesh” in Jesus Christ, whose body is represented by the communion bread and wine: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1) “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,” (John1:14) In the poem the “Words” are consumed directly. The Bible, described with the metaphor “Bequest of Wings” serves as nourishment for the spirit. The masculine pronoun can refer to Man, that is Mankind, whose mortality is suggested by the image of dust. Ignoring this (“He knew no more”...) implies that there is hope for humans to be redeemed by these words. Here the Book bears enough power to liberate the spirit from the burden of sin and the cares of the world, making the believer forget about his physical existence. This idea reflects a deviation from the Puritan idea of predestination according to which only the elect are saved and assured by gifts of faith. The dramatic image of a man dancing with joy, exalted by the words, evokes the effect of conversion as described by Jonathan Edwards in his accounts of the First Awakening in *A Faithful A Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*: “Their joyful surprise has caused their hearts as it were to leap, so that they have been ready to break forth into laughter, tears often at the same time issuing like a flood, and intermingling a loud weeping. Sometimes they have not been able to forebear crying out with a loud voice, expressing their great admiration” (Edwards 19). Thus, the poem may be read as Dickinson’s idea of the experience of conversion.

An even more characteristic example of how the poet's religious and biblical heritage is integrated in her work may be seen in "A word made flesh is seldom" (1715):

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

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

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

In this poem Dickinson does not only refer to the Gospel according to John, as in "He ate and drank the precious words," but she cites the lines: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" from the King James version of the Bible (John 1:14).

The opening image of the incarnated Word of God, which serves as nourishment for the soul corresponds to that of "Your thoughts dont have words every day" and "He ate and drank the precious words". The words "tremblingly", "stealth" and "debated" imply a fearful, however doubtful respect for the Word, which attitude is shared by the poet. She may have been excluded from communion and thus church membership, but not from studying the Word of God. The personified word of the second stanza represents Christ, as the verb "expire" may also refer to Christ giving up his soul on the crucifix. He is immortal: "Has not the power to die." It is the immortal nature of Christ, the incarnated divine Word, that is contrasted to the language of mortal human beings represented by philology. Both Richard B. Sewall and Lindsay Braddy find correlation between the incarnation of the Word of God in Christ and Dickinson's language brought to life in poetry (Sewall 1996:45, Braddy 3). Emily Dickinson's idea of poetry as living is also included in her first letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, which starts with the question: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" (L260). Similarly, she speaks of living words, for example in "A word is dead when it is said" (278):

A word is dead when it is said,
 some say.
 I say it just begins to live
 that day.

For Christ, condescension seems to be the condition of mortality, which means absolute identification with humans. Christ "may expire" if He has the "power" to become a mortal human being, a single person, the Son, giving up the two other persons: the Father and the Holy Spirit of the Trinity. In Cristanne Miller's interpretation condescension is an allusion to the completion of the Holy Trinity: "Dickinson plays on the words 'descend', as the Spirit did in the

form of a dove...and 'condescend' ", which suggests God's courtesy or "His hierarchical system that keeps humanity low" (Miller 1987:171). The closing lines imply that Christ might have the "power to die," to utterly identify with humans if He and his words became comparable to the human language, comprehensible and consented to by humans, like philology. Considering that the Word of God and philology representing the human language are paralleled, we might presume that the human language is also divine, as an element of creation. Artistic creation makes it divine, and poetry makes it immortal.

As demonstrated by the poems discussed, the impact of the Bible is strong on Dickinson's vocabulary, style and imagery, in spite of the fact that she withdrew from institutional religion into the fortress of her privacy as a believer just as she withdrew from the world as a person and a poet. This privacy provided her with independence and freedom for creation. She enjoyed the freedom to treat language in a creatively unconventional way, to lead an unusual life consecrated to poetry, to integrate her theological culture and the language of the Bible into her poems, to adjust religion to herself and to find her own God and her own road to immortality.

In her private religion, Dickinson secularized the sacraments, drawing a parallel between Communion and the process of writing poetry, between divine and artistic creation, between the Word of God and the words of the human language. She found divine attributes in language and hope for immortality through her poems.

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