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EMILY DICKINSON: MYTH OF THE PERPETUAL CHILD

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Rebecca Faust

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Rebecca Faust
(digital signature)

04/28/16

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Dr. Scanlon

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Emily Dickinson: The Myth of the Perpetual Child

Emily Dickinson is known as an enigmatic poet who has been described as child-like and as having a child's voice due to her penchant for dressing her "little body" (qtd. in Sewall 564) in all white and walking with "a step like a pattering child's . . ." and "a soft . . . breathless childlike voice" (Johnson 207-8). Not surprisingly, other contemporaries extended the childish and unsophisticated qualities to her poetry, with Thomas Wentworth Higginson noting her works "lacked the proper control . . ." (Miller 241) and author and educator Arlo Bates, in 1890, commenting that "Dickinson combined the 'insight of the civilized adult' with the 'simplicity of the savage child'" (Miller 241). Like other critics, Higginson and Bates seemed to project their impression of Dickinson's diminutive appearance onto her poetry, concluding that the sometimes child-like qualities and subjects of her work made many of her poems more suitable as children's literature. Thus, with a cursory read, many have assumed that Dickinson experienced a deep-seated aversion to growing up; however, more likely is that the poet utilized a variety of voices. The specific use of a childish persona enabled Dickinson to reconcile her views on death, faith, and relationships by challenging the differing and often opposing tenets presented through her intellectual and rigid Puritan-based, Calvinist childhood, and through the less confining views of a Natural world offered by the Romantic movement.

Religion in Puritan-grounded Amherst, Massachusetts, served as the foundation for family and social life even in the 19th century. Dickinson would have been taught that everyone was born in sin, as stated in *The Holy Bible*: “The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies” (Psalms 58:3). With the premise that there was no innocence associated with childhood, parents would be expected to provide constant, stringent guidance, and necessary correction, as noted by clergyman Benjamin Wadsworth in his book *The Well-Ordered Family*: “Children should not be left to themselves, to a loose end, to do as they please” (“Puritans #5”). In addition to following the Puritan tenets, the Dickinsons raised their children specifically in Calvinist tradition, for which the primary belief was that all aspects of life (physical and spiritual) should involve religion (“Calvinism”). Accordingly, although God pre-ordained (for the chosen elite) to be admitted to heaven, it was nonetheless necessary to live according to scripture, with the intent of retaining favor if one of God’s chosen few. According to Jane Eberwein in her article “‘Earth’s Confiding Time’: Childhood Trust and Christian Nurture,” the Dickinsons, as dutiful parents, would have consulted at least one of several popular religious parenting books which described methods to instill “the habits of prompt and cheerful obedience and a grateful, affectionate disposition” (8) in order to “overcome their children’s inherent willfulness, [and] establish...obedience” (3). A primary reference for the Dickinsons was the “book Edward gave his wife, Emily Norcross Dickinson, John S. C. Abbott’s *The Mother at Home* (1833)” (Eberwein 2), which espoused the need for establishing absolute parental authority while simultaneously conditioning children to follow the biblical dictate: “(Children) obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (Ephesians 6:1-3). With parents

working within the structure of their faith, the best possible outcome could be afforded to children as they “prepared for divine judgement” (Eberwein 3) through adherence to their religion, which required thoughtfulness and introspection from its followers, old and young alike.

While the methods to ensure children would not follow their inherent inclinations for evil included the use of a firm hand, loving motherly intervention, and catechistic teaching, equally as important was “preserving the child-like spirit” (qtd. in Eberwein 12). Such a contradiction would surely have led to internal conflict in being expected to behave as a naturally-sinful small adult, yet remaining simultaneously child-like at heart. This conflict was apparent in Emily Dickinson, who was by no means filled with the desired attitudes of compliance at all times. As evidenced by her letter to Abiah Root, Emily admittedly is helping her family during her mother’s illness while “cheerfully . . . humming . . . then crying . . . think[ing] I was much abused . . . [as I] came to my senses in [a] great dungeon” (Johnson 39) which she felt her life had become. She was obviously resentful of being obliged to perform an inordinate amount of housework, feeling unfairly burdened by the responsibilities thrust upon her. As most young adults, she wished for freedom to explore outside relationships or independence to pursue her own passions. Having been guided by and instilled with biblically-based teachings calling for self-reflection and obedience, Dickinson responded by lamenting that she was “much abused” and felt imprisoned by the expectations of her religion and society. One of Dickinson’s poems, “They shut me up in Prose” (#445), written twelve years later in 1862, echoes similar sentiments:

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl

They put me in the Closet –
 Because they liked me “still” –
 Still! Could themselves have peeped –
 And seen my Brain – go round –
 They might as wise have lodged a Bird
 For Treason – in the Pound –
 Himself has but to will
 And easy as a Star
 Look down upon Captivity –
 And laugh – No more have I - . . . (Franklin 206)

Dickinson suggests that just “as when a little girl,” the speaker has been constrained or confined, perhaps literally in way of punishment for some transgression, but more than likely figuratively by the use of “prose,” implying that the rules or structures of the ever-present sermons and exemplary stories, which were designed to teach proper behavior, would guide her behavior. Again, the speaker is encouraged to engage in self-reflection through being “still” and not just to be compliant, but to discover her own worth and value through introspection while focusing on preparing for her ultimate heavenly reward. Further, the second stanza reveals that although she appears physically compliant as a dutiful child, the speaker’s thoughts are roaming free as a bird in flight and like that bird, should not be confined for behaving as Nature intends. And in the third stanza, the speaker mockingly “laughs” like a bird, suggesting only through personal willingness could stillness be achieved, not through being imprisoned by the will of others.

While many readers have interpreted this poem as decidedly autobiographical, given the well-known nature of Dickinson's regional and eventual physical isolation, the author clearly states in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson that in general "[w]hen I state myself as the Representative of the Verse, it does not mean - me - but a supposed person" (Johnson 177). This statement by the poet leads to the question: if her works are not autobiographical, then who is being presented or represented as the speaker, and, to what end?

Dickinson, according to several critics, has utilized multiple voices ranging from a bride, to a dead person, to a child (both gendered and ungendered). While some readers believe that by adopting a child's voice in particular, Dickinson's goal is to make "commentary on a woman's place in a male-centric culture" (Raymond 108) - drawing parallels to being a perpetual child without autonomy - a more careful read reveals that by utilizing various voices, the poet has latitude to explore and make sense of a changing and contradictory world. The use of a child's voice specifically allows certain freedoms from societal conventions not readily afforded to other women of the period who chose to write autobiographically.

While Emily Dickinson contributed to the "popular nineteenth century women's poetry of the child elegy" genre (Raymond 109), unlike her contemporaries, the use of a child's persona was not to "comfort the grieving parents" (Raymond 109) as tradition would suggest, but instead she chose to present death from the point of view of the child. The child's voice, for Dickinson, is simple and honest in its perspective, such as in "I took my Power in my Hand" (#660) in which the male speaker claims the power of the biblical David as a child, though "'Twas not so much as David - had -," lest the speaker be equating himself physically with his hero. Rather, the speaker insists he was "... twice as bold -" or defiant by railing "... against the World" in

an attempt to understand the adult realm by traversing the line between the innocence of children and the knowledge of more worldly adults. Unlike the successful David defeating Goliath, the speaker “. . . Myself / Was all the one. . .” who failed and thus, was not able to comprehend his own deficiencies which led to the perceived failure: “Was it Goliath - was too large - / Or was myself - too small?” are the only reasons he could fathom for not prevailing as David did. The speaker questions the outcome and wonders the reasons for being the one to suffer the pain after “[he] aimed my Pebble,” while failing to achieve even a semblance of David’s success, rather than simply accepting his plight. This speaker’s questioning is similar to Dickinson’s questioning predestination rather than just accepting her fate of not being one of the few chosen for salvation, even though she is seemingly doing all that is required.

Additional works present the voice of the child speaking from the position of being buried. In “‘Tis true - They shut me in the Cold -” (# 658), the child laments being removed from the warmth of the family home by being placed into a cold grave. However, the child works through the bitterness of being separated by “ ‘The Harm They Did” to put him/her in that position since the harmful situation was short-lived. Rather, the child excuses and even forgives the slight since “. . .Themselves were warm / And could not know the feeling ’twas - ” going to be unwelcomed. The child even wishes those responsible to be forgiven by God in order to gain “. . . Heavenly esteem.” By presenting the point of view of a dead child as capable of understanding the nature and importance of forgiveness, Dickinson is able to present the ideal Puritan adult-child while introducing the concepts of the Romantic child whose innocence places it closer to God and thus, the plea to Him as a Father for similar forgiveness is appropriate. Even for the staunch Puritan, the direct plea for Heavenly forgiveness is consistent with the need to

retain a child-like spirit. This connection between her Puritanism and the Romantic world would have appealed to Dickinson and be something she would continue to investigate through her poetry.

As Dickinson struggled with the contradictions brought about by her fundamental religious education and the introduction of alternative belief systems such as Romanticism, she found herself thrust into an even more perplexing situation which would further test her belief in the teachings of her youth. As a young adult, during a time in which Dickinson's family and friends were re-committing themselves to the church at revivals, she admits that she would “. . . pause, and ponder, and ponder, and pause” (Johnson 39), ultimately exercising individual will as she resisted the pressure of the masses to commit to the church when she did not feel a calling by God to do so. While the rest of her friends and family had made their public professions of faith within the church, Dickinson was contemplating the prospects of achieving her heavenly reward by a means other than being predestined. As she became more familiar with Emerson's views on reason as “the highest faculty of the soul” (qtd. in Campbell), Dickinson described herself as a “lingering bad one” (Johnson 39) who came to reject the Puritan belief in predestination as well as the fundamentally innate depravity of the human soul. Instead, she was purposefully embracing aspects of Romanticism, including the prospect of achieving immortality through retaining the inherent innocence of the human spirit present at birth. She remarks in a letter to her friend, Abiah Root, “. . . I . . .do work without knowing why - not surely for *this* brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven . . .”(Johnson 39), acknowledging that no deed done on earth will gain her the ultimate reward she seeks.

As Dickinson pulled farther away from the structure and some tenets of her religion, she attended fewer and fewer services, eventually giving up the practice of being present for sermons. While not without faith in her God, Dickinson did express the loss of the familiar in the poem “I Years had been from Home” (#440):

I Years had been from Home
 And now before the Door
 I dared not enter, lest a Face
 I never saw before
 Stare stolid into mine
 And ask my Business there –
 “My Business but a Life I left
 Was such remaining there?” . . . (Franklin 203)

Obviously autobiographical in sentiment, Dickinson uses an ungendered persona to express a sense of estrangement from her church (her “home”) and her concept of faith. By this time, Dickinson had begun to be more physically reclusive, which she alludes to in line one as she had been away for “years” and was afraid to encounter “a Face / I never saw before.” Similarly, she indicates that she no longer has a clear connection with the church, evidenced in the second stanza by the possibility of being asked “my Business there.” For this question, she only could ask if her foundational religious beliefs, through using the metaphor of a “life,” were still valid – “was such (life/spirit/faith) remaining there?” The speaker is doubtful if what is being presented on the other side of the closed, uninviting doors would be recognized from a time in the past. For Dickinson, this poem is not intended to be an account of a specific event, rather to recognize the

internal conflict with the traditional religion of her youth and the evolution of her faith through Nature. As if an answer to her fears expressed in the previous poem, “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church” (#236) serves as a reassurance of the personal choices to “. . .stay at home -” (Franklin 106) for worship. As such, the speaker has “a Bobolink for a Chorister - / and an Orchard, for a dome -” where “God preaches, a noted Clergyman - / and the sermon is never long” (Franklin 106). Here the speaker playfully uses rhyme and the sublime as a venue for accessing God directly which gives the sense of familiarity that a child would have in the presence of a parent who is giving guidance. It is in Nature that Truth could be found and most importantly, the speaker could attain Heavenly reward not at the end, but by “. . .going, all along” (Franklin 106). By embracing the Natural world, one could see and experience a higher level of spirituality without the dogma and “trappings of man” (Franklin 312) which the traditional church offered.

Dickinson’s continued belief in faith through personal introspection during this period presented opportunities to further explore the Natural world to find the Truth she was seeking. Living in an academic and intellectual town such as Amherst, Dickinson was exposed to literature and ideology of the Romantic movement as presented by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s followers. She became aware of an idealized notion of children exemplified by William Wordsworth’s poem “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” in which infants “. . .trailing clouds of glory do . . . come / From God, who is our home: / Heaven lies about us in our infancy!” (qtd. in Rovee), and only through being earthly creatures would sin crept into the soul as we move “farther from the east” (qtd. in Rovee), or through the passage of time, further from heaven. For Dickinson, the notion of children’s being born innocent and closely associated with Nature,

instead of being born as sin-filled, little adults in need of unyielding guidance and already doomed for eternity, held great appeal. So enamoured was Dickinson with this Romantic concept that she explored the notion in her poem “The Child’s faith is new” (#701):

The Child’s faith is new –
 Whole – like His Principle –
 Wide – like the Sunrise
 On fresh Eyes –
 Never had a Doubt –
 Laughs – at a scruple –
 Believes all sham
 But Paradise –

 Grown bye and bye
 To hold mistaken
 His pretty estimates of Prickly Things
 He gains the skill
 Sorrowful – as certain –
 Men – to Anticipate
 Instead of Kings - (Franklin 312)

In stanza one, the speaker reflects that children are innocent when born because they are sent directly from heaven; their faith is fresh and uncorrupted by earthly teaching and molding (by men). This pure spirit is all encompassing (“like the Sunrise”) and enlightening, unlike the

beliefs being taught on earth. Having been sent straight from God, children have no “doubt” of their faith, of the True faith or “Paradise,” as all others are but a “sham” to be childishly “laugh”(ed) at and mocked. Continuing to stanza three, Dickinson further states that children are aware that those who place their faith in “. . . Men . . . / Instead of Kings” move farther away from the state of innocence, or more simply, that children can fall into this lesser way of being as they are “grown” and therefore lose their childish wisdom. So pervasive were the ideals of the Romantic movement across America, that this notion of children’s representing pure faith and innocence was incorporated into popular parenting manuals, stating that a child “should carefully cherish at home the flame which is kindled in his bosom. . .” (Eberwein 12) - a spirit provided specifically by God - even while developing the necessary characteristics to be a faithful Christian while on earth.

Emily Dickinson had sustained her child-like spirit, allowing it to manifest itself through natural playfulness that was exhibited both in behavior and in silly poems and riddles shared with those closest to her. Additionally, through exposure to Romanticism such as in works by George Eliot and Ralph Waldo Emerson, which were available to her within the home, Dickinson was able incorporate those Romantic notions of childhood into her thoughts. In a letter to Susan Gilbert in 1852, for example, Dickinson wistfully longs for each of them to be children again to “ramble away among the woods and fields” (Johnson 90) in order to go back to a simpler time in which “sorrowing cares” (Johnson 90) could be forgotten. Although she may have wished for this simpler time, she never shirked her adult responsibilities and remained ever faithful in her attendance to her family. It is the child-like spirit and the allure of the innocence of childhood that drew Dickinson to take more than just a traditional familial interest in her

brother's children. In a letter to Mrs. Holland in 1866, Emily wrote of her nephew Ned and how he "tells us that the Clock purrs and the Kitten ticks. He inherits his Uncle Emily's ardor for the lie" (Johnson 191). Here Dickinson exhibits not just her love of his child-like spirit but also her willingness to recognize those aspects in herself (by calling herself "Uncle Emily"). In encouraging the child's misspoken words, Dickinson seemed to defy the very religious tenets under which she was raised: being quiet, introspective, obedient, and moving away from sin, in this instance, lying. She further took note of her mother's wish that Ned would be "a very good Boy," yet reveled in his proclamation that he would be "Not very dood" (Johnson 194) – a statement Dickinson fondly proclaimed as from a "sweet defiant child" (Johnson 194). This exchange again clearly exemplifies the conflict between the prevailing Puritan attitudes toward children, as small adults, needing firm guidance against inherent sin (or mischievousness) and those of the Romanticists, who rather embraced the playful innocence associated with these types of small indiscretions. Additionally, supporting the notion that Dickinson took delight in encouraging the child-like spirit is the story told by Clara Newman Turner of a nephew who routinely left an article of clothing in his grandmother's home after visits. After each "'Sin of Omission'" (Sewall 272), each item was returned in a playful manner by Aunt/Uncle Emily. On one occasion, for example, a pair of boots were "returned erect and spotless on a silver tray, their tops running over with Emily's flowers and on another, his jacket pockets were pinned down, and a card with "Knock" on it. Inside this pocket were cracked nuts" (Sewall 272). It was noted that this habit was a family joke and no one had the heart to admonish either participant for their roles in the ruse (Sewall 272). Unlike Dickinson's own childhood, in which Puritan-sanctioned foundational training prevailed, she earnestly encouraged the children in her life to keep their

child-like spirit burning by advocating for curiosity about the natural world without becoming a willing participant.

As Emily Dickinson remained faithful to her familial duties while limiting her social encounters over time, her affinity for children spread beyond family, as noted in a letter written by Mabel Loomis Todd in 1881: [Dickinson] “lets down the sweetmeat by a string out a window” (Sewall 216), to young visitors waiting below. Dickinson’s biographer Sewall notes the same practice, saying that Emily “lower[ed] baskets of delectable eatables out of her window to the cousins and neighbors waiting below” (Sewall 290), further indicating that Dickinson, found ways to stay socially involved with those she chose to be part of her society. In her interactions with children, Dickinson allowed them to speak freely, embracing their child-like spirit, and even urging them to “. . . never grow up” (Sewall 322). She knew at some point that crossing over from childhood to adulthood would inhibit the ability to openly share honest questions, silly thoughts, wild hopes, and imaginative dreams. Eager to engage her own spirit, Dickinson often spoke to her littlest visitors as equals while sharing her own observations, poems, and stories, which made Emily “their favorite” (qtd. in Sewall 331). Despite the influence of children themselves or their childish spirits, Dickinson “took childhood seriously” (Sewall 331), consistent with Romantic tenets, by believing “. . . the early spiritual influences about a child are more hallowing than we know” (Sewall 333), thus acknowledging that the very essence of the child was as important to nurture as the physical body.

Dickinson’s affinity for children and her desire to nurture a child-like spirit in them as well as herself is grounded in the following scripture which she would have read from the Book of Mark:

And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them: and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. . . Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)

For Dickinson, this scripture would have bolstered her resolve to cherish faith that is intuitive versus learned; it is the child-like spirit within that perceives the Truth. To explore this concept more, in “What is – ‘Paradise’” (#241), the speaker asks:

“What is – ‘Paradise’ - / Who live there – / Are they ‘Farmers’ - / ...Do they wear ‘new shoes’ – in ‘Eden’- / Is it always pleasant . . . / Won’t they scold us . . . / You are sure there’s . . . / ‘Father’ – in the sky - . . .” (Franklin 108)

Using the child’s persona, Dickinson rapidly fires question after question much in the manner of a small child, without waiting for an answer, while attempting to understand the concept of Heaven. By encompassing specific words in quotation marks, Dickinson is indicating that those are concepts the speaker is having trouble reconciling. And by asking these questions using a child’s point of view, Dickinson avoids the criticism that would be encountered if the same questions were asked by an adult.

Known as the “Myth of Amherst,” Emily was an enigma to most; however, her acceptance of and by children was as important to her faith as it was to her social and professional lives. With the use of a multiple voices, especially a child’s persona, Emily

Dickinson was able to “rehearse different views” (Stonum 56) without claiming the thoughts as being autobiographical, and thus avoided criticism that would otherwise be cast upon her work. By noting a child speaker in her works, as well as citing her diminutive nature and choice of wording for a fair number of poems, critics have presumed that Dickinson had a penchant for more than “sentimentalizing her own childhood” (Sewall 332). However, more likely, the influences of her Puritanical background in conjunction with the rise of the Romantic movement with its view of children as innocents of Nature, presented an avenue for Dickinson to utilize her clearly mature thought processes in order to explore often conflicting beliefs. The eventual fusion of beliefs allowed Dickinson to develop an appreciation for and a confidence in her journey in faith as well as her gift of writing.

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