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Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture

Tradition and Experience

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Preface

Any writer who sets out to engage with questions surrounding spirituality has an especially challenging road ahead of them. There are multiple opportunities for forging ahead with one direction in mind, only to find there are an equal number of u-turns and changes in direction required. When Emily Dickinson is the primary companion on that road, the journey is even more surprising. She is, without doubt, one of the most rich and complex poets to read on the subject of spirituality. I set out on this particular road because I wanted to 'go' where she 'went'; to know some of what she knew. In some ways this is the journey 'to' nowhere, and Dickinson is instructive on this point ('Done with the Compass -/ Done with the Chart!' (Fr 269)). However imposed disorientation notwithstanding, the frequently recurrent images, rhythms and echoed voices to be found in Dickinson's poems suggested ways of looking at her vast corpus which highlight moments when tradition and experience on spirituality meet. At these moments the dialogism at work in Dickinson's poems is most effectively clear and it is also the most transformative. What followed was an investigation of the relationship between the expressions of spirituality in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and the representations of spirituality associated with the hymn culture she encountered.

Drawing upon contemporary women hymnists and the influence of the hymns of Isaac Watts, the book traces the dissent and challenge to the hierarchical 'I-Thou' model of relation found in traditional hymn address and shows how Dickinson engaged with it to produce her most spiritually probing and expansive poems. Watts's Dissenting position has been overlooked in previous discussions of Dickinson's use of the hymn form. Women hymnists contemporary with Dickinson, who also sought to redefine God in ways more compatible with their own experience, have similarly been ignored when considering the impact of hymn culture on Dickinson's poetry. This cultural context is further illuminated by the debates concerning alternative versions of the divine found in recent feminist theology. Like the redefinitions of the expectations surrounding hymns, these feminist debates centre around ideas of community and relation and so are employed in this book as a basis for the exploration of the emphasis on multiple and diverse relation in Dickinson's poetics.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section (Chapters 1, 2 and 3) is introduced with an outline of the scope of the book. This first section describes the history of hymn culture, analyses current debates about hymns and considers how hymnic space might be theorised. The second section (Chapters 4 and 5) examines the literary contexts and influences surrounding Dickinson's writing and engagement with hymn culture. This is exemplified by the work of Isaac Watts, Phoebe Hinsdale Brown and Eliza Lee Follen. The third section (Chapter 6, Parts 1 and 2, and Chapter 7) offers detailed analysis of a selection of Dickinson's hymnic

poems, focusing on her use of bee imagery, the image which most closely aligns itself with hymn culture in Dickinson's poetics.

The conclusion the book reaches is that Dickinson's relation to hymnody is more wide-reaching, complex and subtle than criticism in this area has allowed. Far from being without a context, the radical re-visioning of the divine to be found in Dickinson's 'alternative hymns' can be situated within an engagement with a community of hymn writers. Moreover, the space which Dickinson's poems generate to accommodate this re-visioning can be seen in terms of a manipulation of hymnic space. In this, the book places readings of Dickinson's poems within important theological and historical contexts which have been previously overlooked. I hope what follows will go some way to stimulate new directions for interpretation and contribute to the ideological questions which currently surround Dickinson's poetics.

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The daguerreotype of Emily Dickinson used on the cover of this book appears by permission of the Trustees of Amherst College. I am grateful to Margaret Dakin at Amherst College Archives and Special Collections for her kind assistance in this matter.

List of Abbreviations

DCC E.A. Livingstone, *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Fr *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (ed.), R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005)

HL Isaac Watts, *Horae Lyricae* (1706) as appears in *PW*

HSF Eliza Lee Follen, *Hymns, Songs and Fables for Young People*, 2nd edn (1831;Boston: W.M. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1851)

HSS Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707) as appears in *PHSS*

L *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols, (ed.), T.H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958)

MWL Alfred Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House, 2001)

PHSS *The Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D. To which are added Select Hymns from other Authors; and Directions for Musical Expression* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong and Crocker and Brewster, 1832)

POD Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and Applied to the Christian State and Worship* (1719) as appears in *PHSS*

PW *The Poetical Works of Isaac Watts, With a Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1866)

RMB Benjamin Lease, *Emily Dickinson's Reading of Men and Books* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990)

SL *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, (ed.), T.H. Johnson, eleventh printing (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002)

THJ *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (ed.), T.H. Johnson, 2nd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1975)

VH Asahel Nettleton, (ed.), *Village Hymns for Social Worship Selected and Original: Designed as a Supplement to Dr Watts's Psalms and Hymns* (Hartford: Printed by Goodwin and Co., 1824)

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PART 1
Hymn Culture: Tradition and Theory

Chapter 1
''Twas as Space Sat Singing to Herself – and Men –': Situating Dickinson's Relation to Hymn Culture

> I have promised three Hymns to a charity, but without your approval could not give them - They are short and I could write them quite plainly, and if you felt it convenient to tell me if they were faithful, I should be very grateful [...].
>
> (November 1880, SL, p. 267)

In a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1880, towards the end of her life, Emily Dickinson describes her poems as 'Hymns'. This emphatic choice of description employed alongside 'faithful' as a benchmark for quality in this letter is undoubtedly ironic.[1] Whilst calling into question the extent to which her gleefully unconventional poems deviate from traditional hymnody is humorous, there is also a genuine challenge being presented: How do these poems differ from traditional hymns and in what ways are they (un)faithful? Her use of the term connotes an irreverence for religious tradition and its expressive forms, but conveys equally, the serious import of her project. Her caveat 'They are short and I could write them quite plainly' confronts openly the expectations and parameters associated with traditionally sacred forms of writing, and the emphasis on 'plainness' in Puritan spirituality specifically. It also mirrors the cultural limitations imposed upon self-expression of the woman writer more generally in the mid-nineteenth-century. Dickinson's 'promise' of a voice which speaks from the margins, occupying only minimal space, is a flimsy veil indeed for what is a bombastic negative enquiry which assertively envisions her art as an alternative new form of hymnody, carrying with it a new kind of 'faith' altogether. The letter to Higginson quoted above witnesses the extent to which Dickinson conferred spirituality upon her writing, where the two are inextricably connected. Whilst calling her poems 'Hymns' operates upon the level of irony, it is undoubtedly also a sincere statement about her relationship with her art. In this letter, and in the poems she produced throughout her life, Dickinson is reclaiming the hymn. In conferring the status of hymns upon her work, and by making the connection between spirituality and

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[1] Wendy Martin views Dickinson's reference to hymns in this letter as ironic because she perceives the poems Dickinson was offering to the charity as 'emphatically secular.' See *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984) p. 109.

writing explicit, Dickinson also aligns herself with other women hymn writers. Given her lack of concern with orthodox modes of publication, alluding to the inferior, 'acceptable' status of the female hymnist as opposed to poet was a risk that Dickinson was prepared to take.

As the following chapter will explore, most histories of hymnody will outline what is predominantly a communal practice which has served to redefine in different ways culturally agreed notions of the divine. It is also a practice which asserts a hierarchical model or mirror for human interrelation. Reassessing Emily Dickinson's engagement with the hymn genre and its associated imagery and assumptions, this book interrogates her critical engagement with religious orthodoxy by examining the symbolic value of the hymn as an ideologically loaded genre that always implies a representation of a speaker-God relation. The term 'religious orthodoxy' refers to the assumptions and practices surrounding Christian doctrine which are exclusionary and hierarchical and were familiar to nineteenth-century New England society, such as Calvinism's emphasis on Original Sin and an 'Elect' society. It also refers to the hierarchical depictions of the speaker-God relation to be found in religious culture more generally. This book argues that Dickinson's connection to hymnody is more complex than recent critical debate has allowed, and can be seen as producing not only subversion of patriarchal discourse on the divine, but also a re-envisioned and performative version of hymnic space in which an alternative mode of relation to the divine comes to the fore. In order to do this, the book provides detailed readings of carefully selected Dickinson poems alongside in-depth analysis of the form and imagery of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hymns.

Many critics have compared Dickinson's verse form and imagery with those of the eighteenth-century hymn writer, Isaac Watts, arguing that any influence stems largely from Dickinson's dependence upon displaying an ironic distance from orthodox religion. Her connection to hymnody has always been analysed with regard to a male hymnist and in view of her being intrinsically antagonistic to the qualities connected with a particular kind of hymnody. As a result, the possibilities for a closer relationship between traditional hymnody and the articulation of spirituality in Dickinson's verse have been obfuscated. The fact that Dickinson was critical of American Evangelical Protestantism is in many ways a given. In contrast, this book aims to uncover the ways in which some of the conventions of traditional hymnody which are employed in Dickinson's poetry serve to convey an ideal space in which experience of spirituality is expressed and given a shape. These conventions will be explored in relation to the imagery and form to be found in Watts, but also those found in the work of contemporary women hymnists. In doing so it will challenge the tradition of reading Dickinson's poems as essentially atheistic and as gaining little more from hymns than an ironic distance from religious orthodoxy. It will also challenge the notion that Dickinson's work was produced out of a dedication to solitariness. Traditionally, the hymn is used to give voice to the imagined or real congregation alongside that of the hymn writer, while also conveying the expression of the writer's relation to God or the divine other.

A form of expression in which individuality *and* a sense of interrelation (such as a sense of community and social cohesion) are simultaneously articulated implies problematic obstacles that Dickinson's poetry engages with in different ways. If the speaker-God relation and notion of community expressed in traditional hymnody and religious discourse does not accurately reflect one's own experience of the divine, then other ways to express it must be negotiated. The notions of 'relation' and community are considered by feminist theologians as an alternative to an 'I-Thou' model of describing an individual's relation to the divine.[2] Dickinson's engagement with the hymn genre can therefore be seen through the dialectic between community and individuality that her poetics construct.

A word of caution: this book does not aim to reclassify Dickinson's poems as hymns, but rather, to explore the ways in which her relation to hymnody can be seen as profoundly informing the representation of spirituality in her work. It sees Dickinson's work as 'alternative hymns' in so far as they display a sophisticated manipulation of hymnic space which serves to incorporate the poet's own experience. In Dickinson's poems (more so than in work by many other poets) there is a sense of space in which the reader has scope to exercise her/his own imaginative processes. The sheer amount of wide-ranging criticism on Dickinson's work perhaps illustrates this point best; if one wishes to find a contradictory feeling or opinion expressed in Dickinson's work then examples are plentiful. It is not the intention in this book therefore, to present analysis of Dickinson's work overall, but rather to show how hymn culture influences particular aspects of her poetics. That is, the way in which some dominant modes of expression in her work, such as her use of the hymn form and of imagery of flight work to convey an alternative to the 'I-Thou'[3] model of address to be found in traditional hymnody and prayer. Dickinson's 'flood subject'[4] of immortality, together with the fluctuation between

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[2] As discussed in Chapter 3 and referred to throughout the book, the notion of 'relation' is used by theologian Elizabeth Johnson to connote the state of relation between the three elements of the Holy Trinity. This mode of relation or 'relatedness' which for Johnson is a model to describe a Christian way of life which does not reinscribe oppositional, patriarchal definitions of self and world and negotiates hierarchical structures, also has affinity with Daphne Hampson's notion of 'relationality' and Susan Welch's idea of 'community'.

[3] The 'I-Thou' model of prayer is referred to throughout this book and is discussed further in Chapter 3, in relation to the hymn. The term is used by Daphne Hampson in *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) (p. 169.) and draws upon Martin Buber's (1878–1965) *Ich Und Du* (1923; Eng. trans., *I and Thou*, 1937 and 1970). See E.A. Livingstone, *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 84. Hereafter abbreviated to '*DCC*' followed by page number.

[4] For example see Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, vol 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 1976) pp. 572, 690, 717. Dickinson describes the 'flood subject' of immortality in a letter to T.W. Higginson, see *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, (ed.), T.H. Johnson, eleventh printing (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002) 9 June, 1866, p. 194. Collection hereafter 'SL', followed by page number.

religious faith and doubt often expressed in her poems, has been of special interest to critics. Indeed spirituality, and the various formalised and pre-established ways in which people express it, is a subject returned to again and again by Dickinson. In order to forge new critical inroads this book provides a historical, literary and theoretical basis through which to explore Dickinson's conspicuous interest in spirituality. It highlights connections between the space which Dickinson's poems allow and generate, and the space(s) which exists within the hymnic forms and imagery she chose to use. In this way the book will show how Dickinson's poems enact what they describe and will explore how they do that and to what radical effects.

The space which is made available in Dickinson's poems serves to accommodate, in a heterologous[5] way, both an individual subjectivity and also an 'open' space of relation with others by rendering the poem unbounded by the restraints and traps of linguistic and semantic definition. The notion of relation to others in Dickinson's work is both the imagined community, the state of being-in-relation, and also anticipated readers of her work. In this way, Dickinson, like mystical writers, offers versions of the divine to the reader in the ways which, somewhat ironically, mimic what might be said of God's offering of grace; with enough space between to create the freedom to choose. Dickinson's frequent rupturing of hymnic common metre and her use of imagery which recalls hymn culture serve only as markers for what is a much deeper engagement with the organising structures of orthodox religion. The 'speaker-God' relation in traditional hymnody is one such organising structure.

Although not formally aligned with a particular church or religious practices Dickinson's use of the hymn form and of biblical/Puritan imagery places her within a tradition of nineteenth-century women poets who negotiate space within traditional religious discourse in order to articulate their own version of spirituality. Cynthia Scheinberg and Linda Lewis have demonstrated the ways in which the work of Victorian poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti utilise orthodox religion in their creative poetic processes to reformulate their own versions of spirituality.[6] Both of these women poets remained more aligned to particular religious affiliations than Dickinson (who famously refused conversion and formal connection with the Church). Their negotiation of religious discourse however has affinities with Dickinson's use of the hymn; working within orthodox religious discoursal space and radically reshaping and transforming it to

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[5] The term 'heterologous,' from Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

[6] See Cynthia Scheinberg, *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), hereafter shortened in parenthesis to 'Scheinberg', and Linda M. Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998).

accommodate their own (and by implication also others') experience of spirituality. Scheinberg argues that women poets such as Barrett Browning and Rossetti

> [...] should be read as creative agents of theological enquiry rather than merely passive recipients of a patriarchal tradition. Poetry was one of the most important generic sites in Victorian culture to accommodate this radical and public theological work of women - radical not in the sense that this theological poetry always positioned itself against traditional notions of gender or religion – but radical at the moment poetry provided a sanctioned public forum through which women could voice their theological ideas and participate in debates about religious, political and gendered identity. (Scheinberg, p. 4)

With this in mind, Dickinson's engagement with hymn culture can be seen as a deliberate attempt to emphasise the consideration of religious, political and gendered identity at work in her poetry more than as an attempt to disguise it within an acceptable mode of expression for a woman. Dickinson's use of the hymn form and of poetics of relation which invoke community can be seen as the representation and enactment of the 'alternative modes of literary values' (Scheinberg, p. 236.) in women's poetry. Scheinberg identifies these 'alternatives' as providing a resistance to the increasingly androcentric and theological 'generic patterns' in Victorian poetic theory:

> The alternatives to these generic patterns might position communal identity as more valuable than individual redemption, might posit multiplicity of perspectives and a community of voices [...] over unitary or monologic identity, might emphasise narratives of persistence rather than conversion or transformation, and might replace narratives of redemptive closure with narratives of perpetual hope. This list [...] is not meant to be conclusive, but rather only suggestive of a method that could challenge the often naturalised, universalised, and essentialised categories of 'great literature' through which certain theological assumptions are recast as 'aesthetic' values. (Scheinberg, p. 236)

Scheinberg's reading of Victorian poetic theory (as espoused by critics and poets such as Matthew Arnold) as androcentric and Christian, and her list of the alternative modes which she finds highlighted in women's poetry of the Victorian period is instructive. Such poetic 'alternatives' of multiple identities and deferred closure are immediately recognisable in Dickinson's 'modern' poetry.[7] However, Dickinson's use of the hymn form and the repeated attraction towards multiplicity *and* relation in her poetics suggests a challenge to the individualistic or 'monologic'

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[7] David Porter's *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) describes Dickinson's spiritual doubt as pre-emptive of modernist decentredness, and in 'Searching For Dickinson's Themes' in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* (ed.) by Gudrun Grabher and others (Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1998) he connects her 'indefinite' self with Post-modernist literary theory, pp. 183–96. Grabher and others hereafter referred to as '*The Emily Dickinson Handbook*'.

identities which Scheinberg identifies in an increasingly theological Victorian poetics. It also suggests a radical reconfiguration of those theological and poetical structures.

In analysing Dickinson's relation to the hymn by establishing key aspects of contemporary hymn culture, and focusing on her use of bee imagery to exemplify her engagement with this culture in the final section, this book will demonstrate how her poems challenge the rigid parameters (and 'narratives of closure', Scheinberg, p. 236.) set by the Puritan Protestant work ethic and the assumptions about worthy production implicit in hymnody. It will illustrate how they display instead a mystical spirituality which opens up a space for ideas of community, revery and sexuality which challenge the exclusionary aspects of orthodox religion. It will also show how this spirituality and production of space has affinities with projections for the divine to be found in feminist theology as well as in philosophical discourses on the 'other.'[8] Such mystical spirituality can be seen through Dickinson's engagement with the modes of orthodox religion, namely through the interchange between God and speaker which the act of worship in hymns invokes. The nature of Dickinson's relation to orthodox Christian faith is a large subject to approach,[9] and any discussion of it involves at least a brief examination of religious culture in mid-nineteenth-century New England. Whilst the legacy of Puritanism showed itself during this period in conservative Evangelical Protestantism in the main, the creative change effected by the rejection of its values is visible in the minority movements that emerged. This study does not aim to pigeonhole Dickinson, or to consider whether she was ultimately a Puritan or aligned with a minority movement. Rather, it aims to examine the extent to which her use of such a religious culture, primarily through hymnody, provided her with an avenue to express a relation to the divine which, as in the mystical tradition, exists by evading such categories.[10]

Critical assessments of Dickinson's work which speculate about the poet's personal experience of religious faith and are predicated upon 'facts' or assumptions about her character (for example as an eccentric 'recluse') are unhelpful. They serve only to obfuscate her literary technique and to reinstate the binaries associated with religious discourse which her poetry necessarily suspends; such as

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[8] Feminist theologians Daphne Hampson and Mary Daly, as well as the theories of Luce Irigaray and Michel de Certeau will be discussed in relation to this, in Chapter 3.

[9] The recent reprint of Roger Lundin's 1998 biography, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004) and James McIntosh's *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 2004) are evidence of the continuing interest in the subject of Dickinson's relation to orthodox religion and the nature of her spirituality.

[10] For a recent discussion of Dickinson's relation to orthodox religion and the medieval mystical tradition, see Angela B. Conrad, *The Wayward Nun of Amherst: Emily Dickinson in the Medieval Women's Visionary Tradition* (New York: Garland Science, 2002) Conrad repositions the 'recluse' model of Dickinson within mystical tradition, associating this, and her preference for wearing white garments, with the lives of medieval mystics.