

Errant Boys and Accidental Falls: Ontological Exegesis in Dickinson's Old Testament Poems

Emily Dickinson's speakers and subjects often slip up. What is interesting is how they find their feet. A plank in reason breaks and sends consciousness into freefall, landing, finally, on more uncertain ground; a 'decoy' sends the credulous, wildly and pleurably, off course; 'Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies'.¹ As one speaker puts it, we maintain a 'precarious gait' because the risk of destabilisation accompanies every step we take (Fr926). Maurice Lee has noticed that Dickinson's poems are full of surprises, accidents like these little slips, which both call attention to, and resist, the stability of received narratives. A poem which begins 'Meeting by Accident' (Fr1578) sets chance against Design and destiny by describing an extraordinary unpredictable 'error' that only happens once a century. 'To interrupt his Yellow Plan' (Fr622) parodies the Providential Will of the Father-God in the image of the tyrannical Sun working against 'Caprices of the Atmosphere'. In 'Luck is not Chance' (Fr1360), aleatory experience dismisses, as too easy, the argument from Design, but, as Lee says, it 'cannot wholly foreclose the potential of Providence'.²

In a poem beginning 'Crumbling is not an instant's Act', Dickinson debunks the myth of sudden and catastrophic collapse with the gradual process of degeneration. Thus, the Fall becomes a mundane 'slip'. Nonetheless, she acknowledges (and slightly parodies) our need for patterns of interpretation, concluding: 'Slipping - is Crashe's Law -' (Fr1010). Turning a crash into a 'Law' attributed to a fictional individual named 'Crashe' is a quip on the laws of physics used to explain the workings of the universe in a manner

equivalent to Providence or Design. Dickinson's speaker also conceives of dilapidation in terms of 'organized Decays', this organisation further reflecting (and again somewhat parodying) the need for interpretative patterns. The poem tracks shifting vocabularies, which map different intellectual orderings of the accidental process of decay; the spiritual 'Cobweb on the Soul' gives way to the corporeal 'Cuticle of Dust', which transmutes into the natural 'Borer in the Axis' and finally the scientific 'Elemental rust'. The idea of a moment where it all went wrong, the instant of failure, or Fall as it is known in Christian mythology, is a nonsense here: 'Fail in an instant, no man did'. But the need for hermeneutic structures, for a 'Law' or language which will render accident legible, remains intact.

The way in which accident immediately becomes subject to an organising hermeneutic has an ontological importance because it both reflects and shapes our way of being in the world. It is, to continue Dickinson's conceit, how we find our feet when understanding slips. By the nineteenth century, the religious hermeneutic that Dickinson expresses through the 'cobweb on the soul', the philosophic materialism which can be seen, in part, in the corporeal decay of a 'cuticle of dust', and the Reformation theology which encouraged Christians to read the Book of Nature had also passed through the Enlightenment. The 'Borer in the Axis' reflects the kind of intellectual curiosity which invests in the observation of natural phenomena as a primary site of new knowledge. Our way of being in the world was no longer rooted in the revelation of a divine plan but our own mental processes: our ability to form a hypothesis based on empirical evidence and act accordingly.

As Jane Eberwein notes, in Dickinson's century it was Darwin who was credited with overturning the received reading of the world. Eberwein recounts how, in an 1882 letter to Otis Philip Lord, Dickinson related the town gossip on the controversial Massachusetts politician, Benjamin F. Butler: 'Mrs Dr Stearns called to know if we didn't think it very shocking for Butler to "liken himself to his Redeemer"'. Dickinson commented rather archly to Lord: 'We [presumably herself and her sister] thought Darwin had thrown the Redeemer away.' (L, 750).³ Dickinson's jest is playful but it makes a serious point. Darwin's disruption, as she presents it here, is a hermeneutic one. Christ is not the Creator-God imperilled by evolutionary theories; he is the figure who, in Christian theology, gives that creation meaning by promising eternal life.

This essay reads several of Dickinson's Old Testament poems in a way that suggests her exegesis was not just concerned with epistemic limit, as scholarship to date has emphasised, but also with the ontological effects of biblical narrative and interpretation.⁴ 'Crumbling is not an instant's act' is, to some extent, an exegetical poem on Genesis 3: accidental processes are recovered from the myth of the Fall. But it is also a poem which confronts a desire to render slip-ups, and chance events, meaningful within world-ordering narratives. Moreover, the poem recognises that such narratological ordering reflects the shaping force of dominant worldviews and thus implicitly acknowledges that hermeneutic shifts are ontological shifts. Dickinson was well aware that the hermeneutics of existence were always involved with questions of its authorship. Milton declared God 'Author of this Universe' (*PL*, Book VIII, line 360) and Darwin was motivated at least partly by a sense that God could not be the author of all the cruelty and waste seen in the natural world.⁵ Recuperating accident from the myth of the Fall while

simultaneously acknowledging the long intellectual history of narratological re-ordering evinces an understanding that exegesis both reflects and shapes our way of being in the world.

As she turns from the narrative structures of Providence to the narrative structures of circumstance, Dickinson wonders about the ontological claims of poetic exegesis: the extent to which creative reading and writing might reconstruct the dominant exegetical discourse. One might theorise this as a version of what Hayden White, responding to Eric Auerbach, has called figural realism. White argues that: ‘if historical discourse is to be comprehended as productive of a certain kind of knowledge, it must first be analysed as a structure of language.’⁶ For White, therefore, figural methods of interpreting and ordering the world, which came to Dickinson through her religious heritage, become a way not just of reading, but also potentially reconfiguring, world-shaping discourse which for Dickinson definitely included, and arguably privileged, exegesis. To some extent Dickinson sets a reading of Genesis in which the world was authored by the forbidding structures of Divine dictat, the vertically positioned and strictly out of reach ‘Apple on the Tree’ (Fr310), against a reading in which the world might be poetically and subversively re-ordered by the errant structures of disobedience, desire and play. Yet there are also poems in which Dickinson imagines the poetic re-ordering of existence as just another pre-lapsarian fantasy. Ultimately, she finds it easier to satirise the Authoritarian Father-God than the forces of circumstance, which frequently press against the ontological claims of her revisionary poetic exegesis.

Errant Boys

Dickinson published only a handful of poems in her lifetime, most probably against her wishes, but when she died, she left a large group of manuscript poems in various stages of completion and, often, in variant versions, or with variant words recorded. Her sister, Lavinia, decided that these were Dickinson's letter to the world and should be published but the first publication of a selection of poems was rather delayed and hampered by a family quarrel and the manuscripts were split up. The first half of the twentieth century saw a number of selected editions and scores of new poems come to public attention but it was not until 1955 that the first three-volume Variorum edition was published, edited by T.H. Johnson, with all known variants. This was followed, in 1998, by R.W. Franklin's Variorum edition, which is now the standard scholarly reference. Johnson and Franklin both released one volume reading editions, more portable and affordable for the interested lay-reader, but the compromise was to exclude the wandering aesthetic that Dickinson made central to her practice.⁷

In a late poem, which Dickinson revised several times, this wandering aesthetic becomes central to the question of revisionary, poetic exegesis.⁸ The Bible, as it has been received over the course of history, appears both as an object of satire, antiquated, heavy and voluminous, and a foundational literary text.

Diagnosis of the Bible, by a Boy –

The Bible is an untold Volume

Written by unknown Men –

By the direction of hallowed Spectres –

Subjects – Bethlehem –

Genesis – Bethlehem’s Ancestor –

Satan – the Brigadier –

Judas – the first Defaulter –

David – the Troubadour –

Sin – a distinguished Precipice –

But I must desist –

Boys that believe – are very lonesome –

Other Boys – are lost –

Had but the Tale a thrilling Teller

All the Boys would come –

Orpheus’ sermon captivated

It did not condemn

(Fr1577)

The first line of this poem is often left out of reading editions of Dickinson’s poetry.⁹ But it sets the tone well: the wry introduction of the poem as biblical ‘Diagnosis’ offered by one of Dickinson’s more subversive faux-innocent alter-egos, is satirical. The poem can be read as an irreverent caricature of a text and a set of subjects Dickinson had been taught to treat with holy reverence and fear. Her juvenile speaker diagnoses many of the

problems Dickinson saw in the church; here, the Bible is variously out-of-touch, antiquated, judgmental, terrifying, and alienating. But the speaker himself is also a subject of affectionate satire. A later version of this poem was sent to a real and beloved boy (her nephew, Ned) who Dickinson may well have identified with the poem's speaker. The childish exegete is very sure of himself, as children often are, convinced that he has identified both problem and solution. He mimics as well as critiques the authoritarian tones of eminent biblical scholars. When her cheeky speaker throws his hands up and 'desist[s]' from his sport, as one might 'desist' from the 'precipice' of 'Sin', satire of the church and of biblical exegesis gives way to sympathy for the stories which might 'captivate' an audience. Dickinson's critique rests on the opening pun: she rescues the 'untold Volume' of stories, which may yet find its 'thrilling Teller' from the 'untold Volume' of heavy sermonizing she heard as a child.

The first stanza demonstrates a keen awareness of exegetical practice. Describing 'Genesis' as 'Bethlehem's ancestor' is typology viewed backwards. The characterization of Satan as a 'brigadier' pays homage to Milton and is a tacit acknowledgement of the way our reading of the Bible is shaped by the cultural myths and literary works which surround it. Dickinson extracts certain narratives and knowingly excludes others. Casting Judas as 'the great defaulter' is deliberately ironic; Judas fulfilled his public duty, but failed in his private commitments of friendship and loyalty. David, here, is not the warrior but the writer of psalms. 'Sin' is satirised as a predictable plot twist; the 'distinguished precipice'; the inevitable Fall.

Dickinson is also in dialogue with contemporary theories about biblical composition. The idea that the Old Testament was composed over three distinct historical

periods, rather than divinely revealed to Moses, culminated in the work of the late nineteenth-century scholar Julius Wellhausen, who synthesised a century of biblical enquiry into a working theory of biblical origins. In Dickinson's poem, current notions of biblical authorship are rendered questionable even as they are given some support. This version has the authors as 'unknown', countering the sure-footed tones of historical scholarship but also upholding the idea that the author was definitely not Moses (as earlier theories had maintained). Another version has them as 'faded'. Like the 'hallowed Spectres' at whose bidding they wrote, they may be falsely venerated ghosts or increasingly irrelevant relics of a past age.

Dickinson's library included a copy of William Jenks' *Companion to the Bible*, which reflected the debates on translation and authorship that changed biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century and drew attention to the Bible as a historical and material text.¹⁰ In 1867, Professor C.E. Stowe published his *Origin and History of the Books of the Bible*, which was reviewed in *The Atlantic Monthly*, to which the Dickinson family subscribed. The reviewer commented:

He [Stowe] brings into prominence a theory now held, we believe, by all the best biblical critics but not, we think, very familiar to the common mind, that the Bible is not an original record, but is made up of the fragments of Hebrew literature, going back to a remote and even to an unknown antiquity. This point will be recognised as one of singular interest and of great importance; especially in connection with the Old Testament.¹¹

For Jenks, Stowe and his reviewer, the primary concern was to arrive at the truest version of the Bible. Dickinson's scepticism towards the truth-claims of historical

scholarship bears comparison with those of her contemporary, the Transcendentalist minister, essayist and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson grew weary of the way contemporary Christianity ‘dwell[ed], with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus’ (emphasis added).¹² For Emerson, the emphasis on the historicity of the Bible suffered from an all-too-familiar dogmatism. As his Calvinist ancestors had insisted on the authenticity and subsequent authority of the Divine Word, so his contemporaries seemed to enforce their authority through the truth-claims of historical artefacts and people. Calling for a new age of ‘poet-priest[s]’, he united religious and poetic office.¹³ Dickinson was no Transcendentalist. But, like Emerson, she accepted, and to some extent internalised, the destabilisation of biblical authority. Like Emerson, she remained sceptical about the justifying claims of historical scholarship even as she accepted the Bible as a historically produced text.

Dickinson was clearly thinking about the character and qualities of storytelling when she wrote this poem because she included an astonishing thirteen variants for ‘thrilling’: ‘typic, hearty, bonnie, breathless, spacious, tropic, warbling (*written twice*), ardent, friendly, magic, pungent, winning, mellow’.¹⁴ While Cristanne Miller has recently suggested, rather persuasively, that Dickinson *did* make final decisions about the ways in which her poems should be read, this is a case where she seems to have struggled to decide, as she enumerates the messy and complex set of qualities she associated with her own craft.¹⁵ Words like ‘mellow’, ‘magic’, ‘friendly’ and ‘winning’ suggest a seductive approach to narration. Yet ‘magic’ is, in many ways, the opposite of ‘friendly’; it is ethereal and invisible rather than companionable and inviting. Perhaps Dickinson’s ‘magic’ teller is closer to her ‘breathless’ one. In Dickinson’s lexicon, ‘breathless’

suggests something unearthly and beyond mortality as well as something furiously racing with the life that 'hearty', 'bonnie' and 'and 'ardent' bring to the fore. This is significant not just because it seems to be a general celebration of exegesis as storytelling but also because it emphasizes the multiple ways in which the teller may shape the tale. In other words, in a poem in which she was clearly thinking about different kinds of voices and modes of reception, and in which her boy speaker both satirises the interpretation and moral codification of biblical texts and is affectionately satirised as another childishly over-confident exegete, Dickinson identifies exegesis as the very opposite of 'Diagnosis'; not something which uncovers meaning, but something which creates it.

This kind of playful thinking about biblical texts allows Dickinson to lampoon scriptural authority and undermine the trend towards historical scholarship. But it also makes a serious point: exegesis builds the stories that take on the currency of truth and create the fictions by which we live. Dickinson has an abiding interest in a kind of exegesis which rethinks biblical hierarchies and challenges accepted worldviews. The boy speaker introduces dynamics of power and playfulness which form a vital part of Dickinson's own reading of the Bible. Choosing a somewhat naughty boy, Dickinson adopts a voice that is both unfallen and profoundly transgressive; the boy is both an innocent and wicked creature. This is not a fetishized vision of the child as the oracle of truth but it does retain a Romantic idea of childhood as a trope through which to rehearse the disruptive reordering of the adult world.

As Hayden White writes, the troping of historical discourse both reflects and shapes our way of being in the world:

it is only by troping, rather than by logical deduction, that any given set of events that we would wish to call historical can be (first) *represented* as having the order of a chronicle; (second) *transformed* by emplotment into a story with identifiable beginning, middle and end phases; and (third) *constituted* as the subject of whatever formal arguments may be adduced to establish their “meaning” – cognitive, ethical or aesthetic as the case may be.¹⁶

In ‘The Bible is an untold Volume’, childhood belongs to the broader trope of errancy, which incorporates playfulness and poetry. The boy exegete has gone deliberately, and playfully, off course: he has chosen to be ‘lost’. He aligns himself with ‘Orpheus’, the legendary poet-prophet-musician of Greek mythology, who stands, here, as a figure of the creative exegete, whose narrative movements are lateral rather than linear. For, if ‘condemn[ation]’ is a top-down structure, ‘captiv[ation]’ suggests something more wayward and enticing: the pull of desire as opposed to the strictures of doctrine.

It is possible to argue, therefore, that Dickinson sets the trope of errancy against the trope of authority in this poem, and that the former is associated with childhood, playfulness, poetry and desire, and the latter with forbidding discipline and strict hierarchical order. In, ‘“Heaven”—is what I cannot reach!’, a poem in which Dickinson explicitly turns to the ontological effects of exegetical discourse, the spatial vertices of authority and errancy are clearly linked to moral codes.

“Heaven”—is what I cannot reach!

The Apple on the Tree—

Provided it do hopeless—hang—

That—“He aven” is—to Me!

The Color, on the Cruising Cloud—
The interdicted Land—
Behind the Hill—the House behind—
There—Paradise—is found!

Her teasing Purples—Afternoons—
The credulous—decoy—
Enamored—of the Conjuror—
That spurned us—Yesterday!

(Fr310)

Two discourses of ‘Heaven’ exist in this poem. In the first instance, there is the received notion. Dickinson places that discourse within the vertical structures and reported speech on which it relies. This is what she has been told to want and told she is not good enough to have. But the speaker’s desire dwells precisely in the pleasures of not having and so the authoritarian structure encodes its own undoing. Her speaker rejects the received notion of ‘Heaven’ in favour of a more personal, affective discourse of ‘Paradise’, which is framed in the language of erotic desire. This discourse turns away from the top-down narrative structures that uphold received worldviews. If the high-hanging apple on the tree imposes authorial control through prohibition, Dickinson’s speaker suggests a counter-narrative in the twin movements of errancy and desire.

The spatial dynamics of this poem confirm what is implicit in Orpheus’ captivating sermon: Dickinson imagined transgressive desire in lateral terms. In

describing tantalising pleasure, the speaker feels outward rather than upward. The ‘Cruising Cloud’ is low-lying, tinged by the seductive glow or ‘Teasing Purples’ of the afternoon sun. ‘The interdicted Land’ is positioned ‘behind’ not above the houses and hills. These horizontal movements are wandering and indulgent. There is every sense here that desire takes one off course. The supposedly *real* ‘Paradise’, mysteriously located in some hidden periphery turns out to be a ‘decoy’, something which distracts from a true purpose. This is both an errant quest and a quest which takes pleasure in errancy. Diverted from the reach upwards, Dickinson’s speaker discovers, in error, the pleasures of fiction. The ‘Conjuror’ bears comparison with the Orphic singer. Both captivate their audience with make-believe, ‘decoy[s]’, which in the very act of distraction, build narratives which take on the status of truth.

The narrative structures of errancy, which are divergent and distracted, are opposed to the narrative structures of God, which are ordered and commanding. Dickinson implicitly recognises the way in which narrative structures encode behaviours and hermeneutics of interpretation have ethical and ontological implications. Like the cheeky child who confidently claims to have ‘diagnos[ed]’ the Bible as a ‘tale’ in need of a ‘thrilling teller’, Dickinson suggests a subversive quality in exegesis which takes pleasure in errancy. It is subversive because it opposes the top-down authoritarian structures which ‘condemn’ rather than ‘captivate’. But it is also constructive because the distractions of a ‘decoy’, the lures of a ‘Conjuror’ and the seductive ‘thrill’ of the Orphic tale are acts of narratological re-ordering, which might change our way of being in the world. As the spatial narrative shifts from the vertical to the horizontal, the world ordered by prohibition gives way to one structured by desire. As a Fall poem, this sets the

seductive lateral pleasures of fiction which ‘captivate[s]’ against the controlling narrative structures of prohibition and ‘condemn[ation]’. But there is also a post-lapsarian knowingness in Dickinson’s writing which exposes the naïve fallibility of her speaker. Once spurned, that speaker should be twice shy. But she is still falling for the same fanciful story the next day.

It was partly Milton who taught Dickinson that the Fall could be construed as a fall into ‘fancy’: that errancy could be seen as human authorship, and that human authorship, with its capacity for equivocation, invention, and multi-directionality, becomes instrumental to the course of human history at the very point at which it becomes distanced from the Providential plan of the Father-God.¹⁷ Milton is clear that God is an author: ‘by His Word, the Mighty Father made / All things’ (*PL*, Book V, lines 836-7). The grammar and lineation are uncompromisingly direct: ‘Word, ...made / All things’. In this pre-lapsarian vision of language as a world-making tool, there is arguably no difference between word and thing. Were Ferdinand de Saussure to be parachuted into Milton’s garden, he would find no imaginative space between signifier and signified.¹⁸

If language is a world-making tool, world-changing narratives need new authors with new attitudes to language. Satan appears as the ‘Author of Evil’ when he leads the revolt in Heaven (*PL*, Book VI, line 262). Satan’s narrative movements are deliberately misleading and markedly different to God’s. He is ‘irresolute / Of thoughts’ and that convolution of mind and capacity for deception are reflected in his serpentine form: ‘He swiftly rolled / In tangles, and made intricate seem straight’ (*PL*, Book IX, lines 87-8 and lines 631-2). Lapsarian history is defined by ‘falsities and lies’ (*PL*, Book 1, line 367)

and, in contrast with the strict correlation between word and thing in Eden, Milton announces that the devils were 'known to men by various names' (*PL*, Book 1, line 374).

Like Milton, Dickinson saw the post-lapsarian garden as a site of duplicity, secrecy, and fiction-making, and she took a poet's pleasure in delightful words which do not lead directly to their sense. In a teenage letter to her friend, Abiah Root, written on the 12th January 1846, Dickinson jokingly dubbed herself 'Eve, alias Mrs Adam' (*L*, p.24). As marriage is a product of the fallen state, her playful name and its 'alias' bears testament to an identity founded in duplicity and deception. Milton's Eve finds that the diabolic gift of verbal fluency and the pleasure of inventing stories follows quickly upon the taste of the forbidden fruit: 'Greedily she ingorged without restraint ... Thus to herself she pleasingly began' (*PL*, Book IX, lines 791 and 794). Dickinson enjoys her identification with the first storyteller.

By contrast, Milton's pre-lapsarian Adam, who knows nothing of his own origins, and cannot fathom his own story, finds God's narrative 'readily' in his mouth:

But who I was, or where, or from what cause,
Knew not; to speak, I tried, and forthwith spake;
My tongue obeyed, and readily could name
Whate'er I saw. (Book VIII, lines 270-273)

Pre-lapsarian Adam intuits language directly from God: his act of naming reiterates and reinforces pre-ordained narrative structures. From the hierarchy of Heaven proceeds the status of man, who is granted dominion in a clear reflection of the celestial order.

Echoing the Divine Word, which orders the world by separating light from dark, earth

from sea and man from beast, Adamic naming creates a place for everything and keeps everything in its place (including man as inferior to God).

In one poem, Dickinson's speaker names herself 'Nobody' in a refusal of the Adamic tradition of naming and the Divine authorship it mimics. 'I'm Nobody' is most obviously read in relation to Dickinson's refusal to publish. Her denial of the name is a denial of the public sphere and the fixity that accompanies renown. Publicity, in this poem, is presented as tedious conformity, self-admiring narcissism and an absurd quest for social status. But another way of reading Dickinson's defence of her own secrecy is through the poem's subversive invocation of a Fall narrative in which the resistant naming of 'I'm Nobody' celebrates fanciful post-lapsarian language in which possibility remains open-ended, and sets it in opposition to the 'dreary' world of fixity in which one might be thought 'Somebody'. Just as Milton's God gives Adam dominion in Eden, publication confers a certain social status, but that status comes at the cost of a 'rigid interdiction' on narrative capability (Book V111, line 334).

Like the 'Boy' who diagnoses the Bible, Dickinson's child personae preserve the poet's difference from the rigid adult world of received wisdom, hierarchical status, and stale doctrine. Playful, errant, and conspiratorial, the poem delights in its subversion of top-down authority, publicity, and society.

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you – Nobody – too?

Then there's a pair of us!

Don't tell! They'd banish us – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell your name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

(Fr260)

The poem elides the difference between the adult world of publication and a world in which everything has a fixed and identifiable meaning; both are ‘dreary’, organized by hierarchies, prohibitions, and taboos. The nameless nobodies belong to the post-lapsarian landscape: a conspiratorial pair, whose indefinite names are an act of secret resistance. By contrast, the act of ‘say[ing] your name’, recalls both the social status and dominion Adam and Eve enjoyed in Eden, the fixed language Adam learned from God and the world of publication which Dickinson abhorred. Naming herself ‘Nobody’, Dickinson’s speaker celebrates errancy as the condition of meaning which is not fixed. As ‘Nobody’ she is unimportant, ordinary, a nonentity but also more important, extraordinary and a more powerful poetic entity than the pitifully ribbiting public ‘Frog’ or the sycophantic ‘admiring Bog’. Milton has Eve besotted with her own reflection; Dickinson’s twist is to darken the landscape. The ‘admiring Bog’ is an absurd and ignominious image of narcissistic self-love.

Dickinson’s colloquial ‘Don’t Tell! They’d banish us – you know!’ irreverently exploits the subversive implications of post-lapsarian concealment as she announces her refusal to publish. ‘Banish’ recalls the exile from Eden. Dickinson includes ‘advertise’ as a variant for ‘banish us’ (Thomas Johnson in fact chooses “advertise” for his reading edition). The world of advertising suggests a kind of promiscuity, in which public appeal

is the endgame. To ‘advertise’ Adam’s and Eve’s sin would also be to effect their banishment. So Dickinson’s speaker converts the sanctity of the pre-lapsarian garden to a post-lapsarian space of secrecy and errancy which allows for greater narrative possibilities than the adult, public world which lies outside of it. Post-lapsarian language, with its emphasis on multiplicity and secrecy, liberates her speaker from repetitive and formulaic utterances, absurd roles, and ridiculous expectations that define being grown up. Her reading of the Fall, here, debunks the mythology of sin and salvation as surely as it rejects the false judgments of a society which prizes status and reputation above all else. It celebrates childish transgressions as narrative possibility and associates pre-lapsarian language with the dull rigidity of renown. Naming herself ‘Nobody’, Dickinson’s speaker jovially asserts her authorial control, subverting the fixed narratives of God and man that are rendered equally absurd in the frog’s repetitive and narcissistic singing to his own muddied reflection.

When Dickinson turns to the story of Moses’s death, her conception of childhood as a trope through which to rehearse the disruptive reordering of the adult world is again in evidence. Here, as in the other poems I have discussed, it is part of a broader ontological connection between the spatial vertices of narrative construction and moral positioning.

It always felt to me - a wrong
To that Old Moses – done –
To let him see – the Canaan –
Without the entering –

And tho' in soberer moments –

No Moses there can be

I'm satisfied – the Romance

In point of injury –

Surpasses sharper stated –

Of Stephen – or of Paul –

For these – were only put to death –

While God's adroiter will

On Moses – seemed to fasten

With tantalizing Play -

As Boy – should deal with lesser Boy –

To prove ability –

The fault – was doubtless Israel's –

Myself – had banned the Tribes –

And ushered Grand Old Moses

In Pentateuchal Robes

Opon the Broad Possession

'Twas little – He should see –

Old Man on Nebo! Late as this –

My justice bleeds – for Thee!

(Fr521)

Drawing out the malignant force of ‘God’s adroiter will’ with her serpentine syntax, Dickinson levels a clear critique at the moral authority of Divine narrative. The bullying God contrasts with the sagacity of ‘Old Moses’, who is wrongly treated like a ‘lesser boy’ despite his age and wisdom. This pointed challenge to Divine authority sets the tone for Dickinson’s interrogation of ideas of power and leadership latent in the biblical text.

In the biblical source for this poem, the ‘tantalising play’ Dickinson perceives in the tale occurs when God takes Moses up from the plains of Moab to the mountain of Nebo and the top of Pisgah and says to him: ‘This is the land, which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying I will give it unto thy seed: I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither’ (Deut. 34.4). God then causes Moses to die while he is still in full health and buries him in an unknown grave:

So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of God. And he buried him in a valley, in the land of Bethpeor. But no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day. And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim nor his natural force abated.

(Deut. 34.5-7)

This is the ‘injury’ Dickinson perceives: God taunts and then murders Moses just as surely as Stephen and Paul are murdered.

In the fifth stanza, she points to a part of the story not told in Deuteronomy. Numbers 20 describes the reason for Moses’ punishment as a loss of faith, or a failure to listen to God. Dickinson, however, tells it another way, suggesting we blame the tribes of

Israel for turning against their leader. As the story is told in Numbers, the Israelites, starving, thirsty, and wandering hopelessly through the desert, berate Moses and Aaron for leading them away from Egypt where, though enslaved, they were at least fed and watered. Moses appeals to God for salvation, and God miraculously brings forth water from a rock. But then he issues Moses' sentence: 'Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them' (Numbers 20.12). So Moses listens to the suffering of his people. But he disbelieves God and, in Dickinson's view, is punished too harshly for it.

Unlike the biblical narrative, Dickinson's 'Romance' has a sentimental ending in which "justice bleeds" for Moses. The involuntary seepage of 'bleed[ing]' provides a sharp juxtaposition with God's narrative of power and control. If God has bullied and punished, Dickinson's speaker (after mimicking that display of power in her injunction to 'ban' the tribes) ultimately sides with the vulnerable and the dispossessed. She becomes a character in the Romance – part sentimental narrator, part affectionate fellow-sufferer, distrustful of God's juvenile stance and his self-aggrandizing need for control. In her sympathy for Moses, Dickinson elucidates the interrogation of leadership implicit in the dramatic irony of the biblical text. Moses arguably seals his own fate by being a better, more humane, and more just leader than God. The playground bully has no authorial command. He is transparently self-aggrandising and defensive.

Moses' untold story is reclaimed as a 'Romance' in which sin is revealed to be nothing more than humanity, Divine strength is satirized as a bullying inadequacy, and respected leadership is shown to involve compassion and an awareness of personal

limitation. The ultimate contrast between Dickinson's 'Justice' and God's is heightened by her inversion of the spatial dynamics of biblical language and power. Whereas God acts from above, smiting Moses for doubting his power, his defensive exertion of authority, which Dickinson parodies in 'bann[ing]', has no place in the end line, where she bleeds rather than bans. Her own weakness is foregrounded as valuable, aligning her with Moses, who asked for help, rather than with God, who denied it was needed. It is no coincidence that Moses is taken to the top of Mount Nebo, the highest ridge on Pisgah, to die. God raises him up in order to knock him down. Honoured and exalted by her elegiac forms of remembrance, Dickinson's 'late' song lifts him up and leaves him standing. Demoting Divine justice to playground bullying and undermining its form, Dickinson makes God a character in a story he does not control. He is no Miltonic 'Author of this universe' but a child in a tale about children with limited perspectives and aggravated tendencies.

And yet Dickinson also acknowledges the limits of elegy. Those 'soberer moments' are the ones when she is not caught up in the fiction of her own authorial control over a story which has already happened. Moses will not be revived by her interpretation. He might, perhaps, never even have existed. Rethinking hierarchies of power does not necessarily grant authorship over events even as it marks the ontological and ethical stakes of biblical hermeneutics.

Accidental Falls

The major nineteenth-century shift in the Fall narrative was from Providence to circumstance; from events which were always going to happen to events which just

happen. In ‘I am afraid to own a Body’, Dickinson’s resistance to Divine authorship marries with the narrative of circumstance in the image of the frontier. As Shira Wolosky has observed, this poem is rooted in the figural order and method of interpreting the world that came to Dickinson through her religious inheritance.¹⁹ The frontier is both limit and possibility. But here there is no-one to test the narrative, no Christ-like ‘Tender Pioneer’ (Fr727) to tread the path for the speaker to follow. It is not a stretch, I think, to see this poem about fear of ownership as, in some sense, being a poem about forms of authorship. As she sets Providence against circumstance and chance, Dickinson undermines the bold control of narrative that she assumes in ‘I’m Nobody’.

I am afraid to own a Body –

I am afraid to own a Soul –

Profound – precarious Property –

Possession, not optional –

Double Estate – entailed at pleasure

Upon an unsuspecting Heir –

Duke in a moment of Deathlessness

And God, for a Frontier.

(Fr1050)

The key to unlocking the exegetical meaning of this poem is found in Book X of *Paradise Lost*. Newly fallen, Milton’s Adam laments his disastrous condition: ‘Why am I

mocked with death, and lengthened out to deathless pain?’ (*PL*, Book X, line 756)

Milton’s Adam is disbelieving of his fate, accusing God of petty vengeance in much the same way Dickinson does in her portrayal of a playground bully:

Can he make a deathless death?

[...]

Will he draw out,

For anger’s sake, finite to infinite,

In punished man, to satisfy his rigor,

Satisfied never. (*PL*, Book X, lines 779-785)

Dickinson’s elusive and seemingly contradictory ‘moment of Deathlessness’ derives from Milton’s term for the condition of relentless misery Adam confronts after he falls. Death would bring relief in the form of finite ending but deathlessness forces a continual awareness of loss, limit and impotency. For Milton’s Adam, the sin which brought death into existence has disclosed the puppet-show of dominion in Eden and revealed him to be entirely at the mercy of God. Adam fears an excess of authorial control: a vengeful severity which allows him no ability to shape his own ends, no release from misery and suffering. Milton’s reflexive vocabulary drives the point home. The finite is undone by the infinite; the release of ending mocked by the unstoppable force of Divine anger.

Dickinson’s ‘moment’ heightens the frustrated loss of control which is inherent in the cultural myth of the Fall; the idea that there was *a moment* when it all went wrong, an instant when the spatio-temporal order of Paradise was put out of joint by the arrival of

death, a suddenness with which humanity was rudely displaced from the garden. Dickinson may also have drawn her language of entail from Milton. Milton's Adam announces himself 'disinherited' of posterity and subject to death 'in perpetuity' (*PL*, Book X, lines 802 and 794). Dickinson's Duke, like Milton's Adam, feels himself to be the 'unsuspecting heir' of a narrative he cannot control. For Milton's Adam, the duality of body and soul is thrust upon him with the fact of mortality: 'the spirit of man, which God inspired, cannot together perish / With this corporeal clod' (*PL*, Book X, lines 765-767). Dickinson's Duke, like Milton's Adam, faces this 'double estate' with a sense of powerlessness: 'Possession not optional'. As Wolosky notes, for Dickinson, the body, at least, also gestures towards more secular predetermined narratives: the gendered and social constraints of being in a body.²⁰ Wolosky also suggests that, for Dickinson, body and soul might also indicate the textual form of poetry. The idea of a narrative which is imposed and an ending over which one has no control recalls, for the poet who refused to publish, the auction house of publication. 'Possession' starts to read as a pun: to possess body and soul is also to be possessed by various narratives one does not own.

The rhythm of this poem, which runs together 'Duke in a moment of deathlessness' and asks us to pause after 'God', as if to think about what 'God' is, suggests a certain logic to reading 'God' as a 'frontier'. God locates epistemic limit, but here, the image of God as a frontier also speaks to the poem's concern with narrative structures. In Dickinson's lifetime, the frontier was associated with the Divinely authored narrative of manifest destiny. But the frontier also belongs to the conditions of history and circumstance. Frontier narratives are replete with accidents and chance encounters. The frontier became a symbol of human vulnerability: a physical and epistemological

threshold, beyond which lay unknown territories of savagery and wildness. Invoking the frontier, Dickinson implies an epistemological quest, but she also sets Providence against circumstance, suggesting, perhaps, that neither leave us much authorial control.

‘I am afraid to own a Body’ suggests that the deliberately silly, childish and playful poem in which Dickinson’s speaker rebelliously names herself ‘Nobody’ ironically occupies its own kind of pre-lapsarian fiction in its celebration of errancy and infancy as forms of authorial control. Like the boy who ‘Diagnos[es]’ the Bible, Dickinson’s ‘Nobody’ is sure that her disobedience is empowering. But, as she elides the difference between the narrative of Providence and the narrative of circumstance in the figure of God as a frontier, Dickinson implies that any claim to authorship is always pushing against narratives we don’t control. Like ‘Diagnosis of the Bible, by a Boy’ and ‘It always felt to me a wrong’, ‘I’m Nobody’ protects a space of childish play, an innocently wicked refusal to conform, as an arena in which to rehearse the potential disruption of the adult world of received exegetical wisdoms and rigid social hierarchies. By contrast, ‘I am afraid to own a Body’ is a coming of age story in which Dickinson’s Duke faces ‘Possession not optional’ just as Milton’s Adam feels ‘misery/ ... begun / Both in me, and without me’ as a narrative he cannot control (Book X, lines 791-3).

The keystone of Adam and Eve’s story is loss; its first chapter is grief. So, it is fitting that Dickinson begins her greatest Fall poem with a funeral, a moment of painful disruption and re-ordering. ‘I felt a funeral in my brain’ has not been read as a Fall poem but several critics have noted its religious relevance. Alike Barnstone sees it as part of Dickinson’s ‘revisionary theology of self-conversion’; Jane Eberwein recognises a ‘condition of emotional arrest’ which Dickinson derived, in part, from her Calvinist

heritage.²¹ Cristanne Miller observes that the aural qualities of this poem work by setting rising and falling rhythms against each other and notes an epistemological reflection in these sound patterns. The ending is anti-climactic; the moment of revelation occurs just before the predictable plunge of the fall 'down and down'. Thus, Miller describes the real breakthrough in consciousness as the moment of aural lingering in the fourth stanza in which 'Being' is 'But an Ear'.²²

Another way of thinking about that moment is in terms of horizontal levelling, when the vertical narrative of the Fall is suspended. In Dickinson's brilliant rendering of the Fall into knowledge as a Fall into unknowing, the vertiginous descent of the received exegetical reading is juxtaposed with moments of levelling awareness as she interrogates the processes of being and becoming while radically rethinking Milton's Providential worldview.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box

And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

(Fr340)

One way of reading this poem is as an allegory of the Fall, which is both deeply in tune with, and strongly resistant to, the narrative implicit in falling. Nowhere in Genesis are we told that Adam and Eve fall. That, like the apple, is part of the cultural mythology that surrounds the story. It is a mythology that Dickinson must have internalized but not one that blinded her to the narratives at work in the biblical text she knew so well. In the King James Version, the effect of eating from the Tree of Knowledge is not described as a downward fall but a breakthrough which suggests movement in quite a different direction: ‘And the eyes of them both were opened’ (Gen. 3.7). Adam and Eve do not fall away from God. Rather, for the first time, and perhaps the only time, they are level with

him: 'And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.'(Gen. 3.22)

Dickinson's interpretation of the Fall keenly deploys this narrative of levelling, for if "I felt a funeral" is a poem about the Fall into Knowledge, it is also a poem which resists falling and resists knowledge. The spatial dynamics turn on a tension between the vertical 'drop' and the horizontal 'to and fro'. The violent 'plunge' is marked by sudden moments of arrest. The heavy repetition of 'treading' and 'beating' agonizingly expands our sense of time. Dickinson's Fall is punctuated by the flattening experiences of pain and grief as her speaker comes to terms with the loss of a metaphysical worldview that grounded Being: the 'creak across' and the disorienting expanse of 'space' and 'solitary' 'wreck' of the third and fourth stanzas suspend and expand our sense of time and space. These levelling movements work against the downward trajectory to suggest the difficult process of becoming, an adjustment to the newly destabilized ontology of Being. The speaker is subject to a sickening verticality which ends with a deliberately ambiguous suspension of meaning and obfuscation of place: "And Finished knowing – then – ." The line can be read in two seemingly contradictory ways: it is both the beginning and the end of knowledge. The graphic silence of her characteristic dash and unfinished sentence spread outwards as the Fall plateaus. Dickinson's variant for 'Finished' is "Got through," a phrase that emphasizes her speaker's survival through a traumatic rupture of the old order of existence.

With the dissolution of the old order comes a new reality where the aesthetics of loss have a different role to play. The key change is at the end of the third stanza, when Dickinson's speaker tells us 'Space began to Toll'. As the sounding of the funeral Bell

consumes her Being, the claustrophobic live-burial gives way to a kind of agoraphobic isolation. Silence and difference accompany the speaker, whose articulations of being and becoming are partial and incomplete. As the 'plank in Reason' breaks, the speaker's descent into the grave is catapulted into freefall. There is no careful lowering of the coffin into the ground; the ceremony with which the funeral began is over. The community of mourners, with their measured 'tread' and mind-numbing 'sense' are left behind. There is a slapstick comedy to the scene which simultaneously pokes fun at their sombre efforts and mocks the expected narrative.

Knowledge, here, is not born of 'sense' or 'Reason' but the bruising realities of accident and chance. 'And hit a World, at every Plunge' is far from the controlled and stifling movements which open the poem. The enclosed funeral parlour has given way to a galactic setting of 'Space' and 'World[s]'. The 'Silence' and 'strange[ness]' of the shipwrecked 'I' (a pun perhaps on the eye-opening trauma of the Fall) recurs in the disorientation of the last line. Perhaps the most literal reading of this poem is that the speaker has fallen unconscious after a violent accident in which she has hit, and hurt, her head. There is a certain absence of knowledge at the end, a blanking out of sense and meaning, which is carried by this narrative. The Fall into Knowledge is, in that sense, conveyed as an abandonment of those forms of knowledge associated with stability and certainty, a dramatic shift in the worldviews which ground our 'Being' and govern our behaviour. But it is not a change born of sin, or part of a Providential history of salvation. It is an accidental slip.

Dickinson's presentation of the Fall as a traumatic rupturing of certainty, which is also a welcome release from the graveyard of 'sense' and 'Reason', forges an integral

connection between ontology and epistemology, or 'Being' and 'Knowing,' in the events of Genesis 3. The poem's resistance to falling, its arrests, plateaus, and eye- (or I-) opening expansions of the self, suggest that what interested Dickinson about the Fall here was the serendipitous narrative of accident and initiation. As such, the endpoint of the poem may not be one where the speaker has been separated from God but one where, cut adrift from 'sense' and 'Reason', she is on more level, but more uncertain, ground. The one certainty here is that forms of knowledge, the worldviews we hold and the narratives that convey them, ground our being. To rupture them may be as necessary and liberating as it is traumatic and terrifying. As Adam and Eve head into the uncertain territory east of Eden, so Dickinson's speaker 'finish[es]' in an unknown place which might be construed as the start of the story. The final 'then - ' both modifies the finish and suggests a continuation, echoing the narrative conjunction, 'And then', which opens the third stanza.

Towards the beginning of this essay I suggested that all exegesis is a selective and story-building activity and that Dickinson recognized it as such. While many of her contemporaries either forged a new way of being religious through poetry or turned to history to authenticate their exegetical narratives, Dickinson did not. As Dickinson invites us to encounter biblical narratives in her poetry, she directs us away from the 'untold Volume' of sermonizing or historicizing tales she encountered as a child and towards exegesis as a version of figural realism which both reflects and shapes our way of being in the world .

Her image of God as a capricious child is both of a form of criticism and identification as she, too, assumes the paradoxical voice of the errant, yet innocent, 'Boy' and celebrates a mischievous space of irresponsible play. The youthful space is levelling,

stripping God of his paternal authority and blurring the boundaries between innocence and wickedness. It is a trope through which the poet's narratives can pose a serious challenge to Divine justice and Providence. In her depiction of the Fall as a slip or trip, the ontological importance of accident, which is implicit in childhood blunders, comes to the fore. The lingering question is whether narratives of circumstance function that differently to the received narrative of Providence.

Dickinson implies that accidents can occasion a fundamental rupture of the nature of Being and its relation to forms of knowledge. The bump to the head which precipitates a shipwreck of the soul leaves Dickinson's speaker no more control over her processes of becoming than the double estate entailed at pleasure upon the unsuspecting heir who echoes Milton's fallen and despairing Adam. What circumstance removes is not the narratological ordering of accident (chance replaces design) but the consolation that comes with salvation theology: the Redeemer that Dickinson knows Darwin had not quite thrown away. The unsuspecting heir of body and soul does echo Milton's Adam but he is also a type of Christ promising.²³ With Providence, the ending is foretold: Adam's sin is redeemed by Christ's sacrifice. With circumstance, the ending is unknown. Dickinson makes a play for authorship in errancy, and her dialogue with Milton undercuts the authoritative trope of Providence. She realises that exegesis might build the fictions by which we live (and sometimes die) and so she lampoons the vertical structures of a narrative which 'condemns' with the 'captivat[ing]' distractions of playful poetics. But she also recognises that these received narratives are not the only limit on human authorship. In the face of circumstance, 'thrilling' tales and disobedient fictions may provide little more than a pre-lapsarian illusion of agency.

¹ R.W. Franklin ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), Poem Numbers: 340, 310, 373. Unless otherwise stated, all further references are to this edition, included in the text with the abbreviation Fr.

² Maurice S. Lee, *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism and Belief in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp.167-8.

³ Jane Donahue Eberwein, 'Outgrowing Genesis: Dickinson, Darwin and the Higher Criticism', in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy* ed. Jedd Deppman, Marianne Noble and Gary Lee Stonum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.47-68, p.47.

⁴ James McIntosh, *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), Jedd Deppman, *Trying to think with Emily Dickinson* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), Linda Freedman, *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Jane Donahue Eberwein, 'Outgrowing Genesis: Dickinson, Darwin and the Higher Criticism' in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, pp.47-68, Linda Freedman, 'Touching the Wounds: Emily Dickinson and Christology' in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, pp.68-85.

⁵ Neal C. Gillespie, *Charles Darwin and the Problem of Creation* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1979), cited in Eberwein, 'Outgrowing Genesis', *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, pp.47-68, p.58.

⁶ Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p.4.

⁷ The scholarly debate around the publication and editing of Dickinson's poems has a long and complicated history. For Franklin's early sense of this see: R.W. Franklin, *The Editing of Emily Dickinson* (Madison, Milwaukee and London, 1967). It is a tribute to the work done by scholars such as Virginia Jackson, Martha Nell Smith, Sharon Cameron and Marta Werner, that what constitutes a 'Dickinson poem' remains an open question for students of her work.

⁸ Franklin notes three (one lost) variant versions of this poem, written about 1882.

⁹ Johnson and Franklin both exclude the line from their reading editions and choose the later variant in which 'Untold' is replaced by 'Antique'.

¹⁰ Jenks' Commentary is available online in digitalised image reproduction <https://archive.org/details/comprehensivecom05jenk> (last accessed 31.07.2017). Dickinson's copy is in the Houghton Library, Harvard, Call No. EDR 458.

¹¹ The *Atlantic Monthly*, vol 21, issue 1 (Jan 1868):.123-7, 124. Available via *The Making of America* <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=atla;cc=atla;q1=stowe;rgn=full%20text;idno=atla0021-1;didno=atla0021-1;view=image;seq=0129;node=atla0021-1%3A17> (last accessed 31.07.2017)

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Divinity School Address', *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* ed. Slater, Spiller, Ferguson et al. 6 vols. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971-2003), vol.1, pp.76-93, p.82.

¹³ Emerson, 'Divinity School Address', p.84.

¹⁴ The thirteen alternatives for 'thrilling' appear in an extra stanza at the end of the earliest recorded version of this poem, written in pencil on a discarded bifolium of stationary and addressed to her sister, Vinnie, in an unidentified hand. R.W. Franklin ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3 vols., vol.3, p.1381.

¹⁵ Cristanne Miller ed., *Emily Dickinson's Poems as she Preserved Them* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2016)

¹⁶ White, *Figural Realism*, p.8.

¹⁷ As Adam and Eve gorge themselves on the forbidden fruit, Milton writes: 'As with new wine intoxicated both, / They swim in mirth, and fancy that they feel / Divinity inside them breeding wings, / Wherewith to scorn the earth' (*PL* Book IX, lines 1008-1010).

¹⁸ In his *First Course of Lectures on General Linguistics* (1907), Saussure identified the two components of the verbal sign as the sound-image (or signifier) and concept (or signified).

¹⁹ Shira Wolosky, 'Emily Dickinson: being in the body', *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.129-142, p.138.

²⁰ Wolosky, 'Emily Dickinson: being in a body', p.129-130.

²¹ Alik Barnstone, *Changing Rapture: Emily Dickinson's Poetic Development* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), p.75, Jane Donahue Eberwein, *Emily Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* (Full Ref), p.141.

²² Cristanne Miller, *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century* FULL REF, pp.39-42. Miller also observes that readers of this poem debate the extent to which the poem's funeral is metaphorical. It is interpreted variously as a poem about consciousness, death, a migraine and a psychic break but also as a poem which recalls a real funeral, possibly that of Frazer Stearns, who was killed in action in the Civil War (p.38).

²³ Linda Freedman, *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination*, pp.35-6.