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“I and the Bible”: The Ambiguous Structures in Emily Dickinson’s Religious Poems

Yumiko Koizumi

One of the difficulties when reading Emily Dickinson is related to the various kinds of omissions in her poems. Dickinson preserves a delicate balance between what is written and what is not. The content of the poems lies rather in what is not engraved than what is engraved. An unexpected surprise comes from such a reversible structure which allows diametrically opposed ideas to coexist in a single poem.

“Water, is taught by thirst” (Fr 93/ J 135) is one of many poems, early and late, that takes up the theme of redemption, and holds the ambiguous structures. In her religious poems on the idea of redemption, her belief in immortality is transmitted in secret code rather than straightforward statements:

Water, is taught by thirst.
Land - by the Oceans passed.
Transport - by three 
Peace - by its battles told 
Love, by memorial mold 
Birds, by the snow.

The syntactic ellipses help us to imagine what is missing, which gives us a clue in deciphering the Dickinson code. Words are deliberately left out of a line, though supposedly the meaning can still be understood. In addition, these ellipses attract our attention to two nouns above all. Then they allow us to imagine freely what brings the two images together. Because of these syntactic omissions, the two words are simultaneously brought together to illuminate two landscapes of absence, two ideas and two personally associated metaphors.

Margaret Homans is one of the few critics who point out “the qualitative differences among the six pairs” (141). Although Homans realizes the unique quality of the third line, “Transport - by three ,” she does not give us a clear explanation why it is “nonsensical.” Moreover, the critic does not explicate the difference between the first and last line in meaning, simply because she assumes that they “refer to simple and remediable absences: thirst teaches the value of water, winter teaches us to miss the birds” (141). Betrayed by the deceptively similar surface, Homans fails to see the crucial difference between the initial and final line.
Sherri Williams also emphasizes an exception in the poem twice:

Except for the third line of the first poem, “Transport - by throe - ” which is the most obvious leap from the language of the first to the language of the second, poem number 135 uses the passive tense and unambiguous language to examine what I have already described as their common theme: the “instructional value of reality.” Again, except for that third line, the language of the first poem is quite straightforward and descriptive. (29)

Williams' rather obsessive concern with the third line as well as Homans' illuminates the point: the third line has an irregular pattern, signaling the poet's major message. “Water, is taught by thirst” seems to demonstrate Dickinson's application of the Christian doctrine of compensation using the Christian paradox. The first two lines introduce the idea of compensation, in that thirst teaches you the taste of water followed by the supporting example. Compare the first two pairs with the third line, “Transport - by throe -.” It catches our attention being the shortest line with a different meter in the odd numbered line. Bruce Hayes and Margaret MacEachern in “Quatrain Form in English Folk Verse,” label this kind of verse irregular after examining the extensive data. The third line deviates from the norm; an odd numbered line should not be shorter than an even numbered line. Dickinson's intentional deviation from the norm signals the significance of the line. Furthermore, the combination of "Transport" and “throe” strikes us as strange compared with other pairs. The two terms are rather abstract and ambiguous in contrast with other concrete nouns employed in the poem.

Among Dickinson's poems, “Transport” in five other poems (Fr199/J207, Fr146/ J148, Fr148/J984, Fr369/J499, Fr192/J984, Fr1438/J1413), is closely associated with “throe” to imply the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The transportation involved in people going from earth to heaven has to be achieved by severe pain. The transporting anguish is juxtaposed upon the passion of Christ.

Shira Wolosky is one of a very few critics who has applied a thodicean structure to the interpretation of Dickinson's war poetry. Wolosky summarizes Dickinson's vision of redemption in terms of her employment of a theodicean structure:

The justification of loss by gain is essentially a theodicean structure. And, if a positive interpretation can be given to a negative fact, a theodicy is accomplished. In Dickinson's work, although such structures are consistently invoked, they are rarely accomplished or fulfilled. Instead, a disjunction between loss and gain, an inversion of the terms, or a defeat of gain by loss occurs. (36-7)
Throughout Dickinson's work, writes Wolosky, “Dickinson repeatedly balances the one against the other, in an effort to determine whether there is indeed some gain in loss, serving to sanction and redeem it.” (36) Dickinson does not affirm grace as suffering's compensation. Sacrifice and redemption are not related concepts for her.

Although the six pairs appear the same on the surface since they have the same sentence structure, they are essentially different. There is a great gap between the first four lines and the last two lines concerning the Christian dogma of redemption.

The traditional interpretation of the Christian idea is set against Dickinson's radical belief in such earthly things as birds, flowers, and snow. The first four lines consist of conventional metaphors of antithesis and are synonymous parallels. In the last two lines, however, the relationship between the first term and the second is not quite antithetical, the two nouns are indirectly connected. What is more, the order of the first noun and the second is inversed. The living memory of “Love” and “Birds” on earth is not directly associated with the landscape of absences as in “memorial mold” and “the snow,” but are personally associated images.

“Water, is taught by thirst” and is end-focused. The emphasis is thus placed on the second noun. “Thirst” is required to comprehend the taste of water. The second noun signifies that the initial experience is to be encountered in order to appreciate the state of satisfaction. In other words, only through suffering, can we attain a future glory. The second noun represents a prerequisite to achieve success.

Dickinson draws the same analogy in several other poems to illustrate the Puritan ethics of sublimating pain into joy:

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To learn the Transport by the Pain -
As Blind Men learn the sun !
To die of thirst - suspecting
That Brooks in Meadows run! (Fr178/ J167)
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“Thirst” is one of the final words expressed by Christ on the cross just before his death (John 19:28). Dickinson dramatizes this very moment of a dying person moaning for a drink in several poems. The cultural association between the two words is strong and deeply connected with the Puritan doctrine of compensation:

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Who never lost, are unprepared
A Coronet to find!
Who never thirsted
Flagons, and Cooling Tamarind! (Fr136/ J73)
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It is apparent that the poet's philosophy of this world poverty, deprivation, or destitution is based on the Christian paradoxes of the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:2 - 12): “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Mt. 5:6).

We thirst at first - 'tis Nature's Act -
And later - when we die -
A little Water supplicate -
Of fingers going by -

It intimates the finer want -
Whose adequate supply
Is that Great Water in the West -
Termed Immortality - (Fr750/ J726)

Behind the Christian formula lies “that Great Water in the West - / Termed Immortality - .” Those who thirst for spiritual wells have “the finer want” in “a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14).

The Christian idea of redemption is crystallized in the third line: “Transport - by throe - .” Compared with the first two pairs, the third line catches our attention. Homans describes the distinctive feature of the third line as follows:

But to group with these innocuous forms of relativism “Transport - by throe - ” is overtly bitter. Though the speaker seems to miss its power, the bland context makes the line stand out for the reader: it is not just different, but nonsensical too. (141)

Although Homans comments on the uniqueness of line 3, she does not mention any definite reasons for its being “nonsensical.” Moreover, she does not see any qualitative difference between the first two lines and the third line. She fails to see a thodicean structure behind the third line, because she does not apply the Christian interpretation to that idiosyncratic line. The theological background behind the third line illuminates the poet's deliberate intention of placing an awkward line at the odd numbered line and determines the meaning of the first four lines.

Redemption is closely associated with the death of Jesus Christ on the cross: “even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). Only through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, can man be redeemed. Admitting one's sinful nature and accepting Christ's sacrifice are what Christians are required. The first nouns in the first four
lines are concerned with a world of heaven represented by these concrete images such as “Water,” “Land,” “Transport,” and “Peace,” while the second set of nouns suggest the great hardships that must be overcome in order to get to heaven. The first line introduces a typical formula of redemption followed by the supporting line. Then the third line crystallizes Dickinson’s interpretation of the traditional dogma. The fourth line summarizes the Puritan world view of peace in heaven contrasted with the battles on earth.

The last two lines, however, are placed against the Puritan ethics to deny earthly experiences of love, changing its focus from heaven to earth. The syntactic ellipses help us to imagine what is common between “Love” and “Birds.” The second group of nouns in the first four lines in the poem represent indispensable prerequisites to achieve a future glory in heaven, while the ones in the later part presuppose that we have lived on earth. The phrase “memorial mold” presupposes that we have experienced love on earth. The absence of birds in the snow presupposes their former presence in spring. “Love” and “birds” leave this earth, but at the same time “memorial mold” and “the snow” remain forever to be remembered in our minds as tokens of immortality. Thus, “the gift of mortality, which, too gigantic to comprehend, certainly cannot be estimated” (L 524).

One of Dickinson’s letters to Susan explicitly conveys that only the power of love transforms a loss into gain: “To miss you, Sue, is power. The stimulus of Loss makes most Possession mean. To live lasts always, but to love is firmer than to live” (L 364). The power of love which enables us to see “Birds” in winter or the loved one after death, reaffirms that “Dying dispels nothing which was firm before” (L 523).

When Dickinson sent a letter with a flower, she assured her friend that “it (a flower) lived”:

I send you a flower from my garden - Though it die in reaching you, you will know it lived, when it left my hand -  (L 512)

If humans lived firmly on earth, we could avenge our sorrow. Dickinson praises the immortality of flowers, resenting the idea of redemption: “The immortality of Flowers must enrich our own, and we certainly should resent a Redemption that excluded them -” (L 528). “The immortality of Flowers” represented by dried flowers is shown through the proof of their precious and full lives. Instead of seeking for comfort in heaven, the poet suggests another way to reach a heaven on earth.

Elsewhere Judith Farr elucidates the significance of snow in Dickinson's poems in The Gardens of Emily Dickinson: “for gardeners realize that without snow and frost, without dying and moldering in the soil, perennials cannot produce new growth” (273), and concludes that winter “provided time to replenish the 'Mile' of imagination” (272). On the other hand, L. Edwin Folsom reveals the reason for the absence of winter poems compared with the abundant number of summer poems: “Winter for Dickinson is the season that forces reality, that strips all hope of transcendence. It is
a season of death and a metaphor for death” (363). On top of that, “the snow” holds a cryptic meaning in Dickinson's poems, because it is associated with “Uniforms of Snow” in “Revelation” (Rev. 7-9). In addition, we may equate “the snow” with her very soul, her poetry. In one of her letters to Samuel Bowles, she writes “If you doubted my Snow - for a moment - you never will - again - I know” (L 251), reminding him that he would never be skeptical about her heart.

The same Christian formula is obsessively repeated in “I should have been too glad, I see” (Fr283/ J313):

Defeat whets Victory - they say -
The Reefs in Old Gethsemane
Endear the Shore beyond -
'Tis Beggards - Banquets best define -
'Tis Thristing - vitalizes Wine -
Faith bleats to understand -

Daniel B. Shea, Jr. regards Dickinson's definition of Christian doctrine as “tragic” according to the patterns of Puritan spiritual autobiography. He argues against Richard Wilbur's interpretation of Dickinson's “turning experience of defeat into gains for consciousness; pain and perception are intimately associated in the tragic economy of loss” (262). He concludes that “there is no definitive Emily Dickinson poem, no structural point in her gathered writing at which one can say that here, crimactically, vision outruns suffering” (262). Shea is right in clarifying the Puritan influence in Dickinson's poems but fails to see through the reversible structure of Dickinson's other poems. Dickinson tends to write her religious poems in code, especially the poems on the idea of redemption.

“Success is counted sweetest” (Fr112/ J67) is another example in which Dickinson's idea of redemption is expressed in secret code:

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory
As he defeated - dying -
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

The paradoxical message delivered in the first stanza is concerned with Christian dogma: the “sor- est need” is a prerequisite for success. Because of the erratic stanza break and the comparative structure, the line “he defeated - dying -” catches the reader’s eye. Brenda Murphy in “Emily Dickinson's Use of Definition by Antithesis” maintains that “he defeated - dying -” is its focus compared with the other philosophical thematic statement. “He” is finally capitalized in the final version of Dickinson's manuscript.

Semantically, certain synonyms exist between the first stanza and the last two stanzas in order to draw the parallel structure. “Success” is synonymous with “Victory” and “triumph.” “Those who ne'er succeed” in the first stanza corresponds with the content of the line “he - defeated - dying.” Dickinson's poem does not follow parallel manners of expression in the last two stanzas. The crucial difference in meaning is that Dickinson's poem focuses on the aspect of suffering alone, because the parallel lines of the concluding parts are omitted in the last eight lines. These deliberate omissions make his agony and thirst stand out without any implication of salvation.

Dickinson dramatizes the moment of Jesus Christ's death without touching upon the possibility of resurrection. Although Richard Wilber mentions that “defeat and death are attended by an increase of awareness and material loss has led to spiritual gain” (41), this is not a valid reading in relation to salvation.

Dickinson's idea of redemption on her terms culminates in “Ample make this Bed” (Fr804/ J829):

Ample make this Bed -
Make this Bed with Awe -
In it wait till Judgment break
Excellent and Fair.

Be its Mattress straight -
Be its Pillow round -
Let no Sunrise’ yellow noise
Interrupt this Ground -
The lyric starts with an imperative sentence whimsically in terms of bed making. Instead of asking the reader to pull the sheets and blankets neatly into place, the only piece of advice the speaker does is to make "this Bed" ample, not someone's bed, but exactly "this Bed." The speaker encourages the reader to make this bed, to seize the day on earth.

The meter moves with a steady regularity, interrupted by elided syllables at the beginning and end of every line all through the poem. As a result of this, each word is stressed and paused. The first word of every line ends with an accented word. The pattern of each stanza is that of common measure, all but the last of the rhymes imperfect. The final agreement lends a note of resolution, of certainty, even perhaps of satisfaction in the final moment of entrance into her kingdom of heavenly life.

According to Fordyce R. Bennett in *A Reference Guide to the Bible in Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, "Ample Make this Bed -" refers to the Last Judgment, and includes several biblical references in the poem. He might be right in saying that "the 'great day of God Almighty' is spoken of metaphorically as an 'Excellent' and 'Fair' daybreak which parallels as well the 'true and righteous' judgments of God" (237).

The determiner "this" signifies not only being closer in time and distance but also psychological closeness. Dickinson thrice uses "this" to put an emphasis on the bed on earth in comparison with the one in heaven. Dickinson employs the same determiner in the first line and the second, and most importantly, in the last line, to leave us with a deep impression of "this Ground" rather than a promising heaven.

"This Bed" symbolizes both life and death through its implication of earth and heaven. The poem, starting with this particular bed, ends with an expanded vision of "this Ground." The metaphor of bed-making suggests that we have to make our beds properly, in either case, in order to lie in them.

It is clear that the longest third line of each stanza gives a note of awe or a quality of determination to the whole. The slower, heavily stressed lines transmit each word with equal stress. The unaccented syllables elided show that some sounds have deliberately been left out of a sentence, though the sound can be echoed.

Alternating the iambic trimeter and iambic tetramer, the longest third line delivers the most complex of messages. The third line in the first stanza "In it, wait till Judgment break" includes the key word "Judgment." You must accept the final day, "the day of judgment the time after death when everyone is judged by God for what they have done in life" (*Webster*). Live full life and wait till dawn breaks with awe.

The second stanza starts with the detailed instruction of bed-making: "Be its Mattress straight - / Be its Pillow round" to get ready for the very moment. However, the last two lines hold rather
ambiguous messages:

Let no Sunrise' yellow noise
Interrupt this Ground -

In Dickinson's poems, the color "yellow" is rarely associated with sunrise. On the other hand, the color has a strong association with sunset. Yellow is such a special color for the poet:

Nature rarer uses Yellow
Than another Hue.-
Saves she all of that for Sunsets
Prodigal of Blue (Fr1086/ J1045)

Yellow is the color to represent “Sunset on the Dawn” (Fr427/ J415). Sunrise symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this poem, however, the image of sunrise has a negative connotation because of its combination of “yellow” and “noise.” The speaker chooses to stay in this ample bed rather than to be awakened by “Sunrise’ yellow noise.”

We have seen some of the ambiguous structures in Emily Dickinson's religious poems, which simultaneously deliver contradictory messages. Many critics have noticed that her faith in poems, beginning with an orthodox image, is finally expressed in a most unorthodox way with little definite reason. My paper has demonstrated some of the reasons why Dickinson reverses the meaning of orthodox images and how she manages to reverse them, technically. Her refusal of accepting the Calvinistic doctrine of redemption and her own belief in immortality are her major stream of thought.

Dickinson employs three major techniques, the deliberate omission of concluding lines, inversion of nouns, and trochaic inversions of line medial and final positions. By means of these three techniques, she expresses her belief in a divinity residing in mortals: “To be human is more than to be divine, for when Christ was divine, he was uncontented till he had been human (L519). Instead of asking for salvation, the poet gradually suggests that it is better to “let Redemption find you” (L522).
Works Cited


