

# The Paradox of Heaven in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

by

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Emily Dickinson's vision of heaven unveils multiple paradoxical dimensions suggesting the poet's profound imaginative experiences. The question what is heaven has been a central issue for Dickinson throughout her life, and she persistently struggled to grasp the true nature of heaven. However, since heaven appeared kaleidoscopic with its "different signs" (575),<sup>1</sup> it was not easy for her to perceive the essence of them. In one poem Dickinson's persona says, "The Heaven hath a Hell—" (459) in a strain of Blakean paradox, signifying a fundamental ambiguity intrinsic in heaven. Moreover, many of Dickinson's heaven-related poems reveal apparent contradictions or paradoxes.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I wish to suggest that in many ways and on many levels Dickinson depends upon paradox to understand the nature of heaven and the universe and that this is a very crucial point of her art and vision. It has been generally recognized that Dickinson's ambiguities derive from her terse poetic language expressing the metaphysical and mysterious, and it has also been thought or assumed that they are often generated by the disunity inherent in her poetry.<sup>3</sup> Yet I think that her poetry apparently shows her attempts to resolve the ambiguities and synthesize oppositions by means of paradox. Her vision of heaven is, as I will argue, fundamentally paradoxical; and only by paradox can it be rightly explained.

A remarkably frequent and persistent phenomenon in Dickinson's

poetry is her presentation of opposed or contradictory suggestions. Poems 248 and 431, for example, offer an interesting contrast. In the former poem the speaker is being expelled from heaven and implores angels to reconsider his expulsion:

Why—do they shut Me out of Heaven?  
Did I sing—too loud?  
But— I can say a little “Minor”  
Timid as a Bird!

Wouldn't the Angels try me—  
Just—once—more—  
Just—see—if I troubled them—  
But don't—shut the door!

Oh, if I—were the Gentleman  
In the “White Robe”—  
And they—were the little Hand—that knocked—  
Could—I—forbid?

“Minor” in the first stanza suggests two meanings: minor in the sense of musical tone, and minor in a biblical sense that only the humble could enter heaven, as “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew, 18: 4). Dickinson reveals an analogous idea in poem 964, in which Christ says to a timid persona, “‘The Least / Is esteemed in Heaven the Chiefest— / Occupy my House’—.” Dickinson frequently employs and converts theological doctrines to express her personal voice. In the poem above, the speaker, wishing for his admission into heaven, putatively replaces positions with angels and asserts that he would be more merciful to the expelled. The “Gentleman” in the “White Robe,” signifying purity, suggests Christ or a saint; and the “little Hand,” used as a synecdoche, alludes to the weak or expelled.

While the above poem describes an expulsion from heaven, poem 431 shows a remarkably different heaven. It presents a joyful and

welcoming heaven, at whose threshold a speaker now stands:

Me—come! My dazzled face  
In such a shining place!  
Me—hear! My foreign Ear  
The sounds of Welcome—there!

The Saints forget  
Our bashful feet—

My Holiday, shall be  
That They—remember me—  
My Paradise—the fame  
That They—pronounce my name—

The speaker's face being illuminated by the light of heaven, he hears the sound of welcome; and the saints seem friendly. The words "dazzled," "foreign," and "bashful" indicate his confusion in heaven, but he is at least welcomed. In the last stanza, looking back on his sojourn in heaven,<sup>4</sup> he feels and hopes that the saints will continue to remember him. Besides, heaven here is revealed within time and space, not beyond death.<sup>5</sup>

From the above analyses, one can know that Dickinson's heaven fundamentally contains contradictory elements—fear and expectation, doubt and hope. Importantly, these elements suggest Dickinson's ambiguous feelings and views toward heaven. Dickinson's heaven is not synonymous with a conventional heaven, and strikingly it contains various symbolic aspects. Dickinson imagines that heaven may have "changed" in accordance with the progress of science and time (70) and that divine promises may be reneged with "unexpected Friends" found there (1180). Also, heaven "beguiles the tired" (121), seems to "decoy" (239), and appears predatory with its "marauding Hand" (1205). It can be the "House of Supposition" (696), "a Prison" (947), and "a Cell" (1594). Furthermore, it is "of the option" (1069), and "Too much of Proof affronts Belief" (1228) in it. The list could be extended almost

indefinitely,<sup>6</sup> but the point is that Dickinson's heaven shows various, often contrary, features.

Probably the most important aspect of her heaven poems is the fact that they represent Dickinson's inner conflicts between rational and irrational (intuitive) and between personal and conventional understandings of heaven. While struggling to understand heaven in rational terms, she feels that intuition is also necessary to perceive it; therefore she fuses rational and intuitive power. Also, Dickinson feels that conventional theology is too rigid to fit her understanding of heaven, and subsequently expresses her views and feelings unbounded by the conventionalities. That is, though Dickinson writes poetry by using elements of Christian heritage, she has her own vision of heaven, a heaven forged by the imaginative unity of art and religion. Obviously, her heaven is highly characterized by her personal view of life and the intellectual and emotional range of her experiences. Dickinson's heaven presents hard-to-reconcile views, such as longing and doubt, hope and despair, which cause dissonance in her poetry. Gelpi astutely points out the ambivalent nature of Dickinson's mind: "The complexity of her mind is not the complexity of harmony but that of dissonance."<sup>7</sup> This dissonance of course contributes to creating irony in her poetry.

In the following poem, the mysterious and ambivalent nature of heaven is adumbrated, and the overall message is very ironical:

It knew no Medicine—  
It was not Sickness—then—  
Nor any need of Surgery—  
And therefore—'twas not Pain—

It moved away the Cheeks—  
A Dimple at a time—  
And left the Profile—plainer—  
And in the place of Bloom

It left the little Tint

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That never had a Name—  
You've seen it on a Cast's face—  
Was Paradise—to blame—

If momentarily ajar—  
Temerity—drew near—  
And sickened—ever afterward  
For Somewhat that it saw?

(559)

“It” is used seven times, but its individual meaning is vague: it could be a soul death, a dead man, or all of these. First, “It” was somehow hurt, but not from sickness nor pain. Next, “It” seems to suggest death, which deprives the cheeks of dimples and leaves the “Profile,” a man, in the “place of Bloom,” a coffin. It also leaves the “little Tint,” which can not be identified but be seen on “a Cast’s face,” implicitly suggesting a dying man’s face. The last stanza questions if Paradise is to blame for causing some kind of sickness. With temerity “it” glances into Paradise and becomes sick, but what is the sickening reality of Paradise? This poem does not reveal an answer and leaves it ambiguous. However, this poem ironically displays Dickinson’s ineffable doubt about the nature of heaven. It also communicates her scary feeling toward heaven.

Although Dickinson’s skepticism toward heaven is one of the sources of her poetical imagination, she recognizes that she can not efface her doubt by any means and that it puts her into constant unrest. Subsequently, she attempts to find a solution to resolve or at least mitigate her doubt. Ultimately, she recognizes that doubt is faith.<sup>8</sup> This absolute paradox is one of the most important dimensions of her poetry. In the following poem this point is precisely illustrated:

A Tooth upon Our Peace  
The Peace cannot deface—  
Then Wherefore be the Tooth?  
To vitalize the Grace—

The Heaven hath a Hell—  
Itself to signalize—  
And every sign before the Place  
Is Gilt with Sacrifice

(459)

“A Tooth” symbolizes doubt or anxiety, evident from a similar usage of the word in another poem: “Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul—” (501). Doubt gnaws at Dickinson’s mind and undermines her faith in heaven. Nevertheless, she attempts to scrutinize the basis of doubt and comes to realize that doubt paradoxically serves “To vitalize the Grace—.” The fact that doubt intensifies grace is the most crucial dimension of Dickinson’s poetic vision. Dickinson suggests in a paradoxical note that heaven could be apprehended by hell, implying that pain and suffering might be the best guarantee to attain heaven. She insists that the road to heaven consists not of primroses but of sacrifice.

The paradox that doubt is faith can be rhetorically called an oxymoron. According to Karl Keller, “the oxymoron served as the main structure for Dickinson’s sense of the indecipherable ambiguity of existence.”<sup>9</sup> Dickinson frequently utilizes oxymoron to express the ambiguous nature of heaven; for example, “Earth is Heaven” (1408), “the uncertain certainty” (1411), “Finite infinity” (1695). In general, the oxymoron involves a high degree of conceptual and stylistic antithesis and a compulsion to fuse disparate or opposed elements into unities. In particular, its validity for Dickinson is intellectual. William R. Sherwood says that Dickinson’s “concern with heaven is intellectual rather than moral; it is a place to be discovered rather than earned.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, I think that Dickinson’s concern with heaven is also highly emotional, as this study will presently show in the discussion of ecstasy.

Although Dickinson consistently searches for the certainty of heaven, her doubt is so pervasive that she often tries to be satisfied with earthly happiness, excluding the possibility of the existence of celestial

heaven. It is a difficult and trying selection, as the following poem displays:

Their Height in Heaven comforts not—  
Their Glory—nought to me—  
'T was best imperfect—as it was—  
I'm finite—I can't see—

The House of Supposition—  
The Glimmering Frontier that  
Skirts the Acres of Perhaps—  
To Me—shows insecure—

The Wealth I had—contented me—  
If 'twas a meaner size—  
Then I had counted it until  
It pleased my narrow Eyes—

Better than larger values—  
That show however true—  
This timid life of Evidence  
Keeps pleading—"I don't know."

(696)

The value of heaven is incomprehensible to the speaker who is finite and therefore cannot perceive it. Human nature is imperfect and incapable of ascertaining the existence of heaven, and the speaker thinks that heaven may be just the "House of Supposition" and the "Acres of Perhaps." He feels that he can be satisfied with his earthly wealth, however it may be in "meaner size." He asserts that his present wealth is better than heavenly wealth should the latter exist. However small and mean, the actual life of evidence on earth is more valuable for him. However, the last line indicates the speaker's ambivalent feeling toward heaven: as "pleading" implies, he cannot entirely renounce his longing for heaven.

Dickinson endeavors to acquire the evidence of heaven or at least to know its location. Where does the soul fly? Does eternity really

exist? Is heaven in the skies, or on the earth, or somewhere else?  
These are the questions which have concerned her most:

We pray—to Heaven—  
We prate—of Heaven—  
Relate—when Neighbors die—  
At what o'clock to Heaven—they fled—  
Who saw them—Wherefore fly?

Is Heaven a Place—a Sky—a Tree?  
Location's narrow way is for Ourselves—  
Unto the Dead  
There's no Geography—

But State—Endowal—Focus—  
Where—Omnipresence—fly?

(489)

Customarily people believe that the soul goes to heaven after quitting its earthly life; yet Dickinson wonders if it is really true and, if so, where it flies. Dickinson places a mild sarcasm upon the optimistic view people tend to have pertaining to invisible heaven.

Dickinson's concept of heaven is dualistic: celestial and earthly. As regards celestial heaven, symbols, such as noon, are often used to represent it: "Where tired Children placid sleep / Thro' Centuries of noon / This place is Bliss—this town is Heaven—" (112). Most often, however, heaven is so elusive and difficult to apprehend that Dickinson utters a painful cry: "I know not which thy chamber is— / I'm knocking—everywhere—" (502). Because of constant failures in comprehending celestial heaven, Dickinson instead attempts to realize heaven on earth:

Going to Heaven!  
How dim it sounds!  
.....

I'm glad I don't believe it



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For it would stop my breath—  
And I'd like to look a little more  
At such a curious Earth! (79)

Or in another poem Dickinson apparently shows attachment to earthly heaven:

Which is best? Heaven—  
Or only Heaven to come  
With that old Codicil of Doubt?  
I cannot help esteem

The "Bird within the Hand"  
Superior to the one  
The "Bush" may yield me  
Or may not  
Too late to choose again. (1012)

The meaning of this poem is too obvious. Since it is impossible to know whether celestial heaven surely exists, what is best is to enjoy present terrestrial happiness. It would not be too wise to await until the last moment the equivocal revelation of heavenly glory, which may not occur, and lose the earthly wealth. This poem suggests that the earthly life is more important than the possible heaven<sup>11</sup> and that man should be responsible for his free will and choice.

Behind the idea of "secular" heaven lies Dickinson's crucial poetic conviction; that is, heaven can be not only visualized but actually realized in the domain of human experience:

Heaven is so far of the Mind  
That were the Mind dissolved—  
The Site—of it—by Architect  
Could not again be proved—

'Tis vast—as our Capacity—  
As fair—as our idea—

To Him of adequate desire  
No further 'tis, than Here—

(370)

The presence of heaven depends upon the mind and that if the mind were dissolved, heaven would also disappear. Heaven is as vast and fair as human capacity; therefore, it is proportionate to human consciousness. In a similar vein, Dickinson says in poem 632, "The Brain is just the weight of God," signifying the imaginative power of consciousness and its capacity to perceive God.

For Dickinson, the earth is the great creation of God and this life on earth contains the true evidence of heaven. She considers this present life more valuable than the life in the invisible heaven which may not exist. She attempts to attain heaven within time and space. Particularly, she endeavors to expand her consciousness to see and feel and to realize heaven by the ultimate perfection of her consciousness. The zenith of consciousness is ecstasy. Simply, ecstasy means joy or rapture, but Dickinson uses it with much deeper meanings. "Almost revelry" (1327) and "transcending" (122), ecstasy means a liberation of the mind, an attainment of unity with eternity, and a self-transcendence or rebirth. The poem below demonstrates a moment of such ecstasy:

One Blessing had I than the rest  
So larger to my Eyes  
That I stopped gauging—satisfied—  
For this enchanted size—

It was the limit of my Dream—  
The focus of my Prayer—  
A perfect—paralyzing Bliss—  
Contented as Despair—

I knew no more of Want—or Cold—  
Phantasms both become  
For this new Value in the Soul—  
Supremest Earthly Sum—

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The Heaven below the Heaven above  
Obscured with ruddier Blue—  
Life's Latitudes leant over—full—  
The Judgment perished—too—

Why Bliss so scantily disburse—  
Why Paradise defer—  
Why Floods be served to Us—in Bowls—  
I speculate no more—

(756)

A vast and profound ecstatic seizure is occurring in the speaker's mind. It is as "Contented as Despair—," implying that ecstasy and despair are similar, for they produce a momentary suspension of rational activity and self-consciousness. The third stanza suggests that due to the ecstasy, all earthly lack and suffering are absolutely converted into supreme wealth. The fourth stanza signifies that celestial and earthly heavens are fused and the distinction between them is dissolved and that human life is elevated to its ultimate height and perfected in the eternal life of the Divine. Fear on the Judgment Day is also dissolved, and lastly the splendid value of ecstasy is reaffirmed. Any conflicting elements, either celestial or earthly, are superseded by a moment of ecstasy; and a new reality created with her profound emotions is revelatory.

Terrestrial heaven could be attained in the moment of ecstasy, the moment in which intellectual or emotional contradictions and oppositions are synthesized. Dickinson asserts that heaven depends upon the vision of the mind. Furthermore, paradoxically, she believes that without earthly heaven no celestial heaven can be gained:

Who has not found the Heaven—below—  
Will fail of it above—  
For Angels rent the House next ours,  
Wherever we remove—

(1544)

This poem shows the ultimate emotional and intellectual stage Dickinson has reached through her persistent struggles with the ambivalence

between celestial and earthly heavens. There is little difference between the two heavens, as long as she can feel the certainty of heaven in momentary ecstasy.

In conclusion, Dickinson has endeavored to comprehend the nature and existence of heaven and has, for this purpose, utilized a main intellectual strategy — paradox — and an emotional approach — ecstasy. However, as long as the truth of the certainty of celestial heaven is kept secret, her skepticism cannot be, of course, entirely effaced. Ambiguities seem inherent in heaven because of its subtle and mysterious manifestations. Also ambiguities are partly of Dickinson's ambivalent feelings toward heaven.

Dickinson glances into the depth of the universe and finds opposed or contradictory elements there, and she also perceives that though the elements are paradoxical, they suggest relative truth. Heaven can be paradoxically known by hell, and the opposed or contradictory elements are compensatory. Ultimately, they can be often synthesized in the momentary consummation of ecstasy, so that they reveal glimpses of emotional and intellectual truths of heaven.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Poem of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1960). All subsequent quotations of Dickinson poems are quoted from this edition and identified by number in the text.

<sup>2</sup> In this study I will focus on the discussion of heaven poems, since it is impossible to deal with all aspects of ambiguity and paradox in Dickinson's poetry.

<sup>3</sup> Concerning the issue of the disunity in Dickinson's poetry, David Porter says, "Unity is not . . . a quality of Dickinson's poem." *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) 111; Albert J. Gelpi states that "her poetry emerged not in a consistent and overmastering design but in an intricate pattern of individual and contrasting fragments." *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet* (New York: Norton, 1965) 92; and Wendy Martin says, focusing on the discontinuities of Dickin-

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son's consciousness, that Dickinson "deliberately avoided a system of categories that would prestructure or limit her perceptions." *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich* (Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1984) 81.

<sup>4</sup> Dickinson often uses heaven, paradise, and Eden almost synonymously. Compare with poems 214 and 575.

<sup>5</sup> A number of Dickinson's poems relate conventionally that heaven can be revealed through death. See poems 929 and 1712.

<sup>6</sup> *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1964) lists 143 instances of the word, heaven.

<sup>7</sup> Gelpi 91.

<sup>8</sup> In a letter to her sister-in-law in about 1884, Dickinson wrote:

Morning might come by Accident—Sister—  
Night comes by Event—  
To believe the final line of the Card would foreclose  
Faith—  
Faith is *Doubt*.

Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960) 830.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Keller, *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979) 132.

<sup>10</sup> William R. Sherwood, *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson* (New York and London: Columbia UP, 1968) 64.

<sup>11</sup> In a letter to her friend Samuel Bowles in about 1858, Dickinson used an analogous expression concerning "Bush": "The Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superseded I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally." *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* 338. The above "Bush" poem is estimated to have been written in 1865, and one can sense in it a more definite voice approving earthly heaven than the above prose ending with hesitant, "occasionally."