

# Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture

Tradition and Experience



*Victoria N. Morgan*

EMILY DICKINSON AND  
HYMN CULTURE

*This book is dedicated to the memory of  
George Francis Balmforth –  
Champion hymn-singer and Grandfather*

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Tradition and Experience

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# Preface

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

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

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

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

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



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

# List of Abbreviations

- DCC* E.A. Livingstone, *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Fr* *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (ed.), R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005)
- HL* Isaac Watts, *Horae Lyricae* (1706) as appears in *PW*
- HSF* Eliza Lee Follen, *Hymns, Songs and Fables for Young People*, 2nd edn (1831; Boston: W.M. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1851)
- HSS* Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707) as appears in *PHSS*
- L* *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols, (ed.), T.H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958)
- MWL* Alfred Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House, 2001)
- PHSS* *The Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D. To which are added Select Hymns from other Authors; and Directions for Musical Expression* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong and Crocker and Brewster, 1832)
- POD* Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and Applied to the Christian State and Worship* (1719) as appears in *PHSS*
- PW* *The Poetical Works of Isaac Watts, With a Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1866)
- RMB* Benjamin Lease, *Emily Dickinson's Reading of Men and Books* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990)
- SL* *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, (ed.), T.H. Johnson, eleventh printing (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002)

- THJ*     *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (ed.), T.H. Johnson, 2nd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1975)
- VH*     Asahel Nettleton, (ed.), *Village Hymns for Social Worship Selected and Original: Designed as a Supplement to Dr Watts's Psalms and Hymns* (Hartford: Printed by Goodwin and Co., 1824)

PART 1  
Hymn Culture:  
Tradition and Theory



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# Chapter 1

## ‘’Twas as Space Sat Singing to Herself – and Men –’: Situating Dickinson’s Relation to Hymn Culture

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

(November 1880, SL, p. 267)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the distinctions between conformity and dissent, atheism and belief or chaos and design. Ambiguity and contradiction are always present in Dickinson’s depiction of her relation to religious faith. Jane Donahue Eberwein argues:

One can make whatever case one wants about Dickinson’s beliefs or disbelief by selecting individual poems, letters, or even lines, but the way to reach insight is to look for long-term patterns in her religious references. Despite variations in tone and imagery, religion remained a centering concern for Dickinson from her first valentine with its comic references to Eden to her last letter [...].<sup>11</sup>

Eberwein’s recommendation to look for ‘long-term patterns’ in Dickinson’s corpus in order to gain insight is instructive. Her use of the hymn form, the use of bee imagery and the commitment to presenting a different relationality to the ‘I-Thou’ relation in traditional hymn address, which takes the form of a liberating space in her poetics, can be seen as ‘long-term patterns’ in Dickinson’s work. David Porter’s estimation of Dickinson’s use of the hymn form epitomises the precedent which was set for criticism on this subject:

[...] inherent in the hymn form is an attitude of faith, humility, and inspiration, and it is against this base of orthodoxy that she so artfully refracts the personal rebellion and individual feeling, the colloquial diction and syntax, the homely image, the scandalous love of this world, and the habitual religious scepticism.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst there is no doubt that Dickinson’s rebellious use of hymns and paraphrases of Watts challenge religious orthodoxy, they also challenge the speaker-God relation that hymns present and represent. Although hymns can be seen as the expression of religious orthodoxy, and as reinscribing hierarchy, in Dickinson’s poems the speaker-God relation becomes fluid, and hymnic space is reshaped to destabilise oppositional thinking. In this way, Dickinson’s relation to the hymn genre precipitates the dialogical interplay in her poetry between orthodox religion and anti-linear, anti-hierarchical, mystical spirituality.

St. Armand argues that ‘much of Dickinson’s poetry was a continuing dialectic that used the imagery, premises and metrics of Puritan hymnology as a basis for a personal psalmody of questioning and protest.’<sup>13</sup> His term ‘personal psalmody’ locates Dickinson’s creative process within a direct response to the Book of Psalms, and suggests a method and structure to her work which other critics

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<sup>11</sup> Jane Donahue Eberwein, ‘Is Immortality True?’: Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals’ in *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson* (ed.) Vivian R. Pollak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 67–102 (p. 70).

<sup>12</sup> David T. Porter, *The Art of Emily Dickinson’s Early Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966) p. 74.

<sup>13</sup> Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul’s Society*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p. 158. Hereafter referred to as St. Armand.

have been inclined to avoid. David Porter, for example, comments; 'For theme-seeking readers especially, Dickinson is not forbiddingly but, rather, *triumphantly* unmanageable.'<sup>14</sup> The meaning or main subject in Dickinson's poems can be especially difficult to pin down because of their combination of tight structure, complex syntax and seeming elusiveness. The complex and often apparently contradictory nature of her work makes any discussion of it challenging. We are given many paths to follow when exploring Dickinson's attitude to faith, and St Armand's term is useful for an inquiry into aspects of it which confront the ideas and images in hymns which she would have been privy to. It is in her attitude to the imagery and ideas implicit in hymnody, more than anywhere else, where we can see most clearly such 'questioning' and the approach of protest through the exploration of alternative possibilities which pervades so much of her work.

In highlighting the musicality in Dickinson's poems Valentine Cunningham asserts that she was an 'alternative hymn writer,' who wrote, like Christina Rossetti, 'in the mode most available to nineteenth century women poets.'<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the writing of congregational hymns initially became an acceptable form of expression for women, because it involved declarations of praise rather than espousing a complex theology and liturgical and poetic symbolism. However, Dickinson's use of hymnody does not appear to be born of necessity, given that she was not obviously aiming to publish her work and that she did not seem particularly interested in gaining critical acclaim or support from those around her. We know that in 1862, aged 31, she wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, asking him whether he thought her verse 'breathed,' (SL, p. 171) but her interest in carving out a place for herself within the literary world seems to be very limited, and only several of her two thousand or so poems were published in her lifetime. Another point to remember is that Dickinson received a good level of education, and was perfectly capable of expressing complex theology and liturgical and poetic symbolism without utilising the hymn form or adducing a form of communal expression. Therefore, Dickinson's use of the hymn form was not born from a desire to offer acceptable, marketable verse, but rather, a decision to adopt the mode of traditional expression of spirituality in order to highlight its dissonance/resonance with her own experience. Moreover, a dialogic engagement with the imagery and ideas laid out in hymns can be seen as providing her with an ideal space in which to articulate her own sense of spirituality. This could be done whilst simultaneously offering comment upon the traditions and restraints of orthodox religious culture, such as Calvinism's hierarchical model of Election in which women were seen as being further away from God than men, and capable of only a vicarious experience of God.

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<sup>14</sup> David Porter, 'Searching for Dickinson's Themes' in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, pp. 183–96 (p. 196).

<sup>15</sup> Valentine Cunningham, 'The Sound of Startled Grass', *The Guardian*, 19 October 2002. (For full reference, see bibliography).

The modes and methods employed by Dickinson to express her experience of spirituality and relation to orthodox religion will be analysed in light of her response to the symbolic nature of the hymn. The book will trace two dominant modes in Dickinson's poetry concerning religion. Firstly, the ways in which the poems challenge the portrayal of a direct and linear movement towards, and communication between, God and speaker in religious orthodoxy as exemplified in the hymns of Isaac Watts. Secondly, the ways in which Dickinson's poems emphasise, instead, the God-in-process and God-in-practice view of spirituality as asserted by twentieth-century feminist theologians.<sup>16</sup> The duality and contradictions which are inherent in Dickinson's relation to the divine have led inevitably to the application of different theoretical approaches in this book. The frequent paradoxes found in the work of Watts and other hymnists also belie the ultimate paradoxes within Puritan and traditionally dominant conceptions of the divine as well as within more radical ones. Theoretical approaches to Dickinson are necessarily dialectical, the intersections between different approaches being more sympathetic to the expansiveness of Dickinson's work, as Roland Hagenbuchle has argued.<sup>17</sup> Whilst there are points of contact with Post-Structuralist theories, some of which are used in this study in reference to feminism and mysticism, the aim of this book is to suggest that the method of Dickinson's poetic production can be seen within the context of the hymn genre and communal subjectivity as supporting the active way-of-being in the divine, which Dickinson's poems reconstruct and endlessly enact. The alternative metaphors for the divine in feminist theology, and Certeau's notion of 'heterologies' are both useful for describing this active mode of being-in-the divine.

In order to trace Dickinson's engagement with and experience of hymn culture, the early influence of the hymns of eighteenth-century hymnographer Isaac Watts will first be examined in Section Two. The motifs of eyes and wings which signal in Watts's hymns the experience of sight and flight, that is, of knowledge of the divine and of spiritual transcendence, will be analysed in relation to Dickinson's use of them. This will be followed by a comparative analysis of Evangelical and Unitarian women hymn writers who were contemporary with Dickinson through her mother's generation of Praying Circles. This chapter assesses the shape of female spiritual community and the ways in which common hymnic motifs are used in their hymns to connote spiritual transport. Section Three serves as the exemplificative section of the book and provides analysis of Dickinson's use of bee imagery. The bee imagery is examined as a 'long-term pattern' which most

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<sup>16</sup> Both terms 'God-in-process' and 'God-in-practice' used in this book allude to Mary Daly's notion of 'God the Verb.' See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973, London: The Women's Press, 1995) p. xvii. Daly describes the trajectory of her book's 'task:' 'of changing the conception/perception of god from 'the supreme being' to Be-ing. The naming of Be-ing as Verb'.

<sup>17</sup> Roland Hagenbuchle, 'Dickinson and Literary Theory' in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, pp. 356–84 (p. 381).

closely signals her engagement with hymn culture, bees being both singers and poets, both workers and revellers, both solitary and communal at different stages in her poetics. Bee imagery is examined as an alternative liturgical symbolism and further explored as part of a theoretical examination of 'community'. Debates about articulating the spiritual in both feminist literary theory and feminist theology are used in order to forge a connection between Dickinson's use of hymn culture and the powerful transformation of 'liturgical' emblems in her work, and what can be seen as a systematic critical engagement with orthodox religion which is hierarchically constructed. In doing so, the arguments in this book serve to provide new debate within Dickinson studies which brings together feminist theology and theories about space in discourse to uncover new ways in which to approach the shape and shaping of Dickinson's spirituality in poetry.

### Dickinson and Belief

We know from Dickinson's letters that she saw herself as being at odds with Evangelical Protestant Christianity. The extent of her 'atheism' has provided a constant source of discussion within Dickinson criticism. Much of Dickinson's poetry does seem to express a reaction against orthodox Christian modes of thinking and practices, and yet the extent and meaning of this reaction is difficult to assess because it also bears affinities with non-Protestant groups prevalent in the mid nineteenth century such as Catholicism and also with the most liberal of the Dissenting Protestant sects, Unitarianism.<sup>18</sup>

However, it was early on in her life that Dickinson dispensed with the comfort of religious orthodoxy and the apparent certainties it brought many of her contemporaries. In a letter to her friend Abiah Root, the sixteen year old Dickinson recalls an earlier time when she had momentarily felt the 'perfect happiness' of religious conviction:

I think of the perfect happiness I experienced while I felt I was an heir of heaven as of a delightful dream, out of which the Evil one bid me wake & again return to the world & its pleasures. [...] The few short moments in which I loved my Saviour I would not now exchange for a thousand worlds like this. It was then my greatest pleasure to commune alone with the great God & to feel that he would listen to my prayers. [...] But the world allured me & in an unguarded moment I listened to her syren voice. From that moment I seemed to lose my interest in heavenly things by degrees. (28 March 1846, L: I, pp. 30–31)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For discussion of religious plurality in nineteenth-century America, see Catherine A. Brekus, 'Interpreting American Religion' in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century America*, (ed.), William L. Barney (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) pp. 317–33.

<sup>19</sup> *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols, (ed.), T.H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958) vol 1, pp. 30–31. Hereafter 'L' followed by volume number and page.



In this letter she describes the 'syren voice' of worldly life which tempted her away from religion. However, for the rest of her life, and from the huge corpus of poetry that she left behind, we can discern an unflinching dedication to the 'syren voice' or poetic muse. As I shall argue this poetic 'syren voice' cannot be divorced from her own spiritual conviction, or the ongoing evaluation of 'heavenly things' which most of her poems convey. For Dickinson, experience of the world and spiritual experience were necessarily concomitant, and her letters and poetry chart equally, a spirituality which developed to collapse the distinction between 'heavenly things' and the 'syren voice' of worldly experience which inspired her writing. The 'heavenly things' in the letter above is conspicuously dismissive, characterising a rehearsal of Calvinist Election rhetoric ('heir of heaven') and Evangelical fervour ('Evil one' and 'great God') as an immature aberration, as opposed to a lamentable lost state of grace.

Connecting the shaping of Dickinson's spirituality with hymn culture serves both to re-contextualise her position within nineteenth-century American society and also within recent criticism which sees her work as having no 'frame of reference'<sup>20</sup> or specific social context. In uncovering the ways in which Dickinson interrogates the hierarchical structures implied by organised religion, we can also highlight her critique of a society that is founded on those structures. Although space and time do not allow for a definitive account of each religious group, effort has been made throughout to distinguish between the various modes of Christianity in mid-nineteenth-century New England. The literary form of the hymn provides a focus through which to see Dickinson's relation to such a culture and her defiance against, as she writes, being 'shut up in prose' (Fr 445)<sup>21</sup> and restricted from speaking against the Church's desire to regulate experience of spirituality. If we view Dickinson's engagement with Isaac Watts and the popular hymn form as a model for dissent and for an articulation of protest, then her apparently heretical stance can be redefined as a desire to be connected to the world in a more solid way. Such a connection with the world also implied for Dickinson a closer experience of heaven.

In a letter written to a friend in 1850 Dickinson denounced the revival and religious fervour engulfing her home town of Amherst. She says:

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<sup>20</sup> Lynn Shakinovsky, *No Frame of Reference: The Absence of Context in Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, in *Emily Dickinson: Critical Assessments*, vol 4, (ed.), Graham Clarke (Mountfield: Helm Information Ltd, 2002) pp. 703–16 (p. 714).

<sup>21</sup> *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (ed.), R.W. Franklin (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005) poem number 445. Franklin's reading edition of Dickinson's poems will be referred to throughout. Poems will hereafter appear with the abbreviation 'Fr' followed by the poem number in this edition. As they do not have titles, poems are sometimes referred to by their initial lines, as well as the poem number. Reasons for using this edition are that Franklin uses the final fair copy of Dickinson's manuscript and also retains all original spelling and punctuation.



Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves and trusts him, and I am standing alone in my rebellion, and growing very careless. (3 April 1850, to Jane Humphrey, L: I, p. 94)<sup>22</sup>

Her ‘rebellion’ I want to argue is not against the God she redefines and articulates in her poems but, rather, against the need to organise spirituality and society in a hierarchical way. The fact that organised religion played such a big part in Dickinson’s community means that any critique of it, including her own, implied also a critique of that particular society, and its effects upon the individual as well. Paradoxically, it is through her interaction with the popular but restrictive nature of hymnody that Dickinson’s sense of spirituality, or, in her own words, her ‘carelessness’ can be most recognised and registered.

In a letter to Mrs Joseph Haven in 1859, when discussing a recent sermon given by Mr Seelye, she clearly states her mistrust of ‘doctrines:’

Mr S preached in our church last Sabbath upon “Predestination,” but I do not respect “doctrines,” and did not listen to him, so I can neither praise, nor blame. (13 February 1859, L: II, p. 346)

Whilst stating that she could ‘neither praise, nor blame’ the preacher and his doctrinal assertions, Dickinson’s stance against orthodox religion was rather more critical and pro-active than this comment suggests. The excerpt below, from a letter written in 1856 to Dr and Mrs J.G. Holland, is particularly interesting because it is typical of the critical nature of her response to religious ideals, and echoes those set out in her poetry:

Don’t tell, dear Mrs. Holland, but wicked as I am, I read my Bible sometimes, [...] and I wished [...] that wonderful world had commenced, which makes such promises [...] If God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I have seen – I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous. Don’t tell Him, for the world, though, for after all He’s said about it, I should like to see what He was building for us, with no hammer, and no stone, and no journeyman either. (L: II, pp. 140–41)

Her derisive distrust of the ‘wonderful world’ of Heaven anticipated and portrayed in the Bible verses she read is equally as vivid as her vision of the paradisaical on earth. Her ability to perceive Godliness in nature, and, simultaneously, to be highly critical of traditional ideas about salvation and ‘Heaven’ is a perspective which she senses would be deemed as a form of heresy, or as an unwelcome challenge to her local community’s religious culture if spoken aloud. ‘Don’t tell Him’ is mocking and gossipy in tone, yet seems to characterise Dickinson’s interest in revering that

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<sup>22</sup> Leder and Abbott discuss this letter briefly in *The Language of Exclusion: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) in order to highlight her increasingly independent stance (pp. 46–7).