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The Heaven Below the Heaven Above

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THE HEAVEN BELOW THE HEAVEN ABOVE

(TITLE)

BY

ELLEN CHILDS KYLANDER

THESIS

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IN TENDER AND JOYOUS MEMORY OF
PROFESSOR MARIE NEVILLE TYCER
WHO LIKED BEST THE HONEST POETS

THE HEAVEN BELOW THE HEAVEN ABOVE

Unheralded poet-prophet of the spiritually disenchanted of her own and later ages, Emily Dickinson left to a heedless, unresponsive world a "letter" since discovered to be almost endlessly rich in art, eloquence and human insight.¹ For, in just one distinctive part of her "letter," this New England poet chronicled without compromise the faith-doubt dichotomy engendered at mid-century by man's increasing scientific and historical knowledge. With great strength of mind and no little imagination Miss Dickinson contemplated the plight of humanity, once more estranged from God, once more cast out of Eden, by modern scepticism rather than original sin. Throughout her prolonged artistic appraisal of mankind's remaining prospects for an ideal immortal existence--a Heaven, a Paradise, an Eden--commensurate with, yet somehow excelling, the best glories of this life, Miss Dickinson repeatedly suggested that our best hopes for supreme happiness reside in this world rather than

¹Emily Dickinson, "This is my letter to the World/ That never wrote to Me--," in THE COMPLETE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, 1955), Poem 441, p. 211. Future references to Miss Dickinson's poems will be to this edition. Each poem cited in the text of this paper will be identified in parentheses immediately following the quotation with the number assigned the poem by Editor Johnson, except in cases of consecutive quotations from one poem.

another, which either may not exist or else would be
offensive to mortals:

The Fact that Earth is Heaven--
Whether Heaven is Heaven or not
If not an Affidavit
Of that specific Spot
Not only must confirm us
That it is not for us
But that it would offend us
To dwell in such a place-- (1408)

This resolute inquisitor of Heaven carefully weighed various aspects of immortality in general and of celestial beatitude in particular, with especial regard for their compatibility with human nature. Her subject is universal; her method, *dramatic*. Thus, in her steadfast scrutiny of a consideration relevant for all mortals, Miss Dickinson explored the several possibilities using several voices, particularly the first person singular, as in this example of a speaker who cherishes the summer on earth while suggesting that an eternal Eden would also have its sting for mortals:

.
When I believe the garden
Mortal shall not see--
Pick by faith its blossom
And avoid its Bee,
I can spare this summer, unreluctantly.
(40)

Miss Dickinson also frequently used a first person plural speaker, which is neither royal nor editorial, as in this general incrimination of an apparently hostile Heaven that plunders us, even "for a time," of "what we need":

Immortal is an ample word
 When what we need is by
 But when it leaves us for a time
 'Tis a necessity.
 Of Heaven above the firmest proof
 We fundamental know
 Except for its marauding Hand
 It had been Heaven below. (1205)

Certainly the "I" and the "We" of so many of these lyrics on the subject of human blessedness are not the public-generic-cosmic pronouns employed by Walt Whitman. Yet, despite their intense personal quality, and especially despite various critics' claims to the contrary, we need not take the voices we hear to be Miss Dickinson's alone.² Neither her idiom nor her ideas are so private, so esoteric, as to prevent the repeated thrill of recognition and identification for the intent reader, for whom she indeed "Distills amazing sense/ From ordinary Meanings--" (448).

Furthermore, by assuming various stances--the doubter, the wary, the ingenuous questioner, the forsaken--

²Those sensationalistic critics who insist that Miss Dickinson's poems are an almost indecent chronicle of self-revelation may have, in this instance, interpreted somewhat too literally the subjective quality characteristic of the lyric genre. Apparently Miss Dickinson succeeded so well in this art form that some of her reviewers have convinced themselves they are reading pure, unabashed autobiography. Certainly several of their "revelations" have been more indecent than anything found in her poems. Most unhappily, "Monsters" with magnifying "glasses" have not confined their efforts at classification to flowers only! (See Poem 70.)

in her imaginative efforts to cope with the perpetual enigma of a blessed afterlife, the poet could be universal in her theme yet highly individualistic in her treatment of that theme; by adapting several such guises she gained versatility of view while maintaining constancy of subject. For her personae tell us as much about "Ourself"--collective humanity, that is,--and our condition as about her own. Each of us can, for example, identify an "Obstacle" between himself and perfect happiness, as he listens to this plaintive reminder:

Lest this be Heaven indeed
An Obstacle is given
That always gauges a Degree
Between Ourselves and Heaven. (1043)

We can thus be absorbed in Miss Dickinson's art alone without recourse to exhaustive, explicit details about some "Obstacle" in her personal life, to label which is to narrow rather than broaden her appeal.

Pending death's belated and somewhat anticlimactic revelation on the question of eternal beatitude, with or without the resurrection of the body, with or without the retention of our individuality, Miss Dickinson's repeated poetic efforts to visualize a future state of bliss which would compensate our human nature for the loss of its humanity exemplifies the struggle for enlightenment she herself described so uniquely:

That oblique Belief which we call
Conjecture
Grapples with a Theme stubborn as
Sublime.... (1221)

In over one hundred forty poems she varied voice, metaphor and idiom in a persistent artistic attempt to examine and portray the many possible human views of Heaven.³ Two such poems demonstrate the contrast she thus achieved. She could phrase our doubts with a colloquial humor that robs them of their anguish though we wonder at fears of hurting one's feet or getting lost or even dying in Heaven where that last awful possibility is supposed to be quite finally banished:⁴

What is--"Paradise"--
 Who live there--
 Are they "Farmers"--
 Do they "hoe"--
 Do they know that this is "Amherst"--
 And that I--am coming--too--

Do they wear "new shoes"--in "Eden"--
 Is it always pleasant--there--
 Won't they scold--us--when we're homesick--
 Or tell God--how cross we are--

³The question of the possible development of an integrated philosophy on the subject of Heaven naturally arises when any artist contemplates the various possibilities over a long period of time, in Miss Dickinson's case almost forty years. Accepting Editor Johnson's dates as the best that scholarship can provide, we find the same questions addressed time and again throughout this canon. We also find, however, the constantly recurring alternative upon which this thesis is based--not nihilism, nor stoicism, nor hedonism, but acceptance and intense appreciation of the pleasures and the pains of this life instead.

⁴See also Poem 172 for the ultimate ironic possibility of being "extinguished," by either joy or surprise, upon one's arrival in Heaven.

You are sure there's such a person
 As "a Father"--in the sky--
 So if I get lost--there ever--
 Or do what the Nurse calls "die"--
 I shan't walk the "Jasper"--barefoot--
 Ransomed folks--won't laugh at me--
 Maybe--"Eden" a'n't so lonesome
 As New England used to be! (215)

And the same poet could, in more conventional language
 and most beautiful imagery, evoke a Heaven as lovely as
 the earth, but "fairer--we suppose--":

"Heaven" has different Signs--to me--
 Sometimes, I think that Noon
 Is but a symbol of the Place--
 And when again, at Dawn,

A mighty look runs round the World
 And settles in the Hills--
 An Awe if it should be like that
 Upon the Ignorance steals--

The Orchard, when the Sun is on--
 The Triumph of the Birds
 When they together Victory make--
 Some Carnivals of Clouds--

The Rapture of a finished Day--
 Returning to the West--
 All these--remind us of the place
 That Men call "Paradise"--

. (575)

Yet, even among these far lovelier prospects, a human
 reservation also appears, for these stanzas end with the
 question "how Ourselves, shall be/ Adorned, for a Superior
 Grace--." Would we retain our physical identities? How
 else could we recognize others, or how could they possibly
 know us?

In yet another attempt to picture a Heaven patterned
 along human lines, Miss Dickinson considered the diffi-
 culty of reunion with a loved one unless the countenances

were the same. In such a Heaven, it would be

.

Pardon--to look upon thy face--
 With these old fashioned Eyes--
 Better than new--could be--for that--
 Though Bought in Paradise--

Because they had looked on thee before--
 And thou hast looked on them--
 Prove me--My Hazel Witnesses
 The features are the same--

. (788)

In these imaginary projections of an ideal future existence, then, Miss Dickinson repeatedly voiced our wish for a next life as much like this one as possible, with ourselves also unchanged except, of course, for the addition of a mysterious "Superior Grace."

Relentlessly probing the stern, intimidating, Old Testament deity of Calvinist New England; acknowledging without enthusiasm the encroachments of Darwinian thought and Higher Criticism upon traditional religious belief; rejecting cloying sentiment, religious dogma, and blind, unquestioning faith (those "Narcotics" which "cannot still the Tooth/ That nibbles at the soul--" 501), Miss Dickinson pursued her investigation into the nature of bliss.

Time and again the poet considered the unappealing, inaccessible nature of an impersonal heavenly "Father," whose invitation to join him in Paradise seems more like

a subpoena to one's own trial,⁵ whose Son's invitation to his Father's "House" occasions no lasting joy. For, lacking the "felicity" to reveal and endear themselves **even** to those children reputed to comprise their "Kingdom," two members of the orthodox triune deity are truly uninviting "hosts," while the third is absent altogether:

Who were "the Father and the Son"
 We pondered when a child,
 And what had they to do with us
 And when portentous told

With inference appalling
 By Childhood fortified
 We thought, at least they are no worse
 Than they have been described.

. (1258)

Later adjustments of early frightening images do not improve our first impressions, and we carefully avoid their invitation:

We start--to learn what we believe
 But once--entirely--
 Belief, it does not fit so well
 When altered frequently--

We blush, that Heaven if we achieve--
 Event ineffable--
 We shall have shunned until ashamed
 To own the Miracle--

One of these unappealing heavenly hosts "broke his contract to his Lamb" (1439), apparently forsaking his own Son in a moment of bitter anguish. This situation

⁵For a delightful treatment of a mortal's costuming preparations for an anticipated summons to quite a different kind of heavenly court, royal rather than hanging, see Poem 373.

is again agonizingly real for another, a poetic persona, who also feels deserted by the "Father," identifying his suffering with Christ's plight and "spelling" anew the "Sabachthani" prayer, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?"⁶ Again, in Miss Dickinson's poetry, "'Faith' bleats--to understand!" (313)

Nor is this distant senior deity's justice reliable; according to biblical account, a mortal may not gain the Promised Land even though he does his "Father's" bidding:

So I pulled my Stockings off
Wading in the Water
For the Disobedience' Sake
Boy that lived for "or'ter"

Went to Heaven perhaps at Death
And perhaps he didn't
Moses wasn't fairly used
Ananias wasn't--⁷ (1201)

This uncertain quality of God's judgments, noted with such disarming scepticism in these lines, is more poignantly expressed by another of Miss Dickinson's speakers:

Not probable--The barest Chance--
A smile too few--a word too much
And far from Heaven as the Rest--
The Soul so close on Paradise--

. (346)

⁶Christ's prayer from the Cross is recorded in Saint Matthew XXVII:46.

⁷Ananias' story is found in The Acts V:1-12. The Lord's injunction against Moses' setting foot in Canaan is found in Deuteronomy XXXII:48-52.

Like Moses and Ananias, other mortals endowed with imperfect natures may also be "Confused by Sweets--," by human temptations, and ever so narrowly miss the Promised Land. If our "barest Chance" depends upon "A smile too few--a word too much," perhaps instead of "Groping" for Paradise, that "Phantom Queen," we might as well go "Wading in the Water."⁸

Seemingly vagarious is so unreliable a "Father," whose children, like the "School boy" chasing the elusive June Bee," are "Homesick for steadfast Honey--" (319). The divine love of such a "parent" appears at times to be a mere caprice:

.
 'Tis this--invites--appalls--endows--
 Flits—glimmers—proves—dissolves--
 Returns--suggests--convicts--enchants--
 The--flings in Paradise-- (673)

God's complete unconcern, in a matter so vital to mortals, is suggested in the word, "flings." There is almost the impression of a bone tossed only to tantalize where loving reassurances are desperately needed instead.

Moreover, this God does not feel obligated to honor the promises made by his Son to mortals in a scene recorded by Saint Matthew;⁹ humans do not long trust a Heaven where prayers for the most "modest needs" are mocked:

⁸See the final stanzas of poems 513 and 569 for other reasons Heaven is not really to be hoped for, being too lovely for ordinary mortals to achieve.

⁹Saint Matthew VII:7-8.

.

And so--upon this wise--I prayed--
Great Spirit--Give to me
A Heaven not so large as Yours,
But large enough--for me--

A Smile suffused Jehovah's face--
The Cherubim--withdrew--
Grave Saints stole out to look at me--
And showed their dimples--too--

I left the Place, with all my might--
I threw my Prayer away--
The Quiet Ages picked it up--
And Judgment--twinkled--too--
That one so honest--be extant--
It take the Tale for true--
That "Whatsoever Ye shall ask--
Itself be given You"--

But I, grown shrewder--scan the Skies--
With a suspicious Air--
As Children--swindled for the first
All Swindlers--be--infer--¹⁰ (476)

Even "Swindler" is a less frightening epithet than another contrived by Miss Dickinson in her relentless effort to characterize a deity who does not answer even simple prayers, a monstrous, unloving deity, the way to whose home is beset with unrelieved suffering:

Far from Love the Heavenly Father
Leads the Chosen Child,
Oftener through Realm of Briar
Than the Meadow mild.

Oftener by the Claw of Dragon
Than the Hand of Friend
Leads the Little One predestined
To the Native Land. (1021)

¹⁰It is noteworthy that the speaker in this poem has been refused a lesser "Heaven" here on earth, some need which he felt would have made this life bliss enough.

Disenchantment with the impersonal, dehumanized deity of Calvinism could scarcely be more graphically expressed. Even the picture of God as an omnipresent "Telescope" which "Perennial beholds us" in Paradise so that we could never relax and "feel at Home" there becomes less revolting by comparison (413).

Alienation and disillusion are scarcely modified by our distant acquaintance with "the Son," whose "courteous" welcome to his Father's "House" is not long a cause for unmoderated joy; once the first thrill has passed, apprehension reasserts itself:

"Remember me" implored the Thief!
 Oh Hospitality!
 My Guest "Today in Paradise"
 I give thee guaranty.

That Courtesy will fair remain
 When the Delight is Dust
 With which we cite this mightiest case
 Of compensated Trust.¹¹

. (1180)

Even such a guarantee, such an "Affidavit" from the Cross itself does not permanently allay fears that Christ's "Courtesy" may insure in Heaven only the company of trusting thieves and other "unexpected Friends--," this ironic voice concludes.

Similar reservations, expressed almost parenthetically, mar the famous words of comfort found in The Gospel According to Saint John:¹²

¹¹For a rephrasing of this same idea, see Poem 1305.

¹²Saint John XIV:2.

"Houses"--so the Wise Men tell me--
 "Mansions"! Mansions must be warm!
 Mansions cannot let the tears in,
 Mansions must exclude the storm!

"Many Mansions," by "his Father,"
 I don't know him; snugly built!
 Could the Children find their way there--
 Some, would even trudge tonight! (127)

We infer from the last line that the speaker, wary of the promises made by the Son of an unknown Father, would not be among those trudging, trusting "Children."

Another poem, in dialogue form, leaves the reader similarly uncertain, despite Christ's familiar reassurances:¹³

"Unto Me?" I do not know you--
 Where may be your House?

"I am Jesus--Late of Judea--
 Now--of Paradise"--

Wagons--have you--to convey me?
 This is far from Thence--

"Arms of Mine--sufficient Phaeton--
 Trust Omnipotence"--

I am spotted--"I am Pardon"--
 I am small--"The Least"

Is esteemed in Heaven the Chiefest--
 Occupy my House"-- (964)

Though the wary inquisitor has apparently exhausted his objections, and Christ has the final word, there is no suggestion in the lines themselves that the invitation is accepted. Perhaps missing here is the application of whatever lesson is to be gleaned from this equivocal exchange between a doubter and Heaven's "Bisecting/ Messenger--" (1411). Thus, an aloof poet ambiguously left

¹³Saint Matthew XI:28.

us to reflect upon our own reservations and to draw our own conclusions. This she specifically suggested must be done in yet another poem on the desirability of beatitude in a foreign sphere:

As if some little Arctic flower
 Upon the polar hem--
 Went wandering down the Latitudes
 Until it puzzled came
 To continents of summer--
 To firmaments of sun--
 To strange, bright crowds of flowers--
 And birds, of foreign tongue!
 I say, As if this little flower
 To Eden, wandered in--
 What then? Why nothing,
 Only, your inference therefrom! (180)

Given the enormous hiatus in our knowledge about a spiritual Eden, each of us may ponder Christ's invitation and judge whether a "little Arctic flower," a mortal, might flourish or smother in so unnatural a clime. At least in these two poems, Miss Dickinson left us to decide and made no slightest effort to sway us, having once presented Christ's pledges in one poem and tropic images in the other. Here, the cases for Christ and Eden end in ambiguity.

Also heightening human perplexity, both humorous and sincere, are certain unwelcome liberties which modern knowledge has taken with "old-fashioned" habits and habitations:

"Arcturus" is his other name--
 I'd rather call him "Star."
 It's very mean of Science
 To go and interfere!

.

I pull a flower from the woods--
 A monster with a glass
 Computes the stamens in a breath--
 And has her in a "class":

.

What once was "Heaven"
 Is "Zenith" now--
 Where I proposed to go
 When Time's brief masquerade was done
 Is mapped and charted too.

. (70)

Much, much more significantly and with even greater disregard for human wishes, "Wisdom" has, in tampering with the sky, bereft us of the traditional site of Heaven:

Denial--is the only fact
 Perceived by the Denied--
 Whose Will-a numb significance--
 The Day the Heaven died--

And all the Earth strove common round--
 Without Delight, or Beam--
 What Comfort was it Wisdom--was--
 The spoiler of Our Home? (965)

Just so are the "sons of Adam" deprived of their belief in a Paradise as their renowned, and disputed, ancestor was dispossessed of Eden itself--by knowledge.¹⁴

Even though the "Father and the Son" are more remote and less trustworthy than we would like, the least glimmer

¹⁴Miss Dickinson's questing contemporary, Herman Melville, also commented, in the "Epilogue" of CLAREL, upon the dubious contributions made by science:

Science the feud can only aggravate--
 No umpire she betwixt the chimes and knell:
 The running battle of the star and clod
 Shall run forever--if there be no God.
 Degrees we know, unknown in days before;
 The light is greater, hence the shadow
 more....

of hope is preferred to none at all, which is what an equally impersonal science has left mankind:

Those--dying then,
Knew where they went--
They went to God's Right Hand--
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found--

. (1551)

Science has confirmed the suspected absence of God; a rueful voice laments humanity's final loss of faith:

"the abdication of Belief/ Makes the Behavior small--."

Thus mortals are left with only themselves and this world to believe in. Emily Dickinson weighed these remaining assets, also, and in a significant number of instances found them adequate to our human natures. In a poem strikingly like the twelfth stanza of THE RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM,¹⁵ this New England seer who so vividly depicted our modern spiritual malaise offered an antidote for our doubts:

A little bread--a crust--a crumb--
A little trust--a demijohn--
Can keep the soul alive--
Not portly, mind! but breathing--warm--
Conscious--as old Napoleon,
The night before the Crown!

¹⁵Edward FitzGerald, translator, THE RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM (Greenwich, 1966), Stanza 12, p. 21:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread--and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness--
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

Though these two poets treated similar themes, evidence that Miss Dickinson was familiar with THE RUBAIYAT is inconclusive.

A modest lot--A fame petite--
 A brief Campaign of sting and sweet
 Is plenty! Is enough!
 A Sailor's business is the shore!
 A Soldier's--balls! Who asketh more
 Must seek the neighboring life! (159)

While disdaining both a dehumanized God and a dehumanized science, Miss Dickinson also took a hard look at blind, sentimental faith, which ignores the patent discrepancies between divine doctrine and mundane reality while providing no permanent palliative for gnawing doubts about an Elysium after this life. As poet, she could generate images so appealing that we temporarily forget the questions behind them:

.
 My figures fail to tell me
 How far the Village lies--
 Whose peasants are the Angels--
 Whose Cantons dot the skies--
 My Classics veil their faces--
 My faith that Dark adores--
 Which from its solemn abbeys
 Such resurrection pours. (7)

A celestial May Day spent in perpetual pagan-like frolic would lure all but the most unyielding:

There is a morn by men unseen--
 Whose maids upon remoter green
 Keep their Seraphic May--
 And all day long, with dance and game,
 And gambol I may never name--
 Employ their holiday.

Here to light measure, move the feet
 Which walk no more the village street--
 Nor by the wood are found--

.

Like thee to dance--like thee to sing--
 People upon the mystic green--
 I ask, each new May morn.
 I wait thy far, fantastic bells--
 Announcing me in other dells--
 Unto the different dawn! (24)

However, before Miss Dickinson's heirs can become totally entranced, a jarring note rings among those "far, fantastic bells"; our eyebrows go up with the first expansive phrases; our hope constricts with the significant last word, so ominously final in such a context:

1 Going to Heaven!
 2 I don't know when--
 3 Pray do not ask me how!
 4 Indeed I'm too astonished
 5 To think of answering you!
 6 Going to Heaven!
 7 How dim it sounds!
 8 And yet it will be done
 9 As sure as flocks go home at night
 10 Unto the Shepherd's arm!

11 Perhaps you're going too!
 12 Who knows?
 13 If you should get there first
 14 Save just a little space for me
 15 Close to the two I lost--
 16 The smallest "Robe" will fit me
 17 And just a bit of "Crown"--
 18 For you know we do not mind our dress
 19 When we are going home--

20 I'm glad I don't believe it
 21 For it would stop my breath--
 22 And I'd like to look a little more
 23 At such a curious Earth!
 24 I'm glad they did believe it
 25 Whom I have never found
 26 Since the mighty Autumn afternoon
 27 I left them in the ground. (79)

What looks at first glance like an exercise in poetic ineptitude proves to be instead a very disconcerting treatment of the popular cliches of sentimental

nineteenth-century thought on death and immortality. If divided after the tenth and the nineteenth lines, instead of as published, these apparently disconnected thoughts become a dialogue, perhaps internal, which not only frustrates stock responses to trite images but also indicts the traditional Christian preoccupation with the possibilities of the next world rather than the realities of this one. The reduced-size metaphors alone--"little space," "smallest 'Robe,'" and "bit of 'Crown'"--doubtlessly inspired by a too-literal interpretation of a well-known biblical passage,¹⁶ are an affront to human expectations of augmented rather than reduced existence once we are invested with immortality. Ironically, such constrictions suggest the grave rather than an endless Heaven; the "two" the believer "lost" (line 15) seem no more likely to be found again than those the doubter "left . . . in the ground." In this antithetical dialogue between honest doubt and unredeemed faith these insipid images offer no true vision beyond the tomb.

Preferred to such unpromising prospects is the opportunity "to look a little more/ At such a curious Earth!" A strong reluctance to relinquish this life, "to put this world down, like a Bundle--/ And walk steady, away," (527) is

¹⁶Saint Matthew XVIII:3-4. "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

found early and late in this poet's assessment of human blessedness. She rephrased this theme continually, rejecting the next world until it was no longer avoidable. Only then does it appeal:

.

How excellent the Heaven--
When Earth--cannot be had--
How hospitable--then--the face
Of our Old Neighbor--God--¹⁷ (623)

Perhaps the most devastating indictment of syrupy, sentimental views of Heaven comes, paradoxically, from the most ingenuous voice in Miss Dickinson's repertory; innocence perceives an ironic difference between one and many bells:

Of Tolling Bell I ask the cause?
"A Soul has gone to Heaven"
I'm answered in a lonesome tone--
Is Heaven then a Prison?

That Bells should ring till all should know
A Soul had gone to Heaven
Would seem to me the more the way
A Good News should be given. (947)

By no means, however, do such antipathetic views of God, science and sentiment prevent all other considerations in this matter of beatitude. They do not, for example, discourage our continued efforts to judge, by purely human standards, what little we do know about the traditional Heaven. Hence, Miss Dickinson's prolonged poetic surmise

¹⁷For a restatement of the idea that God's adjacent abode appeals only to those of reduced vitality in this life see Poem 121, where Miss Dickinson captured this concept in the lovely line "Heaven beguiles the tired."

on the subject of supernal joy includes especially poignant treatments of our feeling of alienation from such a state; of our despair of ever reaching it; of our uncertainty even of its nature and its locale, which we try by various means to determine; and of our fears at its cost to humans in terms of pain, sacrifice and mortal life itself.

Particularly haunting is the sense of human deprivation suggested in these stanzas:

A loss of something ever felt I--
The first that I could recollect
Bereft I was--of what I knew not
Too young that any should suspect

A Mourner walked among the children
I notwithstanding went about
As one bemoaning a Dominion
Itself the only Prince cast out--

Elder, Today, a session wiser
And fainter, too, as Wiseness is--
I find myself still softly searching
For my Delinquent Palaces--

And a Suspicion, like a Finger
Touches my Forehead now and then
That I am looking oppositely
For the site of the Kingdom of Heaven--
(959)

Miss Dickinson could also capture, just as convincingly, a sense of poignant despair despite intense human longing:

"Heaven"--is what I cannot reach!
The Apple on the Tree--
Provided it do hopeless--hang--
That--"Heaven" 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! (239)

"Heaven" is a "Conjuror," luring, eluding, repulsing us,
 forever beyond our mortal grasp:

.

Flees so the phantom meadow
 Before the breathless Bee--
 So bubble brooks in deserts
 On Ears that ~~die~~ dying lie--
 Burn so the Evening Spires
 To Eyes that Closing go--
 Hangs so distant Heaven--
 To a hand below. (20)

The poet acknowledged, too, the hopelessness of proving
 even that there is such a place:

Of Paradise' existence
 All we know
 Is the uncertain certainty--
 But its vicinity infer,
 By its Bisecting
 Messenger-- (1411)

"Heaven" is "Untenable to Logic--" (1293), and cannot
 be located spatially, though we try, ineffectually enough:

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)

To help answer such queries, Miss Dickinson, with delightful
 whimsy, proposed a brief scouting trip, just for the purpose

of "ascertaining" the rumored "House" in the sky:

The spry Arms of the Wind
 If I could crawl between
 I have an errand imminent
 To an adjoining Zone--

I should not care to stop
 My process is not long
 The Wind could wait without the Gate
 Or stroll the Town among.

To ascertain the House
 And is the soul at Home
 And hold the Wick of mine to it
 To light, and then return-- (1103)

The inference, of course, is that Heaven would be a reassuring place to visit, but a human wouldn't want to live there.

In the absence of even a "twig of Evidence--" (501) about Heaven's existence, Miss Dickinson argued a blessed abode from necessity:

So much of Heaven has gone from Earth
 That there must be a Heaven
 If only to enclose the Saints
 To Affidavit given.

. (1228)

And, in what must be a masterpiece of ironic overstatement under the circumstances, she succinctly rationalized the absence of even token evidence: "Too much of Proof affronts Belief."

Dogged assertion is another possibility explored by Miss Dickinson in her artistic effort to demonstrate the existence of God's abode:

I never saw a Moor--
 I never saw the Sea--
 Yet know I how the Heather looks
 And what a Billow be.

I never spoke with God
 Nor visited in Heaven--
 Yet certain am I of the spot
 As if the Checks were given-- (1052)

Yet there is no suggestion in these lines that the speaker wants those railroad "Checks" to Heaven. Again we catch a glimpse of the aloof poet at work in a poem which is merely an affirmation of Heaven's existence, not a testimonial recommending a trip there.

The very journey itself, as this poet pictured it, would dissuade most travellers:

'Twas the old--road--through pain--
 That unfrequented--one--
 With many a turn--and thorn--
 That stops--at Heaven--

. (344)

The unlovely metaphors multiply: "The Road to Paradise is plain,A Dimpled Road/ Is more preferred" (1491); The fields of "Asphodel" are reached only through "transporting anguish" (148). One voice confidently confirms Christ's description of the "way" itself, and then fades off in uncertainty:

You're right--"the way is narrow"--
 And "difficult the Gate"--
 And "few there be"--Correct again--
 That "enter in--thereat"--

'Tis Costly--So are purples!
 'Tis just the price of Breath--
 With but the "Discount" of the Grave--
 Termed by the Brokers--"Death"!

And after that--there's Heaven--
 The Good Man's--"Dividend"--
 And Bad Men--"go to Jail"--
 I guess-- (234)

We can only speculate, too, whether the final re-
 velation will repay our solitary, uphill struggle:

The going from a world we know
 To one a wonder still
 Is like a child's adversity
 Whose vista is a hill,

 Behind the hill is sorcery
 And everything unknown,
 But will the secret compensate
 For climbing it alone? (1603)

Our one complete certainty is that to gain sanctity we
 must pay everything we own:

The hallowing of Pain
 Like hallowing of Heaven,
 Obtains at a corporeal cost--
 The Summit is not given

 To Him who strives severe
 At middle of the Hill--
 But He who has achieved the Top--
 All--is the price of All-- (772)

Once at "the Summit," however, there is no possible
 chance of mistaking our destination:

.
 The Heaven hath a Hell--
 Itself to signalize--
 And every sign before the Place
 Is gilt with Sacrifice-- (459)

This incongruent association of the greatest bliss with
 the greatest misery which mortals can envision was made
 more than once by Miss Dickinson in her determined effort
 to define supreme joy in terms of human experience;
 ironically enough, she noted, "Parting is all we know of

heaven,/ And all we need of hell." (1732) Although the heaven-hell juxtaposition provides tremendous artistic tension in these poems, such an uneasy combination does not bode well for humanity;¹⁸ even road directions for both stop at the grave:

How far is it to Heaven?
As far as Death this way--
Of River or of Ridge beyond
Was no discovery.

How far is it to Hell?
As far as Death this way--
How far left hand the Sepulchre
Defies Topography. (929)

Pending the final reconciliation of these opposites, Miss Dickinson voiced the hopelessness of all human conjecture:

I reason, Earth is short--
And Anguish--absolute--
And many hurt,
But, what of that?

I reason, we could die--
The best Vitality
Cannot excel Decay,
But, what of that?

I reason, that in Heaven--
Somehow, it will be even--
Some new Equation, given--
But, what of that? (301)

Not anticipating any immediate reply to her own ambiguous queries, this poet employed her talents in an artistic examination of our chances for human bliss now.

¹⁸For another instance of the Heaven-Hell linkage see Poem 1632.

For, although she could assert, in a dogged little
singsong stanza,

In thy long Paradise of Light
No moment will there be
When I shall long for Earthly Play
And mortal Company-- (1145)

the curious among her readers can only wish she had
elaborated and told why. Time and again she more feelingly
considered quite opposite possibilities, delineating human
bliss in terms of both Earth and "mortal Company," and
ranging the latter from a simple humor to sacrilege.

Certain human experiences we think must be fleeting
foretastes of future uninterrupted joy:

To help our Bleaker Parts
Salubrious Hours are given
Which if they do not fit for Earth
Drill silently for Heaven-- (1064)

Among the lighter of such joys is the near-universal de-
light of sleeping late, a truly "heavenly" experience
celebrated in this humorous plea to a demanding father
for just a bit longer abed:

Where bells no more affright the morn--
Where scrabble never comes--
Where very nimble Gentlemen
Are forced to keep their rooms--

Where tired Children placid sleep
Thro' Centuries of noon
This place is Bliss--this town is Heaven--
Please, Pater, pretty soon!

"Oh could we climb where Moses Stood,
And view the Landscape o'er"
Not Father's bells--nor Factories,
Could scare us any more! (112)

Other moments of complete happiness derive from more
individual joys; the source of such rapture may differ

from person to person, but the uplift is the same for
all:

I think I was enchanted
When first a sombre Girl--
I read that Foreign Lady--
The Dark--felt beautiful--

And whether it was noon at night--
Or only Heaven--at Noon--
For very Lunacy of Light
I had not power to tell--

. (593)

Generally recognized also is the blessedness realized
in our homes, most poignantly recalled when we are away:

Eden is that old-fashioned House
We dwell in every day
Without suspecting our abode
Until we drive away.

. (1657)

Or so completely sublime can some one individual
blessing be that it disorients our judgment and distorts
our perspectives until we grudgingly admit why mortals
are "scanted" with such earthly transports. In this poem,
Miss Dickinson left the joy unspecified; each reader
may identify it for himself:

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--

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)

Only the fugitive quality of such mortal joy prevents
 us from achieving supreme happiness in this life:

Did our Best Moment last--
 'Twould supersede the Heaven--
 (393)

Indeed, so completely satisfied can we be here on earth
 that we feel compelled to apologize for our unwitting
 transgression in finding so much delight in this transitory
 temporal existence:

Of God we ask one favor,
 That we may be forgiven--
 For what, he is presumed to know--
 The Crime, from us, is hidden--
 Immured the whole of Life
 Within a magic Prison
 We reprimand the Happiness
 That too competes with Heaven. (1601)

Even balanced against the potentially infinite
 bliss of Paradise, as we can best imagine it, this
 narrower existence satisfies our mortal nature; esti-
 mating the "solemnity" of becoming "A woman--white--"
 and "blameless," in Heaven, the poet contrasted that
 hypothetical joy with present circumstances and reached
 quite opposite conclusions:

.
 I pondered how the bliss would look--
 And would it feel as big--
 When I could take it in my hand--
 As hovering--seen-through fog--

And then--the size of this "small" life--
 The Sages--call it small--
 Swelled--like Horizons--in my vest--
 And I sneered--softly--"small"! (271)

Although the hope of seeing again in a larger life someone
 whom we now miss makes the waiting seem long, we are re-
 luctant to forfeit our lesser estate for even that joy:

Not in this World to see his face--
 Sounds long--until I read the place
 Where this--is said to be
 But just the Primer--to a life--
 Unopened--rare--Upon the Shelf--
 Clasped yet--to Him--and me--

And yet--My Primer suits me so
 I would not choose--a Book to know
 Than that--be sweeter wise--
 Might some one else--so learned--be--
 And leave me--just my A--B--C--
 Himself--could have the Skies-- (418)

So ineffable a concept, so immediately lacking in rela-
 vance to our immediate human needs, is the "Further
 Heaven," (569) compared with even the momentary gratifi-
 cations of this life, that we define highest human bliss
 accordingly:

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)

Of equal import in Miss Dickinson's poetic survey of mortal blessedness is the role of other humans, whom we cherish beyond mortal estimate:

The Heaven vests for Each
In that small Deity
It craved the grace to worship
Some bashful Summer's Day--

Half shrinking from the Glory
It importuned to see
Till these faint Tabernacles drop
In full Eternity--

. (694)

No matter where we move, "Angels rent the House next ours," (1544), prefiguring another Heaven. Granting God's prior claims, Miss Dickinson also acknowledged our preoccupation with earthly "deities" and mortal "Angels":

God is indeed a jealous God--
He cannot bear to see
That we had rather not with Him
But with each other play. (1719)

Such devotion to other mortals can take the form of light, irreverent exuberance:

To own a Susan of my own
Is of itself a Bliss--
Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,
Continue me in this! (1401)

or of heightened sensitivity to another's presence:

Elysium is as far as to
The very nearest Room
If in that Room a Friend await
Felicity or Doom--

. (1760)

or it can, as Miss Dickinson demonstrated in exploring all its possibilities, become consummate, sacrilegious

idolatry. Another human's attraction can "reduce" the Heaven's (464); the absolute, all-inclusive dedication of one mortal to another would more than satisfy the demands of even a jealous God:

Doubt Me! My Dim Companion!
 Why, God, would be content
 With but a fraction of the Life--
 Poured thee, without a stint--

The whole of me--forever--
 What more the Woman can,
 Say quick, that I may dower thee
 With last Delight I own!

It cannot be my Spirit
 For that was thine, before--
 (275)

If such utter human devotion were denied its object during this life, it would become transformed into sublimated hope of possession in death. Perhaps the final irony is that "Bliss," in such an instance, would be defined exclusively in terms of union, not in Heaven with an unknown, uncherished God, but in death with another mortal whom we could know and cherish more:

.
 Forgive me, if the Grave come slow--
 For Coveting to look at Thee--
 Forgive me, if to stroke thy frost
 Outvisions Paradise! (577)

Certainly this nineteenth-century New England poet contemplated unflinchingly both the appealing and the appalling possibilities of beatitude. In the absence of any further reassurances from a distant deity to resolve modern human doubts, she captured the essence of our ambivalence with respect to another "World"--supposedly

"better"--but "Still to be explained" (934):

I sued the News--yet feared-the News
 That such a Realm could be--
 "The House not made with Hands" it was--
 Thrown open wide to me-- (1360)

In colloquialisms she could consider our possibilities
 and suggest one resolution of our dilemma:

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)

And, in the loveliest of utterances, she could weigh
 the "Evidence"--images of unsubstantiality--and cast a
 poignant verdict in favor of Earth and mortal joy:

Their Height in Heaven comforts not--
 Their Glory--nought to me--
 'Twas 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)

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