

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#501 (1862)

This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond –
Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound –
It beckons, and it baffles –
Philosophy – don't know –
And through a Riddle, at the last –
Sagacity, must go –
To guess it, puzzles scholars –
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown –
Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
Blushes, if any see –
Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
And asks a Vane, the way –
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
Strong Hallelujahs roll –
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul –

ANALYSIS

“The first twelve lines were first published in the *Outlook*, LIII (25 January 1896), 140, titled ‘Immortality’... The same lines were also issued in *Poems* (1896), 139, without title, and appear in later collections.”

Thomas H. Johnson, ed.
The Poems of Emily Dickinson
(Harvard 1955) II, 385

“In Emily’s realm of religious thought, both doubt and belief occupy minor places beside a direct and hostile attack upon the orthodox position. Often with a fine irony, yet with unmistakable intention, she reviled her ancestral God.... All her instincts lead her to believe in the reality of God, and equally induce her to doubt the reality of the preposterous monster proposed to her by conventional religion.... No one though of bitterer gibes: even Blake appears vague and indefinite beside her.... ‘Burglar, banker, father,’ she addresses the deity, in a memorable line hinting at a relation in her subconscious between her father on earth and in heaven. She cannot absolve God for veiling his face behind the ruthlessness of life and nature... God has vainly sought to envelop himself in a pink shawl. A brilliant poem begins with the seemingly innocent and orthodox statement, ‘I know that he exists.’ The argument is that God plays hide-and-seek with his creatures.”

Henry W. Wells
Introduction to Emily Dickinson
(Packard & Company 1947) 152-56

“[In reference to her religious faith] the important question is: if Emily Dickinson found theological orthodoxies unacceptable, even repugnant, why did she turn in moments of greatest need to such men as Hale and Gladden and Wadsworth? Since so much of her poetry shows her kinship with the transcendentalists in their iconoclasm and distrust of institutions, why did she not find in the essays of

George Ripley or the sermons of Theodore Parker, and especially in the persuasive voice of Emerson, all the affirmations that she needed? The answer is clear. Her 'rapt attention' to immortality never deceived her senses into overlooking the essential difference between the nature of the Godhead and the nature of man. She knew that the immensity and obduracy of the Creator are beyond the grasp of the creature. Yet she was rebel enough not to accept willingly the limits that she knew are man's. She gave early expression to the thought in 'Just lost – when I was saved.' On the verge of finding the meaning of meaning she becomes 'lost,' in the sense of realizing that she will never discover it during her span of mortality.

She now began to record in poems each new awareness of her relation to the inscrutable. 'This World is not Conclusion,' she avers almost truculently, as though she hoped the assertion would forestall her own doubts; 'And through a Riddle, at the last / Sagacity must go.' We have the witness of martyrs who have endured contempt and crucifixion for their faith, yet our uncertainty persists.... On occasion she queries whether simple stoicism may not be the answer. 'Our journey had advanced,' she imagines, to the fork in Being's road called Eternity....

Thus from the first she quested for certainties which from beginning to end she rejected. Yet in the light of her philosophic achievement in the years between 1862 and 1865, one can observe that the questings are directed less at her own uncertainties than at the gestures she saw and the hallelujahs she heard rolling from the Valley pulpits. She never again came near to matching the fecundity of those years, nor did she ever again deal so brilliantly with the philosophical problems now central in almost all the poems she was writing. A marked change occurs in the nature and the virtuosity of the poems written after she had made her adjustment to Wadsworth's removal, and had undertaken, as it were, her preceptorial studies with Higginson. The lyrical, despairing outbursts of the bereaved bride come abruptly to an end. In their place she wrote a whole series of poems that establish her philosophical position on the nature and destiny of man. They are written with a serene detachment that shows the emergence of a new being."

Thomas H. Johnson
Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography
(Harvard 1955) 238-40

"With many great religious thinkers doubt is a constant ingredient of faith. These are the ones who know despair as well as ecstasy, and this is what keeps their believing 'nimble.' Such is the tension that marks the vitality of Dickinson's religious life and informs her best poems on immortality.

Whenever the formulas of conventional religion are invoked, the resistance of her inquiring mind rises to cancel them out or at least to balance them in a precarious equilibrium. Such is her strategy in an extremely interesting poem ["This World is not Conclusion"].... Her private debate is framed by the public profession of faith, as in a church service remembered during her subsequent inner struggle to make this official belief personal. The poem begins with a resounding echo of the hymns she had sung out of Watts' *Christian Psalms*. Heaven may be 'Invisible' but we hear it in the "music" of Sunday worship, answered at the end when 'Strong Hallelujahs roll.' Once again this positive assertion of belief is reinforced by her rare use of a period to punctuate the opening line, 'This World is not Conclusion.'—which lends an air of finality excluding all further discussion. But no sooner is a description of heaven attempted than doubts begin to proliferate, already planted in the second line by the scientific word 'Species' for the kind of world that stands beyond.

Following the initial quatrain each succeeding one modifies its flat statement of act. (The poem clearly divides itself into five stanzas though there are no spacings to indicate this.) The structure of antitheses is set up by the fifth line, 'It beckons, and it baffles,' the two alliterating predications balanced on a fulcrum and weighted syllable against syllable. Throughout the center of the poem philosophy has usurped the role of faith, but the doubts are countered by a positive 'it' which continues to stand for the after life until lost in confusion at the end. 'Scholars' puzzle their heads here on earth because to solve the riddle of death 'Sagacity'—both mortal wisdom and sentience—"must go...through" the grave, presumably emerging vindicated on the other side. But to answer the questions raised by the rational mind requires something more than the calm assumption of immortality made at the beginning.

The martyred saints of an earlier day bore the contempt of unbelievers, even to the point of crucifixion, because they were exalted by faith. Though this profound emotional assurance is exactly what has been missing from the poem so far, 'Faith' finally appears belatedly at the opening of the fourth stanza. But this shy young lady does not make a very dignified entrance into the august assemblage of scholars. She trips at the threshold, is covered with confusion ('Blushes'), fidgets with her hands ('Plucks'), and instead of offering any triumphant evidence asks the first inane question that enters her head. Can a weather vane, in default of a steeple, point the way to heaven today?

The last stanza is a final reversal of the first one, its quiet assertion having been gradually replaced by the noise of debate and then by the attempt to drown that out with rolling hallelujahs. But modern man is afflicted by doubts, and there is no drug to relieve his pain. 'Narcotics' is the sharpest epithet she ever applied to the sermons and hymns of an orthodoxy she found inadequate. The poem has moved steadily downward from a flat statement of belief to a confession of gnawing doubt that 'nibbles the soul.' There is no attempt at a resolution of the debate, and this is the source of its special effect. There is even a suggestion that it has spread to the pulpit, where 'Much Gesture' implies too much for a faith that is firmly held, which adds a final irony. Such is the plight of the religious sensibility in an increasingly rational age, but the poet does not take sides."

Charles R. Anderson
Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise
(Holt 1960) 266-68

Michael Hollister (2014)