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# Notes on "God" and Father in Poems of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath

James E. Kulas

On the funeral day of her father, Edward Dickinson, in 1874, Emily, aged forty-three, retired to her room and for the last twelve years of her life saw almost no one save her mother, brother and sister. When Otto Plath died in 1940 his eight-year-old daughter, Sylvia, told her mother, "I'll never speak to God again."[1] These facts about two eminent modern poets (Dickinson's fame, and correct texts of her work, coming mainly in this century) might have little significance in themselves. But related circumstances taken with the facts combine to enhance our appreciation of certain outstanding poems of each author.

Emily's loss of her father, and indeed of many others in her life whom she also loved, began in her early years.[2] This early "loss" in the case of her father was a growing separation between them, which took various forms. Edward was often away from home at his legal and public duties, and when at home seemed distant and forbidding to Emily. He clearly favored his son, Austin, and while this was a quite common situation in those days, it greatly distressed Emily, as her letters to relatives and friends make clear; she very much wanted and needed care and approval for her ideas and writing from her successful father, but it was not provided. When, recovering from an illness, she longs to return to school and friends but must wait, she is unhappy. Her mother too is often bedridden, and Emily dutifully cares for her; yet Emily apparently felt as little understanding from her mother as from her father. At fourteen Emily is depressed over the death of school friends, and the following year she is left lonely again as her brother Austin goes away to college. Already an avid letter writer, she is pained when one of her friends does not reply. Whatever time may cause her to lack or lose, she will

not suffer it bleakly, as she begins to live in and for the companionship of written words, others' and hers.

But before those best of her own words are to come—a number of the thousand poems of her middle years—Emily experiences further separation. This was a separation she herself chose, yet it may have been more painful than some of the previous and subsequent withdrawals by death and departure of others from her. It was her deciding not to join her family and friends in religious commitment, as she watched them profess Conversion, or Revival, as it was called, including examination of conscience, admission of sin, and repentance. When Emily entered Mount Holyoke College in 1847, so strong were the Revivalist pressures on the students to convert to the conservative Trinitarian faith that many of them did so. In the words of Professor Knapp, the converts then, with school officials, "worked on" Emily's "sensitive, nervous nature" instead of trying "to convince her on rational grounds." (ED, p. 33) Emily would not give in; she became miserable, grew ill, and left the College after one year. Knapp comments that had Emily accepted conversion, she would also have had "to believe that the horrific realities of both sickness and death are gifts of God." (ED, p. 30) Or, in other religious language, that they are divine mysteries, not to be questioned. Emily was seventeen, but had felt and seen enough of harsh reality that she must question a providential God, a Father of All. New losses awaited her, of men she would love besides Father, and increasing illnesses until the end: her mother's, and Judge Otis Lord's and her own. Take any two "huge" losses or partings (Emily's or one's own), and consider: (1732)[3]

My life closed twice before its close—
It yet remains to see
If immortality unveil
A third event to me

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell. (?, 1896)

Though Johnson gives no date for the writing of the poem, he places it among the last in the collection, and it may well have been composed soon after Judge Lord's death in 1884. Lord and Emily wrote to each other weekly for five years; what survives of their letters shows their deep mutual love, and Lord's offer of marriage, which Emily declined. (ED, pp. 52-3) We have seen enough of Emily's early losses to know her last one, of Judge Lord, is not needed as one of the two referred to in the poem. In any case, readers may prefer not to think of loss by physical death as being meant by the two closings: forsaken love, betrayals, disgraces, and more may qualify, giving the poem amplitude of appeal. Yet it is interesting if the immediate stimulus for the poem was Dickinson's grief over Lord's death. Lord was eighteen years older than Emily, eminent in law as her father had been—and bestowing on her love and attention as her father had never done, clearly arousing her in turn to exultant love and happiness. Then why her rejection of marriage? Emily may well have felt she could not take proper care of both her paralytic mother and a husband. By the time her mother died in late 1882, Judge Lord had become critically ill.

But we may ask, what is the point of the biographical information, as its relevance to the poem quoted cannot be more than speculative? Indeed the main point of these notes is no more than speculation: that certain traumas in the life of a literary artist, particularly in relation to a father, may be the occasion or even cause of certain works of the artist. Such speculation became popular after Sigmund Freud, though the psychoanalytic approach is no longer in favor; or at least among critics dealing with women authors, Freud's system of "complexes" is being assimilated and refined in a more comprehensive psychology, such as that of Carl Jung.[4] That there is a basis for such speculation is seen in biographical material that authors produce that sometimes clearly sheds light on their more major imaginative creations, such as Franz Kafka's long "Letter to His Father" and Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, not to mention the many personal letters, diaries, interviews that may be left.

The Dickinson poem #1732 does not tell us much about the speaker's attitude toward God, and surely not about whether the speaker is desolate over the loss of (as I speculate) a prospective-husband-cum-father. We know from other poems that Dickinson believed in a God, but in an incomprehensible one, rather than in the Christian benevolent and compassionate God. Too many of her poems about death—and death is by far her favorite topic—offer little hope of immortality of any sort, even in poems that mention it, as in the present poem. What happened to man after death, if anything, only God knew. In #1732 immortality, heaven and hell are all used ironically.

Until the last two lines we might think the speaker imagines a third great ("huge") event awaits her after death. Parting from another, whether of family members, friends or lovers, as shown not only in Dickinson's and our time but in countless narratives historical and fictional, far more often brings pain than any pleasant feeling. Thus, if that "is all we know of heaven," which faith holds is where God abides, then we know not where nor when nor what nor even if it is — we know nothing of it, and the closest we can get to it in knowledge is the fact of death or other shocking loss. In an earlier poem, #489, Dickinson had turned the faith in God's "Omnipresence" into a mocking question and answer: "Is Heaven a Place...?/...Unto the Dead/There's no Geography—." That is, "Location's narrow way"—the grave—"is for Ourselves." (c. 1862, 1927) Both the last verses, then, are grimly of a piece in #1732. For parting "is all we need of hell" must be especially convincing in our century. What need of some postmortem hell have war-torn and otherwise-ravaged multitudes who lost almost everything?

Some readers might counter that in poem #1052, familiar to generations of Americans from their high-school literature anthologies, Dickinson is affirming belief in heaven: "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—." (c. 1865-1890) But the poem is hardly compelling upon scrutiny. Presumably the speaker at least saw pictures

of heather and billow, while no credible ones exist for God and heaven. And the last line virtually turns the poem into a satire of an attitude that heaven is a place for special privilege. That is, "Checks" (British : cheques), orders for money to be paid by a bank, will gain one's arrival and entry at heaven. Curiously, early editions of this poem, even well into this century, had the word "Charts" for "Checks," removing the satire. Even if we take "Checks" in the sense of "tickets," implying payment for a trip, the negative connotation remains.

Dickinson's poem #49 is a terse, strong complaint against the benevolence and kindness of God the Father.

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God !
Angels—twice descending
Reimbursed my store—
Burglar ! Banker—Father !
I am poor once more ! (c. 1858, 1890)

Unlike the losses mentioned in the previously-discussed "My life closed twice before its close," we can be sure that the first two losses here are by death, "in the sod." The opening lines also imply that her subsequent losses were of another kind. The poignancy of the images and tone of the rest of the poem, together with the shift to trochees and the vocative mood, fill us with a sense of how sharp can be losses other than by death. If Johnson's date for the writing of the poem is right, Dickinson has in the previous few years met and grown close to, and quite possibly come to love, two men who in turn gave her their affection and friendship : the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, a Presbyterian minister, and Samuel Bowles, editor of a newspaper.

If Emily did love either or both of these men, the hopelessness for a fulfilling relationship must have soon overcome her, for they were both married and fathers. Is this the sort of loss to which Dickinson is referring in the second stanza? There is no evidence for saying so. Yet

including Judge Lord the three men Emily loved most were all family men, such as with whom she might imagine herself, if not realistically as wife (except in the case of Judge Lord), then at least as daughter. If this seems too far-fetched and Freudian, we may note that Emily at age thirty-one, in a letter to her unidentified "Master," implores him to open his "life wide, and take me in forever," and should he do so, she would always be very quiet and would be his "best little girl." (Quoted by Knapp, ED, p. 49) It is not impossible to take these words as those of a young girl who is still missing her father.

Thus in poem #49 "Father" is not only the supernatural but the natural one. It is a commonplace of psychology that a person's conception of God is drawn from the childhood relationship with his or her father. For some children, like Emily, it seems "The Lord giveth, but alas ! He often taketh away, even Himself!" Often He takes away by death, and the child stands begging at the grave (the so-called "door of God"). The child's angels (and passing time) bring happiness again (new loves, friends, hopes). Then banker-father turns burglar again! To his own poor child! This may appear a sentimental reading and interpretation, but I hope not a fantastic one.

To conclude these notes on Dickinson, I would like to comment briefly on poem #1055, in which, Professor Knapp says, Emily "commemorated her father." (ED, p. 52)

> The Soul should always stand ajar
> That if the Heaven inquire
> He will not be obliged to wait
> Or shy of troubling Her
> Depart, before the Host have slid
> The Bolt unto the Door—
> To search for the accomplished Guest,
> Her Visitor, no more— (c. 1865, 1896)

The soul, in Christian faith, is the undying personal spirit or essence of everyone. It holds all the faculties : mind, imagination, feelings, memories and hopes. This true and full self, says the poet, should always be open.

To whom? Why, to the loved one, the heavenly guest who may call at any time. In line two "the Heaven" is a metonymy for the one most beloved, the best of all. In a religious interpretation, this one is God the Father, or it is his son Jesus, who himself opened and offered his life to others. Humanly, this person is who we love and want and need most, and so in Emily's case we may guess it is her father, or another in her life who is a father image. Such a one should not be kept waiting or find the door bolted, as he may be "shy of troubling Her" and leave before the host comes to the door; then she may look for the "accomplished Guest," who may return "no more." This poem is not only a commemoration but a testimony of hope and faith that to be open always to love is best, even though there is no assurance the beloved will call (only if "the Heaven inquire"). Emily's fidelity to her father and others she loved outlived them. While many of her poems speak of closings, partings and losses, this poem in its voice of hope is resonant and prevailing.

Sylvia Plath was born a century after Dickinson's birth. Like Dickinson, she had a difficult, ambivalent relationship with her father, which lasted all her life, though he died when she was eight. Also like Dickinson, she was a prolific letter writer, and longed to receive letters from family and friends. Yet here the similarities between them end. Plath traveled widely in her country, received higher education, published poetry and fiction in her twenties, went to England where she became a wife and mother, became separated from her husband, and wrote her best poetry in the year before she died, a suicide at thirty. Readers who wish more information on Plath's life and its relation to her work should consult professor Lynda K. Bundtzen's recent study.[5] Her book relates major events in Plath's life to her works, and includes excerpts from her letters not previously published. Plath's letters in their entirety, together with her novel, give readers a sense of the high degree to which her exterior life affected her artistic achievement.

The poem "Full Fathom Five" is an allusion to the song sung by Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. As the verse continues "...thy father lies,"

we see the poem is about Plath's own father, long dead, whom she imagines drowned. She says of him, as she imagines his body strangely preserved and awesome, "You defy other godhood./... Father, this thick air is murderous./I would breathe water." It is a death wish by the author to join the "Old man."[6]

In "Little Fugue"—fugue in the sense of lost memory—the speaker calls out : "Such a dark funnel, my father ! /I see your voice / Black and leafy, as in my childhood,/... I am guilty of nothing." This sense of guilt in the speaker, that is, Plath, may well go back to her childhood, when she saw her father on one leg, dying uncaringly, perversely (he refused to see a doctor), in spite of her tending him, a little nurse dressed in white. She concludes dully, "Death opened, like a black tree, blackly. /I survive the while, /Arranging my morning. /These are my fingers, this is my baby." This is in 1962. Her father had died twenty-one years ago. And, as Sylvia learned, he could have been saved. (SPLH, p. 23)

And so, not long after "Little Fugue" nor long before her own death, Sylvia writes to him, in "Daddy" : "Daddy, I have had to kill you. /You died before I had time—/Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,/... I never could talk to you. /The tongue stuck in my jaw./... I have always been scared of you, /With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo./... Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—/Not God but a swastica /So black no sky could squeak through./... The boot in the face, the brute /Brute heart of a brute like you./... I made a model of you, /A man in black with a Meinkampf look /And a love of the rack and the screw."/

Daddy, you can lie back now.
There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

This is painful and it is poetry. It comes from one who in the last weeks of her life could call herself "God's lioness" ("Ariel") ; from one who could say, "the far /Fields melt my heart./They threaten /To let me

through to a heaven / Starless and fatherless, a dark water." ("Sheep in Fog") And at last from one who wrote ("Edge"):

The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment,...

To a loved one, after explaining why she could not live with him, Emily Dickinson concluded that they must live on "that White Sustenance— / Despair —" (poem #640) (c. 1862, 1890) At about the same time she wrote to her "Sire," who left her "A Legacy of Love" and "Boundaries of Pain—" (poem #644) (c. 1862, 1890) In her ambivalent but essentially hurtful feelings toward the Father and her father and other men in her life, Dickinson certainly knew despair, but it was not what sustained her. Her themes and moods in her work were many and far-ranging. When despair came from time to time, she faced it, and gave it a voice and shape and color, so that others in loneliness and loss might recognize it and find it controlled. Sylvia Plath, early abandoned by her dead father and at twenty-nine left by her husband, feeling the more alone in caring for her children, writes ("Lesbos") : "Now I am silent, hate / Up to my neck, / Thick, thick." Yet she, like Dickinson, was not silenced by despair but by death, for not every suicide acts in despair. It may be an act of desire for something or someone more, for a new beginning, as at the end of "Ariel" Plath feels "at one with the drive / Into the red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning." If in her last days Plath felt desolate, this did not kill her spirit. She wrote on, and left words like "Axes/After whose stroke the wood rings, /And the echoes ! " ("Words")

Dickinson and Plath are not outstanding poets because of certain paternal and other losses in their early and later life. Nor can it be argued that more than a relatively few of their poems have a plausible connection with their personal sorrows. Yet it seems to me likely that had they not suffered as shown, some of their best poems would not have been made. Genius is required to turn personal suffering into art. But it is also true that some geniuses require a suffering that most people have not felt in order to create a lasting vision of such reality for all people.

Notes:

1. *Sylvia Plath : Letters Home,* Selected and edited by Aurelia Plath. New York : Harper and Row, 1975, p. 25. Subsequent references to this work appear in the text as *SPLH.*
2. Facts in this paragraph are drawn from Bettina L. Knapp, *Emily Dickinson.* New York : The Continuum Publishing Company, 1989, pp. 20, 22, 23, 25-7, 39, 44-5. Subsequent references to this work appear in the text as ED.
3. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson,* ed. Thomas H. Johnson. London : Faber and Faber Limited, 1970. All references to Dickinson's poems are as numbered in parenthesis in this edition. If dates are given in parenthesis, e. g. (c. 1865, 1890), the first is that which Johnson conjectures for the poem's composition, and the second date is that of first publication.
4. See, for example, Jung's *Aspects of the Feminine,* tr. R. F. C. Hull. Bollingen Series. New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1982.
5. *Plath's Incarnations : Woman and the Creative Process,* Lynda K. Bundtzen. Ann Arbor : The University of Michigan, 1988 (paperback).
6. Quotations from the poems of Plath are from *Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems.* Chosen by Ted Hughes. London : Faber and Faber, 1985.