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Reading Emily Dickinson's "Now I lay thee down to sleep" as a Variant¹

Due to thorough manuscript analysis and inquiries into Dickinson's personal relationships and private circulation of poems, now there is a general openness in today's critical thinking to the open-endedness and inherent ambiguity of her poetry, though the possibility for various interpretations have given scholars ground for much debate and disagreement.² Sharon Cameron's recent *Choosing not Choosing*³ seems to have started a new chapter in the dispute. Having thoroughly researched fascicles fifteen, sixteen and twenty, Cameron proposed the possibility of reading variants as non-exclusive variants,⁴ saying that "words that are variants are part of the poem outside of which they ostensibly lie, as poems in the same fascicle may sometimes be seen as variants of each other."⁵ These variants, moreover, argues Cameron, are not about the same thing, but are the same thing. This can be applied, I think, to all of Dickinson's poems where there is a multitude of meanings, by considering the various possibilities of interpretation as variants of the poems. Accordingly, "Now I lay thee down to

¹ I am very grateful to Prof. Jane Donahue Ebewein, who called my attention to the parodic aspect of the poem, and helped my work with her comments, criticism and suggestions.

² Dickinson's contradictions are usually "reconciled" by declaring no need for reconciliation. Among the recent publications, see, for example: Gary Lee Stonum. *The Dickinson Sublime*. Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990; and Beth Maclay Doriani. *Emily Dickinson: Daughter of Prophecy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.

³ Cameron. *Choosing not Choosing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

⁴ Before Cameron, Miller also recognises the importance of variations, considering them as clarifying means that "bring us closer to the poet's own thoughts about her poem" (Cristanne Miller. *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1987, p. 47).

⁵ Cameron, p. 5.

sleep," written in approximately 1882 and first published in 1924, is on the textual level a variant of a well-known bedtime prayer, while on the level of interpretation it carries the possibility of being several variants at the same time:

The prayer:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

The poem:

Now I lay thee down to Sleep -
I pray the Lord thy Dust to keep -
And if thou live before thou wake -
I pray the Lord thy Soul to make -⁶

The prayer presumes a benevolent, provident God who would take care of a person's eternal part (i.e., the soul) after death has separated it from the body. Following Cameron's theory, Dickinson's task when rewriting the prayer was to produce a variant that is the same as the original text, yet "extends the text's identity in ways that make it seem potentially limitless."⁷

Wheatcroft calls this poem a "mock elegy in the form of a parody,"⁸ arguing that "[n]ot only does the poem pervert the most widely used bedtime prayer of Protestant New England children; it also casts doubt on the eternal existence of the soul."⁹ Yet, this parody is not funny in the first place, carrying a serious sense of humour and wit. While rejecting the metaphysic of orthodoxy in theory, Dickinson could not repudiate the condition coming from it, therefore "her humour undermines the foundations of New England orthodoxy"¹⁰ and at the same time offers a redefinition for unacceptable doctrines. In fact, her act of rewriting a prayer reflects this attitude.

⁶ All references to the poems by Dickinson are to this edition: Thomas H. Johnson, ed. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1960.

⁷ Cameron, p. 5.

⁸ John Wheatcroft. "A Serious View of Humour in Emily Dickinson's Poetry." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 22.3 (Spring 1974) 95-104, p. 99. Lindberg-Seyersted also refers to this poem as a parody: "A set of full rhymes coloring all the line ends of a stanza cooperates with metrical regularity to bring about a humorously exaggerated formality of tone in the following parody..." (Brita Lindberg-Seyersted. *The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson*. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri AB, 1968, p. 159). However, all the components of this "humorously exaggerated formality" can be found in the original piece, too. Therefore it is the content, in the first place, that strikes the reader - the form is borrowed. And though the poem may provoke laughter as a first reaction, it surely urges us to think over the "perverted" message.

⁹ Wheatcroft, p. 99.

¹⁰ Wheatcroft, p. 97.

If we regard the two texts as variants to each other, the exchanged words should stand for the same things. In this case the poem is a self-addressing one, it is clear; how soul can be equivalent with Dust, die with live, and take with make, needs further investigation, which I attempt later on. But even changing the person induces difficulties in the interpretation. The complication lies in the fact that, although Dickinson changes the first person singular to second person when referring to the one about whom she speaks, she keeps the first person for the one who says the prayer. This double nature of the speaking character together with the additional changes in the vocabulary and the spelling reshape the meaning of the text.

Capitalising sleep strengthens the traditional Christian identification of sleep with eternal sleep, that is death, while capitalising dust and soul emphasises the two concepts as constituents of the individual. Exchanging the verb die for the verb live shifts the stress from hypothesis in the original prayer to reality in the poem: “And if I die before I wake” reflects the Christian attitude that life should be lived knowing that it might end at any moment. Thus every night carries the possibility of a sudden death. Dickinson goes one step further: “And if thou live before thou wake” assumes that every night carries the possibility – and only the possibility – of life;¹¹ as a consequence, every night is a death. But due to the split identity it is difficult to define who exactly dies repeatedly.

The individual consisting of two parts, Dust (body) and Soul corresponds to Christian teaching and becomes a recurring theme in Dickinson’s poetry.¹² What is extraordinary is her assigning separate lives to these components (even while the person is alive), which turns the natural state of the person into

¹¹ See a variant of the same idea in “On that specific pillow” (#1533), written in approximately 1881 (almost concurrently with “Now I lay thee down to sleep”): “On that specific Pillow / Our projects flit away – / The Night’s tremendous Morrow / And whether sleep will stay / Or usher us – a stranger – / To situation new / The effort to comprise it / Is all the soul can do.” Antecedents of these poems could be “Let me not mar that perfect dream” (#1335; from c. 1875): “Let me not mar that perfect Dream / By an Auroral stain / But so adjust my *daily Night* / That it will come again” (ll. 1–4; my emphasis); and “Heart, not so heavy as mine” (#83): “Tomorrow, night will come again – / Perhaps, weary and sore” (ll. 17–18).

¹² One of the most illustrious examples is in poem “I am afraid to own a body” (#1090): “I am afraid to own a Body – / I am afraid to own a Soul – / Profound – precarious Property – / Possession, not optional –” (ll. 1–4). In Dickinson’s poetry, this “double estate” suggests a unity, in the first place, and the separation of the two components is mostly described as the consequence of death: for instance, see “Departed to the judgement” (#524), “Death is a dialogue between” (#976) and “The overtakeness of those” (#1691).

schizophrenia, resulting in a peculiar trinity: there is the persona as Dust, the persona as Soul, and a complex persona as the unity of Dust and Soul – the latter persona identified as I, addressing her two other selves.¹³ Soul and body, furthermore, obviously experience different realities in a person's life. But while Christian teachings try to settle this duality by proposing a conscious choice of the soul, that is true experience, Dickinson adapts this spiritual reality to the body's experience, too.

At the same time, the bodily reality is applied to the soul, since the endurance of the body and the soul is reversed, if compared with the traditional Christian concept: whereas in the prayer the soul survives death, in the poem the soul must each day be made anew. The soul is not immortal and there is a permanent need for its re-creation, as a pre-condition for the existence of the complete identity, just as the living body is a pre-condition for the existence of the soul. This multi-layered inter-dependence gives special emphasis to the body, being more enduring than the soul, and offering an opportunity for the soul to exist. However, this relation also implies that it is the soul that is able to revive, while the body is only a dwelling place for the spiritual self. Reducing the soul and the body to a common denominator, it is the corporal that is more determining on the textual level. As Robert M. Smith contends: "Dickinson's art is never ethereal, but aggressively physical."¹⁴ This is how the word Dust can function as soul.

The changes Dickinson made turned the bedtime prayer into a funeral prayer, or rather combined the two types, assuming that each night is a death to come. In consequence, each day is an agonising experience, resulting in the extinction of the soul. Life is dreadful, continuously labouring with death. This fear is expressed in the gothic image of being buried alive,¹⁵ which may be found

¹³ This attitude was not alien to Dickinson, as can be observed in "I felt my life with both my hands" (#351): "I felt my life with both my hands / To see if it was there - / I held my spirit to the Glass, / To prove it possibler - // I turned my Being round and round / And paused at every pound / To ask the Owner's name - / For doubt, that I should know the Sound -" (ll. 1-8). The poem clearly has a speaking character (identified as "I"), and has both a soul (identified as "my spirit") and a living body (identified as "my Being"), so it is a mistake to identify the "I" simply with the spirit, as Robert McClure Smith suggests (*The Seductions of Emily Dickinson*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1996, p. 118).

¹⁴ Smith, p. 110.

¹⁵ The feeling of being buried alive is also a recurring theme in Dickinson's poetry, meaning an entombed existence in-between Life and Resurrection. Due to the manifold meaning of her terminology, especially of death and life, this existence can be understood as both of this world and

in the line “And if thou live before thou wake” which may be paraphrased as: and if you (body) resurrect while you do not have your spirit, therefore being still in the state of being dead. For the living body without the soul the world – its dwelling place – is just a tomb. But continuing with the parallel, we might see the body functioning as a tomb for the soul, too – especially since it is called Dust. This further strengthens the claustrophobia of the selves as the multi-layered inter-relation is transformed into the image of a nest of coffins. Again, while life is lived symbolically in “the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23) in the Christian belief, life practically is a death-experience here.

From this analysis we can see how the text becomes transformed. Dickinson touches upon all the possibilities of ambiguity, which the original function (the prayer) clears up. The possible separation of body and soul in life – an unusual idea – may generate from the second line of the prayer: “I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” Religion makes it clear that ‘keep’ here is to be understood as protect, guard – that is, keep safe. Yet, separating the text from Christian doctrine, keep takes up the meaning of keep somewhere, as if the soul were kept separately from the body at night for safety.¹⁶ Dickinson takes advantage of this reading and supports it by her special use of the dash, signifying a suppressed word or idea.¹⁷ The physical separation inherent in the meanings of the words keep as well as take (prayer, l. 4.) and make (poem, l.4.), respectively, confirms that every night does become a death – death according to Christian

of the other. See, for example, “So give me back to death” (#1632). “And now, by Life deprived, / In my own Grave I breathe” (ll. 4–5); “Advance is Life’s condition / The Grave but a Relay / Supposed to be a terminus / That makes it hated so – / / The Tunnel is not lighted / Existence with a wall / Is better we consider / Than not exist at all –” (#1652, ll. 1–8). See also the poems where a grave appears as somebody’s home as in “A dimple in the tomb” (#1489), “Sweet, safe houses” (#457); or an inn: “What inn is this” (#115); or simply something protective: “Some, too fragile for winter winds” (#141) and “The clouds their backs together laid” (#1172). Lindberg-Seyersted contends that “[h]ere domestic imagery is most certainly used to make the mystery of death appear less terrifying” (p. 87). Since Dickinson draws the two worlds near each other, making death look less terrifying means, at the same time, making life look more terrifying.

¹⁶ A similar gothic reading of “It was a grave, yet bore no stone” (#876) might begin with a person’s soul entombed as a punishment. “It was a Grave, yet bore no Stone / Enclosed ‘twas not of Rail / A consciousness its Acre, and / It held a Human Soul. // Entombed by whom, for what offence” (ll. 1–5). The poem is also an example of how the word *soul* may substitute *body*.

¹⁷ The clearest example to demonstrate this technique of Dickinson’s may be found in the last line of “We dream – it s good we are dreaming –” (#531): “It’s pruderter – to dream –” the poem ends, without phrasing the hardly omissible government of the grammatical structure. Also in the last line of “Follow wise Orion” (#1538): “He is just as high –”.

theology as the separation of dust and soul. The consuming everyday struggle for the spiritual survival manifested in this disintegrating procedure results in the person's collapse. Consequently, even if we accept the possibility of self-address, we might as well state that the speaker addresses someone (or something) that is not identified as the speaker's person.¹⁸

The speaker takes care of the addressed one. The first line ("Now I lay thee down to Sleep") if read literally, clearly expresses motherly care. But if we also accept the symbolic meaning of the poem, this concern then turns into an utterly gothic, gruesome providence: care that is revealed in terms of providing a proper death both physically and spiritually. Considering the conjectured date for this poem, 1882, when Dickinson was hit or threatened by deaths of loved ones (Josiah Holland, Charles Wadsworth, her own mother and Judge Lord),¹⁹ the poem's reading as a funeral oration seems to be appropriate.

Death as the manifestation of Providence in the poem becomes qualified as a purifying, sustaining force. This aspect of death, which is absolutely contrary to the Christian concept and to what we have observed so far in the poem, can further be justified if we assume a parallelly existing symbolic reading of Sleep, in which the idea of separation becomes dominant, resulting in a farewell poem. In this case the speaker decides on excluding the addressee – or her relationship with the addressee – from her life. Yet, the caring attitude of the speaking person remains, so the need for separation must be generated by an outside force.

One of the several feasible readings, supported by Dickinson's biography, suggests a love affair that should not, cannot be fulfilled. Bidding farewell, therefore, makes a memory out of the flesh and blood experience, turning it into Dust, lacking the contact that would make the relationship live. The exclusion, composed in the image of Sleep, resembles rather a life imprisonment than a death penalty. The resurrection of the relation is independent of the speaker. The exemption from the punishment (which is a mutual punishment) is shifted to an undefined dimension, beyond the physical world. This dimension can be the other world, the Kingdom of God. The same idea can also be found in her last

¹⁸ The unspecified address is a general characteristic of Dickinson's late poetry, helping to create the universality of reference. Dickinson's poetry of 1880's demonstrate "a shifting of emphasis from the very emotional and personal to a more 'philosophical' and more universal tone" (Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, p. 55-7).

¹⁹ Facts about Dickinson's life are taken from: Richard B Sewall. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1994.

letter²⁰ to John Graves: “Ah John – Gone? Then I lift the lid to my box of Phantoms, and lay another in, unto the Resurrection – Then will I gather in Paradise, the blossoms fallen here, and on the shores of the sea of Light, seek my missing sands”²¹ (Letter #186).²² Accordingly, the last three lines of the poem refer to a possible Judgement Day, interpretable as follows: I pray that there be a Judgement Day when your body is also to resurrect in the Kingdom of God (“I pray the Lord thy Dust to keep”); and if God raises your body from the dead (“And if thou live before thou wake”), I pray that it should be a complete resurrection; not the resurrection of the memory I made out of you, which is only Dust, but I ask God to recreate your soul which I took away on Earth (“I pray the Lord thy Soul to make”). At this point the verbs take and make meet, since make here accounts for what has previously been taken.

The above interpretation considers the expression of a dead relationship in the image of a body without a soul. Similarly, these four lines could refer to somebody “dead” in the same sense, just like the subject of “That this should feel the need of death.” Knowing that the poem in question was sent to Susan Dickinson, with whom Emily usually shared her witty opinion on everything, the poem as a humorous judgement on a person who struck the two women as

²⁰ Lindberg-Seyersted calls our attention to the fact that Dickinson often phrases parallelly the same idea in prose (letters) and in poetry; moreover, “she seems often to have stored her preliminary literary efforts the way writers frequently do, and reworked them later; sometimes she may not have remembered that she had used a phrase or a line before” (Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, p. 19).

²¹ All letters by Dickinson are to this edition: Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, eds. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. 3 vols. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP & Belknap Press, 1958.

²² The date of the letter is uncertain (1850s). Resting until a re-encounter at the Resurrection appears in Dickinson’s poetry in various forms, for example, that of the dead in “Safe in their alabaster chamber” (#216; versions: #1859, 1861). “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers – / Untouched by Mourning – / And untouched by Noon – / Lie the meek members of the Resurrection –” (ll. 1–3), and in “Of nearness to her sundered things” (#607): “As we – it were – that perished – / Themselves – had just remained till we rejoin them –” (ll. 17–18); that of the Soul and the Flesh in “Departed to the Judgment” (#524); that of love in “The bustle in a house” (#1078): “The Sweeping up the Heart / And putting Love away / We shall not want to use again / Until Eternity” (ll. 5–8) and in “The grave my little cottage is” (#1743): “The grave my little cottage is, / Where “Keeping house” for the / I make my parlor orderly / And lay the marble tea. // For two divided, briefly, / A cycle, it may be, / Till everlasting life unite / In strong society”; unspecified in “Ample make this bed” (#829): “Ample make this Bed – / Make this Bed with Awe – / In it wait till Judgement break / Excellent and Fair” (ll. 1–4). In all of these poems, death gains a symbolic meaning, so the subjects and consequently the poems themselves become open to various interpretations.

never having really lived is not only acceptable, but also consonant with Wheatcroft's reading of the poem as containing parodic elements.

As the last line may also emphasise the replacement of the physical nature of the relationship with the spiritual one, another possible identification for the new dimension is the dimension of Art. For Dickinson, poetry, like religion, is both private and impersonal, she uses the personal experience, yet distances it from herself. In this case, the whole poem can be interpreted as if it were addressed to Dickinson's own making, a piece of art. The poem thus becomes part of the creative act, as a ritual, a magic spell, following the birth of each piece of poetry. However, what follows from the text is that every labour results in a still-birth. Producing dead poetry was one of Dickinson's major apprehensions. In her first letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson on April 15, 1862, she openly asked the essayist: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" and added: "Should you think it breathed – and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude –" (letter #260). The poem "Now I lay thee down to sleep" testifies that she experienced writing as a perpetual failure. For Dickinson, labouring and birth are both unfinished activities, they do not have a completed state: the author lays down her creation as if it were only its ashes (Dust), a dead body.²³ What appears curious here is that we are not given any kind of explanation about how the poems come to life.²⁴

It is not the creation of soul by divine providence that enables the words to live, because coming to life is a prerequisite for asking the Lord to do so. Living, in this context, is rather an ability to live in a new dimension, being fit for life, having a quality that justifies the existence of the work of art: that is, being a good poem. Poems, accordingly, exist even before they are written. The poet calls them to life – wakes them – in this world by putting them down. Nevertheless, vitality is not a physical but an artistic attribute, thus corporal survival (which is the precondition of the intellectual one) must be assured spiritually, as it derives from Dickinson's body-soul dualism. Immortality demands a Soul, without which

²³ This idea is also present in "I felt my life with both my hands" (#351), where the speaker has a spirit and a body, which body is her creation; that is, her poem. The creator is not sure whether her poetry is alive or not. "I pushed my dimples by, and waited – / If they – twinkled back –" (ll. 10–11). In both poems, the conditional structure holds out the bright prospects of life.

²⁴ For Dickinson on the act of creation see "This is a Blossom of the Brain – / A small – italic Seed / Lodged by Design or Happening / The Spirit fructified – // Shy as the Wind of his Chambers / Swift as a Freshet's Tongue / So of the Flower of the Soul / Its process is unknown" ("This is a blossom of the brain," #945, ll. 1–8).

the poems would remain dead, forgotten bodies, however strong they would otherwise be. And though the poet exposes her own makings to death²⁵ without exception (“Now I lay thee down to Sleep –”), the poems have their own lives, independently of the one who helps them to be born, and the perfect ones may survive death – and this is the moment where real Life begins.

Art as Life is often discussed in relation to the Dickinsonian oeuvre.²⁶ Now we can add Art as Death, since death-like experience is the characteristic of live art, as Dickinson sees it: “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry” she explained once to Higginson (letter #342a). Both poem and poet are touched by Death in the mystery of Art. Perfection results in death – a concept borrowed from nature:²⁷ “Midsummer, was it, when They died – / A full, and perfect time –[...] / When These – leaned into Perfectness – / Through Haze of Burial –[.]”²⁸ “Artistic death” is thus not a demolishing force, but a fruitful one, bringing perfection, perfect art – that is, pure magic. In this light, Dickinson’s “[...]dying I may earn the look / For which I cease to live –”²⁹ becomes paraphrasable as: if I give up (the enjoyment of) life for artistic pleasures, I may reach Art. This is dying without dying, the greatest miracle possible, as the poet testifies in her poem “To die – without the dying” (#1017).³⁰ But whether one is capable of this wonder depends on one’s poems. It is the work of art that can call the artist to this death without dying – that is,

²⁵ The ironical assumption that levels Dickinson’s creative work with death functions as a source of humour in the first place; its role of masking Dickinson’s fears, however, is also detectable. This attitude is in harmony with her often assumed role as “the persona of the body of her poetry; the child. [...] [S]he transforms her perceptions into the child’s experience [...] . Whimsy, innocence, humor, irony are modes that she commands, enabling her to establish her distinctive poetic control” (Wheatcroft, p. 97).

²⁶ See, for instance, Judith Farr. *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1992, Chapter 6.

²⁷ The capitalisation adds another dimension to the image of harvest (for instance, that of art).

²⁸ “Midsummer, was it, when they died” (#962, ll. 1–2; 7–8).

²⁹ “Tried always and condemned by thee” (#1559, ll. 3–4).

³⁰ “To die – without the Dying / And live – without the Life / This is the hardest Miracle / Propounded to Belief.” See also “The going from a world we know” (#1603), where the hill of Art is described as to be climbed alone (that is, renouncing everything and everybody in life): “The going from a world we know / To one a wonder still / Is like the 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?”

immortality.³¹ Conquering death in this way has a double consequence for Dickinson: firstly, death offers the manifestation of reality – real life – as opposed to the life she must live;³² secondly, death, as a concept, becomes absolutely relative, being demise and animation at one and the same time.³³

The idea of being born in death generates modifications in the speaker-addressee relation in "Now I lay thee down to sleep." The motherly creator is regarded as a midwife of the creation, and if the poem is viable and starts breathing, it is God's task to complete it with a soul – to provide it with immortality. The personal experience is thus distanced and gains impersonality. The birth takes place in the reality of the known world, while the (re-)vitalisation occurs in another dimension, in-between the earthly and the heavenly spheres: in the realm of Art, where everything comes into being through craft. Even God becomes the supreme craftsman, who makes souls – makes, which implicates manual art (a Blake-like concept) unlike in Genesis 2:7, where He breathes the soul into the body. Thus the soul of a piece of art must be created in the same way as its body, or its form. But the last word of the poem (make) gives it yet another turn instead of closing it. As the verb keep can be assigned different meanings, so with the verb make. Besides the already discussed meaning, this transitive verb make can take an object complement, also. Since there is a dash at the end of the last line – instead of any other punctuation that might indicate closure – this dash could stand for the unuttered complement, which can either indicate nothing itself, or anything a reader may think of. Nothing and everything merge in the mystery of the act of creation. Nothing is everything, death is the life of art. If you can make everything out of the nothing, this is art. If you can make the contrary, this is art, too. Dickinson claims live art makes you feel as if you died and were resurrected. Consequently, to be an Artist or to be a

³¹ Thus I suggest that in "I had no cause to be awake" (#542) the visiting dead who call her to the other world can be identified as her poems. The process of becoming a real poet (through death) is procreated by her Best [poem]: "I had no Cause to be awake – / My Best – was gone to sleep – / And Mourn a new politeness took – / And failed to wake them up – // But called the others – clear – / And passed their Curtains by – / Sweet Morning – When I oversleep – / Knock – Recollect – to Me –" (ll. 1–8)

³² See "I like a look of agony" (#241): "I like a look of Agony / Because I know it's true –" (ll. 1–2).

³³ See "A death blow is a life blow to some" (#816): "A Death blow is a Life blow to Some / Who till they died, did not alive become – / Who had they lived, had died but when / They died, Vitality begun." The philosophy on the relativity of death also appears in "Unfulfilled to observation" (#972; probably of the same year, c. 1864): "Unto Us – the Suns extinguish – / To our Opposite – / New Horizons – they embellish – / Fronting Us – with Night" (ll. 5–8).

work of Art demands a continuous state of being buried alive – of which both Dickinson and her poetry were the manifestations.

This analysis of “Now I lay thee down to sleep” has demonstrated how various interpretations, justified by numerous other poems in the oeuvre, offer an understanding of the poem by reading them as non-exclusive variants of the same idea, even though such readings might seem contradictory at first sight. Dickinson’s contradictory constructions manifest in her poetry result from a deep philosophy. I consciously use the term philosophy instead of religion, since “Dickinson’s version of spirituality is not creedal,” as Doriani contends.³⁴ Moreover, her ideas concerning the Transcendental are of the same nature as her ideas concerning anything in the world: “If White – a Red – Must be!”³⁵ – that is, each thing carries in itself its own opposite that ultimately derives from God’s double nature.³⁶ The two things are, in fact, identical, and one must seek the dimension where one can recognise their sameness.³⁷ This dimension appears often in Dickinson’s poetry. Accordingly, the best reading of these poems is the one that offers the various levels of interpretation with an awareness of their being different aspects of the same thing, and not really different possible solutions to the poems’ riddle.³⁸

Dickinson’s carefully composed poetry leads us into Temptation, which is at the same time Salvation: we are tempted to renounce the daily experienced truth and tempted to find a different one, through Art. But since artistic and divine are synonyms in her vocabulary, what Dickinson suggests is a truth whose dimension is infinite and can, therefore, only be approached.

Truth – is as old as God –
His Twin Identity
And will endure as long as He
A co-Eternity –³⁹

³⁴ Doriani, p. 26.

³⁵ “The zeroes – taught us – phosphorus –” (#689, l. 6).

³⁶ See “‘Heavenly Father’ take to thee” (#1461): “‘Heavenly Father’ – take to thee / The supreme iniquity / Fashioned by thy candid Hand / In a moment contraband – / Though to trust us – seem to us / More respectful – ‘We are Dust’ – / We apologize to thee / For thine own Duplicity –” (ll. 1–8).

³⁷ One must also make an attempt to see the other aspect of the same: “What Duplicate – exist – / What Parallel can be –” (“No crowd that has occurred,” #515, ll. 13–14).

³⁸ See also Lindberg-Seyersted on Dickinson’s use of paradox, calling it “an attempt at completeness” (Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, p. 104).

³⁹ #836, ll. 1–4.