

XIII

Pearl, Fytt XIII

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We play at Paste—
Till qualified, for Pearl—

—Emily Dickinson

“We see – Comparatively” according to Emily Dickinson (534, ll. 1). So, Dickinson advances a poetic credo of glossing, a practice that she refers to more explicitly when she writes:

A Book I have – a friend gave me –
Whose Pencil – here and there –
Had notched the place that pleased Him –
At rest – His fingers are –
(360, ll. 13-16)

Dickinson would have us interpret through comparison—by way of synonym, analogy, and type. In fact, over one-third of Dickinson’s poems partake of a comparative method: many of her works are “meta-poetic glosses” that reflect upon the conception of the simile.¹ Dickinson’s vein of comparison is decidedly spiritual, especially in her “We see,” where she argues that the large things of this world, when translated through a spiritual lens, appear quite tiny. This interpretative process makes “A furrow—Our Cordillera— / Our Apennine—a Knoll” (ll. 7-8). Earthly travails, like mountain chains, seem vast from a human perspective; but, viewed from the heavens, they are microscopic, inconsequential.

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¹ See Shirley Sharon-Zisser, “To ‘See—Comparatively’: Emily Dickinson’s Use of Simile” *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 3.1 (1994): 59-84

This sentiment rhymes with the advice given by the Pearl in Fytt XIII when she recounts the parable of the precious pearl, which exceeds all earthly value and represents heaven's riches. Actually, Dickinson's work shares many points of resemblance with *Pearl*, and her comparative method mimics, in some ways, medieval practices of exegesis. Dickinson's mode of seeing partakes of a medieval-ish, allegorical sensibility. Here I will describe some connections between Dickinson and medieval glossing; then I will gloss Fytt XIII with Dickinson.

Through allegoresis, Dickinson finds, first, that the flesh represents the spirit; and, reading further, she imagines that the spirit supersedes the flesh. Her poem "We see" shucks off the husk and advances the kernel. The literal, though immanent, is rapturously transcended. Through spiritual interpretation, the soul is spared "Some Morning of Chagrin" at doomsday (ll. 14). Dickinson's critical approach, as a mode of Christian mysticism, takes Christ as the grounds of its beseeching. In sotto voce, Dickinson alludes to the Crucifixion when she imagines that worldly suffering ("the Anguish") is a sign "for His Firmament" (ll. 10-11). Christ's Passion, a perfect realization of human pain, is its very annulment. Through a Christological readerly posture, Dickinson spiritualizes the worldly, even to the point of ruthless trivialization. Creation is a "book," written by its Creator, Who subsequently "Had notched the place that pleased Him."

Dickinson participates, then, in what Kathleen Biddick has termed the "typological imaginary."² As Biddick points out, the (medieval, clerical) worldview is rooted in a comparative reading practice that regards the Hebrew Bible as the "Old Testament." Judaism, from this perspective, is a type for the Christian anti-type, so that Christians understand the Old Testament as typologically equivalent with the Gospels. As Biddick says, this equivalence generates anxiety, because it makes Judaism and Christianity synonymous and hence reversible.³ Christians, Biddick argues,

² See Kathleen Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2003), particularly p. 1-8.

³ This reversibility is, according to Jeffrey S. Librett, implicit in Erich Auerbach's formulation of the *figura*; see *The Rhetoric of Cultural Dialogue: Jews and Germans from Moses Mendelssohn to Richard Wagner and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 12, ff. Librett argues that with figural interpretation, as opposed to allegorical interpretation, "neither the prefiguration nor its fulfillment... loses its reality" (13). Biddick's contention

arrest the possibility of reversion through a supersessionary logic, which sees Christianity as breaking from and supplanting Judaism. Christians “cut off” the Jewish type, a formulation that is commonly articulated through metaphors of circumcision. Thus Saint Augustine in his *Tractatus adversus Iudaeos* explains that Christians no longer perform literal circumcision because “*veterem hominem circumcidimur, non in exspoliatione corporis carnis*” (2; “we are circumcised by cutting off the old man, not by mutilating the flesh of our bodies”). Augustine “sees comparatively,” finding the “old man” of Judaism as a type for Christian truth, a prefiguration whose content is abnegated by “cutting it off.”

Dickinson herself is aware—if not necessarily critical—of the anti-Jewish implications of her Christian comparative seeing. In her “Your Riches – taught me – Poverty,” Dickinson celebrates the paradoxical value system enabled by allegoresis, which takes “the first” as “the last,” (299). Dickinson attempts to relate to the Divine by way of the earthly, an interpretative method that she describes as her will to “estimate the Pearl” (ll. 30). This spiritual expedition, in which carnal “riches” are excised in favor of pure, spiritual wealth, is articulated as a process of excising what Augustine called the “old man” of Jewish literalism. Dickinson’s “estimation” requires, she notes, that she remove from the soul the “stint” and “blame” that “but be the Jew” (ll. 19-20). Dickinson’s comparative poetics is not innocent of the anti-Jewish posture that inflected medieval exegesis.

Dickinson also intimates a circumlogical dimension to her comparative sensibility. She describes her method of glossing in terms of a phallic figure that is suggestively “segmented.” Dickinson’s comparative vision in “We see” opens with an image of a tower, thus:

We see – Comparatively –
The Thing so towering high
We could not grasp its segment
Unaided – Yesterday–
(ll. 1-4)

Like the medieval trope of circumcision—the mechanism, as Biddick establishes, through which Jewish type becomes translated into and

is that the supersessionary logic of Christian doctrine in fact alters the reality of the prefiguration; Christians assume the inferiority of the literal type.

then amputated from Christian anti-type—Dickinson’s divided tower is the hinge upon which her comparison turns. It facilitates the supercessionary logic of a “Yesterday” that now is understood in light of “This Morning’s finer Verdict” (ll. 5). Meanwhile, Dickinson’s slashes mark the gloss as a cut. Through slashing, Dickinson transitions from type to antitype (like the “furrow” that is a “Cordillera”). The apparently seamless, seemingly innocent gesture of the hyphen incarnates the scissoring by which the spiritual is excised from the letter.

Arguably, the poem’s final stanza complicates this analysis. The last two lines are ambiguous, if not cryptic: “The waking in a Gnat’s – embrace – / Our Giants—further on—” (ll. 15-16). These lines may be emblematic of what Shirley Sharon-Zisser calls “another type of simile that Dickinson uses to foreground language at the expense of knowledge,” a kind of “free play of signifiers at the expense of a transcendental signified” (70). If indeed Dickinson has dropped out of a transcendental mode and entered into a more ambiguous, riddling mood, then perhaps she has superseded supersession altogether and escaped the ethical-political problems of her medievalish glossing. More likely, Dickinson ends her poem with these enigmatic lines in order to skirt the cheap sentimentality—the “don’t sweat the small stuff” philosophy—that her poem flirts with.

In any case, it is not the agenda of this commentary to see Dickinson as beyond, above, or after the medieval. Rather, the hope would be to fulfill comparison’s potential for reversibility (to see, for example, “Our Apennine” as a “knoll,” while holding the Apennine, too, in the mind, in itself, without reference to its anticipated anti-type). I want to situate Dickinson in relation to the medieval without historical cutting, allowing each one to dock into the other. Medieval commentators perhaps permitted just such exegetical shuttling in secular contexts. They often glossed Virgil’s *Aeneid* with passages from Boethius’s *De consolacione philosophiae*, and Boethius likewise was frequently understood in terms of Virgil.⁴ At a certain level both of these works could be taken as allegories for Christian salvation; but, read in relation to one another, neither work necessarily supersedes the other. This critical method of interrelated glossing would inlay literary works into an interconnected net, with each

⁴ See Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* (Cambridge UP, 1995), 120-30.

work, jewel-like, reflecting other works, their facets gleaming with gloss-reflections.

To undertake a gem-tactics of uncut annotation, this commentary would gloss *The Pearl*, Fytt XIII, with passages from Scripture and with poems by Emily Dickinson.⁵ Passages from Dickinson will be provided in-text using brief comments that explicate how both Dickinson and the Pearl-Poet might meet in the prism of the figure of the pearl. Biblical allusions and philological issues are treated in footnotes, which also offer paraphrases and treat textual matters.

This commentary is not an exegesis but an edition. I do not aim to elaborate fully all of the points of comparison between Dickinson and *Pearl* in order to establish a typological, one-to-one equivalence. The point, instead, is to create through parataxis an invitation for the reader to dwell in the possibility of a harmony between the two poets. This possibility I see as something of an antidote to supercessionary readings. The juxtaposition of Dickinson and *Pearl* would facilitate, through the wormhole of glossing, a naïve reading that credits poetry for its power to possess readers with the unhistorical. Indeed, the amateur reader represents my gloss's target audience. What follows is a kind of course-packet for those uninitiated into the field of *Pearl*/Dickinson studies. I borrow the commentaries found in the standard classroom editions of *Pearl*, in order to open up these texts to further glosses. This edition, however, is followed up by some further thoughts on how Dickinson's "pearl" ambiguously negotiates between the literal and the figurative as a vexed sign that, like Dickinson's dashes, hangs on to both sides of the divide.

⁵ All Biblical citations are from the King James Version. Dickinson's poems are from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 84, 214, 320. Fytt XIII is cited from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979), 87-90. Line and folio numbers follow Andrew and Waldron and run continuously with the rest of the poem. Marginal commentaries borrow from Andrew and Waldron, and marginal glosses and paraphrases are from J.J. Anderson, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience* (London: Everyman, 1996), 28-30.

XIII⁶

721	‘Ryzt ⁷ con calle to Hym Hys mylde And sayde Hys ryche no wy3 myzt wynne Bot he com þyder ryzt as a chylde Oþer ellez neuermore com þerinne. ⁸ Harmlez, trwe, and vndefylde,*	<i>called; gentle (disciples)</i> <i>kingdom; man</i> <i>or else</i> <i>guiltless</i>
725	Withouten mote oþer mascle of sulphande ⁹ synne: Quen such þer cnoken on þe bylde, ¹⁰ Tyt schal hem men þe zate unpynne. ¹¹ Per is the blys þat con not blynne	<i>knock; dwelling</i> <i>quickly; unfasten</i> <i>cease</i>
730	Þat þe jueler so3te þur3 perré pres And solde alle hys goud, boþe wolen and lynne, ¹² To bye hym a perle was mascellez. ¹³	<i>a precious stone</i> <i>that was spotless</i>

⁶ Andrew and Waldron note that the concatenation is supplied by *mascellez perle*, and that there is some play on *mascellez* (“spotless”) and *makellez* (“matchless”), as in 781-4.

⁷ The MS has “Jesu,” which would be the only instance in which the poem breaks the pattern of concatenation. Andrew and Waldron argue, based on the poem’s formal regularity, that “Jesu” must be a scribal substitution for “Ryzt.”

⁸ Lines 1-4 refer to the episode in which Christ’s disciples ask Him who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Christ calls a child to Him (“calle to Hym Hys mylde”), and then He replies, “Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven,” (Matthew 18:3).

* Note that the poet employs tricolons in the fifth line of stanza one and again in the fifth line of stanza two. These tricolons would seem to mimic poetically the shape of the Trinity.

⁹ The word’s etymology is obscure, but it may be related to German dialect *sulper*, *solper* (bog, mud), *sölpfern* to soil, *sully* (*OED*).

¹⁰ “Without spot or stain of polluting sin” (Anderson).

¹¹ A reference to Revelation 3:20, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”

¹² “And sold all his goods, both woolen and linen” (Anderson).

¹³ Christ teaches that “the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: / Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it” (Matthew 13:45-46). The Pearl-Poet translates the “merchant” of the Gospels into a dealer of cloth (“wolen and lynne”). Cloth production was the driving force of the English economy during the late fourteenth century, as discussed in Eileen Power, *The Wool Trade in English Medieval History* (London: Oxford UP, 1942). Notably, the Jewish Law forbids clothes that contain both wool and linen (see Lev. 19:19

- ‘This makellez perle, þat boʒt is dere,
 Pe joueler gef fore alle hys god,¹⁴
 735 Is lyke þe reme of hevenesse clere–
 So sayde the Fader of folde and flode– *land, sea*
 For hit is wemlez, clene, and clere,* *spotless, pure*
 And endelez rounde and blyþe of mode,¹⁵
 And commune to alle þat ryʒtwys were. *common*
 740 Lo, euen inmyddez my breste hit stode: *exactly in the middle of*

Her breast is fit for pearls,
 But I was not a “Diver”–
 Her brow is fit for thrones
 But I have not a crest.
 Her heart is fit for *home*–
 I–a Sparrow–build there
 Sweet of twigs and twine
 My perennial nest.

Like a breath, the pearl exists
 in the Pearl’s chest–“Lo, even
 inmyddes my breste hit stode,”
 she says (ll. 740). The Pearl
 goes on to describe her pearl
 not as a literal necklace, but as
 a spiritual sign of God’s love.
 Dickinson, too, tells us that
 “Her breast is fit for pearls,”
 and she similarly means a
 figurative pearl, admitting “But
 I was not a ‘Diver’” (84, ll 1-2).

Dickinson, like a “Sparrow”
 (ll. 6) builds a nest in the heart
 that is “sweet of twigs and
 twine.” Dickinson, like the
 Pearl-Poet, exploits the power
 of alliteration to create
 spiritual poem-pearls from air,
 as birds twine together twigs.

and Deut. 22:11). As Karl Steel notes, the point of this law is about maintaining purity and avoiding mixture. Thus it applies readily to the Pearl’s advocacy for spiritual purity.

¹⁴ “This matchless pearl, which is dear bought, for which the jeweler gave all his goods, is like the realm of bright Heaven” (Anderson).

¹⁵ Andrew and Waldron provide a lovely explication: “The pearl’s shape is thus seen to symbolize the perfection and infiniteness of heaven. It may be argued that the poem itself, with its meticulously proportioned construction, imitates this formal perfection.”

My Lorde, þe Lombe þat schede Hys blode,
 He pyȝt hit þere in token of pes. *set; peace*
 I rede þee forsake the worlde wode *advise you to; mad*
 And porchace þy perle maskelles.'

I taste a liquor never brewed—
 From Tankards scooped in
 Pearl—
 Not all the Vats upon the
 Rhine
 Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air—am I—
 And Debauchee of Dew—
 Reeling—thro endless summer
 days—
 From inns of Molten Blue.

When “Landlords” turn the
 drunken Bee
 Out of the Foxglove's door—
 When Butterflies—renounce
 their “drams”—
 I shall but drink the more!

Till seraphs swing their snowy
 Hats,
 And Saints—to windows run—
 To see the little Tippler
 Leaning against the—Sun—

Dickinson calls herself an “inebriate of Air” who drinks “from Tankards scooped in Pearl.” Dickinson thus distills “air” into the pearl-brew of poetry. Fytt XIII, too, reflects on how poetry is ornamented breath, or air inlaid with “pearl.” [Steel: The overall point is that the E.D. and Pearl are both meta-poetical works about creation, at least when read alongside one another.]

The pearl “is lyke the reme of hevenesse clere; / So sayde the Fader of folde and flode” (XIII, ll. 735-6). Here, “hevenesse clere,” refers to the next life, but also to the literal air of the heavens. This is the vault of heaven that God “sayde” into existence in Genesis I, when He (as Holy Spirit) first created the air, land, and sea. The pearl, then, is like the clear air of the sky, like the speech of God as he fabricated the elements—it is a kind of divine poetry, a stylization of air that turns the ether into the celestial heavens (just as Dickinson conflates these two kinds of air when she announces the parallels between butterflies and seraphs; ll. 9-16).

- 745 ‘O maskelez perle in perlez pure,
 Pat beres,’ quop I, ‘the perle of prys, *wears; of great value*
 Quo formed þee þy fayre fygure? *for you*
 Pat wro3t þy wede he watz ful wys;¹⁶
 Þy beauté com neuer of nature— *from*
 750 Pymalyon paynted never þy vys, *Pygmalion; face*
 Ne Arystotel nawþer by hys letrure
 Of carped þe kynde þese propertéz;¹⁷
 Þy colour passez þe flour-de-lys, *surpasses*
 Pyn angel-hauyng so clene cortez.
 755 Breue me, bry3t, quat kyn offys¹⁸
 Berez the perle so maskelles?¹⁹

We play at Paste—
 Till qualified, for Pearl—
 Then, drop the Paste—
 And deem ourself a fool—

The Shapes—though—were
 similar—
 And our new hands
 Learned *Gem-Tactics*—
 Practicing *Sands*—

The Jeweler compares God to the artist Pygmalion and to the scientist Aristotle, finding Him superior to both. This shares an understanding of God’s pearl—his poetry—as both an aesthetic object and a kind of philosophy, but transcendent ones [Steel: Has God left behind the material or simply been better at it? Given the rich aesthetic effects of the poem, I have to say it’s probably the former. God is better than Aristotle and Pygmalion: he’s not devalued what they do, but rather does what they do better than they do it. I think that materiality of the Pearl, so material even in Paradise, is a key quality of the poem, and

¹⁶ “And he who made your clothes was most skilful” (Anderson).

¹⁷ “Nor did Aristotle in his writings speak of the nature of these attributes” (Anderson).

¹⁸ As Andrew and Waldron note, the MS is unclear, with some editors reading *ostriys* (“oysters”) and others *of triys* (“of peace”).

¹⁹ “Your angelic bearing (is) so perfectly refined. Tell me, beautiful one, what kind of office does the pearl so spotless hold?” (Anderson).

perhaps a place to introduce a bit of conflict between your gloss and the E.D. poem]. Earthly art and science do not measure up to the truth of the Pearl, a division at play as the Pearl struggles to teach her student, the Jeweler, about her place in Heaven.

Dickinson similarly notes that Christian salvation can be a pedagogical problem. “We play at paste,” she says, “Till qualified for pearl” (320, ll. 1-2); in other words, man, made of clay, play-acts his journey toward salvation, only to find that, when he becomes worthy of Heaven, the pasty life of mortals will have been foolish.

- ‘My makelez Lambe þat al may bete,²⁰
 Quoth scho, ‘my dere Destyné,
 Me ches to Hys make, alþa3 unmete
 760 Sumtyme semed þat assemblé.²¹
 When I wente fro yor worlde wete²² *dismal* (lit. *wet*)
 He calde me to Hys bonerté: *blessedness*
 “Cum hyder to Me, My lemman swete, *beloved (one)*
 For mote ne spot is non in þee.” *stain; none*
 765 He gef me my3t and als bewté;²³ *gave; power; also*
 In Hys blod He wesch my wede on dese,
 And coronde clene in vergynté,²⁴

²⁰ “My matchless Lamb, who may make amends for everything” (Anderson).

²¹ “Chose me as His bride, although at one time that union would have seemed unfitting (i.e. while she was still alive)” (Anderson).

²² Andrew and Waldron suggest that *wete* emphasizes the contrast between the world of flower and flesh and the world of eternity.

²³ The lines echo the Song of Songs 4:7, “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.”

²⁴ “In His blood He washed my clothes on the dais (i.e. where His heavenly throne was), and crowned me pure in (my) virginity” (Anderson).

	And pyzt me in perlez maskellez. ²⁵	<i>set</i>
770	‘Why, maskellez bryd, þat bryzt con flambe, Pat reiatéz hatz so ryche and ryf, ²⁶ Quat kyn þyng may bè that Lambe Pat þee wolde wedde unto Hys vyf? Ouer alle oþer so hy3 þou clambe To lede wyþ Hym so ladyly lyf.	<i>kind of as His wife climbed so queenly a</i>
775	So mony a comly onvunder cambe ²⁷ For Kryst han lyued in much stryf, And þou con alle þo dere outdryf, And fro þat maryag al oþer depres, Al only þyself so stout and styf,	
780	A makelez may and maskellez. ²⁸	

Dickinson’s comparisons often turn upon the figure of the pearl. In the lines that make my epigraph, for example, Dickinson’s “pearl” represents a spiritual realm that is somehow superior to “paste.” She accesses this pearl only after she has first become “qualified.” “Pearls” are exclusively for the elect—not intended for the proverbial swine. They belong to those whose good works earn them heavenly credentials. Then, these certified paste-players “drop the paste, / And deem ourself a fool” (ll. 3-4). Notably, the shift in number from plural “we” to singular “a fool” mimics the supercessionary formula by which individual Christians are subsumed into the Divine. Dickinson transliterates the philosophical awkwardness of the mystical *imitatio Christi* into the ambiguously numbered “ourself.” Meanwhile the “paste” of the type is “dropped” for the “pearl” of the anti-type. But Dickinson resists, to some extent,

²⁵ Compare to Isaiah 61:10, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh *himself* with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth *herself* with her jewels.”

²⁶ “Why, spotless bride, who shines so brightly, who has such rich and abundant royal honours” (Anderson).

²⁷ Anderson reads *annunder*.

²⁸ “So many lovely ladies (lit. many a lovely one under comb) have lived in great hardship for Christ, and you are able to drive out all those worthy ones and exclude all others from that marriage, yourself being the only one sufficiently firm and resolute, a peerless and spotless maiden” (Anderson). Andrew and Waldron point out that *comly onvunder cambe* is a periphrasis, and that similar constructions are found in *Pearl* at ll. 116 and 1110. They suggest that the Dreamer is characteristically incredulous.

complete supersession. Her poem turns back, rereading the original “paste” as a necessary prerequisite for spiritual advancement: “the shapes, though, were similar,” she reminds us (ll. 5). By “playing,” we have learned to “practice” our gem-tactics. Dickinson’s comparative figuration operates through “dropping,” but finally returning to and rereading her “paste.”

This movement of supersession and then reversal is the trajectory, too, of several other “pearls” in the Dickinson corpus. The enchanting “I started Early – Took my Dog” undertakes a spiritual journey from earth to heaven; but at its narratological volta the poem turns back to reflect upon the worldly, a turn affected by the moment when “my Shoes / Would overflow with Pearl” (520; ll. 19-20). Writing elsewhere that “She rose to His Requirement – dropt / The Playthings of Her Life,” Dickinson suggests that the soul must “rise” to a higher calling and leave behind the earthly (732; ll. 1-2). But, as Dickinson intimates in the concluding stanza of that poem, these “playthings” live on, with spiritual lives of their own, even despite the allegorical comparison that apparently has evacuated them of meaning: “as the Sea / Develop Pearl, and Weed,” (ll. 9-10). Like Saint Paul, Dickinson “puts away childish things” (1. Cor. 13:11). But her pasty and playthings, once “dropped,” remain replete with resonance.

The pearl reflects a desire for access to that otherworldly realm of meaning beyond the physical. As the Jeweler communes wistfully with his deceased daughter, praying for knowledge of the life to come, Dickinson’s “pearl” is charged, too, with love-longing for transubstantiation, as in her prayer to raindrops: “Myself Conjectured were they Pearls – What Necklaces could be” (794; ll. 7-8). And her hope for the grass is that it “thread the dews all night, like pearls,” (333; ll. 9). The pearl announces a poetic sensibility that craves allegoresis, of a unity with the world that would produce spiritual transcendence. The pearl enables a mystical shift from the literal to the spiritual when Dickinson asks “Did the harebell loose her girdle / To the lover bee” (213; ll. 1-2). Dickinson’s carnal research agenda—her prurience about pollination—is translated into a spiritual domain when, with a parallel question, she asks “Did the ‘Paradise’ – persuaded – / Yield her moat of pearl” (ll. 5-6). The pornography of bee/flower sex becomes translated into a spiritual deflowering when the soul, yielding up its virginal “pearl,” is seduced by Paradise. The convoluted reversibility of typology, however, inspires Dickinson to recognize the ambiguity inherent in

Christian figuration: “Would the Eden,” she asks, “*be* an Eden?” (ll. 7). If the literal is transcended, what remains of meaning? If, in fact, spiritual purity ends in an eroticized merging with the divine, how does one credit such a state without recourse to the letter? Dickinson’s “pearl” must be the flag of a poetic disposition that desires to hold the contraries of type and anti-type, both together at once, transcended and yet reversed. It is this inability to let go—this inseparable cleavage between spiritual and earthly, despite all attempts at excision—that haunts the typological imaginary and that motivates the dreamer of the *Pearl*.

The pearl, too, embodies Dickinson’s critique of the way in which modernity relies upon a Christian supercessionary logic in order to delineate its break with and supremacy over the past. “What once was ‘Heaven’” Dickinson laments, “Is ‘Zenith’ now” (70; ll. 17-18) The regime of modern science “sees comparatively” and usurps old, religiously inflected signs. Science re-reads the world and empties it of spiritual content. Dickinson’s vexed hope for a reversal, again, lies with the pearl:

I hope the Father in the skies
Will lift his little girl –
Old fashioned – naughty – everything –
Over the stile of “Pearl.”

(ll. 29-32)

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