

“Ordained To Suffering:” Three Moments of American
Devotional Poetics

by

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Introduction

This project began over four years ago when I first heard Brand New's *The Devil and God Are Raging Inside Me*—an album that holds immense personal significance for me. Since that moment, I have been anxiously awaiting the opportunity to consider the spiritual themes of the record in a larger religious and literary context. My college experience studying Puritan devotional poetry and my fondness for the philosophical yet highly affective verse of Emily Dickinson offered the ideal framework through which to approach the music of Brand New. These three moments of American devotional poetics synthesized my interests in poetry, religion, and music into one intensely personal and intellectually challenging project. Thrice's *Beggars*, which saw its release three years after Brand New's metaphysical opus, reveals another popular alternative rock band engaging with the trials of spirituality and provides further support to my research. The work of my thesis is to situate the music of Brand New and Thrice in relation to the devotional poetics of the Puritans and Dickinson, with special attention to the persistence of biblical allusions and motifs and the articulation of a complex, emotionally strained relationship to faith and God. The different ways in which the poets and musicians represent themselves and express their individual emotions reflect the development of devotional poetics through different mediums and time-spaces, moving from the Puritan typological voice (a term I will define in Chapter 1), to Dickinson's de-centered reflections, to Brand New's personal confessions.

In Chapter One, I consider the works of Anne Bradstreet, Michael Wigglesworth, and Edward Taylor in my analysis of Puritan devotional poetry. The

Puritans, writes Perry Miller, thought that “man, created upright, fell of his own untrammelled choice into a corruption so horrible as to deserve the worst of punishments and so abject as to preclude all hope of recovery by his unaided efforts” (*Seventeenth Century* 21). Acute awareness of humanity’s backsliding tendencies and baseness in comparison to the grace of God permeates Puritan self-understanding, and this awareness orients my thesis: good works could not secure salvation, but every transgression further proved the innately sinful nature of humanity and called for more repentance. I examine the different manifestations of the typological voice within the Puritan structure of feeling.¹ Bradstreet’s reflective lyric, “As Weary Pilgrim, Now At Rest,” depicts the strength and comfort that a devoted believer can derive from God as she figures her self through the pilgrimage archetype.

Wigglesworth’s “God’s Controversy with New-England” exemplifies the apocalyptic jeremiads of the Puritans, which implemented an aggressive and condemning tone in their effort to motivate the backsliding community to return to righteousness. My final Puritan poet, Edward Taylor, practices a self-interrogative verse that focuses on the unworthiness of humanity in receiving God’s grace. In his poem, “Meditation #23, The Spouse,” we find a self-deprecating speaker who harbors intense personal guilt and constantly feels the need to repent.

In Chapter Two, I explore the devotional poetics of Emily Dickinson, who offers a de-centered engagement with the theological beliefs of Puritanism. Dickinson views herself as an unsaved soul because she cannot accept Calvinist doctrine or

¹ Raymond Williams defines structure of feeling as “social experiences in *solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available” (133).

sustain belief in God. Although she formally holds this stance for her entire life, Dickinson cannot escape the shadow of Puritanism, and she uses its theological framework for her personal inquiries into the nature of faith and doubt. “Doubt and faith,” Anna Kessler suggests, “rather than being two antithetical concepts, go hand in hand. [...] Doubt [...] is simply another face or moment of faith” (83). The precariousness of Dickinson’s position is an ambiguity upon which I meditate throughout my discussion of her work. She philosophizes on the nature of faith and God using paradoxical metaphors that retain the instability of the unintelligible concepts they represent. I examine the poems “Faith – is the Pierless Bridge” (# 915), “Of Course – I prayed –” (# 376), and “It might be lonelier” (# 415) to highlight the variability of Dickinson’s perspectives on God. Though Dickinson uses poetic personae that distort her personal views, she maintains an intimacy in her writing that enables a synthesis of the metaphysical and the affective, represented through a constant interaction with the Bible and Christian language. I argue that Dickinson’s “smart misery” results from her intellectual awareness of God’s distance and her personal spiritual deficiency, which is combined with her inability to transcend this deficiency in faith.

In Chapter Three, I examine the music of Brand New and Thrice using the religious framework set forth by my discussion of the Puritans and Dickinson. The music follows in the Puritan strain of self-criticism by presuming the inherently fallen nature of humanity and communicating similar anxieties over the destination of the soul. Although I draw connections between these three moments, I do not argue that there is a direct evolution from Puritanism to the music of Brand New and Thrice.

There are certainly many other sources of inspiration and influence for the music of these two bands. However, the music's overt Christian themes and conscious choice to emphasize the same motifs and forms of self-understanding as the Puritans and Dickinson provide material and reason for exploration. It reveals a persistence of Christian religious thought, translated from a purely religious, poetic medium to a partially secularized, contemporary music sphere. I connect the expressions of self-doubt and personal guilt in "Jesus" and "Millstone," from Brand New's *The Devil and God Are Raging Inside Me*, to Taylor's self-interrogative devotional poetics and the metaphysical poetry of Dickinson. The confessional lyric style of Brand New serves as a main point for my discussion, as this type of personal lyric remains unique to the third moment of devotional poetics. Thrice's *Beggars* echoes both the aggressive jeremiads of Wigglesworth and the comforting verse of Bradstreet. I argue that the songs "All the World Is Mad" and "Beggars" function as modern jeremiads, while "Wood and Wire" depicts the strength and security that faith affords the devoted believer. Throughout my discussion of both records I remain attentive to the use of biblical allusions and Christian motifs, as well as the artist's work of figuring emotional states through religious language. This project affords me the opportunity to explore three different modes of self-representation that all reflect upon the same anxiety—the inherent sinfulness of humanity and the uncertain trajectory of the soul in the afterlife.

"The doctrines of original sin, of the depravity of man, and of irresistible grace," Miller posits, "were not embraced for their logic, but out of a hunger of the human spirit and an anxiety of the soul" (*Seventeenth Century* 22). This hunger and

anxiety persist into the work of Dickinson, Brand New, and Thrice. Although over a century separates each of these three moments of devotional poetics, the poets and musicians articulate the same anxieties through an adherence to the biblical tradition and the language of Christianity. They use the religious register of their verse to characterize personal emotional states and seek answers to the mystery of human teleology. My argument traces the contours of the poetic self throughout these unique, though related, moments of devotional poetry with a special focus on how the poet or musician positions themselves in relation to the divine. The music and poetry remains fraught with emotionality as the art attempts to satiate what Miller theorizes as the Puritan's "fundamental issues: the natural emptiness of the heart and its consuming desire for fullness" (*Seventeenth Century* 22).

Chapter One

Fear, Faith, and Fervor: Puritan Devotional Poetics

The Puritan social order of colonial New England shaped individual forms of poetic expression and placed importance on the preacher's authority over the congregation. The sermons of the ministers instilled the fear of hell and the wrath of God in the Puritans in an attempt to drive them to repentance. Yet Puritan poetics was not solely a matter of ministerial authority. As Hugh Amory points out, "Puritans insisted that the purpose of speech and writing was to communicate divine truth, a truth that was inherently transformative in how it affected sinful humankind" (118). The emotional performance of hymns and sermons was essential to this culture because it excited the congregation and offered an appropriate manner to praise God. Like these public performances, Puritan poetry could be both severe and celebratory. This literature is full of biblical allusions and enthusiastic language that lends itself to impassioned performance. The apocalyptic tone of Michael Wigglesworth's "God's Controversy with New-England" is sustained in part through the poem's biblical allusiveness. Against Wigglesworth's jeremiad, Anne Bradstreet writes about the glory of God, His infallible justice, and everlasting mercy. Drawing from this range of poetic expression, this chapter argues that Puritan devotional poetics, which take the form of reflective lyrics, apocalyptic jeremiads, and self-interrogative verse, adopts a biblical typology through which the poet comes to understand both personal and public relationships with God.

The Puritan poets I read here apply a biblical framework to their personal and community experiences to figure themselves as the new chosen people and to define

the colonial project in New England as an extension of the biblical narrative. Puritan typology imbues everyday events with spiritual mystery and significance and emphasizes God's omnipresence in the new chosen land, New England. Amory writes, "Good writing was also modeled on the archetypal patterns of pilgrimage, exile, suffering, and providential deliverance that were 'the touchstone' for all of human experience. The Bible was the great source of these archetypes" (ibid.). The Puritans view their migration from religious persecution in England to America in terms of a spiritual pilgrimage and compare themselves to the chosen people in the Old Testament escaping slavery in Egypt. Typology works by connecting an independent event with a story from the Bible as a means of creating a cohesive history between the real world events and the history set forth in the Bible. It also sees the stories of the Old Testament as prefiguring the life of Christ in the New Testament. A typological interpretation understands a real world event as another instance of a biblical story, thus, synthesizing that independent event into a sacred history. By mapping religious meaning onto secular events, the Puritans transform their colonial mission into a divine project and create a framework for intellectual interpretation and understanding. This mapping forces people to constantly reference the Bible when seeking an explanation for events in the town and reminds them that the hand of God remains active and could react to any lulls in the congregation's spiritual commitment. Biblical typology also provides comfort for the Puritan and inspires pride in the New Englanders who see their colony as "A city upon a hill."²

² John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity." The speech was given in April 1630 aboard the *Arbella* as the Puritans were heading for America. In it, Winthrop outlines his vision for the colony and delineates the settlement as a part of a covenant with God.

An excerpt from a 1653 tract, *Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Saviour in New England*, by Captain Edward Johnson states:

Surely this second work of his [God] shall far more glorious seem.
 And now you antient people of Israel look out of your Prison grates,
 let these Armies of the Lord Christ [in America] provoke you to
 acknowledge he is certainly come, to put life in your dry bones. (qtd.
 Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad* 79)

In this first published history of New England, Johnson offers his “grand apologia for the New England way” (Gallagher 32). The Puritans relish their providential mission in the New Jerusalem. They approach the journey with the faith that God will protect them in the New World and allow them to succeed in their spiritual project of fulfilling the biblical narrative. The Puritans attribute the abundance of natural resources and their initial economic prosperity to the belief that they remain in God’s favor and will receive spiritual and temporal blessings for their servitude. While biblical typology elevates the importance of the Puritan settlement in New England, it also transforms the way individual pilgrims perceive the world and conceive of themselves. Puritan devotional poetics conveys emotional states and spiritual interrogations through a typological framework.

The typological voice is the voice that articulates the personal emotions and experiences of the author through a biblical framework. It creates a semi-personal self through the application of a biblical framework to an individual’s life events and the reliance upon the soul’s relationship with God for the derivation of meaning and personal definition. Typology shapes the Puritan structure of feeling, interweaving the

personal, the social, and the theological. For Puritan poets, personal reflection relies upon the authority of the Bible and faith for its interpretive power, rather than the authority of individual, human reason. Although the Puritan doctrines of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* grant the individual the freedom to practice his faith outside of the church-house, the anxiety over election for salvation and the acute-awareness of one's own sinfulness thwarts the flourishing of personal, confessional poetry.³ Sacvan Bercovitch argues that, for the Puritans, "self-examination serves not to liberate but to constrict; selfhood appears as a state to be overcome, obliterated; and identity is asserted through an act of submission to a transcendent absolute" (*Puritan Origins* 13). For poets to write directly of their personal condition and make themselves the subjects of their art would be an example of extreme vanity, a blatant mark of their unelect status. Thus, the Puritan poets I examine in this chapter represent themselves as biblical types, among God's chosen people, and they remain vigilant in achieving the ultimate goal of their art, to praise God. The poetry also serves as a tool for self-interrogation because the Puritans find grave spiritual fault with the actions of the physical self and relish the opportunity to castigate its sinful behavior. In "God's Controversy with New England," Wigglesworth attends to the transgressions of the community by chastising the New Englanders for their spiritual abandonment. Anne Bradstreet represents herself as a biblical type, "the pilgrim," to place herself in the sacred history of New England. She allows her unwavering faith to regulate her emotional apprehension of the external world because she submits human will to a

³ According to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, the Bible contains all knowledge needed for salvation (Headley 82). *Sola fide* holds that God grants salvation to faithful individuals; justification through faith alone (Luther 27).

higher calling. The typological voice distances the poet from the speaker of the poem and distills the individual emotions of the speaker into a biblical—and social—framework.

I have chosen three poets, Anne Bradstreet, Michael Wigglesworth, and Edward Taylor, to trace the contours of the typological voice across different modes of Puritan devotional poetry. Anne Bradstreet demonstrates the reflective, Puritan lyric that uses the typological voice as a mode of intimate self-representation. Michael Wigglesworth exemplifies the Puritan use of the jeremiad tradition as a means of figuring the community's tumultuous relationship with God and its wavering faith and devotion. Edward Taylor illustrates the Puritan poetics of self-interrogation and the manner in which the Puritans found great discomfort with their human condition and sought the constant need to repent and denounce the body.

Anne Bradstreet: Intimacy and the Puritan Lyric

In “As Weary Pilgrim, Now At Rest,” the poet Anne Bradstreet figures herself as a biblical type, the pilgrim. Bradstreet's use of the typological voice makes her ruminations applicable to every pilgrim and ensures that God maintains priority as the primary subject of the poem over the emotions of the individual speaker. The poetry is not impersonal; rather, Bradstreet feels through a pre-existing interpretive structure, the Bible. Her reflective lyric glorifies God and exalts the sweetness of heavenly existence over the pleasures of the physical world by depicting the comfort and strength the speaker derives from the promise of eternal life. Bradstreet begins, “As weary pilgrim, now at rest / Hugs with delight his silent nest” (ll. 1-2). She describes

the deceased Puritan as a pilgrim because physical life is the pilgrimage that the soul must endure on its journey to the kingdom of God. The deceased individual happily embraces his death because heaven promises the pilgrim unparalleled joy and safety from the evils of the world. The pilgrim does not fear death; rather he awaits it.

Bradstreet's conflation of herself with the persona of the pilgrim fits her state of spiritual and physical being into a typological framework. Physically, Bradstreet is a pilgrim on Earth who has not yet reached her body's final destination, death.

Spiritually, Bradstreet's pilgrimage refers to the state of her soul as it continues to move towards heaven. The typological reading sets the stage for her complaints with physical life and her desire to pass through death and achieve union with God. What is at stake in the poem is the soul's salvation; the poet's life becomes a spiritual drama.

The semi-personal, typological voice of the speaker provides Bradstreet with a vehicle through which she can channel her spiritual reflections. Bradstreet writes:

A pilgrim I, on earth, perplext
 With sinns with cares and sorrows vext
 By age and paines brought to decay
 and my Clay house mouldring away. (ll. 19-22)

She defines herself as a pilgrim to fulfill the biblical archetype and depict the difficulty of her plight on Earth. If, through biblical interpretation, the speaker is currently a pilgrim on the journey through life, her ultimate destination becomes heaven. The earthly pilgrim constantly fears for the state of her soul because along with the gift of life comes the realization that, while on Earth, she remains distant

from God. The “sins” and “sorrows,” which are applicable to any Puritan, represent the temptations and subsequent feelings of guilt and wickedness that plague the devoted speaker because she cannot escape her fallen nature. Bradstreet composes this poem in the final years of her life as a reflection on her readiness for eternal life. While the time limits of physical life lead to her bodily decay, the eternal promise of heavenly life bolsters her spiritual commitments. The description of her “mouldring” body as clay connects the substance of her literal body with the substance of creation in the Book of Genesis⁴ and, consequently, emphasizes her status as God’s creation. The typology that enables Bradstreet to interpret and poeticize her life also restricts her personal expression and regulates her self-representation. She ensures that her sorrows fit into the pilgrimage archetype because the typology offers the poet a conception of herself as a spiritual being on a path towards salvation.

Bradstreet describes her death in terms of being part of an elected community who share in eternal union with God:

Oh how I long to be at rest
 And soare on high among the blest.
 This body shall in silence sleep,
 Mine eyes no more shall ever weep. (ll. 25-28)

Artistically, Bradstreet cannot conceive of her self without considering the biblical and community framework. The Puritan self does not derive its meaning from the individual’s emotional response; rather, it attains significance from biblical interpretation and connection. Bradstreet desires death as a result of her commitment

⁴ “The Lord God also made the man of the dust of the ground, and breathed in his face breath of life, and the man was a living soul” (Genesis 2:7)

to the typological framework because she knows that union with God will pacify her sorrows, cleanse her soul, and bring her boundless joy. She introduces the dichotomy between the soul and the body because, while her body remains in eternal sleep, her soul will soar among the heavens. The speaker's sadness ends with the abandonment of her physical body because the soul knows nothing but pure happiness when united with the Lord. The typological form offers comfort because it provides the pilgrim with hope: pilgrimage narratives always end with the pilgrim uniting with God. Thus, Bradstreet envisions this future for herself by establishing her current status as a pilgrim. The effect is both to reduce individuality in the mode of expression and to convey the spiritual drama of Bradstreet's personal experience.

Bradstreet further reflects on the dichotomy between the soul and the body and notes the purified spirit that emerges through salvation. She writes, "A Corrupt Carcasse downe it lyes / a glorious body it shall rise" (ll. 37-38). The term "corrupt" defines the body as a corpse and presents it as an entity that lies at the mercy of earthly temptation. It carries a severe connotation because it implies a fundamental change in a person's manner of being once the evils of physical life begin to overshadow righteousness. The word also refers to physical ailments that plague the human body in old age, as Bradstreet's body has begun to physically decay. The term "carcass" figures the body of the pilgrim as nothing more than the dead body of an animal. Thus, as material beings, people are no more than animals; the existence of the soul allows the human to transcend the carcass of the body and assume a higher order of existence. The separation of the body and the soul stems from the Christian idea of resurrection, where after the Second Coming of Christ, the souls of saved will

rise from their bodily graves and ascend to heaven. In resurrection, the soul leaves the sinful carcass as a glorious entity and unites with God.

Along with her use of biblical typology, Bradstreet adopts symbols from the Bible as a means of interpreting her worldly situation. The symbol of wolves appears in Bradstreet's poetry to represent the temptations and evils of the physical world. The wolf embodies untamed barbarism and the threat of sin; it serves as a constant reminder that the Puritan must remain steadfast in her faith. Bradstreet writes:

The bryars and thornes no more shall scrat
nor hungry wolves at him shall catch
He erring pathes no more shall tread
Nor wild fruits eate, in stead of bread
for waters cold he doth not long
for thirst no more shall parch his tongue. (ll. 9-14)

In heaven, the pilgrim finally escapes the sins and evils that tempt humanity and remains fully righteous in union with God. The "thornes" denote the ease with which a person can be led astray because they can prick a person when she believes she is touching a harmless, beautiful rose. Thus, the thorn reflects the ensnaring nature of sin. The image of the "hungry wolves" represents the voracity of earthly temptations, but it also refers to the wilderness as a dangerous place. Wolves symbolize danger because they approximate dogs, but are untamed. The wolves also represent a literal threat to the Puritans who hear the howls of wolves emanating from the wilderness.⁵

⁵ "But aboute midnight, they heard a hideous and great crie, and their sentinell caled, 'Arme, arme'; so they bestired them and stood to their armes, and shote of a cupple of moskets, and then the noys seased. They concluded it was a companie of wolves" (Bradford 84).

Bradstreet describes the wolves as hungry because humanity must remain extremely vigilant in order to avoid backsliding. The image of the sinister wolf originates in the Bible. Matthew 10:16 reads, “Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents, and innocent as doves.” Since biblical metaphors figure faithful Christians as the Lord’s sheep, the wolf becomes a threatening animal. The Bible gives the Puritans a way to interpret wolves as Jesus constantly warns his flock of sheep, or his followers, of sin. The “wild fruits” signify an indulgence in earthly pleasures as opposed to a devotion to God, represented by the “bread,” which the congregation receives during church services. The speaker notes that eternal life with God satiates all human needs, such as thirst, because God’s love provides the soul of the pilgrim with sustenance.

“As Weary Pilgrim, Now At Rest” depicts Bradstreet’s steadfast faith and unwavering devotion to God. Bradstreet wishes for death because of the certainty that the joys of heaven outweigh the greatest pleasures Earth has to offer. She emphasizes the distinction between the sinful body and the graceful soul and promotes the Puritan belief that the soul will transcend its physical chamber in death. Bradstreet’s typological voice conflates her personal reflections with the pilgrimage archetype and uses a biblical framework to interpret the speaker’s emotions.

Michael Wigglesworth: Public Poetry and the Puritan Jeremiad

Bradstreet’s work is counterpointed by the apocalyptic and condemning verse of Michael Wigglesworth, who follows the jeremiad tradition in an attempt to motivate the sinful New Englanders to repent and return to God. God serves as

Bradstreet's source of unwavering strength because His love and grace promise the worthy pilgrim an eternal life full of joy. The poetry of Michael Wigglesworth forfeits the comforting tone of Bradstreet's poetry and replaces it with the vehement condemnation of the Puritans' transgressions of God's law and grace.

The Puritans adopt the jeremiad tradition as a means of bridging the gap between the sins of the colonists and their position as a chosen people favored by God. In its sermonic form, the jeremiad typically begins with a quote from either the Book of Isaiah or Jeremiah, denounces the manner in which the people have turned from their faith, and describes the punishment that awaits backsliders. It ends with the reassurance that God still favors His people and will again provide them with temporal and spiritual blessings, as long as they return to their faith. The call to repentance emphasizes the Puritans' New Covenant with God, even when they neglect their faith. Bercovitch points out that the:

Puritans' concept of errand entailed a fusion of secular and sacred history. The purpose of their jeremiads was to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God. (*American Jeremiad* 9)

The jeremiad derives its potency from typology and continues the Puritan tradition of setting ordinary events in a sacred history. It figures the colony as the new chosen land and the pilgrims as the new chosen people, who like the Israelites in the Old Testament, continually backslide. The speaker of the jeremiad, either a preacher or

poet, assumes the role of the prophet who warns his people of God's imminent wrath if they continue to sin.

Before the jeremiad became a Puritan poetic style, it existed as a popular sermonic form combining fierce, threatening language with the reassurance of hope. It allowed the preachers to denounce their congregations for their spiritual shortcomings, while also attempting to re-establish the faith commitment of the community. Perry Miller describes the way in which fast-day jeremiads were incorporated into the business of the Massachusetts Bay Colony:

Before turning to business the General Court regularly listened to a sermon which, under the circumstances, was bound to be more a review of recent afflictions than an exposition of doctrine; ministers chosen for the occasion would try then to be their most impressive.

(From Colony 29)

The standardized jeremiad form developed organically from these fast-day sermons, which occurred on special occasions of fasting and prayer and offered the minister the opportunity to preach on a topic other than the Gospels.

Michael Wigglesworth adopts the jeremiad style for his poetry, which enables him to create sensationalized verse that appeals stylistically to a Puritan audience, yet still denounce the sins of economically motivated New Englanders. This sensational poetry draws on the apocalyptic tone of the Book of Revelation. He condemns the whole of New England for its sins and aims to re-establish the community's spiritual commitment. Through the jeremiad poetic style, Wigglesworth tells the sacred history

of New England's prosperity, spiritual failing, and suffering, and concludes with the persistence of hope.

"God's Controversy with New-England" transforms the colonial settlement into a dramatic, spiritual setting. The poem traces the Puritans discovery and settlement of New England and the subsequent backsliding that results from their newfound economic prosperity. Wigglesworth, like an Old Testament prophet, aims to inspire the temporally-focused colonists to abandon their wicked ways so that New England can avoid God's wrath, which includes drought, famine, and storms. He includes a stanza of Latin verse in the opening lines of the poem as an address to the reader that emphasizes the serious nature of the lyrical content. Wigglesworth's Latin verse reads, in English:

What God omnipotent tells with a ruler's voice,
 What the prophets proclaim unto you with one mouth,
 And what I with many tears testify to in wrath,
 You may not consider lightly, Dear Reader. (ll. 17-20)

He groups his voice with those of God and the prophets to proclaim his spiritual authority to the reader. Wigglesworth writes this address in Latin to display his learnedness as further support for the authority of his voice. Even though a common New England audience would not be familiar with Latin, the inclusion would carry Wigglesworth's intended connotations and provide evidence of his ability to make spiritual assessments of New England and the sins of its people.

In adherence to the jeremiad tradition, he opens his verse with a passage from the book of Isaiah that calls the chosen people to turn away from greed and graciously

accept the bounty God grants them. This immediately moves the poetic discourse into a typological realm. Wigglesworth describes the pre-colonial New World as:

A waste and howling wilderness,
 Where none inhabited
 But hellish fiends, and brutish men
 That Devils worshiped. (ll. 25-28)

God's absence allows the unsettled New World to exist as an uncivilized abyss. Only the Puritans' colonization will bring the light of God to the "howling wilderness" because God's presence travels with them. This wilderness is the Puritans' promised land and, although it initially appears as an unappealing location, God will transform the land into a bountiful paradise. The term "howling" implies an inarticulateness that Puritans would associate with the Native Americans. The howl is a primitive, non-linguistic sound that connotes barbarism and, thus, the perceived untamed nature of the New World's inhabitants. While this term signifies the Natives non-Christian religion, it also refers to the real dangers the colonists felt while living in the New World. The Puritans heard what they took to be inarticulate noises echoing from the wilderness, such as the howls of wolves and the voices of Native Americans, that instilled in them constant fear. They worried that the sources of the hellish sounds emanating from the wilderness would violently attack their Godly settlement, a concern that had a real basis, in that the Natives did at times engage the Pilgrims in violent skirmishes, and a typological basis, that figures the good, saintly Puritans trying to fight off the wicked, ungodly beings. The Puritan interpretation of their sacred history does not represent the actual history of New England because the

inarticulate sounds were Native American languages foreign to the Puritans, not savage howls. The Puritans, in fact, knew better as they had trade relations with the Native Americans. The categorization of these noises as “howling” reveals the Puritans’ deliberate effort to see the New World as a desolate wilderness so that it would fit their typological history.

Wigglesworth’s depiction of the pre-colonial New World creates an apocalyptic setting in which the sacred history of the Puritans can unfold. Readers accept this apocalyptic scenery as realistic because the Puritans lived in a world full of wonders. In *Worlds of Wonder*, David Hall writes, “A final source [of wonder] was that great wonder book the Bible. Its narrative visions, voices, witches, and strange deaths lent credence to such stories of a later date” (75). Since the Puritans located the source of these wonders in the Bible, the New World mysteries were credible due to the Bible’s status as the infallible word of God.⁶ The term “wilderness” carries spiritual implications because it is used to describe a land in which God is not present, a place conceived of as hell in the imagination of a Puritan. The Puritan anxiety rests upon the unknown fate of the soul and the fear that if the soul does not achieve salvation, it must spend eternity in the absence of God. Wigglesworth’s conception of this pre-colonial wilderness stems from his fear that if the Puritans do not return to their faith, God will allow the colony to deteriorate back into this howling wilderness—and, this time, the Puritans will be present for the experience.

⁶ “Accordingly, at Night, there fell a great Toad out of the Blanket, which ran up and down the Hearth. A Boy catch’t it, and held it in the Fire with the Tongs: where it made an horrible Noise and Flash’d like to Gun-Powder, with a report like that of a Pistol: Whereupon the Toad was no more to be seen [...] After the Burning of the Toad, this Child Recovered” (Mather 112). This event was interpreted as evidence of the devil’s presence.

Wigglesworth uses the biblical motif of light and darkness to heighten the spiritual drama that results from the Puritan anxiety over salvation. Referring to New England, he writes:

This region was in darkness plac't
Far off from heavens light,
Amidst the shaddows of grim death
And of eternal night. (ll. 29-32)

The distinction between light and darkness delineates between the absence and presence of God in the New World. Until the Puritans arrive in the colonies, the land remains in darkness because its sole inhabitants are the non-Christian Native Americans. The term “eternal night” contrasts the Christian notion of eternal life and expresses the belief that those who die as non-Christians remain separated from the light of God as a punishment for their disbelief. Wigglesworth figures this as a “grim death” because it does not bear the promise of happiness and union with Lord. This type of death differs from Bradstreet’s conception of a death that grants the pilgrim eternal life and unmeasured joys. Bradstreet desires the death of a pilgrim because, as reward for a life of faith, she will receive salvation. However, Wigglesworth portrays the death of a disbeliever, who must suffer eternally by experiencing the pain of the soul’s distance from its maker. He offers the prospect of a grim death to both the non-Christian Native Americans and the backsliding Puritans. Threatening Puritans with the same fate as the unbelieving Native Americans, Wigglesworth aims to motivate readers to recommit to their faith. Bercovitch describes the Puritans’ deep psychological anxiety about the future of the soul:

The struggle entailed a relentless psychic strain; and in New England, where the theocracy insisted upon it with unusual vigor—where anxiety about election was not only normal but mandatory—hysteria, breakdowns, and suicides were not uncommon. (*Puritan Origins* 23)

Wigglesworth operates within the tradition of Puritan preachers who use apocalyptic language in their sermons to convey to their congregation the depravity of man and the suffering that stems from separation from God. He hopes that his fellow Puritans will recognize the seriousness of their sins in order to achieve individual salvation and return God's light to New England.

Wigglesworth uses his depiction of the menacing weather to sensationalize the New England setting and prepare the colony for the height of its spiritual drama. The apocalyptic setting also spikes the interest of a Puritan reader. Hall asserts, "Such texts drew readers out into a terrifying world before reassuring them that good triumphs over evil" (*Worlds of Wonder* 56). Wigglesworth's devotional poetics competed on the literary market with even the most exciting secular literature because, as Hall notes, it coupled sensationalism with spiritual inquiry. The language operates within a biblical tradition that figures the arrival and voice of God with co-occurrence of thunder, earthquakes, and stormy weather:

And dismal clouds for sun-shine late
 O'respread from east to west.
 The air became tempestuous;
 The wilderness gan quake:
 And from above with awfull voice

Th' Almighty thundring spake. (ll. 143-148)

Wigglesworth notes an ominous change in the weather and the earthly disruptions that result from the sins of the Puritans bringing God's wrath upon New England. The accumulation of clouds that block out the sun follows from the motif of light and darkness. The darkness returns to depict God's displeasure and the absence of His grace and love. When clouds fill the place of the sunlight, the promise of heaven disappears and humanity must face the emptiness of its earthly condition.

Wigglesworth's description of the meteorological changes in New England that accompany the punishment of its people's sins assumes an Old Testament tone by portraying God as a wrathful being who severely punishes wickedness. The term "tempestuous" denotes the arrival of the great winds that accompany a violent storm and connotes wanton aggression, which mirrors the untamed and uncontrollable nature of the howl. Even the wilderness, which represents the home of the non-Christians and, thus, the absence of God, quakes because it feels God's vengeful presence. Wigglesworth likens the voice of God to thunder to represent God's omnipotence. The stormy scene in New England connects with the biblical images of the tumultuous weather that accompanies the Flood⁷ and the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah,⁸ which God destroys as punishment for the sins their inhabitants. Wigglesworth applies biblical descriptions of God's destruction to his depiction of New England to connect modern events with their biblical predecessors.

Wigglesworth's devotional poetics intends to inspire the consciences of the Puritans by pointing out their ungratefulness for the economic prosperity bestowed

⁷ Genesis 6-8:22

⁸ Genesis 19

upon them by God. The drought of 1662 in New England motivates Wigglesworth to write this poem because he perceives the drought as a punishment for the Puritans' spiritual failings. The voice of God enters the poem and proclaims:

Is this the people blest with bounteous store,

By land and sea full richly clad and fed

.....

For whose dear sake an howling wilderness

I lately turned into a fruitful paradeis? (ll. 179-180, 183-184)

God condemns the New Englanders for failing to give proper thanks and praise for the gifts and grace that He grants their colonial project. God does not even recognize the Puritans as his people because it shocks Him that the people to whom He had shown His favor would act in such a sinful manner and neglect the commitment to making their Christian settlement a shining light to the world. Miller writes that John Winthrop “knew the danger to be not failure but success” (*From Colony* 5). The comforts of prosperity make it easy for the Puritans to forget the times when they relied on the grace of God to guide them safely through their perilous journey across the Atlantic into an unknown world inhabited by “devil worshippers.” God takes credit for changing the untamed, howling wilderness into a plentiful land that provides the colonists with tremendous economic resources. Wigglesworth chooses the word “paradise” to describe New England’s Eden-like nature before the fall brought on by sin. This nomenclature not only separates New England from the surrounding, non-Christian wilderness, but also from non-Puritan Europe.

Wigglesworth uses this chosen-nature of the Puritans to inspire guilt because their sins directly offend God due to the belief that God provides their community with gifts that He withholds from the rest of the world. He writes: “Are these the folk to whom I milked out / And sweetness steam’d from consolations brest” (ll. 191-192). He describes the manner in which God cares for the people of New England and figures God as a mother feeding her child. The term “milked” connotes the biblical description of the promised land as a place of milk and honey.⁹ In Puritan typology, the New World becomes the new promised land. Sweetness refers to the amazing and countless gifts that God bestows upon the Puritans. This term appears in the Bible and signifies the unmatched quality of God’s grace and affection. Psalms 19:10 states, “And more to be desired than gold, yea, then much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honey comb.” The taste of God’s grace and favor is so sweet that nothing on Earth could provide the same delectability. Sweetness also denotes the taste of the fruit in Eden before the Fall of humanity. God consoled the Puritans during the settling of the colony, but he now finds them forgetting the incomparable nature of the Lord’s sweetness.

Wigglesworth denounces the Puritans for their sins and marks the change in the people’s sentiments since the founding of the colony:

If these be they, how is it that I find
 In stead of holiness Carnality,
 In stead of heavenly frames an Earthly mind

⁹ “To a land, I say, that floweth with milk and honey; for I will not go up with thee, because thou art a stiffnecked people, lest I consume thee in the way” (Exodus 33:3)

For temperance (in meat, and drinke, and cloaths) excess? (ll. 209-211, 214)

The Puritans turned away from the main tenets of their faith and found indulgence in newfound economic prosperity more pleasurable than spiritual devotion. The poem asserts that earthly overindulgence augments the innate depravity of humanity as carnality shifts a person's focus from the state of his soul to a pursuit of bodily pleasure. Temperance functions as a main Puritan virtue because it shows that a person adheres to a proper moral code and maintains control over his desires. Overindulgence exposes a person's need for fulfillment and reveals that God's sweetness is not enough for that individual. The saved do not find pleasure in material items, such as clothes, and obtain their main sustenance from faith. Regardless of how strictly a person follows the law of God, the Puritan must always remain weary of backsliding and the temptation of sin. Thus, Wigglesworth uses his devotional poetics to motivate a re-orientation of the New Englanders aims and desires.

The prophetic threats of the punishment that God will unleash upon the backsliding Puritans highlight the public nature of Wigglesworth's devotional poetics and his intention to motivate the congregation to change their sinful ways. Bercovitch writes that the clergy "prepared the saint for heaven by making visible the prospect of hell" (*Puritan Origins* 54). The ministers found success with this rhetorical mode because it played with the Puritan anxiety over election by offering the transgressing Puritans a vivid idea of their eternal fates. Wigglesworth applies this persuasive method to his poetry:

Beware, O sinful Land, beware;

And do not think it strange
 That sorer judgements are at hand,
 Unless thou quickly change

.....

Wrath cannot cease, if sin remain,
 Where judgement is begun. (ll. 415-418, 421-422)

The poem explicitly addresses a public audience, the Puritan congregation, and advises them to prepare for the judgment of God if they continue to transgress His law. Wigglesworth expresses this cautionary advice outwardly because the fate of New England rests upon the spiritual commitment of the entire community and not merely one righteous individual. Thus, he warns the sinful colonists that the suffering will become worse if they continue to sin and neglect the Lord, since, as God's Chosen People, they remain especially subject to His judgment in order to prove that they are worthy of His favor. Wigglesworth conveys the strength of God's threat by emphasizing that God will not reserve the punishment for the afterlife, but rather unleash His wrath upon the sinners very soon, during their earthly existence. He proceeds to enumerate the punishments that New England must endure, which parallel punishments handed down by God in the Old Testament. The Puritans experience drought, famine, sickness, and floods that disrupt their economic prosperity and jeopardize the future of their colony. God inflicts these punishments upon New England to remind them that, without God, they would not be blessed with enough food, drink, and clothes to survive. Wigglesworth implores the Puritans to hastily change their ways because the situation will continue to deteriorate with

further sin. The aggressive tone of the verse depicts New England as if it lies in the midst of the Apocalypse, with God handing down either salvation or suffering to the members of the community. And this is precisely the typological mindset: a poor harvest or a harsh winter are not simply explainable physical events; instead, they conjure a biblical story of sin and punishment that makes New England the setting for an apocalyptic stand-off between God and the depravity of human nature.

Wigglesworth follows in the jeremiad tradition in his devotional poetry and closes “God’s Controversy with New-England” with the prospect of hope. Even though the Puritans have developed a pattern of sinfulness and ingratitude, hope of salvation and reunion with God persists. God promises never to abandon his chosen people as long as they remain committed to the Lord above any material or earthly interest. Although the jeremiad form is fear-inducing, above all it is a reminder for the Puritans to remain vigilant of the temptation of sin and to constantly prostrate themselves before the Lord. Wigglesworth writes:

Cheer on, sweet souls, my heart is with you all,
 And shall be with you, maugre sathan’s might:
 And whereso’ere this body be a Thrall,
 Still in New-England shall be my delight. (ll. 435-438)

He refers to the souls as sweet because, even though the body’s indulgence in worldly pleasures tarnishes a person’s commitment to God, the soul remains unified with the Lord. Since the soul stems from the Lord, it always retains the possibility of salvation through repentance. If the sinners can overcome Satan’s power and again make themselves servants to the Lord, the wrath of God will cease to punish New England.

Wigglesworth reinforces the conception of New England as the new Promised Land by emphasizing that, even though the Puritans neglect their faith and fail to adequately thank God for their success, New England and its people remain chosen and favored by the Lord.

Edward Taylor: The Poetics of Self-Interrogation

While Wigglesworth directs his condemnation toward the entire community, Edward Taylor directs his criticism toward himself. Taylor's poetics of self-interrogation is distinguished by its vehement self-denial and its insistence upon the worthlessness of the poet in the eyes of God. The poetry serves as a way of remaining vigilant against sin because it enables the burdened Puritan to admit his sinfulness and re-orient his focus towards God. This cycle of self-denunciation and re-orientation is interminable because the human is oriented toward sinful behavior that it must continually try to reject. Bercovitch writes that:

[The Puritan] call for self-examination had an urgency that far exceeded the classical-humanist demand for self-knowledge. Yet they also, and in the same breath, outdid the medieval preachers in denouncing innate depravity. The thing itself was not merely for them a poor, bare, forked animal; it was a sink of iniquity. (*Puritan Origins* 16)

Since Puritans believe in the doctrine of pre-destination, the fear that death could strike at any moment and bring God's judgment constantly forces them to consider the spiritual ramifications of their actions. Through the poetry of self-denial, Puritans

address the gap between humanity's sinfulness and the perfection of God and work to overcome their fallen condition. The Puritan cannot escape the intense feelings of inadequacy and baseness because only the salvation of their soul through the grace of God can bring peace and fulfillment.

The incoherence of human sin and God's perfection leaves the Puritan in a persistent state of internal anxiety that pits the saintly soul against the wicked self. The doctrines of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* emphasized personal responsibility for one's salvation. However, the human self proves an improper vehicle because it falls prey to the base desires of the corrupt body and, thus, leads the soul away from God. Only in self-denial can the Puritan begin on the path towards salvation. Bercovitch writes, "All record the 'Self Civil War'—as they repeatedly describe the struggle—of a Puritan Sisyphus, driven by self-loathing to Christ and forced back to himself by the recognition that his labors are an assertion of what he loathes" (*Puritan Origins* 19). The Puritans find it necessary to rely on God's grace for salvation, but they view their faltering devotion as an insurmountable obstacle. From the Puritan perspective, humans do not possess the tools to achieve salvation or properly glorify God because the human self distorts every attempt at representing the divine or professing one's sinfulness. The self results as a product of the self-interrogation and denial of the human condition.

Edward Taylor, a minister and private poet in Westfield, Massachusetts, locates this feeling of inadequacy in his major theme: the futility of his writing. Regardless of how highly he praises God or how strongly he denounces his own vileness, the improper nature of his vehicle, human language, keeps his poetry from

succeeding. Thus, Taylor falls back into a state of resigned hopelessness and reaches out to God to intervene on his behalf. His only option is to continue offering confessions about his corrupt, immoral nature and hope that God finds his self-denial worthy of salvation. Prior to delivering his sermons to his congregation, Taylor spent hours locked in his study meditating on biblical passages and reflecting upon the meaning of the verses in relation to his own life. He grappled personally with the spiritual issues that the passages raised before giving a public address because he was just as much a part of the congregation as he was the intermediary between the Puritan community and God. Taylor's private meditations offer a revealing look into the internal civil war Bercovitch describes. Since Taylor never intended to publish these poems, he was free of the fear of vain self-representation. He creates deeply personal poetry that reflects the gravity of the actual struggle with depravity.

In "Meditation #23, The Spouse," a gloss on Cantic of Canticles 4:8, from his *Preparatory Meditations (First Series)*, Edward Taylor reflects on his own sinfulness and the baseness of the human condition:

And glaze those Gates of Pearle, with brighter Glory;

And pave the golden Street with greater light.

'Twould in fresh Raptures Saints, and Angells fling.

But I poore Snake Crawl here, scarce mudwalld in. (ll. 9-12)

In contrast to the pearly gates and golden streets of heaven, Taylor crawls around in the mud on Earth. He likens himself to a snake, which is the creature that symbolizes sin in the biblical story of the Fall.¹⁰ The snake tempts Eve to eat fruit from the Tree

¹⁰ Genesis 3:1-24

of Knowledge of Good and Evil, bringing about humanity's fall from grace. The snake also represents baseness because of its closeness to the ground. Taylor cannot prostrate himself low enough when venerating the divine being, so he compares himself to animals that inhabit the ground. A person can only crawl when in the presence of God because any display or glorification of the human self is an offense to God's omnipotence. Taylor feels overwhelmed by sin and must resort to the intense comparison of himself to the snake, the animal responsible for the fall of humanity and the arrival of sin in the world.

Taylor feels unworthy of receiving God's grace or salvation because he cannot believe that human sinfulness could be coupled with God's perfect nature. This poem is a meditation on a biblical passage that discusses the spousal relationship between God and his people.¹¹ Christians cite this verse commonly when using the metaphor of Christ as the bridegroom and the community of Christians as his bride. Taylor believes that his innately corrupt nature should disallow such a union:

I am to Christ more base, than to a King
 A Mite, Fly, Worm, Ant, Serpent, Divell is,
 Or Can be, being tumbled all in Sin,
 And shall I be his Spouse? How good is this? (ll. 31-34)

Taylor figures himself as a worthless, sinful beast that deserves to crawl on the ground, rather than float among angels inside the gates of heaven. He describes his condition as being drowned in sin and sees his union with the Lord as too good to be

¹¹ "Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, even with me from Lebanon, and look from the top of Amanah, from the top of Shenir and Hermon, from the dens of the lions, and from the mountains of the leopards" (Song of Solomon 4:8)

true. Taylor's conception of himself exemplifies the Puritan view of humanity as a "sink of iniquity" (*Puritan Origins* 16) because this baseness is overwhelming and inescapable. The poet cannot even lobby for his own salvation and, instead, only offers scathing descriptions of his character and his lack of worth. Although Taylor is an outstanding member of the community—a minister, teacher and doctor—he still perceives himself as nothing more than a vile "mite" in the eyes of the Lord.

Just as Taylor finds his writing futile in expressing his devotion to God and professing his corrupt nature, he characterizes his voice as too rough to sing among the beautiful voices of angels. He writes, "May my Rough Voice, and my blunt Tongue but spell / My Tale (for tune they can't) perhaps there may / Some Angell catch an end of't up" (ll. 13-15). He uses the terms rough and blunt to portray human tools in comparison to the pureness, brightness, and beauty that define divine capabilities. This characterization persists throughout the poem as he also speaks of his "dull soule" (l. 5) in contrast to the light that gleams from heaven. The light of God has an unparalleled brightness that makes all other things seem dull. Humanity remains weak because its sinfulness separates the human soul from the divine spirit. Despite Taylor's highly literate and stylized devotional poetics—evidence enough that his not a "rough voice"—he still sees his writing as insignificant and trivial when compared to the glory of God. The Puritans believe that no human activity can adequately praise God because humans do not even retain the capacity to understand the totality of His being. Thus, Puritan devotional art, such as Taylor's poetry, is no more than a mere representation of God based on humanity's limited understanding of the divine. Since Taylor's glorifications of God are never grand enough and his

denunciations of himself are never harsh enough, he remains stuck in this cycle of self-interrogation that ultimately fails at expressing its intended sentiment.

After continually professing his failures as a human and his unworthiness of participating in the covenant with the Lord, Taylor calls out to God to intervene and grant him salvation. He recognizes that he cannot attain eternal life without the help of Christ, whose death enabled salvation for sinners. Taylor expresses the Puritan hope that the human soul will unite with God in a marriage of creator and creation:

Seing, Dear Lord, its thus, thy Spirit take

And send thy Spokes man, to my Soul, I pray.

Thy Saving Grace my Wedden Garment make:

Thy Spouses Frame into my Soul Convay. (ll. 43-46)

Taylor includes an apostrophe to God that asks for Him to send the Puritan the divine spirit and grant him salvation through this marital union. The apostrophe reveals the desperate nature of Taylor's state because crying out to the Lord for help is the only option that Taylor has available as a means of lobbying for his own salvation. While the "spokesman" could be the divine spirit, it also refers to Christ—who assumes the role of a spokesman because he died in order to enable salvation for sinners such as Taylor. The gift of salvation becomes Taylor's metaphorical wedding garment as the divine spirit fills his soul. Sinfulness divorces the Puritan community from God and forces it to wallow in the misery of earthly life. Taylor views himself as completely insignificant when not joined in union with the divine spirit because the human condition alone is not enough to provide a person with meaning and a sense of selfhood. As Miller writes:

[The soul] takes flight from the realization that the natural man, standing alone in the universe, is not only minute and insignificant, but completely out of touch with both justice and beauty. It cries out for forgiveness of the sins by which he has cut himself off from full and joyous participation. (*Seventeenth Century* 8)

Taylor and the Puritans intensely feel the distance between themselves and God and blame their own sinfulness as the cause. The poetics of self-interrogation and self-denial serves as their means of attempting to correct the fatal human flaw of sinfulness by admitting their corrupt nature and constantly repenting for their vileness. Taylor realizes that he cannot achieve salvation on his own and finds it necessary to lay himself bare before the Lord in the hope that his faith, devotion, and repentance will be enough to evidence his inclusion among the elect and his soul's final destination in eternal life.

Puritan devotional poetics explores the individual's and the community's relationship with the God through a structure of feeling shaped in relation to the interpretive tradition of biblical typology. Anne Bradstreet's poetry exemplifies a reflective lyric form that uses the typological voice as a means of self-representation. She derives strength from her faith in God and longs for eternal life in heaven. The apocalyptic jeremiad of Michael Wigglesworth condemns the backsliding reader for his or her sinful actions and implores the individual to turn back to a devoted faith in order to achieve salvation. Edward Taylor's private devotional verse articulates a poetics of self-interrogation in which the speaker finds himself unworthy of salvation and continuously repents as a means of devoting himself to the glory of God. As I

show in Chapter Two, the poetry of Emily Dickinson operates under the shadow of Puritanism, but it eschews the Puritan structure of feeling for a de-centered metaphysical inquiry into the nature of faith, the afterlife, and God.

Chapter Two

Smart Misery: The Devotional Poetics of Emily Dickinson

From an early age, Dickinson found it difficult to devote herself to Calvinism and thought of herself as an “unsaved” person. Emily Norcross, Dickinson’s cousin and fellow student, wrote, “She says she has no particular objection to becoming a Christian and she says she feels bad when she hears of one and another of her friends who are expressing a hope but still she feels no more interest” (qtd. Sewall 360). Dickinson considered herself “one of the lingering *bad* ones,” unconverted despite the religious pressure at Mount Holyoke, where Dickinson’s teacher Miss Lyon dubbed the unconverted “no-hoppers” (Sewall 364, 361). Dickinson’s acute awareness of her unsaved status enables her to write incisive poetry that reflects upon the nature of the human soul, the function of faith, and the sense of alienation from God that stems from a lack of devoted belief. Her poetry derives its power from her self-awareness and her desire to explore the anxiety that results from this self-awareness as opposed to simply coming to the conclusion that God does not exist. In Dickinson’s devotional poetry, uncertainty is central; the eternal life of the soul is constantly threatened. Dickinson creates metaphors built on paradoxes and uses oppositions and perspectives that collapse into each other. The complexity of her verse and the gravity of her ruminations force the reader to struggle with Dickinson’s poetry in the same way that she struggles to understand God and attain knowledge of the soul. Dickinson’s mode of devotional poetics stems from personal reflections on her own life and philosophical musings that find their genesis in her personal experiences. Her de-centered position in relation to faith—in contrast with the Puritans whose theology

determined their structure of feeling—enables her to take a more critical approach to the question of faith as a construct necessitated by the limits of intellect. Dickinson's pressing spiritual concerns reveal the insufficiency of the human mind in grasping the true nature of being and God as the unknowable quality of these concepts persists in her unstable and paradoxical metaphors.

The devotional poetry I examine in this chapter reflects upon faith as an ambivalent but necessary construct. If faith provides comfort and support, it also inspires persistent doubt. Since the intellect is too weak to understand the nature of God and the mystery of eternal life, faith serves to reassure Christians that their belief is valid. But Dickinson finds no reassurance in an invisible support structure that reveals its weak foundation during the moments of spiritual abandonment she terms "smart misery." She feels severely disconnected from God and views the Calvinist set of theological assumptions as an unsubstantiated theory that explains away the mysteries of human teleology. Nevertheless, Dickinson's is an immanent analysis of faith. She is no Puritan, but she remains intrinsically connected to their structure of feeling. Kenneth Stocks writes that:

[Dickinson, who] established herself primarily within a traditional system of beliefs, was unable to find in it this degree of security. The system was being increasingly undermined; and she had to find her own way in it, still with some of the old signpostings to help her. (30)

Dickinson never completely separated herself from Protestantism, in part because of her family's rich connection with Puritanism¹² and the enlightened fear that disbelief means there is no eternal life; yet her continual failure to find spiritual fulfillment in the Protestant faith produces an overwhelming tension that persists throughout her poetry. She feels the constant pull of an expected faith, while simultaneously expressing suffering and her estrangement from God; faith, for Dickinson, is no longer a comforting force. Although the old Puritan poetics of Bradstreet, Wigglesworth, and Taylor had long-since decayed, Dickinson's location in Amherst and inheritance of a Puritan past¹³ keep her in contentious relationship with the doctrines of Calvinism. As Richard Sewall describes, Dickinson "could no more escape it [Puritanism], than she could escape breathing the air of her native Amherst" (20). Dickinson's enlightened perspective on the insufficiencies of the human mind and the fragile foundation of religious devotion combined with the omnipresence of the Puritan tradition to place the poet in a state of immense intellectual tension. Out of this tension sprouts poetry that is as fanatical in its exploration of the mysteries of God, faith, and death as her grandfather, Samuel Fowler, was in his ministerial devotion. Instead of viewing her suffering as punishment for her sinful behavior (as for example, Wigglesworth viewed it in "God's Controversy with New-England"), Dickinson sees her suffering as a manifestation of God's absence and her consequent feelings of purposelessness and hopelessness.

¹² Samuel Fowler Dickinson (Emily's grandfather) was a founder of Amherst College and, soon after its founding, he became fanatically committed to revivalist ministerial work through the college that would eventually lead to his financial ruin and death (Sewall 33).

¹³ "She knew what the massive Puritan traits were, saw them in her family and in herself" (Sewall 19).

Dickinson's poetry operates at multiple levels at once, offering a cohesive, though difficult to untangle, synthesis of her individual emotional perspective and her metaphysical ruminations. The verse addresses her depressed emotional state and the metaphysical strain that stems from her disconnection from God as well as her intellectual conception of eternal life and of the effect of faith on the human mind and experience. The intense structural and thematic tension of the poetry emerges from its struggle to at once apprehend, relish, and overcome the inherent uncertainties of religious belief. Dickinson refracts her emotions and life experiences, such as the deaths of relatives and close friends,¹⁴ through the philosophical and theological contemplations of her poetry, which establish affective and intellectual registers of the verse that edge toward the confessional mode. Sewall writes:

If many of her poems are in the confessional mode she never wrote such sustained, explicit accounts of herself as, say, Wordsworth did. [...] Even here she apologized, or covered up. 'When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person.' Romantic barings of soul would have embarrassed her. (715)

Although Dickinson divorces herself from the poetic personae of her poems, the poetry remains intensely personal. The “confessional” or “personal” here is therefore an essential component of her devotional poetics.

¹⁴ “Every death among her relatives and friends (and there had been many) had come as a peculiar shock to her; she adjusted slowly; but this [the death of her father, Edward] was the first of the ‘mighty deaths’ that wracked her so” (Sewall 69).

In this chapter, I will explore Dickinson's devotional poetics through a consideration of three poems: "Faith – is the Pierless Bridge" (No. 915), "Of Course – I prayed –" (No. 376), and "It might be lonelier" (No. 415). I have chosen "Faith – is the Pierless Bridge" to illustrate Dickinson's development of the concept of faith and its function. I will use "Of Course – I prayed –" to depict the distant, uncaring God that persists in Dickinson's poetry. The final poem, "It might be lonelier" exemplifies the integration of the affective and the intellectual and the manner in which Dickinson connects religious terms with sadness and misery.

Faith as the Pierless Bridge

In "Faith – is the Pierless Bridge" (No. 915), Dickinson explores the function of faith and its mysterious nature as an invisible source of spiritual support and metaphysical reassurance. The immediate caesura following the term "faith," denoted by the Dickinsonian hyphen, establishes the concept of faith as a distinct entity that is distant from the speaker. The dramatic and reflective pause introduces a meditative tone to the poem and emphasizes the gravity of the verse's subject. The conceit in the opening line, which compares faith to a "pierless bridge," offers a way to understand the mystical nature of spiritual belief and also internally reflects its paradoxes and mysteries. Even though the bridge has no supports, it floats steadily in the air. The poet likens faith to an invisible support structure because, functionally speaking, it is the manner in which faith operates on a person. A bridge connects two separated places, just as faith connects the rational mind with the spiritual realm, which lies beyond the reach of the human intellect. Although belief in God and eternal life has

no basis in rational thinking, faith provides the structural logic and reassurance to support such spiritual notions. Dickinson's imaginary creation, a pierless bridge, makes the metaphor inherently unstable because faith is not grounded in a real object. The tension in the metaphor reflects Dickinson's perception of the condition of faith, which is one of insecurity and assurance.

The pierless bridge, or faith, accounts for the insufficiencies of the human mind by serving as the connecting force between the known, physical world and the unknown, spiritual realm. Dickinson writes:

Faith – is the Pierless Bridge
 Supporting what We see
 Unto the Scene that We do not –
 Too slender for the eye (ll. 1-4)

Dickinson plays with the language of the familiar Nicene Creed, the profession of faith in the Christian liturgy. The opening lines of the Nicene Creed proclaim, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth, of all that is seen and unseen." This reveals the lasting effect of her Calvinist upbringing because, even while she attempts to take stock of faith as a distinct entity, the terms of the Christian prayer inform her language. Dickinson renames the unseen "the Scene that We do not" as a reference to the kingdom of heaven and uses the Christian notion of heaven as a place where souls find eternal communion with God. Her allusion to the Nicene Creed recalls the performative aspect of the prayer in which the congregation speaks their faith into existence. Like the Nicene Creed, Dickinson also makes a distinction between the seen and the unseen. Humans can know the seen world and

have certain proof of its existence and laws through science, while the unseen, or “the Scene that We do not,” remains mysterious and unknowable. Thus, faith connects scientific or rational certainties with teleological reassurance in providing the faithful with a cohesive perspective of existence and the omnipotence of God.

What James McIntosh calls the “experimental stability” (6) of Dickinson’s poetics refers to her ability to function within the Puritan tradition, yet remain in a de-centered position in relation to its structure of feeling. McIntosh argues that:

[Dickinson’s] rudderless condition as a poet of intellect who resists Calvinism but still uses it gives her expression of religious ideas an experimental stability. She is willing to vacillate to get her whole truth down. By the same token, she is more open to an awareness of the flux of thought and belief and more prone to cultivate a rhetoric of nimble believing. (6)

The echoes of the Nicene Creed exemplify the “experimental stability” that permeates her poetry. Although she cannot find stability in spiritual belief or theological assumptions, Protestantism offers her a religious structure in which she can explore God and faith, as well as their unintelligible natures. Dickinson does not want to abandon Puritanism completely; rather, she wants to intellectually interact with its philosophical propositions in her examination of personal and universal truth. Even though she attempts to integrate religious beliefs and teachings into her logical understanding of the world, she continually finds that faith and logic resist cohesion. The limits of language and reason in representing and understanding spiritual matters reveals itself in the instability of the “pierless bridge” metaphor, which is inherently

paradoxical. For the believer, faith quells the longings of the rational mind to apprehend the unknown. For Dickinson, however, faith does not provide any intellectual satiation and, instead, serves to inspire greater internal metaphysical dialogue and meditation.

The “scene” that is “too slender for the eye” refers to the eternal life of the soul in union with God in heaven, which is not a final destination promised through reason alone. Since human reason cannot logically determine that eternal life exists, faith, the invisible support system, provides the mind with the comforting promise of heaven. The opening stanza sets the stage for Dickinson’s ruminations on the nature and function of faith by highlighting the distinction between knowledge and faith. Faith compensates for the limits of the intellect by offering humanity a way to apprehend “the Scene” it cannot see. The constant instability of religious belief, which wavers between insecurity and assurance, is expressed by the conceit of the pierless bridge, which conveys the robust fragility of faith.

Faith acts as a source of comfort and support for the soul who finds the structure of the pierless bridge to be stable and sufficient. Dickinson describes the effect that it has on the soul of a believer:

It bears the Soul as bold
 As it were rocked in Steel
 With arms of Steel at either side –
 It joins – behind the Veil (ll. 5-8)

She uses the image of faith as the strong arms of a mother who is rocking her child, the soul, to depict the safety and security that faith offers the believer. The term

“bold” implies that even in the face of danger, faith is strong enough to protect the soul and ensure its safe arrival in heaven. The repetition of the term “steel” with the phrase “arms of steel” emphasizes the security that faith affords the faithful.

Dickinson compares faith to a secure set of strong arms that protects and rocks the soul as a means of showing the lack of vulnerability that persists in the consciousness of the believer, in comparison to the extreme vulnerability that she feels as a person who lacks faith. If she does not believe, then her soul has no destination beyond the physical world and reality becomes devoid of meaning. Dickinson notes, “It joins” (l. 8), because faith provides individuals with the promise of eternal life as well as the comfort of knowing that heaven exists while still on Earth. “Behind the veil” lay heaven and the mystery of eternal life, both of which can only be understood through the vehicle of faith. The pierless bridge joins the seen, physical world to the unseen, spiritual world that exists “behind the veil,” but which continues to elude the grasp of the human intellect. The mysteries behind the veil are only truly revealed to the soul in death, but faith provides the reassurance that something more than just the physical world exists. For someone who personally lacks faith, Dickinson ascribes spiritual belief with an immense power to offer comfort and support to an individual. This move reflects her metaphysical musings that interpret faith as a human construct that grants believers satisfactory evidence of God.

As Mary Lee Huffer writes:

Dickinson’s expression of grief for an unattained and seemingly unattainable state of spiritual assurance is consistent with the orthodox

morphology of conversion narratives. Puritan theology warned that any form of assurance in this lifetime is false assurance. (15)

Dickinson experiences the paradox of faith because, although faith promises the devoted believer comfort and security, it also provides them with insecurity and doubt. She assumes Puritanism's rhetoric of uncertainty and never experiences the "steel arms" of faith that appear in the poem. Dickinson's experience with faith reveals a relationship with God that includes a constant longing for a peaceful and stable spiritual communion that one can never achieve on Earth. The only way to experience such a perfect relationship with God is by taking theological assumptions at face value and accepting them as dogmatic truth. Dickinson's intellect and lack of religious conviction preclude her from accepting such fundamentally important metaphysical claims naively. Her faith is not a soothing force because she cannot accept the basic premises of Protestantism's theological structure and her intellect is not a fulfilling alternative because it has its own limits that keep her from uncovering the ultimate truth. The poem occupies this frustrated position where her self-awareness and intellectual engagement spoil the naïve pleasures of faith and produce the deeper pleasures of poetry and metaphysical reflection, while ultimately offering no resolutions to the questions they propose.

The final stanza comments on the necessity of faith due to the limits of the human intellect. Faith is only necessary because the human mind on its own cannot comprehend the spiritual mysteries that hide the ultimate truths of being and existence. Dickinson states:

To what, could We presume

The Bridge would cease to be

To Our far, vacillating Feet –

A first Necessity (ll. 9-12)

The enjambment following the second stanza connects the final two stanzas in the same manner that the pierless bridge joins the physical and spiritual realms. The opening phrase of the final stanza “to what” describes the spiritual world that exists beyond the veil of the physical world. Even though faith securely rocks the soul, it still does not offer real insight into the mysterious state of being that the soul will encounter after physical death. The nature of the afterlife continues to elude the grasp of human knowledge: Dickinson can only refer to it as “the scene,” “behind the veil,” or “to what.” Dickinson posits that if humanity could “presume” that God exists and that the soul’s final destination is eternal life, then the human construction of faith would be unnecessary. The term “presume” represents more of an assertion than mere knowledge because it provides the person with autonomy over her salvation; as opposed to having to remain dependent upon the “pierless bridge” or “arms of steel.” Pure reason cannot adequately comprehend the mysteries of God and the soul because the rational human mind remains unable to understand the ultimate truths. Dickinson quickly disregards the momentary assertion of human autonomy because a person cannot exercise control over the unknown and, therefore, cannot be the arbiter of her own salvation. Thus, faith serves as the vehicle that provides the individual with access and connection to salvation. The autonomy associated with presumption is only a “what if” scenario for Dickinson, who references the “vacillating feet” of humanity as yet another reason why people do not have autonomy over their own

fate. Along with the insufficiency of the intellect, she blames humanity's "vacillating feet" for the necessity of faith. The "vacillating feet" refer to the propensity to sin and stray from the righteous path that leads to God. Since people are so easily diverted from the moral path, the steel structure of faith aids in keeping them steadfast in their devotion.

Ben Kimpel writes:

Emily Dickinson was clearly aware that beyond all orthodox creeds and beyond all earnest efforts to know ultimate reality is a Reality which transcends the language-skills and the concepts of the most able of philosophers and theologians. Although theologians can polish language into acceptable statements of creed, there is no such polishing ultimate reality to make it fit into the framework of creeds.

(7)

Dickinson realizes that the human condition limits understanding of spiritual matters and keeps the prospect of full revelation impossible. From her perspective, the condition of faith is one of constant uncertainty with only intermittent periods of assurance. Since pure reason cannot provide spiritual assurance or alleviate the psychological strain that develops from an individual's awareness of her distance and alienation from God, faith becomes the constructed force that pacifies the anxious Puritan. It offers the believer a way to integrate religious assumptions into the framework of life by separating faith and reason into distinct realms. This distinction perturbs Dickinson and motivates her to make coming to a comprehensive and intellectual understanding of religion and human teleology the object of her poetry.

“Faith – is the Pierless Bridge” uses a complex and paradoxical conceit to understand the function of faith and its nature as a necessary supporting force. Dickinson’s self-awareness of her own faith and relationship to God leads her to the conclusion that faith is a production that allows humanity to maintain a relationship with the divine. It bridges the gap between the known and the unknown without offering any solutions to the spiritual mysteries that plague the metaphysical thinker, leaving her with the same unanswered questions that initially inspired her devotional poetics.

An Uncaring, Absent God

The absence of God in Dickinson’s life profoundly affects the philosophical poet who, instead of using this absence as a reason to discount God’s existence, turns her ruminations inward and explores the misery that results from an awareness of her alienation from God. Dickinson’s rational mind fails to provide comfort for the resulting “smart misery;” rather, her intensely curious and perceptive intellect heavily contributes to her experience of spiritual discomfort. Although God is absent, His is a very present absence because He continually commands Dickinson’s thoughts without playing an active role. God’s absence could be more properly described as an inactive presence. Patrick Keane writes that:

[Dickinson] asserted in the opening line of a poem that ends in bitterness: ‘I know that He exists.’ But if suffering did not preclude God’s existence, it did raise the question of what kind of God he is and how we are to relate to him. [...] But to question is not to deny. To

wrestle with God, even at times to denounce him, is still to have a relationship, however stormy. (2)

This stormy relationship with God provides the meditative material from which spawns Dickinson's insightful lyric poetry. The instability of this type of relationship produces the tension and anxiety that persists in the poetry and also compels Dickinson to keep writing. Her poem's on the nature of faith and God represent an attempt to understand how humanity's or the individual's relationship with God works, but each lyric proves to be insufficient in its explanation of the divine. The apparent absence of God leaves room for spiritual anxiety to flourish, especially in an intellectually restless mind, such as the poet's.

Dickinson finds it difficult to accept the notion of an omnipotent, omniscient God, who remains seemingly absent from the physical world, while allowing human suffering to continue on Earth.¹⁵ She notes this gap between the human world of suffering and the perfection and bliss of the divine and sees it as a fundamental flaw in the Christian system of belief.¹⁶ Keane speaks to Dickinson's rejection of the all-powerful God on the basis of human suffering, arguing that:

[The fact] that life was tragic did not make it meaningless; but in the world of circumstances the clear-eyed poet saw all around her—a world of natural violence, of sickness and death—there were

¹⁵ "When the matter of death became more 'organized' in her mind, it inspired some of her finest poems" (Sewall 342). Her most creative poetic years coincided with the Civil War (Brantley 1), and much of her poetry about death was occasioned by the deaths of close friends.

¹⁶ "She rejected many of the tenets of her own faith, not least the doctrine of Original Sin; and she seldom shirked from confronting a God who often seemed indifferent to suffering" (Keane 2). Once she rejects the doctrine of Original Sin, the Christian view of human nature as inherently fallen no longer holds.

‘accidents’ that could not always be converted into good, let alone accommodated in any grand and benevolent ‘Design.’ (191)

The deaths of her close friends and the overwhelming violence of the Civil War motivated much of Dickinson’s writing and further energized her tumultuous relationship with God. Dickinson also finds herself unsatisfied with the answers that Christian faith offers in its attempt to explain the mysteries of the unknown, spiritual world. While Christian theology offers a simple way of understanding the soul’s journey after death, Dickinson’s overwhelming feeling of God’s absence makes this explanation appear more like a nice story than actual truth. Faith cannot explain away the mysteries of the unknown that remain omnipresent in Dickinson’s consciousness because, in order for faith to achieve its pacifying effect, Dickinson would have to devote herself to an absent God who turns a blind eye to human suffering. God’s absence only serves to further amplify Dickinson’s spiritual anxiety and questions about the nature of being and existence. The relentless ruminations on faith, despondent reflections on God’s absence, and Enlightenment influence lead to Dickinson’s state of “smart misery.”

“Smart misery” refers to Dickinson’s awareness of her distance and alienation from God, inability to use faith as a source of comfort, and realization that the absent nature of God could have serious theological implications. Her philosophically oriented poetry pushes her beyond the bounds of simple faith and motivates her to develop an intellectual understanding of God. A deep sadness results from this philosophical inquiry because, although Dickinson does not truly accept the tenets of Christian faith, she cannot remove herself from thinking that God exists, even if she

cannot feel His presence. Dickinson realizes that she will never be able to truly understand the unknowable and that there persists the possibility that the unknowable may not even exist. Since she cannot claim mastery of the unintelligible, Dickinson cannot perform any action or posit any theory to lift herself out of this distress and anxiety. Once she arrives at this “smart misery” from the conclusions of her reflections, the state is inescapable. It is the recognition of the individual’s lack of control over the fate of her soul and the inability to even connect with God while on Earth. The melancholic and irresolvable sadness and anxiety that result from an insufficient intellectual apprehension of the divine coupled with a lack of faith that stems from a recognition of God’s absence in light of the immense amount of human suffering, such as the kind Dickinson would hear about during the Civil War years, leads to her the restless state of “smart misery.”

In “Of Course – I prayed –” (No. 376), Dickinson meditates on the inactive and distant presence of God. The poem begins with an assertion of her alienation from God as she claims that her desperate appeals fall on the deaf ears of an uncaring deity. Dickinson writes:

Of Course – I prayed –
 And did God Care?
 He cared as much as if on the Air
 A Bird – had stamped her foot –
 And cried ‘Give Me’ – (ll. 1-5)

The opening lines immediately position the speaker at odds with the Lord and describe the despondency that develops in the individual who turns to God for help in

times of suffering but finds no comfort. The gravity of the second line is immense because, instead of simply saying faith affords little comfort, Dickinson declares that God does not even care about the suffering of humanity. Her notion of an uncaring God directly challenges the Christian teachings of a merciful, just, and loving God. The first line suggests the universality of Dickinson's individual experience with unanswered prayers because the phrase "of course" implies that it is taken for granted or naturally expected that people will pray to God. The phrase could also function as a response to a faithful Christian who would advise a "nimble believer" (McIntosh 1), such as Dickinson, to simply put her trust in God to take care of the problems in life. The opening line of this poem pre-empts that advice and asserts that she has already gone through the motions of prayer without success. God has already broken her trust before, so what would be her impetus to place her faith in Him again? She compares her prayers to a personified bird who stamps her foot and childishly cries out demanding recognition from a higher authority. The higher authority, who represents God, ignores the bird's demands as if he could not afford to be bothered by such juvenile wishes. Dickinson feels this same power dynamic in humanity's relationship with God, as she perceives God's apparent absence as a sign that He does not regard human prayers as significant. God's lack of concern for His people, as suggested by this metaphor, paints a picture of a deity that differs entirely from the beneficent God of the New Testament. The metaphor also resonates in another register because it speaks to the self-supporting nature of faith in a manner that is similar to the pierless bridge metaphor in poem No. 915. The bird is flying in the air and stamps its foot not on solid matter, but on nothing. The bird must sustain itself in the air in the same way

that faith must support itself. Just as the bird has no solid ground to use as support, faith cannot rely on rational logic to bolster its doctrinal teachings. However, the bird does not need solid matter because it has wings, which makes its act of stamping its foot a paradox similar to that of the pierless bridge. Dickinson's metaphors reflect the paradox and unintelligibility of faith; they deepen its mystery. The bird's stamping of the foot is meaningless to the authority figure because it is unnecessary and makes no sound. Saying a prayer is as helpful to a person as stamping a foot in mid-air is to a bird that is trying to get attention.

What happens to meaning in the face of this absent God? Dickinson proclaims, "My Reason – Life – / I had not had – but for Yourself –" (ll. 6-7). The speaker desperately reveals that God is the sole entity that provides her life with meaning and that the lack of affection that He has shown her has left her feeling lost and purposeless. When the prospect of an afterlife for the soul diminishes, human teleology loses its glorious endpoint, eternal union with God. Since there is no inherent reason to endure the difficulties of human life without God, the speaker sees no reason to continue living. These emotionally charged lines are overflowing with despondency as a pitiful, powerless human who had placed all her hopes in God comes to the realization that she has been operating under an illusion. The speaker embraces a tone of resignation as the reasons for living disappear and it becomes evident that the state of "smart misery" will never abate. Kimpel suggests:

This version of religion is an acknowledgment that within oneself, and within human resources, there is no dependable security. If, however, this were the only realization of which there is awareness, a human

being would be reduced to total despondency. But such despondency is qualified or averted insofar as there is also a belief that apart from oneself is another reality which is capable of doing for him what he cannot do for himself. (239)

The resignation in this poem points to the speaker's loss of that belief in another reality due to the absence of God, as manifested in unanswered prayers. The speaker falls into despondency because her life loses all meaning and she feels like the supposedly loving and merciful God in whom she placed her trust does not care about her.

The gravity of the loss expressed in poem No. 376 is elaborated on in the poem, "To lose one's faith – surpass" (No. 377), which discusses the notion that the loss of faith is the loss of everything. Dickinson writes:

To lose one's faith – surpass
 The loss of an Estate –
 Because Estates can be
 Replenished – faith cannot – (ll. 1-4)

Once an individual loses her faith and the orienting entity in her life proves to be an illusion, the original faith will never return. Dickinson plays with the Puritan poetic tradition in this poem, subtly alluding to Anne Bradstreet's "Upon the Burning of My House" (1666). In that poem, Bradstreet writes from a position of devoted faith and asserts that material wealth can be replaced because a greater treasure lies in heaven. While Dickinson would interpret the loss of her house as a sign that God does not answer prayers and allows suffering to endlessly plague humanity, Bradstreet never

questions her devotion and uses her faith as a source of strength during this difficult period of her life.

The despondency of Dickinson's poem No. 376 starkly contrasts Bradstreet's unwavering faith. Dickinson closes the poem with the sentiment that it would be better to have never been born than made to endure a life of "smart misery." She writes:

'Twere better Charity
 To leave me in the Atom's Tomb –
 Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb –
 Than this smart Misery. (ll. 8-11)

The term "atom" alludes to nineteenth-century science, with which Dickinson became familiar during her years at school.¹⁷ Dickinson uses this scientific term to refer to a state of being that she would prefer to the one she was granted by God. As Dickinson constantly vacillates between emotion and intellect, faith and reason, the use of a scientific term suggests the speaker's intense resignation. The definitive nature of scientific knowledge offers a reassuring alternative to the constant mysteries that are inherent in faith. She describes the state of non-existence as "merry" and "numb"—the polar opposite of "smart misery." Instead of being burdened with inescapable self-awareness and sadness, she would be purely happy. The period following "smart misery" emphasizes the finality of this state of being because, once an individual

¹⁷ Edward Hitchcock [President of Amherst College (1845-1854)] exposed Dickinson to the cutting edge science of the day, thus, providing her with this type of scientific language to use in her poetry. Sewall describes him as "the 'pace setter,' a man of God and man of Science, who inspired a whole generation with a love of nature that combined a sense of its sublimity with an accurate knowledge of its parts and processes, as far as the natural sciences of the day knew them" (Sewall 342).

comes to see God as an uncaring and absent deity, there is no return to her former state of faith. Since periods are so rare in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the inclusion of this type of punctuation at the conclusion of this poem carries intense gravity and structurally reflects the resignation and despondency that the speaker feels.

McIntosh posits:

One consequence of Dickinson's extreme sensitivity to the evanescence of thought and feeling is that in her world spiritual and emotional states such as love, despair, and imaginative enthrallment can be felt and represented poetically but not pinned down, analyzed, or known. Another is that her language repeatedly reflects her consciousness of flux. (2)

Although Dickinson ends this poem on the hopeless note of the inescapable fate of "smart misery," it would be reductive to read the poem solely in this light. The defining quality of her poetry is that it always includes tension and constantly responds to the phases of waxing and waning faith. Thus, while this poem may end on a depressing note, it cannot be read as Dickinson's ultimate view on the nature of God. It is not as if God did not answer her prayers and she, then, became a despondent disbeliever. Rather, the condition of her faith is that she constantly achieves momentary apprehension of her relationship with the unknown and then loses it. Her metaphors at once grasp at the mystery of God and also leave room for the mystery to persist within the metaphor itself. The fluidity of her relationship with faith and God provides the meditative material for her devotional poetics and compels her to continue writing.

The “Person” in the Poetry

The devotional poetics of Emily Dickinson offer a difficult-to-untangle synthesis of personal emotions and metaphysical meditations. Although Dickinson did not consciously write in a confessional mode, her poetry is fraught with personal feelings that she refracts through the voices of aloof speakers. As Huffer suggests, “While Dickinson’s poetry does derive from the theology, hymns, and sermons of orthodox tradition, hers is not a passive reception of ideas, but an individual testing of a living faith that must endure a life of questioning and proof through experience” (3). In the experiential gestures of Dickinson’s poetics lies the “person” of Dickinson. Even though she is not the direct speaker in her poetry, Dickinson’s personal experience of faith informs her writing in a manner that gives the poetry a proto-confessional feel for the modern reader. Her emotional experience influences and directs the thematic trends and evolving perspectives of the personae in her poetry, but it does not completely define the work. The compressed lyrics are carefully constructed pieces of art, so they cannot be seen as unfiltered personal confessions. Dickinson’s poetics rely upon an internal instability in order to reflect the paradoxical nature of the philosophical and theological concepts they attempt to apprehend. Were we to read her poems as mere confessions, we would ground the poetry firmly in biographical facts that explain away the instability that persists in the poems. Her poetic personae are personal, yet they are not reducible to the person of Dickinson. As I approach the question of the personal in Dickinson’s poetics, I am careful to respect the distance between the speaker and the poet that her verse commands. However,

through a biographically-grounded evaluation of her poem, “It might be lonelier” (No. 405), I will seek to depict the manner in which the personal appears in her poetry, with attention to the distortion of the personal that occurs when her emotions are transposed into a compressed, static, and metaphysical lyric.

The hyper-individualistic nature of the form of Dickinson’s devotional poetics reveals that she allows her personal preferences, both stylistic and thematic, to guide her creative process. Although she uses the hymn form as the basic template for her verse, her hyphenated lines, complex syntactical structures, and paradoxical metaphors make it uniquely her own. She distinguishes her work from the conventions of devotional poetry, while simultaneously writing within and connecting to the rich, Puritan religious heritage. As Victoria Morgan notes, “The hymn can be seen not only as a form of religious devotion, but also as a site of political dissent which articulates an alternative version of devotion, both religious and/or secular” (23). Dickinson’s poetry is her form of dissent.

Although Dickinson’s poetry remains as steadfastly metaphysical and theological as the work of Bradstreet, Wigglesworth, and Taylor, she sets herself in distant relation to God and sees the throes of faith as opportunities for intellectual reflection. As Morgan suggests, Dickinson uses the hymn form to question “the premises about spiritual experience which the hymn form gives structure to” (27). She uses the Puritan hymn form against itself as a means of offering reflections on the Puritan conception of faith, God, and eternal life. Dickinson transforms the public hymn, which was primarily used during church services by the collective

congregation,¹⁸ into a private form of intellectual assertion. While the hymn form functions as a means of political and religious dissention, it also offers Dickinson a way to enact her own salvation.

Since Dickinson cannot achieve salvation through faith due to her wavering religious commitment and dissatisfaction with the fundamental teachings of Puritanism, she uses her poetry as a means of salvation. Kimpel posits:

Being ‘Deprived of other Banquet’ [faith and spiritual reassurance], it offered her an opportunity to devote her life to an activity within her own control, and thus assured her a type of salvation, as it were, from the uncertainties to which she would otherwise have been subjected had she persisted in relating herself to others in any conventional manner. (9)

As evidenced by the potent jeremiads and self-critical lyrics of the Puritan poets, the Puritan spiritual condition was one of constant unease due to the unrelenting fear of not achieving salvation. Dickinson asserts her own form of salvation through writing poetry because, instead of devoting her life to God and remaining a powerless participant amidst a congregation of people hoping for a pre-destined spot in heaven, she devotes herself to the acts of writing and intellectual reflection, which enable her to maintain a sense of personal autonomy. Although Dickinson remains emotionally susceptible to the flux of her religious devotion and her distant relationship to God, her devotional poetics do not stem from fear, as in the case of the Puritans.

Dickinson’s poetic personae apprehend topics, such as the divine or death, from

¹⁸ In 1647, Reverend John Cotton wrote, “That singing of Psalms with a lively voyce, is an holy Duty of God’s Worship now in the dayes of the New Testament” (qtd. Hood 36).

intellectual or emotional perspectives that starkly contrast the condemning, violent, and threatening tones of the Puritan jeremiad. She also eschews the self-critical verse of Edward Taylor and, instead of finding human sin culpable for the problems of the world, explores the distance that persists between the divine good and human suffering as a thought-provoking conception of humanity's relationship to God that, if anything, reflects negatively on an ignorant God.

In "It might be lonelier" (No. 405) Dickinson conveys the intense feelings of depression and imbues the verse with religious language and Christian allusions that liken the speaker's emotional confines to a room that is too small to contain God. The poem begins, "It might be lonelier / Without the Loneliness —"(ll. 1-2). The opening lines thrust the reader immediately into the emotional life of the speaker who suggests that loneliness is her only company. The repetition of the term "lonely" communicates an overwhelming sense of emotional desolation and alienation. The scene feels completely silent aside from the speaker's thoughts of loneliness and evokes the image of a solitary speaker amidst an empty world. The opening sentiment places pressure on the distance between the speaker and the actual poet due to the emotional charge of the first two lines and the use of the first person pronoun "I." The authentic emotional register of the poem, along with the use of "I," points to the claim that the ambiguous speaker refers more directly to the actual Dickinson. This particular poem abandons the carefully constructed, paradoxical metaphors of "the pierless bridge" and replaces it with raw emotional revelations that feel as if they painfully leaked from the poet's heart onto the paper, as opposed to undergoing intense intellectual and creative rigor. The speaker sounds so emotionally distraught

that she would seemingly not have the energy to produce a clever conceit to categorize her current condition. Although the pressure between the speaker and the poet persists, the personal abstraction¹⁹ that occurs in the Dickinsonian lyrics prevents her poetry from being reduced to pure confessions. The relationship between the two stems from the experiential basis for Dickinson's poetry, which in this case lies in Dickinson's personal struggle with depression. Sewall notes Dickinson's growing, "awareness of how necessary they [her poetry] were to her own health of mind and spirit; how (as she wrote Higginson in her third letter, June 7, 1862) 'the Verses just relieve' palsy, how their 'jingling cooled my Tramp –'" (546). Dickinson's reclusive behavior, penchant for gloomy imagery, and pre-occupation with the tragedy of life point to her depressed emotional state, even though she pre-dates official psychiatric diagnosis of depression. She maintains a fascination with death, loss, and suffering that has a basis in her tragic family history and unfortunate familiarity with the effects of illness, such as tuberculosis, to which she lost many close friends. It would be impossible for a perfectly healthy, non-depressed mind to produce such emotionally raw and intimate poetry as Dickinson. Her reluctance to publish bolsters the authenticity of the emotions in "It might be lonelier" as she uses the pronoun "I" without the intention of having a public readership. In the private sphere, this poem serves as a soothing expulsion of emotion that reflects back on the poet without specific biographical grounding. Although the poem is intensely intimate, it remains entirely abstract, timeless, and ambiguous.

¹⁹ Virginia Jackson suggests "that the lyric has come to seem so ideal and so ludicrous because it has been progressively identified with a form of personal abstraction" (236).

The only moments of potential life in the poem occur as moments of interruption. Dickinson continues, “I’m so accustomed to my Fate – / Perhaps the Other – Peace – / Would interrupt the Dark –” (ll. 3-5). The speaker finds a cold comfort in loneliness and sees “peace” as an interruption as opposed to a positive change. The term “fate” connotes a loss of personal agency and the perception that the speaker is now totally subject to the sadness, which has now taken control of her life. The enjambment of the first two stanzas heightens the interruption of the “peace” into the pre-existing “dark.” The structural interruption that occurs in the enjambment parallels the interruption of happiness into the speaker’s world of misery. While the term “dark” refers to the emotional low of the speaker, it also carries a religious register in reference to the Christian dialectic of light and dark. The “dark” describes the lack of God’s presence, which relates to Dickinson’s lack of personal faith. In continuing with her conception of a cold, distant God, the lack of a spiritual presence in the opening stanzas of the poem emphasizes the speaker’s feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness.

Dickinson uses Christian allusions to characterize her speaker’s depression. She writes, “And crowd the little Room – / Too scant – by Cubits – to contain / The Sacrament – of Him –” (ll. 6-8). Dickinson compares the speaker’s “little room,” or depressed emotional state, to the Temple in the Bible that was constructed to house the spirit of God. While the Temple is large enough to “hold” God, the speaker’s “little room” is much too small. Cubits are the units of measurement used in the Bible in the construction of buildings and items, such as the Temple and the Ark of the

Covenant.²⁰ Dickinson uses this allusion to describe the speaker's lack of faith and spiritually-based hope. The speaker holds on to nothing but loneliness, thus, she does not derive meaning from the belief that her soul will ultimately unite with God. She cannot see or feel beyond the confines of her "little room," which leaves no place for commitment to a higher power. The "sacrament" refers to the congregation's participation in receiving the bread and wine of the Last Supper as a mystical experience with God. Dickinson's use of the term not only suggests that God is not present in the "little room," but also expresses the notion that the congregation cannot be present in the "little room," due to the fact that the sacrament is inherently community-oriented. The speaker is isolated from God and her community in a manner that parallels Dickinson's actual life. In these raw moments of emptiness, Dickinson's persona abstractly appears and the feelings of loneliness seem to be her own even though they are refracted through the ambiguous "I."

Dickinson comments on the Bible:

Anybody that knows grammar must admit the surpassing splendor and force of its speech, but the fathomless gulfs of meaning – those words which He spoke to those most necessary to him, hints about some celestial reunion – yearning for a oneness – has anyone fathomed that sea? (qtd. McIntosh 89)

She uses the Bible as a source of imagery and meaning that provides greater weight to her verse. Although her views about the Bible constantly change and elude definition, she found it to be an endlessly fruitful source of inspiration. Without the reference to

²⁰ E.g., "And the house which King Solomon built for the Lord, was three score cubits long, and twenty broad, and thirty cubits high" (1 Kings 6:2)

the Bible's unit of measurement, the cubit, this particular poem would not carry the same religious register. Her creative use of biblical allusion enables her to develop a depiction of depression through a religious scope and using Christian terminology. Dickinson's devotional poetics are difficult to untangle due to her use of the biblical text because it allows for multiple layers of interpretation to exist in the poetry. The verse has its experiential meaning that is then imbued with further significance with the addition of a biblical component. It transforms a "little room" into an anti-religious space that derives much of its literary gravity from its characterization as a spatial location in which God remains completely absent.

Dickinson continues with her use of Puritan language to describe the speaker's depression and likens hope to blasphemy. She writes:

I am not used to Hope –
 It might intrude upon –
 Its sweet parade – blaspheme the place –
 Ordained to Suffering (ll. 9-12)

The third stanza offers the second moment of interruption in the poem as the "sweet parade" interrupts the speaker before she can even describe her current condition, which is completely unfamiliar with "hope." The term "sweet" has a long history of use in Puritanism as a description for moments of divine intervention and personal conversion.²¹ Dickinson inverts the connotation of the term "sweet" and uses it to describe a "parade," which would be seen as a loud and obnoxious interruption of

²¹ As Jonathan Edwards writes in 1736, "In some, even the view of the glory of God's sovereignty, in the exercises of His grace, has surprised the soul with such sweetness, as to produce the same effects" (188).

silence and emptiness. Instead of welcoming moments of sweetness, as is the usual case throughout Puritan writings, she characterizes the “sweet parade” as blasphemy to the speaker’s condition, which is one of suffering as opposed to happiness.

Dickinson’s application of religious language for her own end, in a manner that contrasts the actual definition of the term, manifests itself in the phrase “Ordained to Suffering” (l. 12). McIntosh posits that the Bible “was a resource for her because it could meet so many of her needs, both ideological and poetic” (82). She did not always adhere to the proper definitions of her Christian language, but the mere use of such terms provides a framework for understanding and interpreting the verse.

Dickinson notes that the speaker has been “ordained to suffering,” just as a preacher is ordained into the Church. There is a finality and loss of agency in ordination as the speaker is ordained by an external force, such as an acute awareness of death, and cannot escape the subsequent suffering, just as a preacher cannot undue his vows to the ministry. She sets her speaker in counterpoint to the faithful Puritan; instead of light there is darkness, instead of hope there is suffering, instead of the congregation there is loneliness. Dickinson emphasizes the speaker’s sadness and isolation by defining her in opposition to devoted faith, God, and sweetness.

The final stanza expresses the speaker’s resignation to her condition of suffering and her disinterest in seeking delight. Dickinson states:

It might be easier
 To fail – with Land in Sight –
 Than gain – My Blue Peninsula –
 To perish – of Delight – (ll. 13-16)

The opening line of the final stanza parallels the opening line of the poem with the only change being Dickinson's replacement of the word "lonelier" with "easier." The use of the term "easier" suggests that the speaker resigns herself to remain in the cold comfort of sadness because she lacks the internal motivation to pull herself out of it. She is content to suffer because the achievement of happiness would be so overwhelming and unfamiliar that she would die from ecstasy. Dickinson continues to invert normal understanding, as "delight" is a life-taking, rather than invigorating force. The speaker in the poem is a figure of inaction: she seems like she is dead even though she is still alive. Peace, hope, and the parade act upon her and interrupt the static silence of her life. The speaker's inaction and loss of agency generate the emotional desolation and sadness of the verse and make it feel as if the speaker barely has the energy to speak the poem. The crowded, dark confines of Dickinson's poetic persona contrast the expansive, vibrantly colored "Blue Peninsula" that the speaker imagines from her abyss of loneliness. Dickinson figuratively places the speaker on a ship because the "Land in Sight" would appear as a "Blue Peninsula" from offshore. However, the "Blue Peninsula" remains an abstract notion because Dickinson does not provide enough support to fully explain the ship metaphor. The peninsula represents a boundless happiness that she can only achieve after being liberated from the hopeless "little room" of depression. The speaker in the poem would literally perish from "delight" because she would no longer be a person of inaction who allows sadness to determine her experience of life. Even though in her current condition it seems like that amount of "delight" would kill her, landing upon the "Blue Peninsula" could actually liberate her from the paralysis of depression and

transform her into a completely new person. Dickinson's aloof nature and penchant for abstraction allow this type of ambiguity to persist at the end of the poem. While the poem does not directly offer the speaker hope for a life free of misery, the conditional nature of the term "might" suggests that the ordination to suffering may not be as permanent as it currently feels for the speaker.

Dickinson's "spiritual gait," Sewall writes, "is [...] spasmodic; but, at the same time, the unitary moments, what she called 'The Soul's Superior instants,' are [...] intense, the concentration of thought and feeling [...] severe" (708). She uses biblical allusions in manners that oppose their proper definitions, but also implements Christian language to describe the intense spiritual distress of her speakers. While, at times, her speakers appear antithetical to God and Calvinism, in other moments, they find a peaceful safety in faith's "arms of steel." Dickinson occupies this space of uncertainty through metaphors that preserve the paradoxical and unstable nature of the concepts they represent. She waxes metaphysical without offering explanations that try to reduce the unknowable concepts into a purely intelligible form. Amidst this precarious balance of philosophical rumination, Dickinson's poetry remains intensely intimate and affective. She expresses de-centered reflections on Calvinism through her lyric speakers, as opposed to the Puritan poets who could not avoid their structure of feeling. The intimate, personal nature of Dickinson's devotional poetics sets the stage for Chapter Three. Even though the music of Brand New exists one hundred and fifty years after Dickinson's most active poetic years, they choose to emphasize the same Christian imagery, allusions, and language in their depiction of individual's emotional experience with God and themselves.

Chapter Three

Where the Pulpit Meets the Mic: Religious Themes in the Music of

Brand New and Thrice

The music of Brand New and Thrice represents a currently developing form of devotional poetics that shares the biblical allusions, Christian language, and teleological questioning that pervades the poetry of the Puritans and Emily Dickinson. Brand New²² formed in 2000 in Long Island, New York, while Thrice²³ formed in 1998 in Irvine, California. I am not attempting to trace a direct lineage from the Puritans to the musicians. Yet the fact that Brand New and Thrice choose to emphasize the same set of literary figures and tropes in a medium that differs greatly from Puritan poetry, especially in its intended audience, provides cause for investigation. Most of the bands' fans know the Bible only through the music's re-contextualization of its stories and motifs. Although the bands' albums explore questions of faith, God, and morality that articulate intimate reflections on the nature of a modern individual's relationship with religion, these bands have achieved success within the popular music industry. Brand New and Thrice combine the aggression of rock music with metaphysically focused lyrics to create a unique juxtaposition of secular and religious artistic sentiments. The work of this chapter will be to situate the music of Brand New and Thrice in relation to the devotional poetics of the Puritans and Emily Dickinson. While Brand New's verse recalls the self-

²² Brand New consists of Jesse Lacey, Vincent Accardi, Garrett Tierney, and Brian Lane who started the band when they were in their early twenties.

²³ Thrice consists of Dustin Kensrue, Tseppei Teranishi, Eddie Breckenridge, and Riley Breckenridge.

criticism of Taylor and the spiritual inquiry of Dickinson, Thrice's lyrics, at times, evoke the condemning tone of the Puritan jeremiad and, in other moments, the gentle faith of Bradstreet. These bands toe the precarious line between emotionally complex, art music and accessible, popular music and allow an intelligent commentary on God and religion to exist in an entertainment-based and economically-driven recording industry.

In this chapter, I will explore the devotional poetics of Brand New through an exploration of the songs "Jesus" and "Millstone." I have chosen "Jesus" for its representation of self-doubt and the individual's internal struggle between sin and righteousness. "Millstone" expresses Brand New's conception of humanity's inherently fallen nature and the unrelenting guilt that permeates the individual's conscience. I will also explore the devotional poetics of Thrice through the songs "All the World Is Mad" and "Wood and Wire." I have chosen "All the World Is Mad" to draw a connection to the Puritan jeremiad tradition and "Wood and Wire" to consider, in closing this thesis, the manner in which Thrice articulates the comfort that faith provides suffering individuals.

Brand New's Poetics of Self-Interrogation

"For Robert, Red, Leo, Bill and Virginia, James, Rosemary, Frances, Manfred, Sid, Seymour, Michelle, George, Alexander, and Omar, all of whom left between the start and completion of this record" (*The Devil and God* CD Booklet). Although Brand New chose not to include an official lyric sheet with their 2006 album, *The Devil and God Are Raging Inside Me*, they did include a fifteen-name

dedication. The album is scarce on liner notes, but the extended dedication reveals the inspiration for the music's somber, desolate tone: the deaths of numerous close friends and family—a topic that also inspired the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Brand New's metaphysical opus explores the fallen nature of man and the individual's relationship to God and faith through an hour of hyper-emotional and intensely self-interrogative rock music. Brand New began as an emo²⁴ band, but, after disappearing from the public spotlight for three years following the release of their second album *Deja Entendu*, returned with a mature, dense, and philosophical work, *The Devil and God Are Raging Inside Me*. The aggressive guitars, pounding drums, and growling bass mixed with shimmering melodies and distraught vocals recall the rawness of Nirvana, the atmospherics of Pink Floyd, and the lyrical wit of Morrissey. The music's subject matter, emotional intensity, and complex compositional structure transcend the limits of the band's prior genre and demand from its audience a higher level of emotional and intellectual attention. Jesse Lacey, the band's singer/guitar player and primary songwriter, eschews the generic emo lyrical content and adopts an intimate, self-reflective style that delves into his psychological state and struggle with faith.

As Scott Heisel notes:

All we have are Lacey's typically cryptic yet intensely personal lyrics, which are more uncomfortable to listen to than ever—they almost make the listener feel guilty that there are no repercussions for willfully violating Lacey's psyche. (Alternative Press)

²⁴ Slang term for “emotional-rock,” which is a genre of angst-driven, teenage music that reflects on topics, such as failing relationships and break-ups.

Lacey's self-critical lyrics emanate overwhelming sadness and alienation as he works through personal struggle and the experience of losing fifteen close friends and family members.²⁵ The motif of death pervades the entire record. Lacey envisions his arrival in heaven and uses death as a representation of ultimate disconnection. Although Brand New's reclusiveness and unwillingness to give interviews during the composition of this album leaves the public in the dark on the band's collective emotional state, the relentlessness of Lacey's self-criticism and the devastating bleakness of the music reveal the intense struggle that spawned the album. "*Devil*," Heisel writes, "is the sound of four men hitting absolute rock bottom and desperately trying to rescue themselves through any means necessary" (Alternative Press).

The striking nature of the title evidences the musical maturation of the band and intimates the emotional density of the music. Although the record poses a challenge to any listener, *The Devil and God* has been extremely well received by fans and critics alike. "Every song," Channing Freeman writes, "has a jaw-dropping moment and the album as a whole is even more impressive than its best parts" (Sputnik Music). While the finished product retains a mass appeal and proves worthy of serious accolades, the intensity of the album title points to the difficult origins of the music. In one of the only interviews available concerning the album's composition, Lacey comments, "I'm getting depressed with all of the anxiety about the album and they say I write my best stuff when I'm in that state. Great, I'll spend the next six months all depressed, so that some good [material] might come out" (Carman).

²⁵ Lacey comments, "A lot of things happened, so far as deaths in our families and amongst friends, and so a lot of those feelings found their way onto the album" (Absolute Punk)

The album readily, though cryptically, explores Lacey's depression. His intensely personal reflections on life when surrounded with the reality of death offer emotional solace to the tormented or depressed individual seeking connection and looking to make sense of his own experience. Although the record's title directly refers to musician Daniel Johnston and his battle with schizophrenia,²⁶ it offers a crystallization of the album's themes and describes the emotional state of the band during the tragedy-defined three years of composition. Lacey explains that Johnston "believes there's a struggle for his soul going on, this battle between good and evil, and if you asked him how he felt he might say something like 'I feel like the devil and God are raging inside me.' [...] It reflects a little bit how we felt whilst recording" (Absolute Punk). A schizophrenic remains constantly vulnerable to intense moments of feeling that pull the individual in opposing directions. Everything has a life or death emotional valence from this perspective and the person feels a loss of autonomy. The hyper-Christian undertones of the music lend greater gravity to the album title as Lacey reflects on the state of his broken relationship with faith. While the Puritans remain devoted to God, even in their fear and feelings of sinfulness, and Dickinson redefines her unstable relationship with faith in every poem, Lacey never finds moments of resolution or comfort. God appears as an antagonistic force and heaven exists as an unwelcoming place. The raw aggression of the instrumentals mirrors the emotional upheaval described in the lyrics, as the music is like a violent storm that retains a sublime beauty as it lulls the listener into a hypnotic fugue. The

²⁶ Lacey comments, "[The title] was actually from a conversation I was having with a friend about a musician, Daniel Johnston, who is a Texan singer-song writer. When we were kids, listening to Nirvana, Kurt Cobain always had a Daniel Johnston shirt on" (Absolute Punk)

calmer moments on the album remain fraught with a resigned disconnection and the unrelenting pressure of trying to be a good man while constantly failing. These quiet parts are like a beast in a coma or the eye of a storm; even though the aggression has abated, the tension persists. Brand New's ability to release intensely honest, dense, and challenging music that grapples with the mystery of human teleology on a major label (Interscope Records) places them in a stratosphere that few bands inhabit and allows them to develop a uniquely modern version of Christian devotional poetics.

Jesse Lacey draws on biblical allusions and implements Christian language in the depiction of his depression and exploration of the fragility of life, or, more importantly, the omnipresence of death. He synthesizes the religious components of his music with a personal lyric style that translates into an intimate form of devotional poetics. Lacey attended Catholic school during his youth and, although his actual religious belief remains obscured due to his unwillingness to directly address personal questions in interviews, religion still affects him in the way that it affects Dickinson. It offers a plentiful source of imagery and language and provides a framework for his metaphysical rumination. Even though popular music seems like an unlikely place to find an evolving form of devotional poetics, Brand New's conscious use of the Bible and Lacey's description of himself as someone who is unable to find salvation prove otherwise. "The introspective nature of the artist," Robert Wuthnow writes, "is in some ways similar to that of the person who meditates or prays. In theory, the arts are concerned with deep questions about human existence just as spirituality is" (18). Lacey contemplates the mystery of human teleology and grounds his inquiries in the Christian framework. He characterizes his internal struggles using biblical verse and

Christian motifs that resonate with a secular audience yet also point to his complex personal relationship with religion. The biblical allusions provide a way of understanding the emotional desolation that plagues him and the Christian moral structure affords him a way to articulate the personal guilt that results from his sinfulness. Lacey adopts a Taylor-esque version of self-criticism in which everything he does is morally reprehensible because he feels inherently flawed. Although he sometimes uses a speaker in a song to tell a story, he often sheds personal abstraction for a more direct, confessional lyric style in which the performance of the song becomes a cathartic way of dealing with the trauma that the music depicts. The raw vocal manner of rock music, which for Brand New includes screaming, serves as a form of relief to a lyricist who feels the constant strain of self-criticism and remains in a frustratingly unresolved psychological state—a state which, in other words, is as if the devil and God were raging inside him in a persistent and everlasting battle.

In the song “Jesus,” Lacey invokes the figure of Jesus Christ in the portrayal of his self-doubt and broken relationship with faith. The song begins:

Jesus Christ, that’s a pretty face,
 The kind you’d find on someone that could save,
 If they don’t put me away,
 Well, it will be a miracle. (ll. 1-4)

Lacey recognizes Jesus by the purity and beauty of his face, but does not include himself among the saved. He condemns himself and laughs at the prospect of a miracle because he feels undeserving and irrevocably flawed. From the outset of the song there exists a division between the speaker and Jesus, as Jesus’ righteousness

contrasts with the speaker's sinfulness. The vocals come in over quiet, chiming guitars and a steady, mid-tempo rhythm section that places the lyrics at the forefront of the mix. The instrumentals create an eerily beautiful atmosphere that carries immense tension as the melodic sequence refuses to resolve to its root chord until the final chorus of the song. The music, harmonically, remains in limbo and feels like a static moment divorced from reality until its ending crescendo, bolstered by screams, distorted guitars, and rumbling bass. Lacey's self-critical lyrics recall the self-deprecation of Taylor, who views himself as unworthy of grace. However, Lacey's self-interrogation stems from a place of depression and resignation, which comes through in the immediate, confessional nature of the verse. The defeated tone of Lacey's lyrics and the hopelessness that exists behind the sarcasm indicate the speaker's emotional desolation; if a future is allowed here, it is a bleak one. The heavy presence of Christianity in the opening lines of the song exemplifies the strong religious undertones of Brand New's music. "Religion," Bruce Forbes notes, "appears not only in churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples; it also appears in popular culture" (1). Although the lyrics do not articulate a devoted commitment to God, as in Gospel music, they depict the distant, but persistent relationship that exists between a flawed, self-aware individual and the divine. The speaker feels like he must answer for his sins and appears distraught knowing that his actions alienate him from righteousness.

The speaker's transgressions leave him disconnected from God, as well as from the rest of humanity. Lacey continues, "And I will die all alone / And when I arrive I won't know anyone" (ll. 9-10). Although an imagined arrival in heaven seems

to promise the salvation that eludes Lacey in the opening stanza, the salvation he receives here is not exactly positive. He remains alone, and the suffering of life persists in heaven, which means that his soul does not experience union with God. For Lacey, unlike the Puritans and Dickinson, pre-destination does not play a role because the gates of heaven are open to all people. Thus, the speaker can achieve salvation even though he feels like a sinner because of the grace and forgiveness of God. His loneliness in heaven points to his perception of himself as inherently flawed, especially when in the company of saved, pure souls in heaven. The speaker is disconnected from his companions on Earth because of his sinful choices and remains disconnected from the heavenly bodies due to his immutable impurity.

Lacey directs an apostrophe to Christ as he seeks a remedy for his loneliness and distraught psychological state: “Well Jesus Christ, I’m alone again / So what did you do those three days you were dead? / ’Cause this problem’s gonna last more than the weekend” (ll. 11-13). The speaker connects his disconnection and the persistent nature of his problems with Jesus’ three lonely days following his death and preceding his resurrection.²⁷ Lacey’s verse carries a resigned sarcasm as, although he bathetically elevates his pain above Christ’s experience, the comparison reflects his true appraisal of his emotional state. The future appears bleak and offers no foreseeable relief, so he reaches out to Jesus, the only being left for him talk to. “Reflection upon and interpretation of the Gospels,” James Knight writes, “has enabled people to make the person of Jesus relevant for their age. [...] Artists have

²⁷ “Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful man, and be crucified, and the third day rise again” (Luke 24:5-7)

[...] been busy making the Word flesh” (17). Lacey re-contextualizes the figure of Jesus for his personal reflections on loneliness, depression, and suffering, but he does not offer praise or devotion towards God. He makes Christ a living character in the song and, therefore, speaks him into creation in the same manner as the Gospels. Brand New does not merely reflect on the historical Christ for answers, but gives him an active presence that connects the historical Jesus with the present speaker.

Lacey begins a dialogue with his savior in which he questions popular Christian conceptions of death and the afterlife. Here, the metaphysical basis of Brand New’s thematic content shines through:

Well Jesus Christ, I’m not scared to die,
 I’m a little bit scared of what comes after,
 Do I get the gold chariot?
 Do I float through the ceiling?
 Do I divide and pull apart? (ll. 14-18)

Although the speaker does not fear death, he fears the uncertainty of the afterlife. While Dickinson meditates on the unknown quality of the afterlife with intrigue, Lacey expresses his personal fear that results from the uncertainty. His questioning stems from a place of concern and worry, as opposed to being pure philosophical inquiry because his personal teleology is at stake. “Through the arts and the responses of their audiences,” Forbes writes, “human beings ask questions of identity and purpose and wrestle with possible answers to these questions” (12). Brand New wrestles with the question of human teleology in “Jesus” and, not only reveal their personal engagement with the mystical, but also open this up for reflection among

their audience. Lacey utilizes biblical allusions to base his meditations fully in the Christian theological template and also uses them as starting points for his investigation. He examines the legitimacy of the Bible's stories about the afterlife by directly questioning Jesus. The "gold chariot" refers to Elijah's ascension to heaven upon his death. Second Kings states, "And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, [there appeared] a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into Heaven" (2 Kings 2:11). Lacey wonders if he will have a triumphant ascension to heaven, as in the case of the prophet Elijah, or if his journey will be unspectacular and see him merely "float through the ceiling," with his spirit leaving his body and traveling upwards to the mythological location of heaven, the sky. He acknowledges the Christian conception of a body and soul that separate in the moment of death, but he inverts the positive connotation of the soul's liberation into a painful-sounding, destructive event. Instead of the soul seamlessly leaving the body, he describes himself "pulling apart." The moment of death becomes an unraveling of his self rather than a liberation that results in communion with God.

The speaker maintains the negative portrayal of himself and references his willingness to lie and deceive as reason for his inclusion among the sinners. Lacey writes:

I know you're coming in the night like a thief,
But I've had some time, oh Lord, to hone my lying technique,
I know you think that I'm someone you can trust,

But I'm scared I'll get scared and I swear I'll try to nail you back up.
(ll. 22-25)

Lacey implements the Christian motif that tells of Christ's Second Coming as like "a thief in the night."²⁸ He does not know when death will come, but the speaker persists in his antagonistic relationship to Christ. Lying is a transgression of the Ten Commandments, an affront to the omniscience of God, and an intimation of the speaker's proclivity towards sin. The speaker champions human wit over divine authority during the judgment of his soul as the ultimate example of his unworthiness. He uses the image of nailing Christ back up on the cross to emphasize the undeserved nature of his salvation and his moral reprehensibility. Even though he does not want to betray Jesus in such a way, he fears that his sinfulness will lead him to commit immoral acts that only exacerbate his personal guilt. The speaker feels a loss of autonomy: he acts under the direction of sin rather than the desires of his heart. The repetition of "I know" contrasts the questioning that pervades the prior verse, concerning the nature of the afterlife, and reveals the speaker's desperate attempt to assert knowledge over the unknown. Lacey only "knows" that he cannot know when Christ will arrive or when death will come, but only that judgment will especially come for him, as a sinner, and that he will betray God's trusting nature.

As the music finally resolves to its root chord, the distorted guitars begin to crescendo, the drums start to loosen, and the vocals transform from delicate crooning to raspy screaming:

²⁸ "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape" (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3)

I know you're coming for the people like me,

But we all got wood and nails,

And we turn out hate in factories,

.....

And we sleep inside of this machine. (ll. 28-30, 34)

Lacey knows that God's harsh judgment will come and repeats the phrase "we all got wood and nails" three times; the repetition references the three beings of the Holy Trinity, the three persons present at the Transfiguration of Christ (Jesus, Moses, and Elijah),²⁹ and the three days that Christ was dead prior to his resurrection. The wood and nails directly allude to the wooden cross and the nails with which Christ was crucified. The pronoun transforms from "I" to "we" in the final lines of the song because the speaker is part of a community of sinners who act hatefully and deceitfully. The speaker and the "people like him" each have their own wood and nails with which they re-crucify Christ due to their sinful behavior and betrayal of his sacrifice. The sinners sleep in a precarious place "inside this machine" where death could come at any moment and the individuals subsist on sin. The lyrics offer no resolution as the speaker persists among the tension of the machine and awaits the unannounced arrival of Christ.

"Jesus" expresses Brand New's metaphysical inquiries into the nature of human teleology, specifically the soul's ascension to and arrival in heaven, and their depiction of personal depression and guilt through Christian terms, biblical allusions,

²⁹ "Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias" (Matthew 17:4)

and apostrophe. “Because conventional wisdom has taught us to regard popular musics as trivial forms of secular entertainment,” Robin Sylvan writes, “these religious dimensions remain hidden from view, marginalized, and misunderstood” (3). An engagement with the sacred appears and flourishes throughout Brand New’s *The Devil and God* and exemplifies the perseverance of a devotional poetics in present-day, mainstream rock music.

“Millstone:” Brand New’s Fallen Man

Moving from the static image of self-doubt in “Jesus,” Brand New explores the fallen nature of man that develops in maturity through the song “Millstone.” A major theme of the album is looking back on childhood as a pure state of being in contrast to the sinfulness of adulthood. Lacey expresses his fall from grace on the record through a religious scope and reflects on the choices that have led him off the virtuous path. Instead of merely noting how one’s experience of life evolves as a person matures, he expresses a turning away from God, righteousness, and love. The peace and piety of youth disappears, while the bleakness and emptiness of adulthood emerges. On the album cover, two individuals dressed in black cloaks with skeleton masks loom in the background as a little girl stands unknowingly around the corner of the house. The photo juxtaposes the sinfulness of adulthood with the purity of childhood, as the two adults look like demonic figures or the grim reaper, while the child stands innocently, dressed in fancy clothes. The photo carries an immense tension as the masked figures represent a sinister, but inactive presence. Lacey traces his fall into sinfulness, which coincides with becoming an adult and making mistakes

that have serious ramifications. Adulthood brings a greater tendency to transgress morality, though to varying degrees, due to the temptations of the world, such as money, pleasure, or intoxication. Lacey sees himself turning from God and disappointing his friends, family, and faith. The personal guilt that pervades the lyrics of “Jesus” persists in the song “Millstone” as the speaker describes his former life with intense despair.

“Millstone” recounts the speaker’s fall from grace into sin and the resignation that results from an awareness of his corrupt behavior. The figure of the millstone originates in the Gospels as a weight or burden that pulls a person down to his death: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and [that] he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6). The connection to childhood further illuminates the significance of the album cover photo, as, in the Bible, children also represent naïve purity in comparison to the fallen adult. Lacey feels his sinful behavior dragging him down and believes it has inflicted irreparable damage to his soul. He sings:

I used to be such a burning example,
 I used to be so original,
 I used to care, I was being cared for,
 Made sure I showed it to those that I love,
 I used to sleep without a single stir,
 ’Cause I was about my Father’s work. (ll. 1-6)

The immediate repetition of “I used” in the first verse emphasizes the speaker’s perception that he has fallen from a previously righteous state. Lacey delineates a clear division between his current and former self that coincides with the division between morality and wickedness. He used to be unadulterated by the corruption of the world and served as the paramount example of morality. Now, he cannot overcome the emotional numbness that defines his disconnection from others and his original, pious self. He cannot experience love for others because he does not love himself and feels plagued by his betrayal of God. Lacey ties the fall from originality, or pure sense of self, morality, and love to religion by saying he used to perform his “Father’s work.” The “Father” refers to God the Father and God’s “work” refers to acting righteously and maintaining a devoted faith. He can no longer sleep peacefully because his conscience is not clear, as a result of wicked acts that leave him with intense personal guilt. Lacey describes a raw experience with faith as he is not a devoted believer or a religious authority. He is simply a normal man who feels like a moral failure. “Millstone,” just like Leonard Cohen’s well-known song “Hallelujah,” “embodies a real and gritty spirituality. It is not afraid to embrace the tragedy of human life” (Casey). Lacey eschews the comforting Christian motifs for the reality of an internal struggle with guilt and depression that transforms life into a bleak endeavor. The speaker yearns for the purity and internal tranquility of his lost state, but sees it as unrecoverable. Every verb is in the past tense as he looks back on his pure state, but cannot attain it.

Lacey calls himself the “millstone,” which reflects the tremendous extent to which he feels personal guilt and holds a negative self-view. He writes:

Well take me out tonight,
 The ship of fools I'm on will sink,
 I'm my own stone around my neck,
 (If you'd) be my breath, there's nothing I wouldn't give. (ll. 7-10)

Lacey uses the figure of a sinking ship to describe the hopelessness of his situation. The verbs change to the present and future tenses in the song's chorus as the person behind the reflections emerges. The speaker, once again, includes himself among a community of sinners, "the ship of fools," which references the ubiquity of the fallen experience. Although Lacey is not alone in his guilt, he does not find comfort in the community aboard the "ship." Rather, he highlights their, and thus his, foolishness as a way of categorizing them as a group who make poor choices in life and turn away from God. The nighttime setting implies the absence of God, as the dark is a metaphorical representation of wickedness. Lacey figures himself as the millstone around his own neck to depict how he is the one bringing himself down. He acts as a burden to himself because his proclivity towards sin condemns him and inspires guilt. The speaker is at war with himself because he understands what it means to be a good man, yet fails at achieving this status. He desperately appeals to an abstract "you" to be his breath because, as he sinks to the bottom of the ocean with the millstone around his neck, he needs help breathing or he will die. Even though he allows the "you" to remain abstract, it still carries the register of a being, either God or a lover, who can pull the speaker from his hopelessness and provide support as he works to overcome his fallen condition. Lacey characterizes his sinful self using biblical imagery and, thus, articulates his self-perspective through a Christian moral

framework. The metaphor elevates the gravity of his self-deprecation and reveals his attempt to understand his corrupt actions in terms of salvation and condemnation.

The speaker also blames himself for pulling others down with him and assumes responsibility for the perceived consequences of his actions. The past-tense verbs resume as he again begins to recall his self prior to his fall:

I used to pray like God was listening,
 I used to make my parents proud,
 I was the glue that kept my friends together,
 Now they don't talk and we don't go out,
 I used to know the name of every person I'd kissed,
 Now I've made this bed and I can't fall asleep in it. (ll. 11-16)

As the vocals become distraught and the rhythm begins to toss and turn like an ocean amid a ferocious storm, the opening lines of the second verse recall the resignation of Emily Dickinson who writes, "I prayed – And did God care?" (No. 376) The speaker has lost his devoted faith and views prayer as a futile activity. The speaker disappoints God, as well as his parents, which causes great emotional distress. Lacey shuffles between the past and present to show the effects of his sins on others and blames himself for the deterioration of the relationships among his friends. The friendships fall apart and give way to disconnection, isolation, and bleakness. He seeks transient relief and connection from sexual relationships, but the promiscuity only adds to his wealth of personal guilt. Lacey uses to the motif of sleep to signify a person's conscience, as when he was pious he slept "without a single a stir," but he now finds sleep difficult. The guilty conscience prevents him from finding peace in

the quiet loneliness of the night, thus, leaving him susceptible to the haunting awareness of his wickedness. As Lacey sings the phrase “I can’t fall asleep in it,” the instrumentals come undone and the rhythm sections drops out completely, leaving the ghostly guitars in a tense limbo that mirrors the psychological state of the speaker. He cannot live with past choices and sees death as the only way out of this persistent uneasiness.

Brand New’s *The Devil and God Are Raging Inside Me* utilizes biblical allusions, Christian language, and direct dialogue with Christ in seeking answers to metaphysical questions. The album takes stock of Jesse Lacey’s complicated relationship with God and offers him a venue for personal reflection. “Men and women,” Wuthnow writes, “who take their spiritual lives seriously have been jolted into doing so by some personal crisis” (109). Although the effect of the loss of fifteen close friends and family members during the compositional period of the album can only be surmised, the drastic turn of Brand New’s music from typical emo/pop music to reflections on death, sin, and religion points to the large influence of the events on the psyche of the band. They turned their focus to more meaningful issues, such as the trajectory of the soul after death, and cultivated a record that offers a commentary on a curious and suffering individual’s relationship with God.

The Modern Jeremiad in the Music of Thrice

Thrice mirrors Brand New’s musical evolution from emo music to a music that offers reflections on religion, metaphysics, and the moral standing of the modern world. Thrice’s 2009 release *Beggars* revitalizes the Puritan jeremiad tradition, as

seen in the poetry of Wigglesworth, and, unlike the music of Brand New, finds comfort and hope in moments of faith. Singer, guitarist, and primary songwriter, Dustin Kensrue is a self-proclaimed Christian who uses his musical forum as an outlet for interacting with his religious belief. The title of the album, *Beggars*, illuminates the major themes that pervade Kensrue's lyrics on the record. He comments:

I think we are at most times deluded in thinking that we are totally responsible for our circumstances, but in the end almost everything is beyond our control to a high degree and we can't even be sure we will wake up tomorrow. Everything in life is a gift at its core; we are beggars all. (qtd. Punk News)

Kensrue sees life as a divine gift and views humanity's sense of autonomy as misguided. This belief fuels his denunciation of human vanity because he realizes that physical rewards, such as money, fame, and power, become futile in the face of sickness, suffering, and death—the times when an individual truly reflects on what is important. Even though Thrice's lyrics express this mode of thinking, Thrice is not a Christian band, nor do they cater to a Christian audience. Their music resonates with a secular crowd who engages with the thematic content of the music in a thought-provoking and self-reflective manner. Although the music reflects Kensrue's personal beliefs and relationship with faith, he, at times, sheds the confessional lyric style and tells a story through a character to illustrate a specific message. Thrice's devotional poetics recall both the condemning jeremiads of Wigglesworth and the reassuring security of Bradstreet in their synthesis of secular rock music and a devoted faith.

Thrice re-contextualizes the Puritan jeremiad for the modern world and denounces humanity's tendency towards self-aggrandizement and vanity. In an increasingly secular society, money and power have become the orienting virtues and, thus, have led to successful individuals feeling as if they are in complete control of their destiny. Brian Froese writes:

The 'comic jeremiad' warns of trouble if humanity does not change its behavior. Within this rhetorical construct, history is not broken, as in a tragic reading, and failure to change often does not mean the end; rather it is a painful lesson. [...] [It] declares that the end is not so much near as it is a choice. (62)

Although Thrice intimates the potential consequences of human vanity, the lyrics take more time pointing out and condemning human sinfulness than warning of the end of the world. The lyrics take stock of modern society's elevation of physical wealth over spiritual wealth and the human overconfidence that results. Kensrue questions humanity's claims to autonomy because he believes they fall apart under further analysis. The persistence of a devotional poetics that so closely echoes the Puritan jeremiad form reveals the ubiquity of humanity's backsliding nature and the ease with which humans turn from faith when in the immediate comfort of physical wealth. The appearance of the jeremiad form in Thrice's music seems extremely unexpected due to their character as a mainstream rock act that performs to a primarily young-adult audience, who values rock-stars over religion. However, the artist assumes the role of the analytical thinker who offers commentary on society because he retains the perceptual ability and soapbox to educate the public. Creating art calls for intense

meditation and reflection upon the most meaningful aspects of existence, and Thrice's *Beggars* expresses these meditations through an engagement with Christian faith and the Bible.

The opening song of the album, "All the World Is Mad," explores humanity's turn from righteousness and embraces the aggressive tone of the Puritan jeremiad tradition. The choppy, thunderous bass riff that opens the record immediately thrusts the listener into the upheaval and madness that the lyrics describe. Kensrue sings:

We are saints made of plaster, our laughter is canned,
 We are demons that hide in the mirror,
 But the blood on our hands,
 Paints a picture exceedingly clear.
 We are brimming with cumbersome, murderous greed,
 And malevolence deep and profound,
 We do unspeakable deeds,
 Does our wickedness know any bounds? (ll. 1-8)

The use of the pronoun "we" allows the speaker to include himself among the universal condemnation of human vanity. The speaker describes the surface level appearance of the saints and laughter, but notes their lack of depth. It depicts a shallow form of religious devotion that is more a facade, than actual belief. Instead of being genuine, the laughter is nothing more than a pre-recorded laugh track, such as the type that a taped sitcom would use. Although humans try to hide their demonic qualities the "blood on their hands" shows distinct proof of society's corruption and makes it impossible for people to clear themselves of guilt. Kensrue strongly

denounces humanity as “murderous” and “greedy” and emphasizes the inherent wickedness of human nature. Individuals fundamentally and naturally transgress morality and seek physical wealth without concern for hurting others. The speaker ends the first verse with the notion that a person cannot even conceive the extent of humanity’s sinfulness. Society continually proves to be increasingly immoral, to the point that the speaker resigns himself to accepting people as wicked beings. This differs from Wigglesworth’s jeremiad, as the speaker of that poem does not include himself in the condemnation of New England, but rather positions himself as an omniscient prophet. Although Kensrue matches the aggressive tone of Wigglesworth’s condemnation, he finds just as much guilt in himself, as he does in the rest of society.

The forceful chorus reveals the speaker’s judgment of the world’s inherent wickedness:

Something’s gone terribly wrong,
 With everyone,
 All the world is mad,
 Darkness brings terrible things,
 The sun is gone,
 What vanity! Our sad, wretched fires. (ll. 9-14)

The speaker views the world as a mad place because no one respects each other or adheres to a moral code. Although he cannot pinpoint the cause of such corruption, the mere ubiquity of selfishness and immorality leads him to the judgment that people have changed for the worse. The motif of light and dark appears as the disappearing

sun signifies the absence of God and righteousness in the mad world. The repetition of the word “terrible” connotes the speaker’s fear and disgust at the disorder that now permeates society. The speaker can only sigh in resignation at the vanity he witnesses, which implies his inability to reverse the cycle. While the Puritan jeremiad calls for a change among the sinners, Thrice’s modern take on the jeremiad contains a passive speaker who can observe and condemn, but not motivate change. Kensrue implements apocalyptic imagery of a world in ruins to portray the consequences of human vanity. “The apocalyptic imagery,” Michael Powell suggests, “serves as a warning of the urgency of the music’s message; namely, that a battle is being waged between good and evil” (Powell). The destruction signals the impending judgment of humanity.

The song’s second verse alludes to the doctrine of original sin in its assertion of the immutability of humanity’s fallen nature. Kensrue sings:

We can’t medicate man to perfection again,
 We can’t legislate peace in our hearts,
 We can’t educate sin from our souls,
 It’s been there from the start,
 But the blind lead the blind into bottomless pits,
 Still we smile and deny that we’re cursed,
 But of all our iniquities,
 Ignorance may be the worst. (ll. 15-22).

The repetition of “we can’t” emphatically asserts that humanity cannot return to its Edenic, perfect state prior to the fall. Modern medicine, namely pharmaceuticals, can

change a person's actions, but cannot change his inherent desires, thoughts, or wickedness. Law and education are also inadequate modes of correction because people still transgress civil and moral law without concern. No external force can erase innate corruption. Even moral leaders, such as political and religious figures, prove to be just as flawed and, subsequently, compound society's problems. People have no proper figures to turn to for guidance and move further into "bottomless pits," a bleak and terrifying image that connotes the depths of hell. Kensrue comments on humanity's vanity by noting society's denial of its wickedness. People do not see the error of their ways because they misguidedly value the attainment of worldly possessions over spiritual wealth or morality. The speaker emphasizes that this "ignorance" is the worst of humanity's sins because it makes it impossible to repent. If individuals do not see their actions as sinful or immoral, they have no reason to change or re-orient their lives towards righteousness.

Society's subscription to an incorrect value system enables people to believe that they are autonomous beings. In relation to the title and main theme of the album, Kensrue asserts that everything in life is a gift from God, or "grace," and that humans are merely beggars who must rely on a higher being for life. The speaker recognizes his lack of autonomy and finds himself morally culpable, but notes society's lack of self-awareness. Thrice's jeremiad ends unresolved as the speaker does not attempt to re-establish society's spiritual commitment, but rather resigns himself to the immutable reality of human sinfulness.

Salvation Comes

Against the jeremiad, the music of Thrice explores the comforting aspects of faith and the safety and security a devotion to God provides individuals in times of immense suffering. The promise of eternal happiness and union with God in heaven mitigates the pain that plagues the tormented individual in the physical world. The earthly realm becomes a transient state that one can overlook. Although most of the music I consider in this chapter discusses the songwriter's strained relationship with God, negative sense of self, or condemnation of human vanity, the music of Thrice also offers reflections on the pleasures of a devoted faith. Mark Hulsether maintains:

That much popular music has a strong religious content which goes underappreciated. Only someone who is not listening or has an extremely narrow definition of faith could say that 'one searches in vain for a positive portrayal of faith in popular culture.' (78)

Thrice's *Beggars* depicts the positive aspects of devotion to God through musical stories that depict individuals in times of struggle who find strength in faith. Kensrue develops these stories, based out of his own relationship to faith, to illustrate the notion that God takes care of humanity through His grace. This music serves as a reminder that, even in a secular, popular music context, artists can articulate a positive relationship to God without sounding preachy or evangelical. Kensrue's characters maintain their poise under tremendous pressure and injustice because of the promise of eternal life that persists beyond the world of human suffering. Just as Bradstreet derives strength from her faith after the burning of her house, the personae of Thrice's lyrics seek solace in a spiritual world when caught amid the bleakness of reality.

The song “Wood and Wire” assumes the perspective of a wrongly convicted, innocent man as he faces execution. The man realizes the transience of his earthly suffering in comparison to the glory that awaits in heaven and approaches his death without fear or trepidation. Kensrue sings, “Fourteen years behind these bars / In twelve-foot square of cold cement / I’ve lost nearly everything” (ll. 1-3). The opening verse sets up the man’s scenario as the unjust conviction deprives the individual of his experience of life. The confined nature and coldness of his jail cell paint a bleak picture of his physical reality and seem to leave no room for hope or faith. The unjust conviction should taint his belief in a divine plan or a merciful Lord because he suffers unnecessarily and loses his life without reason, yet he maintains his belief. The second verse elaborates on the prisoner’s hopeless reality and depicts his final walk towards the execution room. Kensrue writes, “They lead me where men fear to tread / But towards the thing I most desire” (ll. 9-10). Death no longer frightens the innocent man because it will liberate him from his earthly suffering and bring him eternal union with God. He longs for his death because he knows a greater realm lies beyond the cold, dismalness of jail cell.

Thrice quotes almost directly from the Bible in the chorus of the song to articulate the source of the prisoner’s strength and the comfort his faith affords him. Kensrue sings:

For all my suffering’s a light and momentary pain,
 While the weight of an endless glory still remains,
 So throw the switch on, I know you ain’t got a choice,
 The dawn is coming, all is well, I will rejoice. (ll. 11-14)

Imprisonment does not rob the innocent man of his faith, as these lines depict a man who appears unbothered by the grave injustice that has befallen him. Although he remains physically present in his experience of the execution, his mind exists elsewhere, in a realm characterized by tranquility and reassurance. He turns his mind towards God and trusts that the Lord will guide him safely and securely across the boundary of the death. Kensrue recalls the Bible, which states:

Though our outward man perishes, yet the inward [man] is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding [and] eternal weight of glory. (2 Corinthians 4:16-17)

Even though the prisoner physically dies, his soul persists and experiences the glory of God. The injustice of being wrongly condemned to death is light in comparison to the joy and glory of heaven, just as an individual's time on Earth seems but a mere moment when compared to the eternity of the soul's union with God. Faith brings the prisoner enlightenment, as he values spiritual wealth over earthly rewards and understands the futility of life. The glory is endless because Christ's resurrection promises eternal life to those who achieve salvation. The prisoner clears the executioner of moral culpability because he recognizes that the man is merely being compliant with the ruling of the justice system. As the instrumentation swells, the final line of the song ends on a hopeful note, which starkly contrasts the cold, bleakness that permeates the opening verses. Light enters the speaker's life, as he prepares for the rebirth of his soul in the afterlife. He looks forward to a new existence in heaven and asserts that "all is well," even as he enters the moment of

death. The man rejoices, like a congregation enraptured in its praise of God, as he looks towards the eternal glory of heaven.

“Wood and Wire” portrays the comfort of faith and articulates a positive relationship with religious belief with a quiet, restrained conviction that allows the music to appeal to a secular audience. The justice in the song comes not from any earthly source, but from God. As Knight posits, the song promotes “the notion of treasure in heaven and indifference to this world” (19). Heaven comforts the prisoner because it provides hope to an existence that is otherwise bleak and empty. The speaker’s imprisonment becomes a step on the path towards God, as opposed to an endpoint for his life. Faith gives the innocent man peace and comfort, as he dies with a clear conscience and the knowledge of the treasure that awaits his soul.

The music of Brand New and Thrice engages with the subjects of faith, the afterlife, and God in a manner that highlights the persistence of religious themes in popular music. Although there is not a direct lineage between the poetry of the Puritans and Emily Dickinson and the music of Brand New and Thrice, the bands choose to emphasize and utilize similar imagery, motifs, and language in the exploration of the individual’s relationship with the divine. While Brand New’s intimate and confessional lyric styles recalls the self-interrogative and self-critical verse of Taylor, Thrice’s music echoes both the aggressive jeremiad of Wigglesworth and the hopeful, comforting verse of Bradstreet. Brand New articulates an anxiety over sinfulness in a manner that closely resembles the self-deprecating Puritan who constantly fears the prospect of not achieving salvation, while Thrice portrays characters who find immense strength in faith during times of suffering. The presence

of biblical allusions throughout both *The Devil and God Are Raging Inside Me* and *Beggars* showcases the bands' intellectual interaction with religious belief and an attempt to re-contextualize the ancient text as a way of understanding themselves and the complexities of the modern world. The persistence of religious themes in the music of Brand New and Thrice reveals the artists' proclivity towards attempting to understand humanity's relationship with the divine and the mystery of human teleology.

Conclusion

“It was obvious,” Perry Miller writes, “that men had contrived to bring upon themselves all the anguish they suffered; it was still more obvious that neither this awareness nor the anguish itself liberated them from the trammels of perversity” (*Seventeenth Century* 25). The inability to escape the limits and pitfalls of the human condition plagues the poets and musicians that I have considered in this project. While faith can offer moments of comfort and security, as in Thrice’s “Wood and Wire,” it remains coupled with severe self-doubt. The Puritan devotional poetics of Bradstreet, Wigglesworth, and Taylor depicts a genuflection towards God and a simultaneous denunciation of their physical selves. I argued that the typological voice affords the Puritans a way to integrate their life experience with the stories of the Bible and provides a theological context for expressing personal emotions. The poetry reveals the intense feelings of unworthiness that characterized the Puritans’ self-understanding and shows that no amount of repentance could assure salvation or compensate for their innate sinfulness.

Although Dickinson eschews the Puritan structure of feeling for a de-centered analysis of faith, her devotional poetics reflect the tension that results from the unintelligibility of the divine. She cannot personally feel the grace of God through devoted faith, nor understand the mysteries of the divine through intellectual or philosophical inquiry. Thus, Dickinson’s awareness of the chasm between humanity and God does not enlighten her metaphysical apprehension by providing definitive answers; rather, it provokes further questions. She inhabits a precarious poetic position that indulges in paradoxical metaphors as a means of preserving the

instability of the concepts they represent. I argued that Dickinson's inability to intellectually bridge the gap between humanity and the divine and her perception of God's distance results in a "smart misery" that leaves her aware of spiritual deficiency, but without the prospect of satiation.

"Religion and God," Robin Sylvan asserts, "are not dead, but very much alive and well and dancing to the beat of popular music" (3). The lyrics of Brand New and Thrice exemplify the persistence of religion in popular music. *The Devil and God Are Raging Inside Me* and *Beggars* explore themes of spiritual desolation and human sinfulness while appealing to a commercial audience. Certainly religious music, such as gospel, maintains a contemporary audience. However, the mainstream appeal of Brand New and Thrice differs from a standard form of devotional music because it articulates a "real and gritty spirituality" (Casey). The musicians are not religious scholars, and they may not even consider themselves devoted believers. But their music expresses a raw experience with God and faith to which an audience can connect, regardless of their religious affiliations. The albums depict the trials of spirituality that are inherent in the human experience, such as episodes of overwhelming personal guilt and reflections on poor decisions or a lost state of purity. In Chapter Three, I argued that the self-critical, confessional lyrics of Brand New and the modern jeremiads and positive depictions of faith of Thrice constitute a present moment of devotional poetics because of their engagement with biblical allusions, Christian language, the teleological mysteries, and the relationship between humanity and the divine. The music provides a wealth of spiritual reflections and reveals the production of metaphysical, religious art in a secular popular music industry. These

three moments of devotional poetics depict a continuity of Christian religious motifs and language, as well as the persistent attempts to articulate the individual's and the community's relationship to God and faith.

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