

Swallowed by the Infinite: Inversion and Imagination in “I reckon - When I count at all”

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Emily Dickinson’s “I reckon - When I count at all” is a poem that plays with inversion: inversion of size, value, and certainly expectation. The poem looks bare with its few words and many spaces, yet it bursts with matters as immense as “Poets - then the Sun - Then Summer - Then the Heaven of God” (3-4). Even with matters this large, Dickinson crafts a thought path that is easy to follow—that is, until the path ends in a space as open and undefined as heaven. Indeed, the first three stanzas establish poets as the single most important thing, as their thoughts encapsulate the sun, summer, *and* heaven. However, ambiguous pronouns in the final five lines force one to re-examine whether the speaker still believes in their own declarations. The final stanza consequently opens up two drastically different messages: one a paean to the limitless glory within poets’ minds and the other an acknowledgement of the futility of imagination in the face of a real heaven.

The poem begins with a list of the things the speaker deems most valuable, with poets assuming the highest position. The syntax is direct and lays out a clear order of significance:

I reckon - When I count at all -

First - Poets - Then the Sun -

Then Summer - Then the Heaven of God -

And then - the List is done - (1-4)

The words “count” and “list” connote a vertical succession where the item of most value is at the top. Already a sense of inversion because heaven is in the sky but at the bottom of the list, whereas poets live on the ground and take on the highest position. Dickinson further juxtaposes these items through deliberate placement of the words. “Poets” stands alone, separated from other phrases by dashes, giving it more time to be considered. Not only that, but it stands in

isolation next to “First,” which accentuates the preeminence of poets in the speaker’s mind; the poets are special in a way that demands unique attention. Conversely, “Then the Heaven of God” remains uninterrupted and draws less visual attention to “Heaven,” consequently providing it less value.

Still, there is space—both literally on the page and linguistically—to question this. The dashes and “Then”s induce a slow pace that forces one to consider each word as it arrives. The poem could very well begin with “When,” yet Dickinson plants the definite article “I” to establish that the poem is more so about the speaker's ruminations on counting rather than the act of counting itself. They “reckon,” not declare, and this subjectivity invites one to question the speaker’s ponderings—or to at least question one’s own hierarchy of valuation. The possibility that the speaker is Dickinson adds confusion because the “I”s land on unstressed syllables in the iambic meter, which diminishes the speaker’s—or Dickinson’s—presence. As such, the meter undermines the power of poets which the speaker expects. The phrase “at all” builds on this tone of diffidence to lessen the speaker’s sense of self. “At all” embodies a feeling of pointlessness, as if it is futile to count at all—and this can easily bleed into larger questions of why one thinks or lives at all. The way the stanza closes also characterizes the speaker as hesitant or doubtful. They say they are “done - ,” but this evidently is untrue because the poem continues. The dash produces no finality; the thought path continues in a tottering way. Interestingly, some sources say that line 1 ends with “it” all instead of “at” all, which would subtract this vanity and instead suggest certainty, as the speaker knows it all and can choose what matters. These contrasting tones mold the different interpretations of the final lines.

Another ambiguous detail in the first stanza is that Dickinson places religion at the bottom of the speaker’s list but draws aural attention to the word Heaven. Lines 1-4 are nearly in

common meter, but the iambic meter breaks in line 3 at “Heaven” due to the line’s feminine ending. Dickinson makes the line’s eighth syllable unstressed and adds the word “God” as a ninth syllable. Consequently, the rhythm sounds uneven at “Heaven” because although the word could fit into an iambic meter, the fact that “of” is unstressed turns it into a spondee. This not only causes a change in cadence at “Heaven” but also gives weight to “God.” This odd meter perhaps underscores an underlying obsession with religion; worries about the afterlife may dominate the speaker’s consciousness and surface as this hiccup as they make their list of what matters to them.

Regardless, the speaker revises their thoughts in the second stanza and decides that poets *are* all that matter, as they encapsulate the latter three things. The speaker is in a mode of retrospection:

But, looking back - the First so seems

To Comprehend the Whole -

The Others look a needless Show -

So I write - Poets - All - (5-8)

“Looking back” has various meanings. The obvious one is that the speaker re-examines what they just declared, but the phrase also has a temporal quality of looking back in time to reflect upon one’s life. The latter reading implies that the speaker is of maturity, perhaps at or near the end of their life. This interpretation strengthens the speaker’s association with being near the “Heaven of God.” If this is the case, then there is also an aspect of literal positionality on the page where the speaker is at the end of line 3 and can look backward in the poem to consider summer, the sun, and poets. This illuminates the idea that being “First” is not necessarily best because it is those that come after that can observe a larger view. Nevertheless, the speaker

realizes from their vantage point that poets encompass the rest. Poets can think and write about the “Whole” of what matters: the sun, summer, heaven, and all else. Although poets are physically the smallest out of the four things, their imagination is limitless. This notion that one item—the “First”—can “comprehend” the “Whole” of three items infuses the overwhelming motif of inversion. Certain structural choices compound this inversion, like how the word “First” is in the latter rather than first half of line 5 and how “all” ends the *first* line of the first stanza but ends the *last* line of the second stanza. The slanted rhyme of “Whole” and “All” works alongside these inversions to emphasize how the different items try to swallow and embody one another: heaven can hold people after death, and people’s imaginations can hold the thought of heaven.

The first three lines of the third stanza explain why the speaker believes that poets embody the rest. There are two particular ways in which poets are superior: “Their Summer - lasts a solid Year - / They can afford a Sun / The East - would deem extravagant -” (9-11). To backtrack, there is little debate in these lines that “their” and “they” refer to poets. The statements only make sense in the context of poets’ imagination. Sure, these phrases feel hyperbolic, but it is true that poets can envision a summer that lasts forever and a sun more brilliant than one rising at daybreak. Imagination wins in aspects of endurance and glory.

However, the diction adds complexity by raising paradoxical notions. The sibilance draws attention to summer, lasts, solid, and sun, words that together bring up certain contradictions. For one, “solid” does not fit this stanza. The poet’s year-lasting “Summer” and brilliant “Sun” are *not* solid. They are intangible. They exist in the poet’s imagination. There is a similar sense of incompatibility between “Summer” and “lasts”; seasons are infamous for their ephemerality. Furthermore, Dickinson mentions summer before the sun, whereas the sun came before summer in the first stanza. If the speaker has already changed their order of what matters

most, there is no guarantee they still believe that poets are the most important. The word “afford” also brings in the negative insinuation that poets must give something up in order to have this long summer and bright sun. The last stanza seems to hint at what this payment is; however, the final five lines are by far the most ambiguous, as there are countless ways to interpret the pronouns “they,” “those,” and “them.”

The interpretation the speaker has set up, though it feels a little banal for Dickinson, is that “they” and “them” refer to poets. Dickinson continues the speaker’s train of thought with a conjunction: “And if the Further Heaven - // Be Beautiful as they prepare / For Those who worship Them - ” (12-14). The assumption that “they” and “them” refer to poets is the most digestible because “their” and “they” certainly concern poets in the preceding lines. This interpretation conveys that poets “prepare”—through their imagination and writing—a beautiful heaven for their readers who worship them and their thoughts. It is interesting to note that line 12 has a feminine ending, again singling out the word “Heaven” as important. The word “worship” then affirms the superiority of poets because it was a word almost only used for God in the 1800s. The poets have thus assumed the role of God in creating heaven—after all, it is poets like Dante and Spenser who crafted the glorious vision of heaven that millions worship.

The poem’s final two lines conclude that if heaven—either real or imagined—is as beautiful as how poets have envisioned it, then it is difficult to justify the effort of faith. Dickinson completes the conditional statement she set up in line 8 here: “It is too difficult a Grace - / To Justify the Dream - ”(12-16). No matter if “Further Heaven” refers to a real or imagined heaven, the speaker decides that it is not worth it to practice religion with the goal of entering heaven because someone can simply picture heaven in their mind. To elaborate, the first possibility is that the “Further Heaven” is the real heaven that sinless folks enter. The speaker

claims that if this heaven is “as”—specifically on the same level as and not more—beautiful as the one the poets write about, then “Grace” is not worth it because faith will not allow religious individuals to reach a place more beautiful than the one already within the poet’s mind. The other option is that the “Further Heaven” is a fully imagined location and not a real place, but this leads to the same conclusion. If the average person can envision a heaven that really is as beautiful as the one poets envision, then it is hard to “Justify” the effort it takes to reach the “Dream” of entering an actual heaven. Ultimately, this reading implies that the possibilities of imagination offer an easier route to seeing heaven than the trials of grace. The strongest evidence for this interpretation is the word “and.” Dickinson does not write “but” or “yet” to implement a turn after talking about the preeminence of poets for 11 lines. She simply adds to the train of thought, which suggests that it must be the poets who are doing the preparing. However, there is a dash after line 11, allowing space for a new thought to enter.

I argue that in the final stanza the speaker actually turns back on their aforementioned statements: they acknowledge that the poet’s act of imagining heaven does not compare to pious folks’ ability to experience it in the afterlife. In this interpretation, the “Further Heaven” refers to a real heaven, “they” and “them” refer to preachers, and “Dream” is the poet’s imaginings. To paraphrase, if the real heaven is as beautiful as preachers describe, then it is difficult to justify poets’ preoccupation with imagining rather than practicing religion. Dickinson’s careful usage of definite versus indefinite articles gives solidity to this interpretation. In the first stanza she lists actual objects and writes “the Sun,” “the Heaven of God,” and “the List.” Conversely, in the third stanza she discusses poets’ thoughts and writes “a solid year” and “a sun.” Lines 10-11 make clear that Dickinson writes definite articles to describe real items and indefinite articles to embody more imaginative concepts because she contrasts “a” ridiculously brilliant sun with

“the” East of the natural world. Definite articles provide more specificity and allow for clearer visualization and thus a more concrete existence. As such, “the Further Heaven” must be the real one: the one that preachers “prepare” and describe to their worshippers. This train of thought concludes that if heaven truly exists in its beauty, then it is difficult “to Justify” the imaginings of poets since they could be focused on their faith.

The question may arise of why it is “the Dream” and not “a” dream since this interpretation argues that imagination is unsubstantial, and I contend that the definite article only emphasizes the reality of heaven. The definite article makes clear that Dickinson is still discussing heaven. Dickinson plays with the idea that dreams are unactualized, hence why it is difficult to justify poets thinking about heaven, but she can describe “the Dream” with a definite article because what the dream is about—heaven—is real. Simply put, the word dream connotes illusory imaginings, but “the” reminds that “the Dream” itself is real. This paradox forces one to recognize the existence of “the Dream” of heaven and creates pressure to ensure it does not remain a dream; Dickinson encourages one to make heaven a reality.

From beginning to end, one thing preoccupies the speaker’s mind: heaven. This scarcely seems apparent upon the first read, though. The overt train of thought revolves around the importance of poets, and their imaginings only become larger and brighter as the poem progresses. The motif of inversion pushes them to swallow the sun, summer, and heaven within their limitless imagination. This very inversion, however, allows heaven to swallow the poets back in the end. Irregularities in meter accentuate the speaker’s concerns about the afterlife, and such concerns cause a slow degradation in their confidence of the original order they proposed. Assuredly, even if the poet can imagine a summer that lasts forever, that summer will cease upon their death, and it is the afterlife that will swallow the poet. The bilateral pressure to encompass

the “Whole” ultimately drives the poem forward, producing two opposing arguments that both find solidity within Dickinson’s ambiguous diction.

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