

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#766 (c.1863)

My Faith is larger than the Hills –  
So when the Hills decay –  
My Faith must take the Purple Wheel  
To show the Sun the way –

'Tis first He steps upon the Vane –  
And then – upon the Hill –  
And then abroad the World He go  
To do His Golden Will –

And if His Yellow feet should miss –  
The Bird would not arise –  
The Flowers would slumber on their Stems –  
No Bells have Paradise –

How dare I, therefore, stint a faith  
On which so vast depends –  
Lest Firmament should fail for me –  
The Rivet in the Bands --

#### ANALYSIS

“Tension is particularly evident in a poem whose subject, diction, and metric is decisively hymnal, but whose purport is a denial of doubt which argues its presence.... A consistent common meter prevails in this poem, whose opening figure is especially hymnlike. It declares a faith greater than the greatest natural phenomena and implies an ascent from things of nature to things of spirit. Hills and sun stand as emblems of eternity. And if hills do alter, the sun’s circuit assuredly never fails. This first stanza does introduce dissonant notes. ‘When the Hills decay’ assumes deterioration to be nature’s most salient trait—and only Dickinson’s expert eye could see in the millennial process of geological change an instance of the transitory. Even the sun, adopted as a more secure figure of eternity, is somewhat acknowledged to be, in this, figural. Faith must still ‘take the Purple Wheel’ and ‘show the sun’ its way toward symbolizing permanence. Nevertheless, the first stanza argues for some movement from the perception of nature’s objects to intimations of immortality.

The poem thus accepts its own figure of eternity and in the second stanza joins omnipresence to sempiternity [eternity]. The sun’s circuit encompasses vane and hill and the world at large. It is only in the third stanza that the dissonant note emerges into prominence. The sun figure comes to signal, through negativity, not an immutable order but a pressing sense of its possible failure. The sun’s stride might break; its circuit comes to suggest an image of eternity confounded. With its overthrow falls every other process: in nature, as seen metonymically in the failure of birds to return and flowers to bloom, and in supernature, with the silencing of heaven’s bells. This last image is in fact redundant. It is the failure of heaven that the sun’s broken movement signals and that has priority. As the final stanza demonstrates, what is at issue is the faith in heaven’s immutability. It is this that determines the poet’s perception of all orders in nature, the sun among them.

This final stanza in some sense reasserts the hymnal stance of the poem’s opening. But it does so in contrary fashion. Faith is not so much affirmed as declared necessary. The poet cannot dare to ‘stint’ her belief in the everlasting, lest the admission of heaven’s failure unleash all the forces of dissolution she thus

far only suspects to be ascendant in her world. 'Firmament' is, for her, the 'Rivet in the Bands.' A belief in eternity is what holds all things together. Its breaking apart would dissolve all else. The hymnal metric is, therefore, not merely ironic. The poem's statement verges on unfaith and a palpable sensing of its consequences. But it draws back from apostasy. The regular common meter continues to assert the organization and regularity which the poet never quite relinquishes."

Shila Wolosky  
"A Syntax of Contention"  
*Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War*  
(Yale 1984)

Her religious Faith is larger than Nature, represented by the "Hills." Transcending the material world and its decay, her Faith is invested instead in the "Purple Wheel," combining the color of royalty and divine rule with the archetypal Wheel. Christ wore a purple robe when condemned to crucifixion and Dickinson repeatedly uses the Wheel as a traditional symbol of celestial order: "Slow tramp the Centuries / And the Cycles wheel!" (#160); "I turned my Being round and round" (#351); "The fine...unvarying Axis / That regulates the Wheel" (#451); "Within my Garden rides a Bird / Upon a single Wheel" (#500); "When Cogs - stop - that's Circumference " / The Ultimate - of Wheels" (#633); "A Route of Evanescence / With a revolving Wheel" (#1463).

*Sun* is a pun. The natural sun in the first stanza is transcended by the supernatural *Son* in the second stanza—Jesus Christ, whose "Hill" is Calvary, in contrast to the natural hills. Jesus embodies the "Purple Wheel" and the rest of the poem is about her faith in Him, the savior known to believers as "the Light of the world." Dickinson refers to Immortality as a "Rendezvous with Light" (#1564). The sun does not "step" down upon "the Vane" (a blade in the *wheel* of a windmill) nor go "abroad" to "do His Golden Will." It is the Son of God who is "The Rivet in the Bands" that holds her vision together. The poem is not even an expression of religious doubt, as declared by secular critics—just the opposite: Dickinson ends by chiding herself because she dares to "stint"—to limit--her faith in Christ.

Michael Hollister (2014)