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# **‘IN MANY AND REPORTLESS PLACES’: PLACE IDENTITY AND EMILY DICKINSON’S AMERICA**

*Hsu Li-Hsin*

## **Abstract**

This paper examines Emily Dickinson’s version of America through her spatial representation of various indeterminate locations. In a number of poems, she negotiates different identities of ‘place’ and ‘space’ through her description of American formlessness. The unaccountable locations and unfixed spatial depictions in her poems correspond with the malleable national boundaries of westward expansion in mid-nineteenth century America. Her persistent poetic investment in several undefined locations suggests her nuanced understanding of and subtle response to the spatial concepts embedded in the national cultural discourses of her time. If (as scholars such as Stephen Fender, Myra Jehlen, and Lawrence Buell have noted) the American West provided antebellum American writers with poetic materials to inscribe personal and national destiny onto the geographical blankness of the unsettled wilderness, Dickinson’s portrayal of the shapeless, the ‘reportless’, and visually opaque places revises the process of inscription by presenting alternative topographies that counterbalance the national vision of expansion and progress.<sup>1</sup> Her experimental approach towards, and delineation of, these indeterminate places offers a glimpse of how Dickinson might have been more responsive than has been previously recognised towards the national cultural attempt of her time to cope with the fluctuating boundaries of antebellum America. Like her contemporary writers, the question of location plays a significant role in her poetry, and her probing of American formlessness shows the complex relationship between place, space, and national identity in mid-nineteenth century America.

**Key Words:** Emily Dickinson, place identity, wilderness, geography, topography, nineteenth-century studies, American Literature

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## **The Question of Location**

The poetry of Emily Dickinson shows a strong propensity to probe the question of location. Although she refused to cross her ‘Father’s ground for any visits’ in later life, her poems explore the dynamic between place and space in a surprisingly persistent manner.<sup>2</sup> She depicts various unknown places, using ‘where’ in many poems, sometimes more than once. In many of her ‘location’ poems, the identity of place is underscored and closely scrutinised, but never clearly defined or explicitly confirmed. Her conscientious dwelling on the notion of ‘where’ implies her sensitivity towards how space and place convey and reshape human emotion and longing. Critics have noted the significance of place in Dickinson’s poetry. Inder Nath Kher describes Dickinson’s poetry as ‘the landscape of absence’, since the external world for Dickinson ‘becomes a concrete metaphor of her life and art’.<sup>3</sup> Jane Donahue Eberwein regards Dickinson’s quest narratives as metaphors for religious pilgrimage.<sup>4</sup> However, Dickinson’s figurative ‘landscape of absence’ is, for Douglas Anderson, based on the ‘presence’ rather than ‘deprivation’ of place in Dickinson’s spiritual geography.<sup>5</sup> Combining the metaphorical and the metaphysical, these comments on Dickinson’s poetic landscape correspond with Diana Fuss’s remark on Dickinson’s lyricisation of space. As Fuss points out, Dickinson’s ‘eccentric relation

to space' is 'not so much phobic as poetic'.<sup>6</sup> The seeming 'absence' of specific locations in Dickinson's poetic landscape paradoxically highlights her active, rather than passive engagement with, or even escape from the external world.

Building on a wealth of scholarship, this article continues to explore Dickinson's poetic topographies by looking at her depictions of a number of undetermined and unaccountable places. It examines Dickinson's portrayal of America in terms of its geographical formlessness, in particular relation to Robert Abrams's concept of 'topographies of skepticism' and Robert Weisbuch's notion of American cultural 'emptiness' that characterises antebellum literature.<sup>7</sup> By considering the question of location, Dickinson's spatial representation discloses a similar sense of instability, uncertainty, and anxiety towards the wilderness of American geography. Recent scholars have placed Dickinson's poetic sense of place firmly in the national and cultural context of her time. Susan Howe and Cynthia L. Hallen interpret her geographical references and poems of exploration as reflecting on American colonial history.<sup>8</sup> Shira Wolosky and Michelle Kohler show how Dickinson's poetry expresses a critique of American identity or a deflation of the national myth of America.<sup>9</sup> Christine Gerhardt and Paul Giles further associate Dickinson's 'reluctant' or 'deconstructive' approach towards place with her ecological or global consciousness.<sup>10</sup> This article furthers the discussion by suggesting that Dickinson's poetic 'deflation' of the notion of America or 'deconstruction' of place might also imply her responsiveness towards American enthusiasm for the symbolic and spiritual value of the American landscape – particularly its geographical formlessness. Dickinson continuously experiments with various ambiguous topographies, reflecting attempts to 'map' or 'make' America. Although critics such as Weisbuch and Vivian Pollak have noted that Dickinson appears to be less concerned than her contemporaries with the idea of America and the national theories of her time, her poetic representations of American landscapes in a number of poems inform how Dickinson, like her literary contemporaries, employs alternative topologies to account for the unsettled condition of mid-nineteenth-century America. This is an area of Dickinson scholarship that has been left relatively untouched by critics.<sup>11</sup>

### **'The swallowed up, of View.': Dickinson's 'reportless places' and Visual Obscurity**

Location, especially the absence of it, plays a significant role in Dickinson's poems. They frequently feature locations of an uncertain nature. Places such as 'Absent Place' in 'Absent Place - an April Day -'; 'illocality' in 'A nearness to Tremendousness -'; 'reportless places' in 'In many and reportless places'; 'Passive Place' in 'This quiet Dust was Gentlemen and Ladies'; and 'no Geography' in 'We pray - to Heaven -'. All of these 'places' accentuate the indeterminacy of one's spatial experiences.<sup>12</sup> A number of poems explore one's sense of place not through the fixed point of a specific location or destination, but through a fluid interaction between the speaker and space. 'In many and reportless places', for example, accounts for places that have an all-consuming physical impact upon their visitors:

In many and reportless places  
We feel a Joy -  
Reportless, also, but sincere as Nature  
Or Deity -  
It comes, without a consternation -  
Dissolves - the same -  
But leaves a sumptuous Destitution -  
Without a Name -

Profane it by a search - we cannot -  
 It has no home -  
 Nor we who having once inhaled it -  
 Thereafter roam.

These 'reportless places' cannot be geographically 'searched' or linguistically 'named'; they are felt and 'inhaled'. They are nameless, homeless, and boundless, and yet leave 'a sumptuous Destitution' that alters one's 'roaming' paths forever.<sup>13</sup> These 'reportless' places exert a power that Lawrence Buell calls a 'deepening' of one's 'sense of place' by creating a place-sense that is close to the sky with its volatility and malleability.<sup>14</sup> These elusive, fluid, and dissoluble locations can be breathed in like the air, soliciting physical sensations while defying definite topographical representations. 'I've known a Heaven, like a Tent -' provides a useful example for understanding one reportless place that Dickinson might have in mind.<sup>15</sup> In the poem, the speaker attempts to capture a heavenly vision of 'the Thing' before its dissolution in the air:

I've known a Heaven, like a Tent -  
 To wrap it's shining Yards -  
 Pluck up it's stakes, and disappear -  
 Without the sound of Boards  
 Or Rip of Nail - Or Carpenter -  
 But just the miles of Stare -  
 That signalize a Show's Retreat -  
 In North America -

No trace - no Figment - of the Thing  
 That dazzled, Yesterday,  
 No Ring - no Marvel -  
 Men, and Feasts -  
 Dissolved as utterly -  
 As Bird's far Navigation  
 Discloses just a Hue -  
 A plash of Oars, a Gaiety -  
 The swallowed up, of View.

While the poem identifies the location to be 'In North America', a gesture that reminds us of the effort to map American Destiny onto the landscape, this heavenly vision renders the viewer-speaker equally dazzled and puzzled. Its lack of 'trace' and 'Figment' like 'Bird's far Navigation' highlights the unaccountable, or even unrepresentable nature of this 'Heaven'. Words and phrases like 'Stare', 'swallowed up', and 'plash', further express the speaker's experiential connection with the sky, which cannot be visually understood. The glimpse of a heavenly vision creates a blinding effect that is physically absorbing and optically disorientating. Echoing her 'sumptuous Destitution', the heavenly spectacle exemplifies a reportless place in America that discloses and dissolves, leaving the speaker who 'inhaled' the scene no trace except for sensuous 'Joy' or 'Gaiety'.

Dickinson's emphasis on 'reportless' locations corresponds to the unsettled geographical boundaries of antebellum America, which were symptomatic of a restless society. As Susan

Roberson notes, a 'national narrative of progress' in antebellum America 'was clearly tied in American minds to mobility and movement and was made evident by the territories claimed and settled'. However, as Roberson observes, 'a narrative of domesticity' was also emerging 'as an answer to the unsettling of society', which focuses on 'domesticity and stressed sessility, immobility, and the interior recesses of the self'.<sup>16</sup> Dickinson's questioning of location or refusal to go anywhere in poems such as 'How Human Nature dotes' and 'Up Life's Hill with my little Bundle' reflect such a stress on the interior and the immobile, which counterbalances the 'official' mapping of upward or westward expansion. 'How Human Nature dotes' extrapolates the longing of human nature for the unreachable destination with an enthusiasm that borders on desperation:

How Human Nature dotes  
On what it can't detect -  
The moment that a Plot is plumbed  
Prospective is extinct -

Prospective is the friend  
Reserved for us to know  
When Constancy is clarified  
Of Curiosity -

Of subjects that resist  
Redoubtablest is this  
Where go we -  
Go we anywhere  
Creation after this?<sup>17</sup>

'Plot' and 'Prospective' indicate advancement and progression. With their capital 'P', these two words point to the designed plan of God. Words such as 'extinct' and 'plumbed', alternatively, provide outlooks not in a forward direction, but in a downward movement. With its implication of gravity and death, 'a Plot is plumbed' suggests that humanity might not ascend to Heaven, but rather descend into oblivion. Humanity that progresses and quests for 'the unanswerable question', as Jane Donahue Eberwein describes it, is the 'Redoubtablest' for its seemingly dismal prospect.<sup>18</sup> The three consecutive questions in the last stanza foreground the significance of location and its paradoxically indeterminate nature; life's journey appears to be a process of measuring, or 'plumbing' the depth of human existence through extinction.

Such an ironic commentary on the human quest for the unknown is allegorised in another earlier poem of Dickinson, 'Up Life's Hill with my little Bundle'. In this poem, the speaker justifies her inability to climb 'Up Life's Hill' due to its steepness:

Up Life's Hill with my little Bundle  
If I prove it steep -  
If a Discouragement withhold me -  
If my newest step

Older feel than the Hope that prompted -  
Spotless be from blame

Heart that proposed as Heart that accepted  
Homelessness, for Home - <sup>19</sup>

Echoing John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the speaker is depicted as a seemingly traditional pilgrim 'with my little Bundle', who climbs towards 'Life's Hill'. The repeated capitalisation of 'H' with nouns such as 'Hill', 'Hope', 'Heart', and 'Home' also evokes the Christian notion of Heaven as one's final resting place. In contrast to the spiritual vision of ascension in the poem, however, is an antithetical topography of one's gravitation, embodied by the plunging steepness of the hill that discourages the speaker. This acceptance or even preference of one's 'Homelessness' over Heaven 'Up Life's Hill' offers an ironic twist to the Christian convention that designates one's spiritual redemption through ascension. Furthermore, the poem provides a temporary solution for the conundrum posed in 'How Human Nature dotes' with the speaker's refusal to proceed somewhere, to ascend or move forward for a 'Perspective' that is 'Redoubtablest'. While the 'Human Nature' dotes on what is unknown, Dickinson's speaker takes a different route by following her 'Heart' and accepting 'Homelessness, for Home -'.

The 'reportless places' and Dickinson's 'Homelessness for Home' can be examined in the light of what Robert E. Abrams calls 'topographies of skepticism' in mid-nineteenth century American literature. According to Abrams, antebellum American art and thought saw the emergence of an alternative, 'more freely floating antithesis' to mapped space, which challenged 'official geographical premises' and 'the logic of the scale map'. Abrams uses the examples of paintings by nineteenth-century artists such as Thomas Cole and George Galeb Bingham, whose aesthetic techniques 'can invoke a space of minimal spectatorial mastery within which the eye fails to find definitive orientation and bearing'.<sup>20</sup> This aesthetic trait, according to Abrams, is also embedded in the writings of antebellum writers such as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau. Dickinson's poetry shows a similar literary ambiguity in her delineation of place and space. For example, her 'miles of Stare' and 'the swallowed up, of View' in 'I've known a Heaven, like a Tent -', point towards a poetic space of 'minimal spectatorial mastery' that reshapes one's spatial experience. Her persistent probing of 'Where go we -', of the human progression 'Up Life's Hill' and 'Home', echoes the questing voices of her contemporary writers in their ambiguous representations of American landscapes.

Interestingly, Dickinson's optical obscuration is compensated through her delineation of the sensation of 'a Joy' or 'a Gaiety' – which are the immediate physical effects that 'reportless places' produce upon their viewer-speakers. In poems such as 'In many and reportless places', the speaker experiences 'a Joy' of the external world through 'inhaling' these places, feeling the existence of these places at their most sensuous moments of interaction. Dickinson's poems of alternative topographies draw one's attention to the dynamic relationship between the speaker and the space, rather than the representation of American landscapes as a symbolic or idealised destination. She states in one 1856 letter that 'They say that "home is where the heart is." I think it is where the *house* is, and the adjacent buildings'.<sup>21</sup> 'How Human Nature dotes' and 'Up Life's Hill with my little Bundle' reveal Dickinson's conscientious search for a more concrete and earthly, if not more realistic, dwelling place. The specificity and tangibility of the 'house' as a location remains a more attractive choice for Dickinson to claim a sense of belonging. In contrast, 'In many and reportless places' and 'I've known a Heaven, like a Tent -' focus on the uncertain nature of 'reportless places' and dissolving 'Heaven'. Dickinson's quest for the tangible and her portrayal of the shapeless, the 'reportless', and visually opaque places demonstrate her creative experimentation with alternative topographies that both echoes and unsettles the relationship between national boundaries and one's place identity.

**'Vast Prairies of Air': Dickinson's Prairie and American 'Emptiness'**

Despite her perceived lack of involvement in or endorsement of the patriotic discourses of her time, Dickinson's poems of 'reportless places' suggest her contemplation and exploration of American place identity.<sup>22</sup> Permeated by topographies of uncertainty, Dickinson's poems paradoxically reveal an intriguingly imaginative engagement with what American destiny might be like. As Evan Carton writes, Dickinson's 'repeated stress on the word "reportless"' in 'In many and reportless places' turns the poem itself into a report.<sup>23</sup> Unknown locations in Dickinson's poetry underscore one's sense of place by flitting intermittently between the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible, the air and the land. Through such vacillation, a sense of place is continuously brought forth and dramatised, and its identity is either courted or dissected, closely examined or critically interrogated. Dickinson's flirtation with one's sense of place and her challenge against a fixed notion of American place identity can be seen through her poetic investigation of one's imaginary interaction with prairies in 'To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee'.<sup>24</sup> The poem undertakes the epic endeavour to 'make a prairie' – the symbol of the American sublime:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,  
One clover, and a bee,  
And revery.  
The revery alone will do,  
If bees are few.

As Eberwein notes, the poem is 'a formula' for the production of American landscape.<sup>25</sup> Ingredients such as 'a clover', 'a bee', and 'revery' are listed in this poetic laboratory, and then measured and weighed against each other for what will 'do' and what one could do without. The poem appears to make bees and clovers, metonymic for nature, almost dispensable, prioritising the power of imagination over reality.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, this seeming disregard of the external world with the statement that 'The Revery alone will do' is triggered by the very attempt of the poem to 'make' nature. Richard Brantley remarks that Dickinson's 'revery' here 'interacts with, as well as withdraws from, clovers and bees'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, this visionary prairie is produced through the simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of the interactive process between bees, clovers, and the speaker's mind, a process that extracts one's sense of place while exposing its constructedness.

Dickinson's minimalistic version of an American prairie both mirrors and exposes the cultural effort of her time to associate geography with national identity by rewriting nature or writing nation over nature. William Cullen Bryant celebrates the distinctiveness of American geography in his 1832 poem 'The Prairie', 'For which the speech of England has no name —'.<sup>28</sup> For Bryant, American prairies are Eden-like for their American uniqueness, and because they are 'quick with life' including 'Myriads of insects', 'gentle quadrupeds', exotic 'birds', 'sliding reptiles of the ground', and the 'graceful deer' that 'Bounds to the wood at my approach'.<sup>29</sup> In particular, Bryant, like Dickinson, evokes the image of the bee in his final stanza, referring to it as 'A more adventurous colonist than man, / With whom he came across the eastern deep'. The bee 'Fills the savannas with his murmurings' and mesmerises Bryant into dreaming about 'the laugh of children, the soft voice / Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn / Of Sabbath worshippers', who represent the future of an America colonised by white settlers.<sup>30</sup> Dickinson's

prairie poem appears to have shared with Bryant's an interest in 'colonising' the 'geographical blankness' of the West with the settlers' reveries and dreams.

Critics such as Stephen Fender have noted how the material nature of American settlers 'became the poets' native material'.<sup>31</sup> The wilderness of the West, especially its imagined 'vacancy', could be regarded as an advantageous opportunity for writers to compose their own versions of American prairies. As Weisbuch writes, Americans were endowed with the privilege 'to capitalize upon the barrenness of their present scene'.<sup>32</sup> This cultural 'emptiness' of America replicates itself in the geographical formlessness of the West, which served as an inexhaustible and readily accessible source of poetic inspiration. Nationalistic discourses in antebellum America were often based on manifest destiny, a rhetorical device that mapped the city of God onto the American landscape as a justification for expansion.<sup>33</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson would proclaim in his essay 'Experience' that 'I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West'.<sup>34</sup> Although Emerson was equally critical of American expansionism, calling '*Manifest Destiny, Democracy, Freedom*, fine names for an ugly thing' to condemn the controversy over slavery, he appears to have shared the enthusiasm of his contemporaries for the potentiality of spiritual rebirth in the American West.<sup>35</sup> American wilderness served as a symbolic location – a new Garden of Eden onto which, as Nina Baym states, each individual was able to 'inscribe, unhindered, his own destiny and his own nature'.<sup>36</sup>

However, nineteenth-century American writers, as Weisbuch remarks, also suffered 'recognition of emptiness', since the 'emptiness and cultural youthfulness' of America might be accused of 'immaturity' or 'savagery'.<sup>37</sup> Bryant's prairie poem hints at such anxiety with his conclusion in 'The Prairies' that 'All at once / A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream, / And I am in the wilderness alone'.<sup>38</sup> This American wilderness could sometimes be too 'empty' to bear. Writers like William Bromwell propose to 'give a correct estimate' of American 'resources, peculiarities, and institutions', presenting America in an officially recognised and geographically accurate manner so European visitors would not 'misunderstand and misrepresent us'.<sup>39</sup> Linguistic interpretations are of paramount importance to promote the distinctiveness of one's national landscapes. At a time when American writers were searching for new ways to establish the uniqueness of American identity, and when the idea of the American prairie was contested, Dickinson's endeavour to 'make a prairie', like her description of 'reportless places', reveals a similar effort to represent, or even to 'make' America. Her 'location' poems were written at a time when westward expansion and land annexation were considered the fulfilment of God's prophecy. Her prairie-making endeavour reverberated with the Protestant quest in the American West for the imagined 'City on a Hill'.

In particular, Dickinson's poetic emphasis on the question of location creates a rhetorical structure of patriotic discourses, reflecting a national cultural moment when Americans were searching for the 'Prospective' of America that was considered to be lying 'Up Life's Hill' or in the prairies of the mythical West. However, Dickinson's delineation of these undefined places shows a more nuanced response to the American joy and sorrow over its cultural youthfulness and geographical formlessness. Several poems of Dickinson about Heaven indicate her poetic dramatisation of this double-edged American 'emptiness'. In 'My period had come for Prayer -', the speaker intrudes upon God's territory, but finds nothing except the air:

My period had come for Prayer -  
No other Art - would do -  
My Tactics missed a rudiment -



Creator - Was it you?

God grows above - so those who pray  
 Horizons - must ascend -  
 And so I stepped upon the North  
 To see this Curious Friend -

His House was not - no sign had He -  
 By Chimney - nor by Door -  
 Could I infer his Residence -  
 Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler -  
 Were all that I could see -  
 Infinitude – Had'st Thou no Face  
 That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended -  
 Creation stopped - for Me -  
 But awed beyond my errand -  
 I worshipped - did not 'pray' - <sup>40</sup>

Transcendentalist writers such as Emerson find divinity in nature, feeling spiritually reborn in the 'new' and 'yet unapproachable America' in the West. Dickinson's speaker here, alternatively, compares God's 'Residence' with 'Vast prairies of Air' that, in Cynthia Griffin Wolff's words, seem 'utterly sterile'. The missing 'rudiment', 'Period' for praying, 'Creation' that 'stopped - for Me -' and condescending 'Silence' all suggest the stark and barren nature of America.<sup>41</sup> Paradoxically, the seemingly infertile and inhospitable prairie-residence of God evokes both silence and awe from the speaker. Heaven, embodied in 'Vast prairies of Air', is depicted as a wilderness that connotes both a sacred destination that the speaker 'worshipped', and a bare scene that evades the search of the speaker for spiritual confirmation.<sup>42</sup> Dickinson's ambiguous portrayal of God's house here appears to correspond with Emerson's treatment of America as a metaphorical clearing, and yet her 'Vast prairies of Air' does not necessarily promise spiritual emancipation.

Like one of her 'reportless places', Dickinson's heavenly prairies are opaque and inexplicable locations. As the speaker concludes in 'My period had come for Prayer -', 'I worshipped - did not "pray"'. Despite its seeming openness, God's place maintains its privacy and authority through its exclusion from visual or linguistic appropriation.<sup>43</sup> This imagined Heaven of an ungraspable nature is elaborated in 'I never felt at Home - Below -', in which God is compared to 'a Telescope' that 'Perennial[ly] beholds us', and 'the Handsome skies' in the paradise have no 'Recess' from such superimposition:

I never felt at Home - Below -  
 And in the Handsome skies  
 I shall not feel at Home - I know -  
 I don't like Paradise -

Because it's Sunday - all the time -  
 And Recess - never comes -  
 And Eden'll be so lonesome  
 Bright Wednesday Afternoons -

If God could make a visit -  
 Or ever took a Nap -  
 So not to see us - but they say  
 Himself - a Telescope

Perennial beholds us -  
 Myself would run away  
 From Him - and Holy Ghost- and All -  
 But there's the 'Judgement Day'!<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to 'Home', Heaven with its lack of 'Recess' and its 'lonesome' environment resembles Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, something to which Dickinson alluded in an 1853 letter.<sup>45</sup> Bentham suggests that an ideal prison 'consists [...] in the centrality of the inspector's situation, combined with the well-known and most effectual contrivances for seeing without being seen'.<sup>46</sup> The 'Handsome skies' of Heaven symbolise not a utopia, but a Benthamian Panopticon. Their visual 'transparency', like the unsettled and unbroken 'Vast Prairies of Air' in 'My period had come for Prayer -', become signs of secrecy and authority, through which the invisible God is 'seeing without being seen', overlooking humans 'Below' with the moral persuasion of 'Judgement Day'. In what Barton Levi St. Armand calls Dickinson's protest hymns against 'a Calvinist paradise', the telescopic and ubiquitous God converts a promising clearing, embodied by 'unprecedented emptiness' of American prairies in the West, into a totalitarian regime with His omnipresent power.<sup>47</sup>

The 'Vast Prairies of Air' that God inhabits, solicit both awe and terror; they could be read as divine places 'Unbroken by a Settler -', but they might also morph into prisons in which 'Recess - never comes'.<sup>48</sup> As Dickinson states in 'How far is it to Heaven?', Heaven, like Hell and death, 'Defies Topography'.<sup>49</sup> This human endeavour to locate God, Heaven, or America, is more closely analysed in 'We pray - to Heaven -', in which the location of Heaven is simply 'no Geography':

We pray - to Heaven -  
 We prate - of Heaven -  
 Relate - when Neighbors die -  
 At what o'clock to heaven - they fled -  
 Who saw them - Wherefore fly?

Is Heaven a Place - a Sky - a Tree?  
 Location's narrow way is for Ourselves -  
 Unto the Dead  
 There's no Geography -

But State - Endowal - Focus -  
 Where - Omnipresence - fly?<sup>50</sup>

Dickinson uses 'where' twice to stress the difficulty of geographically defining Heaven.<sup>51</sup> By juxtaposing 'a Place - a Sky - a Tree' and 'State - Endowal - Focus -' (the concrete and the abstract), the poem highlights 'Location's narrow way', pointing towards a spatial imagination that is not confined to a specific place, sky, or tree, but encompasses all. As Eberwein remarks, the poem shows a deconstruction of geographical metaphors to explain God's omnipresence.<sup>52</sup> This 'no Geography' recalls 'reportless places' and 'Vast Prairies of Air' that evade visual mapping. 'Pray' and 'prate' further suggest verbal impotence in the quest to locate Heaven. By searching for 'Where - Omnipresence - fly', the poem exposes the narrowness of place identity promulgated in the public discourse of her time, which was 'praying' for and 'prating' of a Heaven that appears to be 'Unbroken' by any 'Settler' and was 'reportless'.

### **Geographical Opacity and Dickinson's Transatlantic Vacillation**

Dickinson's various representations and making of American 'emptiness' showcase her preoccupation with the question of location, especially with the ambiguity and indeterminacy of place identity in an America of fluctuating geographical and national boundaries. The lack of a specific location spurs Dickinson's speaker on to break into Heaven, demanding an answer to 'Wherefore - fly'. However, the 'narrow' way of humanity is incapable of imagining God. Dickinson's 'intellectual provincialism', as James R. Guthrie writes, illuminates the aspiration and limitation of human perception that Dickinson addresses throughout her poetry. Her spatial vacillation between the earthly and the heavenly, the transparent and the opaque, is particularly fitting in a national and cultural moment in America, when the Emersonian 'transparent eyeball' soars as high as 'Where - Omnipresence - fly'.<sup>53</sup> Dickinson explores this Emersonian perception of transcendental transparency in American landscapes with her poetic mapping of American geographical opacity. 'Four Trees - upon a solitary Acre -', for example, explicitly represents Dickinson's attempt to present the formlessness of the American landscape that invokes and yet calls linguistic or teleological appropriation into question:

Four Trees - upon a solitary Acre -  
Without Design  
Or Order, or Apparent Action -  
Maintain -

The Sun - upon a Morning meets them -  
The Wind -  
No nearer Neighbor - have they -  
But God -

The Acre gives them - Place -  
They - Him - Attention of Passer by -  
Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply -  
Or Boy -

What Deed is Their's unto the General Nature -  
What Plan  
They severally - retard - or further -  
Unknown -<sup>54</sup>

‘Design’, ‘Order’, and ‘Apparent Action’ all designate a divine intention that ties in with the national narrative of mobility and progress. Without an obvious direction to ‘retard’ or ‘further’, these trees ‘upon a solitary Acre’ put the American celebration of movement into suspension with their static ‘General Nature’. The ‘Unknown’ deed and plan of these trees, except their ‘haply’ encounter with ‘Shadow’ or ‘Squirrel’, shift one’s focus from the ‘Destiny’ of this place to the spatial dynamics between this ‘solitary Acre’ and its neighbours in nature. As critics have noted, the poem draws readers’ attention to the notion of place itself.<sup>55</sup> By probing the fulfilment of spiritual as well as geographical settlement, both of which God the remote ‘Neighbor’ does not seem to ascertain, the poem provides an alternative spatial experience that does not rely on mobility or progress to determine the value or identity of a place.

Without any manifestation of ‘Deed’, ‘Plan’, ‘Design’, or ‘Order’, Dickinson’s solitary acre with four trees countenances the topographic ambiguities of American ‘emptiness’. Michelle Kohler writes that ‘the blankness of the speaker’s vision’ in the poem reinforces ‘the inability for human language to do much more than provide placeholders for meaning’.<sup>56</sup> The visual ‘blankness’ might also reflect the geographical opacity of American place identity. These four trees in a solitary place are emblematic of the wilderness that ‘maintain[s]’ but the purpose of which remains ‘Unknown’. The conundrum of locating Eden in America is examined further in ‘The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune -’, in which Dickinson places America in a broader transatlantic context. David Potter calls the poem a ‘New England *Lyrical Ballad*’, and it negotiates one’s place identity in relation to nation and nature in a dexterous manner.<sup>57</sup> It has a seemingly patriotic voice declare a ‘New Englandly’ way of seeing on the one hand, and compares the speaker to ‘The Queen’ on the other, who, like the speaker herself, views the world ‘Provincially’:

The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune -  
Because I grow - where Robins do -  
But, were I Cuckoo born -  
I’d swear by him -  
The ode familiar - rules the Noon -  
The Buttercup’s, my Whim for Bloom -  
Because, we’re Orchard sprung -  
But, were I Britain born,  
I’d Daisies spurn -

None but the Nut - October fit -  
Because - through dropping it,  
The Seasons flit - I’m taught -  
Without the Snow’s Tableau  
Winter, were lie - to me -  
Because I see - New Englandly -  
The Queen, discerns like me -  
Provincially - <sup>58</sup>

Like Dickinson’s other ‘prairie’ poems, this poem foregrounds a strong sense of American place identity, and yet exposes its unsteady nature.<sup>59</sup> Locations such as the ‘Orchard’ and ‘the Snow’s Tableau’ signal in the poem one’s local or national allegiance. This ‘New Englandly’ vision serves as an anchor to which the speaker clings, so that her world will not ‘flit’. This fear of loss



of one's place compels Dickinson's speaker to 'discern' and 'swear by' a certain local criterion 'for Tune'. However, in contrast to the explanatory tone of the seemingly assertive speaker in her repeated 'Because', is the emergence of a hypothetical voice twice stating 'But, were I'. The subjective perspective exemplified in 'I grow' and 'I see' throughout the poem is punctuated by the passive mode in 'I'm taught - / Without the Snow's Tableau / Winter, were lie - to me -' in the second stanza. As Kohler notes, the poem reflects upon 'the constructedness of truth attached to places'.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the oscillation of perspectives between the subjective and the objective, the assertive and the passive accentuates the speaker's understanding of the world in her own 'narrow' way. By swinging one's perception between that of the New England and the old one, the poem portrays a transatlantic shuffling of landscapes, climates, and outlooks that the provincial speaker paradoxically shares with the Queen of England.

In Dickinson's 'location' poems, various alternative topographies are explored to represent the formlessness of American landscapes. They demonstrate her poetic investigation and critical reflection of the 'double consciousness' of American joy and sorrow over its geographical 'emptiness', which prompted her contemporary writers to inscribe individual and national destiny onto nature. By exploring undefined nature and the unfixed representation of American landscapes, Dickinson's poems address the need felt by American writers to establish their distinctive national or regional identity and seem 'New Englandly'. Nevertheless, her endeavour to 'make a prairie' and to reconstruct American wilderness was in tandem with an acknowledgement of the slipperiness of American wilderness, and its topographical 'emptiness' and geographical opacity. Dickinson plays upon the constructed nature of 'reporting' or representing America by declaring the need to 'make a prairie', demonstrating what Roland Hagenbüchle considers the 'experimental quality' of 'American existence'.<sup>61</sup> Dickinson's 'location' poems reveal the complex relationships between nature and nation, place and identity that mid-nineteenth century American authors interpreted, negotiated, and responded to in a unique way. They also suggest how Dickinson might have been more receptive of and subtly engaged with American efforts to cope with the fluctuating boundaries of antebellum America than has been previously recognised. By mapping 'reportless places', Dickinson straddles the geographically transcendental and the visually opaque, producing her 'New England' version of American prairies.<sup>62</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Fender, "'Introduction' to Sea Changes", *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, eds. by Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 300. See also works such as Myra Jehlen's *American Incarnation: the Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Harvard University Press, 1986) and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> As T. H. Johnson points out in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, this was her third refusal to visit her spiritual mentor T. W. Higginson in Boston. In the same letter, she invited Higginson to come to Amherst for the second time (Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986), p. 460.

<sup>3</sup> Inder Nath Kher, *The Landscape of Absence: Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1974), pp.47-8. Critics such as Rebecca Patterson and Juzanne Juhasz similarly associate Dickinson's consistent exploration of unaccountable places with her interest in interiority. See, for example, Rebecca Patterson's analysis of Dickinson's geographical imagery in her groundbreaking *Emily Dickinson's Imagery* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), p.30-73 & 141-179. Juzanne Juhasz devotes a book to Dickinson's interior journey in *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind* (1983). Dickinson's recent

biographer Alfred Habegger similarly notes that the outside world seems to turn ‘increasingly symbolic’ for her in *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), p.160.

<sup>4</sup> On Dickinson’s travel as a metaphor for spiritual pilgrimage, see Jane Donahue Eberwein’s *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* (Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), pp. 40-42, 110 & 209.

<sup>5</sup> See Douglas Anderson’s “Presence and Place in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry” for correlation between the heavenly and earthly landscapes in Dickinson’s poems (*The New England Quarterly* 57.2, 1984), pp. 205–224.

<sup>6</sup> Diana Fuss explores the Amherst Homestead in relation to Dickinson’s lyricised space in *The Sense of An Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.20. On the transforming power of Dickinson’s poetry in relation to women’s history, see Thomas Foster’s *Transformations of Domesticity in Modern Women’s Writing: Homeslessness at Home* (Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). On the American oscillation between the trivial and the boundless in Dickinson’s poems, see James E. von der Heydt’s *At the Brink of Infinity: Poetic Humility in Boundless American Space* (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See on topologies of scepticism in antebellum literature, see the introduction of Robert E. Abrams’s *Landscape and Ideology in American Renaissance Literature: Topographies of Skepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On the cultural ‘emptiness’ of America, see Robert Weisbuch’s ‘Cultural time in England and America’ in *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1986), pp.109-132.

<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Hallen proposes reading Dickinson as an epic poet of America, connecting her poetic interest in exploration with the search of Columbus for land in ‘Brave Columbus, Brave Columba: Emily Dickinson’s Search for Land’ (*The Emily Dickinson Journal* 5.2 (1996): 169-175). Susan Howe, alternatively, elucidates Dickinson’s poems about explorers and frontiersmen through her puritan anxiety about ‘Liberty, Exile, Origin’ (*My Emily Dickinson*, New York: A New Directions Book, 2007), p. 107

<sup>9</sup> On Dickinson’s deflation of teleological discourses, see Michelle Kohler’s ‘Dickinson and the Poetics of Revolution’ (*The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 19.2, 2010), pp. 20-46. On Dickinson’s critique of American notions of selfhood, see Shira Wolosky’s “Dickinson’s Emerson: A Critique of American Identity” (*The Emily Dickinson Journal* 9.2: 2000), pp. 134-141.

<sup>10</sup> On Dickinson’s proto-environmentalism, see Christine Gerhardt’s “‘Often seen - but seldom felt’: Emily Dickinson’s Reluctant Ecology of Place” (*The Emily Dickinson Journal* 15.1: 2006), pp. 56-78. On Dickinson’s global consciousness, see Paul Giles’s “‘The Earth reversed her Hemispheres’: Dickinson’s Global Antipodality” (*The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 20.1: 2011), pp.1-21.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Weisbush and Vivian R. Pollak both note how Dickinson’s poems show less concern about the notion of America than those of her contemporary writers. Robert Weisbush, *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1986), p.34. Vivian R. Pollak, ‘Introduction’, *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson* (ed. by Vivian Pollak, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.4

<sup>12</sup> R. W. Franklin, ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (3 vols. Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), p.874; pp.779-80; p.1224; pp.948-49 & p.489.

<sup>13</sup> See Richard E. Brantley’s ‘Dickinson’s Signature Conundrum’ (*The Emily Dickinson Journal* 16.1: 2007), pp. 27-52, p.28.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.261-66.

<sup>15</sup> Franklin, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, pp. 276-77.

<sup>16</sup> Susan L. Roberson, *Antebellum American Women Writers and the Road: American Mobilities* (New York & London: Routledge, 2011), pp.3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (3 vols. Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), p.1260.

<sup>18</sup> Eberwein, *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*, p. 228.

<sup>19</sup> Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 909.

<sup>20</sup> Robert E. Abrams, *Landscape and Ideology in American Renaissance Literature: Topographies of Skepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.4.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, p. 324.

<sup>22</sup> Critics have observed the obscurity of Dickinson’s engagement with the national cultural projects of her time. See, for example, Páraic Finnerty’s discussion of American cultural nationalism in *Emily Dickinson’s Shakespeare* (Amherst & Boston, University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), pp.78-94. Critics such as Shira Wolosky and

Michelle Kohler further show how Dickinson's poetry expresses a critique of American identity or a deflation of the national myth of America. On Dickinson's writing against teleological discourses, see Michelle Kohler's 'Dickinson and the Poetics of Revolution' (*The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 19.2, 2010), pp. 20-46. On Dickinson's critique of American notions of selfhood, see Shira Wolosky's "Dickinson's Emerson: A Critique of American Identity" (*The Emily Dickinson Journal* 9.2: 2000): pp. 134-141.

<sup>23</sup> Evan Carton, *The rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, and Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p.83.

<sup>24</sup> Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 1521.

<sup>25</sup> Eberwein, *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*, p. 134.

<sup>26</sup> Buell uses this poem of Dickinson to remind readers that 'Anyone looking for place-sense in literature had better start with modest expectations, bearing in mind Yi-fu Tuan's dictum that "topophilia is not the strongest of human emotions" and Neil Evernden's definition of Homo sapiens as "the natural alien", the creature without a proper habitat', p. 254.

<sup>27</sup> Richard E. Brantley, *Experience and Faith: The Late-Romantic Imagination of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.76.

<sup>28</sup> Bryant's poem is quoted from his *Poems by William Cullen Bryant*, Vol. II (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1869), p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Bryant, *Poems by William Cullen Bryant*, pp.29-30.

<sup>30</sup> Bryant, *Poems by William Cullen Bryant*, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Fender, "Introduction" to Sea Changes', *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, eds. by Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 300. See also works such as Myra Jehlen's *American Incarnation: the Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Harvard University Press, 1986) and Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross*, p. 126.

<sup>33</sup> On the historical development of manifest destiny, see for example, Frederick Merk's *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995 (1963)). On the significance and application of American exceptionalism to the rhetoric of manifest destiny, see, for example, *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* edited by Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, eds, Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), pp. 207-08.

<sup>35</sup> The quotation comes from Andrew Taylor's *Thinking America: New England Intellectuals and the Varieties of American Identity* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010), p. 56. Emerson stated in his eulogy for Thoreau in 1862 that Thoreau 'wished to go to Oregon, not to London', a gesture that, according to Paul Giles, indicates his own patriotic endorsement of westward expansion. Paul Giles, 'Transnationalism and Classic American Literature', *Transatlantic Studies: A Reader* (eds. by Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.49.

<sup>36</sup> Nina Baym, *Feminism and American Literary History: Essays* (New Jersey: New Brunswick, 1992), p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross*, pp. 125-26.

<sup>38</sup> Bryant, *Poems by William Cullen Bryant*, p. 30

<sup>39</sup> *Locomotive Sketches with Pen and Pencil*, the 1854 tour book over the rail route from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh indicated a growing need for more sophisticated domestic travelling guidance. See Bruce's quotes from William Brownwell's *Locomotive Sketches, with Pen and Pencil: or, Hints and Suggestions to the Tourist over the Great Central Route from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh* (Philadelphia, 1854), p11. On the American vindication against European criticism of the amorality of American wilderness, see Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, 1967, 2001), pp. 67-83.

<sup>40</sup> Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, pp.533-34.

<sup>41</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1988), p.314

<sup>42</sup> The poem has received mixed critical reception. Critics such as David Porter in *Dickinson: the Modern Idiom* sees the ending of the poem as 'a rare moment of high Emersonian transport' (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981), p. 161. Eberwein, alternatively, considers the ending as the failure of religious language to communicate with God, p. 258.

- <sup>43</sup> In *Word, Birth, and Culture: The Poetry of Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson*, Daneen Wardrop differentiates praying from worshipping, arguing for Dickinson's 'respect for the division between private and public, prayer and open worship' in the poem (Connecticut: Westport, London, 2002), p. 115.
- <sup>44</sup> Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, pp.459-60.
- <sup>45</sup> Johnson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, p. 143.
- <sup>46</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings* (Ed. Miran Bozovic, London: Verso, 1995), p.43. See also Michel Foucault's *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Pantheon, 1977), pp. 201-02.
- <sup>47</sup> Barton Levi St Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 156.
- <sup>48</sup> More on Dickinson's prison imagery, see for example Eberwein's *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* (86-88, 162-63 & 238-39). See also Paul Crumbley's 'Art's Haunted House: Dickinson's Sense of Self' in *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 5.2, (1996), pp. 78-84 (pp. 79-82) and James T. Guthrie's 'Exceeding Legal and Linguistic Limits: Dickinson as "Involuntary Bankrupt"' in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 14.2, (2005), pp. 89-102 (pp.91-99).
- <sup>49</sup> Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p.879
- <sup>50</sup> Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p.489
- <sup>51</sup> The poem is often considered as a reminder against the prevalent portrayal of Heaven. See, for example, Wolff's *Emily Dickinson* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1988), p.327. See also Guthrie's *Emily Dickinson's Vision: Illness and Identity in her Poetry* (Gainesville: Florida, University Press of Florida, 1998), p.108
- <sup>52</sup> Jane Donahue Eberwein, "'Where - Omnipresence - fly?'" Calvinism as Impetus to Spiritual Amplitude', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 14.2, (2005), pp.12-23 (pp. 20-21).
- <sup>53</sup> James R. Guthrie, *Emily Dickinson's Vision: Illness and Identity in her Poetry* (Gainesville: Florida, University Press of Florida, 1998), p.88
- <sup>54</sup> Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p.733.
- <sup>55</sup> Critics have noted how this poem shows Dickinson's proto-ecological awareness. See, for example, Nancy Mayer's 'God's Place in Dickinson's Ecology' (*A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, eds. by Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz. Malden: Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 275. See also Christine Gerhardt's "'Often seen - but seldom felt": Emily Dickinson's Reluctant Ecology of Place' (*The Emily Dickinson Journal* 15.1 (2006), p. 65.
- <sup>56</sup> Kohler, 'Dickinson's Embodied Eyeball: Transcendentalism and the Scope of Vision' (*The Emily Dickinson Journal* 13.2 (2004), pp.38-39.
- <sup>57</sup> Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p.276.
- <sup>58</sup> Porter, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*, p.224.
- <sup>59</sup> Critics have pointed out how the poem challenges regional perception. See, for example, Christine Gerhardt's "'Often seen - but seldom felt": Emily Dickinson's Reluctant Ecology of Place' (*The Emily Dickinson Journal* 15.1 (2006), pp. 56-78 (p.75). See also Paul Giles's "'The Earth reversed her Hemispheres': Dickinson's Global Antipodality" (*The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 20.1, (2011), pp.1-21 (p.17).
- <sup>60</sup> Kohler, 'Dickinson and the Poetics of Revolution', p.33.
- <sup>61</sup> Roland Hagenbüchle, 'Emily Dickinson's Poetic Covenant', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 2.2, (1993), pp.14-39 (p.16).

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### **Biography**

Ms Li-hsin Hsu has recently completed her PhD at the University of Edinburgh. Research interests include Orientalism in Emily Dickinson, Transatlantic studies, Eco-criticism, and Travel theory, but currently her research centres on the role of tourism in nineteenth-century English literature.