Power in the Blood: Christianity as an Element of Craft in the Narrative Poetry of Jericho Brown, Emily Dickinson, and Dave Johnson

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Abstract

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This paper explores the connection between human despair and American religion through classic and contemporary poetry. I trace the use of Christian language, imagery, and themes across time, beginning with Emily Dickinson and ending with Jericho Brown. Doing so highlights the complicated relationship between Americans and Christianity, which speaks to the universal plight of humanity in the face of existential despair.

Power in the Blood: Christianity as an Element of Craft in the Narrative Poetry of Jericho Brown, Emily Dickinson, and Dave Johnson

I have spent most of my life in Loganville, Georgia, and all of my life as the son of a preacher. Some assume that I "escaped" this upbringing, and in some ways, I did, but for much of my life I was an active participant in the systems and structures that I inherited. I tried to embrace my parents' church, faith, and values, which were not merely passed down to them but were their life's purpose. My parents' purpose was not something I could conjure up within myself. As a result, fear, despair, and confusion set in. I had no conception of a what a good life or person looked like apart from my parents, and their Christianity was the only truth I knew. According to that truth, my inability to believe and obey condemned me. I had nightmares of hell and incessant thoughts about death. I became chronically anxious and depressed by nine years old. Only in my early twenties was I able to fully individuate in a healthy way. I still deal with mental, spiritual, and emotional damage from such intense despair at a young age, a theme that typifies my poetry.

When I started writing poetry, I had already left the church and faith behind. I began with no masters or mentors, writing primarily as a means of revisiting past experiences and interpreting them through a fresh lens. Consequently, I leaned heavily on what I later learned was the narrative style. Besides being cathartic, the practice of writing narratives brought me joy and excitement, and I slowly discovered my talent. I saw poetry as worthy of pursuit for the first time.

My newfound pursuit soon led me to my first mentor, who then pointed me towards Dave Johnson, a Southern narrative poet with a similar background to myself. I bought Johnson's

book, *Marble Shoot,* read it repeatedly, and adapted his narrative style for my earliest poems. Johnson is a preacher's son, like me, and his poems are rich with the language and imagery of the South that I grew up in. He also explores the themes that I was interested in at the time, namely despair. I later discovered Emily Dickinson and identified with her unique despair as well. She lived in a time and place in which she felt alienated. Her point of view deviates from the sociocultural sentiments of her time. This alienation resonates with me, as I too once felt alienated in the place I called home, trapped in a prison of performance. Dickinson captures the intense emotion of an instant in time, couching despair—defined by her incompatibility with her religious environment—in the ordinary; she effectively subverts the heavenly through the terrestrial.

More recently, Jericho Brown's work has influenced my writing, particularly his use of biblical source material to depict secular, queer, but nonetheless spiritual experiences.

Both Johnson and Dickinson deal with despair in their writing, and especially in the poems examined in this paper, Johnson's "Once and Forever" and Dickinson's "a certain slant of light." These poems represent styles and themes that I've tried to emulate in my short poetic journey, namely the use of religious language, imagery, and settings to explore human nature and death. Religion framed my early knowledge of such human experiences as death, sexuality, pleasure, pain, and love. Regarding these experiences, I find powerful observations of profound consequence in the plain depiction of seemingly mundane events, mined from moments that retrospect has christened with perspective. Narrative poetry is a suitable means to that end.

For the purposes of this paper, I will lay out our criteria for a narrative poem:

1. Strong setting/sense of place

- The reader should feel situated in the poem. Where an event takes place becomes as important as what, how, or why it took place. All of the journalistic questions work together to paint the narrative, but the setting tells us where all of these components converge. The setting defines the event, and the event defines or redefines the setting.

2. Ephemeral
    - Based on one experience, one brief moment in time that opens up worlds within the speaker.
3. Grounded
    - A narrative poem highlights the strange, terrifying, and profound through penetrating observations of the mundane. Where surrealism seeks to heighten and complicate, narrative strips back and simplifies.
4. Perspective
    - People should be present in the poem, even if only the speaker. Narrative centers the personal, the human.
5. Characters
    - Not as important as the other four, but narrative often incorporates multiple voices and/or perspectives. Narrative poems can introduce characters and build worlds in ways that other poems cannot.

Dave Johnson's poem, "Once and Forever," situates the reader in the religious American South through the use of Christian language and ideology and the presence of characters that we do not meet but nonetheless feel. Using sincere, straightforward diction and regional turns of phrase, Johnson achieves a strong sense of place combined with a somber tone that evokes

earnest longing, transcending the poem's setting and granting it universality. The core theme of human despair, shared by all, shines through the speaker's individual experience.

"Once and Forever" opens with the speaker's past experience of the Southern Baptist denomination he grew up in, introducing paternal characters in the first stanza whose titles—Daddy, Preacher, Reverend, and father—carry weight and authority. These authority figures author the world that the young speaker inhabits and shape his understanding of that world: "According to the early southern Baptists, / the ones I knew, Daddy Russell, Preacher Ivey, / Reverend Sailor, and my father" (Jonhson ll. 1-3). Besides contributing to the poem's sense of place in the deep south, the paternal titles of these figures create distance and establish a power dynamic between them and the speaker, but Jonhson's use of a line break after "Ivey" puts those on the third line—Reverend Sailor and the Father—at an even further distance by separating them from the qualifier "the ones I knew" on the previous line. This line break implies that the speaker may not have known their father very well. Given that Johnson describes time spent with his father in his other poems, we know that his father was present in his life; it's likely, then, that the speaker knew his father's presence but was not intimately familiar with who his father was a person—his desires, motivations, struggles, and doubts. When you inherit the belief of your father without seeing the inherent doubts and imperfections of that belief, those doubts and imperfections will shake you when they arise.

Having established the authoritative presence of the father and other religious leaders, the poem moves into their beliefs and the speaker's past perspective on those beliefs, highlighting the disparity between the conviction of the paternal figures and that of the speaker. According to Christian doctrine, salvation is, as the poem's title says, once and forever. Most Christian denominations believe that you cannot lose your salvation, hence the poem's affirmation from

the religious leaders that "you only needed to be saved once" (Johnson l. 4). The ease and simplicity with which salvation is presented often makes it far less so. Southern Baptist doctrine holds that once a person believes in Christ as God, and that Christ died for their sins and rose again, they are saved. This instant, ethereal transformation leaves the believer waiting for some tangible proof of their new condition, sometimes resulting in despair and disillusion when there is no identifiable change. The old thoughts, desires, and behaviors persist, leaving the believer to fear that they may not be saved at all. Indeed, for the speaker, losing his salvation is not of primary concern, but rather attaining salvation in the first place: "But since that warm September evening, / at the James Robinson Crusade, up in Wadesboro, / I have begged to be saved over and over" (Johnson ll. 5-7). The speaker feels that his faith is not genuine. But this statement, self-contained in its own line within the poem, is ambiguous. He could be seeking salvation from anything, drawing on the concept of Christian salvation as just one example of the broader human condition, the need for solace and security. Christianity is just one of many salves for despair.

This idea of the purported simplicity of salvation deviates from the speaker's experience of repeatedly begging to be saved and continues into the second stanza, articulated by Johnson through southern religious language that further solidifies the poem's setting: "Oh you could backslide, fall by the wayside, / but you just ask forgiveness and it was *all washed clean*, / no need for another saving" (Jonhson ll. 8-10). By beginning this sentence with "oh," Jonhson phrases the statement as somewhat dismissive and sarcastic, as if the speaker is dubious about this prospect of forgiveness. Johnson's repetition of the "once and forever" religious doctrine in various forms and phrasing throughout the poem mirrors the speaker's repetitive cycle of asking for salvation and suggests that, for the speaker, the ritual of constantly asking for forgiveness

feels fraudulent; if he is truly saved, should his need for forgiveness not fade with his sinful ways? And if salvation is once and forever, as the title suggests, why must he continue to ask forgiveness? Salvation as instant gratification is incompatible with the speaker's human need for continual, progressive growth. Johnson evinces this through the speaker's state of perpetual salvation-seeking, begging "over and over." Like Dickinson, Johnson struggles to find solace in the slant salvation offered to him, despite—unlike Dickinson—his apparent contrition and commitment to the ritual.

Johnson furthers this idea of salvation as a ritual by turning from the abstract realm of religious doctrine to a concrete image that once again lends itself to the poem's setting in a subtle way. As he continues to reflect on the religious maxims of his upbringing, the speaker recalls that "*Once saved, always saved*, / rattled off the tongue easy / like skimming stones" (Johnson ll. 11-13). When one thinks of skimming stones, one may picture a child skipping rocks by some lake or river in the forest, which could contribute to the southern setting. Thematically, the stones signify faith as the Southern Baptists present it—solid, tangible, but evasive and impractical. The image of "skimming stones" evokes ease but also futility; the act involves technique and an aesthetically pleasing result, but the stone always sinks in the end, leaving no evidence of your skimming, and you must throw another to achieve the same result—the same feeling. You may feel the need to show yourself that you can still do it. This image also complicates the idea of being "all washed clean," as skimmed stones bounce repeatedly across the water, splashing for a time before finally immersing in it. When the stones do enter the water, they do not emerge "all washed clean" as one would in a baptism—and baptism is merely a physical, external representation of one's internal salvation—but invariably sink to the bottom, thus reinforcing the

need to skim another stone, because you can no longer see the first. Longing for such a fleeting, ephemeral experience may lead to endless strife rather than peace.

As the poem moves to the final stanza, we shift from past experience and past perspective in the first and second stanzas, respectively, to present experience and perspective, signaled by Johnson's transition from past tense to present tense. The speaker is no longer a child and no longer reflects on the past. Instead, they detail their nightly routine: "Some nights I drink, sometimes just a cup of tea, / sometimes a few words from *James*" (Johnson ll. 14-15). Johnson's use of "just" to describe the cup of tea ascribes a potential double-meaning to the word "James," as it implies a forthcoming escalation in the substances the speaker imbibes. This descriptor, in addition to the fact that he's drinking the words from "James," allows us to read the name as a reference to hard liquor—Jim Beam, perhaps—as well as to the book of the Bible. The Bible, then, becomes an object of consumption, like alcohol. The speaker uses both interchangeably, ostensibly for the same purpose, "But every night it's the same story" (Johnson l. 16). Regardless of what is consumed, or for what purpose, the result remains the same. Equal outcomes, in this case, imply equal value. For the speaker, the Bible and the bottle serve the same purpose. They are a means to an insatiable end, something to help him sleep.

Regarding the speaker's sleep, Johnson returns to the image of the stone, which has taken on a new meaning as the speaker's relationship with it has evolved: "I sleep with a stone, a sleeping stone we call it" (Johnson l. 17). Stones, which earlier signify faith, now reappear as a sleep aid, more practical and useful than their previously mentioned use. Johnson's use of "we" in this line is ambiguous but could refer to the speaker's family or religious community. Regardless of who "we" refers to, the plural pronoun implies a collective belief in the stone's efficacy; the speaker does not claim the sleeping stone for himself but attributes it to a wider group, minimizing his

ownership of the totem. This subtle hesitancy to claim the totem intimates the speaker's uncertainty and doubt—the root of his despair. The speaker clings to his stone like one clings to faith for peace and rest.

Johnson establishes the sleeping stone as a metaphor for faith in the lines that follow, connecting the past speaker's stated uncertainty to the present speaker's relationship with the stone. The speaker explains that "Some nights [the stone] gets cold and I lose it between the sheets. / I wake to not having it in my hand, / I fumble to find solid ground" (Johnson ll. 18-20). The information Johnson provides us to this point prepares the reader for this metaphor; the overt religious context of the poem allows us to read this scene with the sleeping stone as a person wrestling with their faith. The use of religious language and imagery is no longer necessary. This shedding of the earlier dialect allows the poem, which begins strongly situated in a specific place and time, to move into a place of much broader human experience while maintaining its core theme and sense of continuity. Those who cannot identify with a Christian experience can likely identify with long, cold nights lying awake and fumbling for metaphorical solid ground. The speaker continues, "When it's cold, I pull it in and rub it. / It gives me heat, / something to believe, / something to ease me into the dark" (Johnson ll. 21-24). By the poem's end, the speaker appears to have reached a more compassionate place regarding faith. The stone, like faith, is solid and inanimate. It has no real, material value or utility. But if a rock helps him sleep, why should faith not help others in the same way? Conversely, this ending can also be read as a critique of the Christian faith as useless and lifeless as stone. Either interpretation leads to the same conclusion: existential dread is universal, and the ways in which we cope with it are numerous. The ambiguity in this poem allows for multiple readings which point to the same

conclusion, yet these various readings arrive at different sentiments towards that conclusion depending on the reader's lived experience.

Poet Jericho Brown's lived experience is very different from that of Dave Johnson, but Brown's poem, "Nativity," channels religion-induced despair in similar fashion to Johnson, using the Christian Bible's characters, concepts, and conceits to queer the story of Jesus's mother, Mary. The poem's title refers specifically to the Christian nativity, the miracle birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, to the virgin Mary. The birth is considered miraculous because of Mary's virginity—Christ was not conceived through sex and had no human father. Christians believe that God himself placed the child within Mary. Devoid of religious connotation, the word nativity refers more generally to the occasion of some birth or beginning. The poem begins not with Christ, but with the speaker, whom Brown frames as Mary: "I was Mary once" (Brown l. 1). The speaker identifies with the biblical Mary in this poem, meaning that something is beginning or being birthed within or through them, though the past tense "was" indicates that they have since separated themselves from this identity. The poem continues, "Somebody big as a beginning / Gave me trouble / I was too young to carry…" (Brown ll. 2-4). Like Mary, the speaker is given something that they have no control over but must carry. God gives Mary a baby to carry, and Somebody gives the speaker an unnamed trouble. Neither have agency in what they are given, only in what they do with it. We can understand the "somebody" in this poem to be God, but because Brown resists naming the giver of trouble, the reader can easily read their own experience onto the giver—it can be anyone they need it to be. The poem 's subject makes it understandable for a religious audience, but it remains universally effective by not naming its actors in situations like this.

Brown employs references to the biblical Mary in decidedly unbiblical language, which retains that effectiveness and allows for the queering of the poem without deviating from the essence of the source material. After receiving the trouble, the speaker "…ran / Off with a man who claimed not / To care" (Brown ll. 4-6). In the Bible, Mary weds Joseph, who assumes the role of Jesus's human father, and they leave their hometown of Nazareth. Brown is a queer poet whose writing deals openly with his sexuality; we can read the speaker and the "man" they run off with as parallels to the biblical Mary and Joseph, which places the speaker in a queer space. Brown centers this queerness in the middle of the poem when the focus returns to the trouble: "Come trouble's birthday, / I think of every gift people get / They don't use" (Brown ll. 7-9). Given Brown's positionality as a queer man, the birth of the speaker's trouble may refer to a coming out or to an internal recognition of one's own sexuality, which, in the speaker's case, is directly opposed to the Christian God who gave it to him. This internal conflict leads the speaker to reflect on "every gift people get / They don't use," which suggests that the speaker sees their trouble as a gift they have denied themselves. In the context of queerness, this denial can be seen as a suppression of one's sexuality. The speaker confirms this suppression in the poem's closing lines: "Lord, let even me / And what the saints say is sin within / My blood, which certainly shall see / Death—see to it I mean— / Let that sting / Last and be transfigured" (Brown ll. 10-15). The speaker addresses God directly, acknowledging the "sin" in their blood—referring here to the aforementioned trouble—as having been deemed so by God's own followers. Brown likens this sin, "which certainly shall see / Death," to Christ, who, like the speaker's trouble, is God-given and destined to die. Christ's death on the cross and subsequent resurrection are meant to pay the price of sin for all mankind, thereby defeating "death" as we know it by providing eternal life to all who believe, hence Brown's addendum "see to [death] I mean"; following this logic, to know

Christ is to know life and freedom. Having established the speaker as Mary early on, it follows that the speaker's trouble, or sin, is their messiah. The sin shall either see death in the form of complete suppression, or it shall see to the death of the speaker from those who wish to stamp it out. Suppressing the sin, sacrificing it, would preserve the speaker's life, much like Christ's sacrifice is said to preserve the lives of believers. But if Christ is life, then so too is this trouble; it is a gift to the speaker. There is hope in the trouble's Christ-likeness: if it must meet death for a time, it will "last and be transfigured" in the end.

Less hopeful is Emily Dickinson's poetry regarding the subject of death and salvation, influenced heavily by the ubiquitous protestant religious fervor of her time. Dickinson was born in 1830, at the tail end of the Second Great Awakening in the United States, a period of intense Protestant religious fervor. At approximately twenty-five years of age, she would see the beginning of the Third Great Awakening. Between proper "awakenings," her hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts remained in a state of ongoing religious revival. This may have been due in part to the eleventh constitutional amendment of Massachusetts, which passed in 1833 and eliminated the existing church tax provision, legally ending state support of religion. (Youngs 128). According to Youngs, "some clergymen actually welcomed the change as an inducement to win converts by a strong ministry" (128). Revivals very well may have been the strong ministry that the new legislation induced. It is also likely that the ongoing Amherst revival, which served as a backdrop for much of Dickinson's life, was the church's response to an increased need for money—and, therefore, an increased need for congregants—brought about by the 1833 legislation. Regardless of origin or inspiration, the revivals were hugely successful. By the age of twenty, Dickinson had seen most of her loved ones join the church: her father, Edward; her

sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert; and her biological sister, Vinnie (Lavinia), all joined in 1850. Her brother, Austin, joined six years later in 1856, likely to facilitate a smooth wedding and marriage, as his wife, Susan Gilbert, was already saved. The circumstances surrounding his conversion—the time between his and his family's and the presence of the wedding—allow for ambiguity and uncertainty with regard to its sincerity. This ambiguity does not pertain to the faith, or lack thereof, of Emily Dickinson. She made no profession of faith in her adult life and did not attend church with her family. In a letter to Jane Humphrey in April 1850, Dickinson proclaims her solitary faithlessness, acknowledging that she is "standing alone in rebellion" (Poetry Foundation). The Dickinson family attended a Congregationalist church, whose doctrine was largely in keeping with the Puritan and Calvinist traditions. The revivals in Amherst would have been of a similar belief. In her poem, "There's a certain Slant of light," Emily Dickinson critically dissects her family's faith through her characterization of the titular light. The poem finds Dickinson observing a particular ray of light that appears on "Winter Afternoons" (l. 2). She goes on to attribute characteristics to the light that appear to be veiled critiques of the religious revival taking place in her hometown of Amherst and in New England generally.

The language Dickinson uses to describe the physical attributes of the light is evocative of the Calvinist doctrine of the Congregationalist churches that her family would have attended, namely that of election. Referring to the light as a "certain Slant of light" suggests a level of discernment on its part; it is selective in where and how it shines, much like God, according to the doctrine of election, will only select a few "elect" faithful to spend eternity in heaven (Dickinson l. 1). That it shines on "Winter Afternoons" implies a coldness and frigidity; this slant of light is not warm and inviting, nor is the selective love of God as presented in election (Dickinson l. 2). On the contrary, Dickinson claims that the light—the God of Calvinist

Christianity—"oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes" (ll. 3-4). The phrase "Cathedral Tunes" evokes images of grand churches, as well as of the somber, spiritually weighty songs that are sung within them, hence the "heft" that Dickinson ascribes to the tunes. This God, according to Dickinson, is burdensome, cold, and oppressive.

Dickinson's metaphysical description of the light is equally critical of its nature and that of the Christian God. The light gives "Heavenly Hurt," a reference to the new affections that salvation is said to bring, which grant conviction and, subsequently, repentance (Dickinson l. 5). The prevailing doctrine of the time held that humans "have a sinful disposition and will not 'will' their way to God unless he miraculously reorients the prevailing disposition of their souls" (Caldwell 46). It is not within our power to love God, because we are so inclined towards sin. So, God must intervene and turn our affections towards him: "In due time, He might create in the heart a new set of affections which would incline the individual towards Christ" (Caldwell 46-47). These new affections result in a natural hatred of sin—a "Heavenly Hurt"—that grieves the Christian and signals the authenticity of their conversion. (Dickinson l. 5). The Christian's grief and sorrow towards sin is their only confirmation of salvation, as Dickinson explains: "We can find no scar, / But internal difference" (ll. 6-7). She establishes the source of this internal difference as divine, defining it as "An imperial affliction / Sent us of the Air" (ll. 11-12). It is not surprising that Dickinson sees the Christian faith as an affliction, given that, excepting herself, her entire family became believers, possibly damaging their relationships with her—especially in the case of Susan Gilbert.

Dickinson, avoiding the affliction, was "set at the greatest distance from [the salvation which the gospel reveals, the way in which it is bestowed, and the Saviour himself]" (Hopkins 27). According to Samuel Hopkins, "unholy" people like Dickinson "never will desire and

choose [these things] until they have a heart friendly to holiness, which is the new heart given in regeneration" (27-28). Dickinson illuminates the state of the unregenerate—according to the doctrine of her time—in the fourth stanza: "When [the light] goes, 'tis like the Distance / On the look of Death" (ll. 15-16).

Given that Dickinson does not appear to have known the God of Christianity personally, "There's a certain Slant of light" likely seeks to criticize the inescapable presence and influence of the religion and its followers, and not necessarily the person of God himself. The oppressive nature of the light is the oppressive nature of her family's religion, one that would confine her to domesticity, demean her art, and isolate her as a consequence of nonconformity. Dickinson's art questions God, life, and death; Christianity eliminates the need for—and value of—her art, because, once believed, Christianity eliminates the need for questions. Her art is not compatible with faith. Understanding the oppressive religious atmosphere in which Dickinson lived and wrote illuminates the societal pressures and expectations at work in her life and allows for speculation as to how those cultural forces shaped her art.

Dickinson's art, along with Johnson's and Brown's, collided with the cultural forces in my own life to shape my art in the same way. I owe much of my poetic style to Dickinson's subtle yet significant imagery, Johnson's distinctly southern religious voice, setting, and characters, and Brown's subversion of the biblical and divine. In deft hands, these elements of craft contribute to a poem's literary and emotional effect, but they also situate a poem within an American literary tradition of flensing the religious experience to uncover the deeply human.

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