



Emily Dickinson's Catholic Sensibility

Editor's Note: Although the following essay only relates tangentially to this issue's theme, its engagement with the Puritanism of New England makes it an intriguing addition to the discussion on the legacy of the Pilgrim Fathers.

Emily Dickinson is America's most enigmatic literary genius. The outpouring of novels (William Nicholson's *Amherst*; Jerome Charyn's *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson*) and movies (*A Quiet Passion*; *Wild Nights with Emily*) about her—not to mention all the scholarly books and articles—attests to our enduring fascination with the belle of Amherst, as she has been called. And yet we still don't know what to make of this isolated genius and her complex poetry. What Winston Churchill famously said of Russia still applies to her. She is “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma”.

However, her life provides an essential clue for a cultural historian who wishes to interpret her work in a broad context. She spent many years confined to her house in Amherst; she was quite simply not of this world, as she acknowledges in her poem “This is my letter to the world/ That never wrote to me”. (This poem takes on particular significance when we learn that she often wrote her poetry on the backs of envelopes.) She may initially have withdrawn from the world because she had epilepsy. Nevertheless, what her consciously chosen withdrawal from the world suggests is that her religious heritage is deceptive and not helpful for a deep appreciation of who she was and what she did. Although she spent her whole life in the environment

of New England Puritanism, it gave her little spiritual fulfillment. Eventually her alienation from that heritage became so great that she took to hiding in closets when her father attempted to take her to

justified, indeed emphasized, engagement with the world. That is the principal message of Max Weber's classic sociological study *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism*. With this in mind, I suggest that

the best way to understand Emily Dickinson—to make sense of her life and her poetry—is not to think of her as a product of the Puritanism that surrounded and alienated her, but rather to think of her as having a Catholic sensibility. I hasten to add that this is an interpretation, and not a matter of her personal religious beliefs or practices. It is rather a matter of her innate sensibility. Although she may not even have known any Catholics, and certainly never entered a Catholic church, her cultural affinities and her spiritual writings resemble those of Catholic saints and poets and are best understood in relation to them. Moreover, some features of her life and work that are inexplicable, or at least puzzling, in a Protestant poet make sense in a Catholic poet.

How this happened, how a great poet with a Catholic sensibility was born into a staunchly Protestant family in Puritan New England, where she was so profoundly out of place, is and will remain a mystery. I offer no solutions to that mystery here. I do take consolation, however, from the fact that the appearance of artistic genius is always a mystery. It's just that the birth of Emily

Dickinson in Amherst, a place so foreign to her sensibility, is an especially puzzling mystery.

And let us acknowledge that she was not the only lonely genius in Western civilization. Artistic geniuses often live lonely lives, if only because they are



church. Although she was profoundly and inescapably a religious poet, she lived and wrote in what she herself considered a spiritually impoverished environment.

Dickinson's withdrawal from the world runs counter to the long-term social effects of the Protestant Reformation, which

constantly aware that they can do things that the people around them cannot do. (This fact explains why Pablo Picasso, for example, valued the friendship of Henri Matisse so much, and why he missed Matisse so much after he died.) Although Dickinson's isolation was extreme because she hardly ever met any kindred spirits in her lifetime, perhaps we can show respect for her, and not incidentally gain a deeper understanding of her life and work, by identifying some Catholic kindred spirits for her in retrospect.

Anyone with a Catholic sensibility who studies her life can readily understand that she thought, and lived, like a nun. In psychological terms, she was predisposed for the life of the cloister because she was an extreme introvert; she probably suffered from agoraphobia as well. She never liked going out even in provincial Amherst, not to mention noisy big cities like Boston and Washington. Had she grown up in a Catholic family, people would have said that she had a calling. As it was, in the absence of convents in the area, she coped as best she could. She chose to live in seclusion in her parents' house and probably remained a virgin her whole life. (We'll never know for sure about that, but it's a reasonable supposition.) In later years she took to wearing plain white dresses as a kind of secular habit.

It is easy to identify the saint with whom she has the greatest affinity: St. Francis. He is of course famous for preaching to birds, and is so depicted in a famous mural by Giotto. Preaching to the birds would have made perfect sense to Dickinson, who again and again turned to birds in her poetry. "Hope is the thing with feathers", she once wrote. Unlike so many of her contemporaries, who remained content to hold themselves apart from nature so that they could look at and admire it, she immersed herself in it. She merged herself with it. "The career of flowers differs from ours only in audibleness", she wrote.

She also created a typically odd phrase: "The Push of joy!" Like so much that she wrote, this phrase requires thoughtful interpretation. I suspect that this "Push" was her way of expressing something like the mystical ecstasy in which—we may believe—St. Francis lived. The Push was, most obviously, the push of her genius, which demanded expression and would not let her rest or—often—sleep. It pushed itself to the forefront of her consciousness and demanded her attention. This is why



Emily Dickinson's home, now a museum in Amherst, MA.

she lived more intensely than everyone around her, and tended to wear people out.

The Push did not manifest itself only in words; it also came out in her romantic fixations—obsessions?—with both men and women. She was for many years in love with Susan Dickinson, her sister-in-law. She wrote more poems, and sent more notes, to her than to anyone else. She was also capable of falling in love at first sight, as happened with Reverend Charles Wadsworth. When he was called to a church in distant San Francisco, she was devastated. But her biographers who have chronicled her fixations have failed to notice what Susan Dickinson and Charles Wadsworth have in common, which is something that links her to St. Francis.

By the standards of her society, and by her own standards as well, Susan Dickinson and Charles Wadsworth were inaccessible love objects: They were both married. In fact, Susan was married to Emily's brother Austin. Dickinson's intense, passionate fixations on inaccessible people occur so often, in fact, that one wishes to ask: What was in it for her? What unconscious psychological need did such fixations satisfy? One possible answer to this question appears in the life of St. Francis, and specifically in his deep, yet chaste relationship with Santa Chiara, known in English as St. Clare. In medieval Italy, they could love each other and God equally. It is reasonable to suppose that this is ultimately the kind of relationship Dickinson would have found fulfilling, and that she sought

in a variety of inappropriate people. The fact that she fell in love with such people suggests that it was the experience of falling in love as an intimation of seeing God that mattered to her, not the physical expression of that love. (Thus, it matters that Charles Wadsworth was a minister.) This was the Push of joy for her. In such a relationship it wouldn't have mattered to her whether it was a man or a woman. Although it is accurate enough to say that she was bisexual, that classification is inadequate by itself. What ultimately mattered to her was the depth of the beloved's spirituality. Dickinson was never lucky enough to meet anybody of either gender with the spiritual depth of St. Francis or Santa Chiara. But then, to be fair, few such people have ever lived in any time period.

However, Dickinson had a distinctly modern, not a medieval, sensibility. Her enduring popularity derives in part from our recognition that she is one of us. In cultural terms, she belongs in the seventeenth century, at the height of the Baroque era and thus at the beginning of what we call the modern world. Her tendency to yoke together opposites such as pleasure and pain, life and death, the physical and the metaphysical, is a key marker of her kinship with the Baroque, as in these powerful lines:

This, dost thou doubt, sweet?
Then have I
Nothing to show
But Calvary.

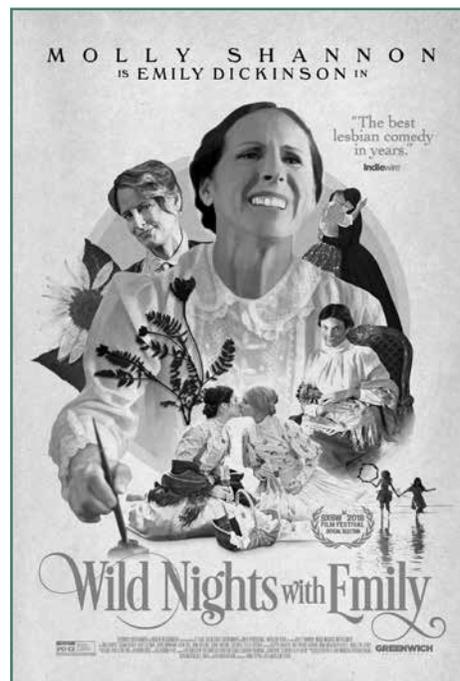
Incidentally, these lines, like so many others that she wrote, show an extreme truncation of style, which makes her poetry so innovative and so modern, and is itself an expression of her truncated social identity. “I’m nobody! Who are you?” she wrote.

Since Protestant verbal expressions of piety usually take the form of sermons, there is very little Protestant religious poetry aside from hymns. Thus, when Dickinson merged Eros and Agape with gut-wrenching power, as was her wont, she wrote in a way that was virtually without precedent in her country, and is still rarely encountered in American literature. Given this pattern in Dickinson’s work—numerous examples could be cited—it is not surprising that she has suggestive affinities with an artist that she surely never heard of—the most important artist of the Baroque era, Gian Lorenzo Bernini. His famous sculpture “Apollo and Daphne”, for example, in the Villa Borghese, presents with breathtaking artistry in solid form the moment of the merger of humans with the natural world. Dickinson perceived the natural world around her with such intensity that at times it does seem as though she has merged with it, very much in the spirit of Bernini’s sculpture.

However, the key European work—and once again, a work that she surely never heard of, so there is no possibility of influence—that presents an analogous sensibility to hers is a masterpiece of the Baroque era, and one of the greatest sculptures ever created, Bernini’s “The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa”. If she had ever seen it, or even seen a picture of it, it would have been an overwhelming experience for her. She would have encountered a work by a great artist who rendered a woman’s spiritual ecstasy—the ultimate fusion of Eros and Agape—in sensuous marble. She surely had experiences comparable to St. Teresa’s experience of agony and ecstasy when the angel plunged his arrow into her. The sense that agony and ecstasy, love and death, ordinary life and immortality, coexist is a hallmark of the Baroque sensibility—and it is quite alien to the Protestant sensibility, which is unapologetically rooted in the physical world. Yet it is just these juxtapositions that produce such concentrated poetic power in Dickinson’s poetry.

And what of the present? If this interpretation of Dickinson as having a Catholic sensibility enriches our understanding of her life and work, then

surely there is a Catholic writer in the modern world who has affinities with her. There is a Catholic writer who withdrew from the world as Dickinson did, who experienced the Push to joy that she experienced, and who wrote poetry that expressed the presence of transcendence in the natural world as she did. That writer was Thomas Merton. In fact, Merton has more in common with Dickinson than with any other artist, a fact that he acknowledged. After someone sent him a book about her in 1949, he wrote in his journal: “I am happy to dip into it and find one person in the world—Emily—with my own aspirations though in a different way. I wish I had Emily’s good sense.”



Clearly, there is more to be said about the affinities between Dickinson and Merton, but in this brief essay it must suffice to cite the following lines from Merton’s “The Song of the Traveller”:

How light the heavy world becomes,
when with
transparent water
All the shy elms and wakeful
appletrees are
dressed!

These lines breathe with the vivifying spirit of Dickinson’s poetry. The phrase “the heavy world” is one that she could have written and is one whose implications she would have immediately grasped. The intimations of transcendence in the animation of nature (“shy elms”; “wakeful

appletrees”) are tropes that have many analogies in her work. As an exercise in American literary history, if nothing else, a detailed comparison of the work of Dickinson and Merton would enrich our understanding of the legacies of both these great writers.

In conclusion I wish to make one final point. Dickinson’s Catholic sensibility, and more particularly, her Baroque sensibility, which appeared in Amherst without apparent cause or influence, represented something unique in her time, and has understandably caused great puzzlement for the 134 years since her death in 1886. Even her fervent admirers, such as the guides at the Emily Dickinson Museum, ignore this essential trait of this great artist. In the twenty-first century, people in general, but especially women, quite understandably want to claim Dickinson as one of their own, as a woman of our time.

A case in point is the film *Wild Nights with Emily*, which was written and directed by Madeleine Olnek and stars Molly Shannon as Dickinson. It presents the poet as somebody that women of our time can relate to—as a gifted, ambitious writer who was prevented by patriarchal authority from achieving literary success. Moreover, the film presents her as a lesbian who had an active sex life with Susan Dickinson. In order to get funding for the film, the script probably had to show an over-simplified version of Emily Dickinson, one that took tendencies that were undoubtedly present in her life (she really was in love with her sister-in-law), and sensationalized them. In pleasing American audiences in this way, *Wild Nights with Emily* brings her into the secular world by eliminating the juxtapositions of the sacred and the profane that informed her life. However, when we acknowledge that her intense awareness of the transcendent element of human existence facilitated her withdrawal from the world, and created a body of extraordinary work that makes sense as the expression of a Catholic sensibility, we show respect for her irreducible complexities.

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