

ANALYSIS

THE SPIRITUALITY OF EMILY DICKINSON

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

Sister Mary Humiliata

“Of all the terms in the vocabulary of the average critical writer, perhaps ‘mystic’ and ‘mysticism’ are the most misused. Probably the ambiguity surrounding the usage is inevitably attendant upon the borrowing of a term from one field for use in another; however, to anyone with the slightest respect for the theological definitions of these words, the lack of discrimination with which they are employed in literary criticism is appalling. Poetry which evades the stereotyped classifications either by reason of its intellectual complexity or, on the other hand, by reason of its vague elusiveness is catalogued as ‘mystical’; its authors become thereby ‘mystics’ or, at least, ‘mystic poets.’ The difficulties of understanding religious poetry and the scarcity of it in modern times are apparently reasons sufficient for placing such work under the title of ‘mystical’ without further analysis.

It is therefore not at all surprising to discover that Emily Dickinson has been called a ‘mystic poet’ by many of her critics. Too often, of course, Miss Dickinson’s works has been subjected to those commentators who are intrigued with the romantic biography, charmed with the love poetry, but somewhat baffled by the more significant poems, and thus the term ‘mystic’ has been called into play....The tendency of the more staid literary historians to carry on the tradition that Miss Dickinson’s poetry is mystical in nature has been not only amazing in its universality but bewildering in its variety of forms....As a matter of American literary history, it is perhaps Emily Dickinson’s sharp divergence from the paths of her predecessors which had puzzled these various critics.

Even a superficial study of American poetry will convince one that Miss Dickinson, who was unable to accept Calvinism from her schooldays [like Hawthorne], would not be satisfied with the cliches of a moderate Unitarianism such as Bryant professed. Her poetry indicates a capability of logical consideration of fundamental truths, and her self-chosen isolation gave her opportunity for such thought. Her continued questioning of the accepted beliefs would have made her a stranger to those who received gratefully the moralistic generalities of Unitarianism.

On the other hand, the perspicacious Emily was not befogged by cloudy Emersonianism. It is becoming customary for those who desire to prove the Emerson-Emily alliance to quote stanzas of similarity from one or the other of these poets and to defy identification of the author by all except the specialist. It should, of course, be unnecessary to point out that a similarity in sources of poetic style does not lead invariably to an identity of philosophical system. An examination of the body of Miss Dickinson’s poetry leaves one with no evidence that she was a pantheist; rather is there constant reference to God as the Creator and Ruler of creation in the orthodox Christian sense. To ally her independence of mind with the doctrine of ‘self-reliance’ as preached by Emerson is only to show a lack of understanding of that specious teaching.

What is striking in the work of Emily Dickinson as one searches it for her beliefs is the frank, thoughtful, sometimes playful, but always direct approach which she makes to the problems of life, death, and immortality. Her concern with these problems and her expression of the judgments she has made in her own highly individualistic idiom has probably led to the classification of much of her poetry as mystical.... If we may except a few flippant references, the poetry seems to manifest a sincere and abiding faith in God. Her ideas of God appear to fluctuate. At times the childlike attitude prevails, and one has a curious mixture of the sophistication and innocence of Miss Dickinson....

[Her] speculation was not that communion with the Divine which the mystic longs for; it was imaginative and entirely based upon sensory experience. Such thoughts are found in ‘Great streets of

silence led away,' 'I went to heaven,' 'I died for beauty,' 'Safe in their alabaster chambers,' 'Ample make this bed,' and 'What inn is this,' as well as many others....Union with God was to be reserved until death, for there was no venture into the supernatural beyond the realm of ideas for Emily Dickinson. For this reason, probably, there is none of that longing for death which the mystic expresses, the result of his communings with God while he remains in the flesh....

References to Christ in the poems of Emily Dickinson are usually not directly concerned with the Person of Christ but rather with some symbol....There are, however, a few exceptions. A spirit of Christian resignation which joins the individual's sufferings to those of Christ is found in 'I shall know why, when time is over'...This is a religious sentiment and a philosophical adjustment of attitude toward suffering. It is not, however, a mystical document; for, while the Christian practices resignation under the burden of grief and trial, the mystic, the saint—enamored of Christ and anxious to resemble Him—begs for the privilege of pain. Thus St. Theresa of Avila could cry out: 'To suffer or to die'...While these writers wrote of the martyrs with a burning desire to share their sacrifice, Miss Dickinson writes with strong appreciation but with detachment....

So far as one can penetrate the poetic mind and achievement of Emily Dickinson, one finds that her work on themes which might be designated as mystical in nature, her poetry concerned with the Creator, the Redeemer, with death and immortality, are the fruit of a peculiarly deep insight and an intensely emotional nature, but they are not of the body of that literature which is based on the search of the mystic for God and for union with Him. There is faith, certainly, and religious conviction; but nowhere is there that complete dedication to the search for perfection which motivates the mystic....

In Emily Dickinson's poetry one finds indeed that intense sensitivity to experience which is characteristic of the mystic. Her self-chosen isolation from the world might easily be interpreted as the retirement for contemplation which the mystics practice. But the writing which came out of this solitude does not tell the story of the mystic quest. [for evidence to the contrary, see "Exultation is the going" #76] The motive for the secluded life is blurred a little in the biographies, but for present purposes it is not that life which one wishes to judge for its mystic experience but rather the poetry for its expression thereof. And, as far as one can perceive, the poems seem to evoke the picture of one whose intellectual and emotional equipment for life was extraordinary in perception and depth. There is a deliberate contraction of the circle of experience, but within that circle the ultimate meaning of each act is traced to its end. Experience is related to experience by metaphor; intense conviction of truth is pointed by personification, but there is never the deliberate putting-by even of the infinitesimal which is the asceticism of the mystic. Miss Dickinson's assertion: 'The time to live is frugal, and good as it is a better earth will not quite be this' is not the statement of an ascetic.

Intellectual discipline in Miss Dickinson means precision of thought and adequate relationship of the unique happening to its place in her scheme of things; it is not the withdrawal into contemplation by which the mystic seeks to establish contact with Ultimate Reality. Her immediate goal, poetic expression, is defined in her lines: 'This was a Poet – it is that / Distils amazing sense / From ordinary meanings, / And attars so immense / From the familiar species / That perished by the door, / We wonder it was not ourselves / Arrested it before.' One searches in vain for the more particular signs of the Christian mystic in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. The expression of personal guilt for sin, the feeling of Christian humility, the symbol of earthly love used to explain the Divine, the ecstatic joy of union, and the utter desolation of the 'dark nights of the soul'—all these are recorded in the writings of the great mystics, but they are not found in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. [Arguably, on the contrary, some poems do exhibit such characteristics to some degree. M.H.] Mystical poetry—in the traditional sense, at least—is not Miss Dickinson's poetic gift. To make such a statement is not, however, to deny either her goodness or her genius."

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