

Dickinson's 'Finite Infinity': Resemblances to Seventeenth-Century Devotional Writers

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It is striking that aspects of Dickinson's work can seem to require, for comparison, a turning to seventeenth-century devotional writers. Emily Dickinson's time, the mid-nineteenth century, and place, small-town Amherst, Massachusetts, the Connecticut River valley, New England, cannot quite explain her. Likewise, religion traditional to her local milieu does not account for her sense that her life has "mystic" dimension. Including reference to her practice of wearing only white, her poem J271/F307 is a self-description: "A solemn thing — it was — I said — /A Woman — white — to be — /And wear — — if God should count me fit — /Her blameless mystery — //A timid thing — to drop a life/Into the mystic well — /Too plummetless — that it come back — //Eternity — until —". On the other hand, she did indeed feel "New Englandly", exhibiting the region's spare style and sometimes its 'Yankee' humor. Indeed, her complex sensibility has driven many critics to appraise her in the light of writers from other times and places. Bray's recent article "Emily Dickinson as Visionary", for instance, claims Charles Anderson to be treating her as an "eighteenth-century wit", ignoring her experience of "a mystical presence" and its "consequences for the poetry" (Bray, 113). And Tate says that between Dickinson and the seventeenth-century Donne "are remarkable ties. Their religious ideas, their abstractions, [move]... from the rational plane to the level of perception" (Tate, 22). Her manner of using concrete and abstract terms is pertinently discussed by MacLeish. Yet he does not mention that it resembles usages occurrent in mystical writers like Saint Teresa, for instance. Dickinson of course did not always "think in images": her frequent use of an abstraction like "eternity" in a concrete image suggests that her thought patterns include a range of convertible modes.

To consider only one passage from the seventeenth-century French writer Pascal, item #72, entitled "Man's disproportion", one sees that it states details of a context also worked by Dickinson. And the much briefer passage, Pascal's famous item #206, "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me", includes several of Dickinson's major terms. Pascal's major themes resemble a list of some of Dickinson's most prominent in her vocabulary of the soul: eternity, fear, silence, infinity and others. Dickinson wrote: "There is a solitude of space, / A solitude of sea, / A solitude of Death, but these / Society shall be, / Compared with that

profounder site, / That polar privacy, / A Soul admitted to Itself: Finite Infinity”(J1695/F1696). Excluding the phrase “Finite infinity”, Franklin notes it was added by an editor when the poem was published in 1914. It seems to me possible that a perceived resemblance to Pascal may have prompted the added phrase. Anyhow, to compare ED to seventeenth-century writers is not necessarily to insist she must have been so “influenced” --though indeed sometimes she likely was-- but is to acknowledge evidence, at least, of like sensibility and interior experience.

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An emblem is a concretion, an object or figurative object, that pictures or makes visible, something that is invisible or abstract; for instance, a picture of a heart may be a simple emblem that visualizes love. And more distinctively, an emblem points to something beyond itself.

Abstractions can vaporize poetry; however, a remarkable thing in Emily Dickinson, as Archibald MacLeish observed, is that her abstractions do not ruin her poetry. Dickinson exploits possibilities inherent in English language, by juxtaposing Latinate words, which feel abstract, to Anglo-Saxon words, which feel concrete. And joining the abstract and the concrete in this way, she uses a simple emblematic technique. When she speaks of “Amethyst remembrance”, or of the “blue and gold mistake” of Indian summer, or of that “white sustenance/Despair”, MacLeish says, though none of these “exist upon the retina”, they “present themselves as images, [and so] do they not?--*act* as images?” (MacLeish, 152).

We may approach this habit MacLeish observes in Dickinson by remembering details from mystics of earlier centuries, whose gestures were popularized not only in England by devotional poets. The 1635 *Emblemes* of Francis Quarles, for instance, an adaptation of two continental Jesuit emblem books that applied the Ignatian *Exercises*, was the most popular book of poems in that English century. Each of Quarles's typical emblems has several parts: 1) a picture, usually showing the figure of winged Amor, representing divine love, in various predicaments in the world that ultimately point to heavenly matters; the figure of Amor often is shown pointing toward heaven in these pictures, as a source of help and as a possible future after death; 2) below the picture, a motto, a brief phrase or sentence, usually a Biblical verse,



Fig. 1

Quarles, *Emblemes*, 1635

summarizing the meaning of the emblematic illustration; 3) a poem by Quarles putting the meaning of the emblematic picture into words; 4) Quarles's epigram summarizing the above; 5) a selection of related passages from Patristic and devotional writers such as St. Augustine and St. Benedict. A nineteenth-century edition of Quarles's *Emblems* was in the Dickinson family's library and is now in the Dickinson Collection at the Houghton Library in Harvard. (Fig. 1 shows the illustration from *Emblems*, Book 5. XIII, with figures and pointing gesture.)

For perhaps without realizing it, MacLeish is noticing something one finds in seventeenth-century English devotional poets (e.g., Herbert, Quarles, Hawkins), and their sources: namely, a mode of knowing, a manner of understanding earlier conveyed in Biblical literature and in Patristic writers and their successors. The most influential Patristic writer, Augustine spoke of the power of spiritual seeing opened by grace to what he calls the "eye of my soul" (*Confessions*, 7.10.16; 48); Dickinson's topic in many poems can seem this very grace, for instance her poems I discuss below. Compare MacLeish's above comment with what in a section entitled "Corporal Metaphors" Ernst Robert Curtius tells us: "In this usage the visual power of the physical eye is transferred to the perceptive faculty of the intellect. Inner senses are co-ordinated with outer": "Characteristic of Augustine are metaphors which violate visual perception: 'the hand of the heart' (Conf., X. 12), the 'head of the soul' (Conf., X. 7)" (136). For a strategy we observe in Dickinson is the presence of something we can see becoming a presence of something we cannot see with bodily eyes, only with 'eyes of the soul', or 'eyes of the heart', by the soul's power of imagination.

A resemblance of ED's language to that Blaise Pascal used in seventeenth-century France offers another suggestive example that shows Dickinson's affinity with a tradition far beyond her milieu in Amherst. In one of his longest *pensées*, "Man's Disproportion", Blaise Pascal asked: "--For, in fact, what is man in nature? A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything." Dickinson shows the dandelion of her poem #J1501/F1490 in process of becoming "a nothing"; turned to a small white globe of seed wings, a globe mostly airy space ("Ether"), the dandelion is an emblem embodying meaning that Pascal's question presents abstractly:

Its little Ether Hood
Doth sit upon its Head--
The millinery supple
Of the sagacious God--

Till when it slip away

A nothing at a time--

A Dandelion's Drama

Expires in a stem. [J1501, c1880; F1490, c1879]

Pascal's pensée on "Man's Disproportion" continues in a vein that we may take as a bare statement of what Dickinson says by means of her dandelion that slips away "A nothing at a time" and "Expires in a stem" that points to the heavens and roots in the earth; this pointing is an emblematic action, for an emblem typically points toward what it signifies. Where the dandelion came from and where it goes, however, we cannot see. Likewise, Pascal continues: "what is man in nature? Since he is infinitely removed from comprehending the extremes, the end of things and their beginning are hopelessly hidden from him in an impenetrable secret; he is equally incapable of seeing the Nothing from which he was made, and the Infinite in which he is swallowed up" (#90). ED's dandelion imagery pictures something very like this.

One might well read this Pascalian comment in conjunction with a poem in which Dickinson says:

By homely gift and hindered Words

The human heart is told

Of Nothing--

"Nothing" is the force

That renovates the world-- [J1563, c1883; F1611, c1883]

a poem she follows (in Johnson's edition) with another whose imagery of ascension originates in Biblical report of Christ's public life, his Cross, and ascension to paradisaal light:

Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light,

Painless except for us--

Who slowly ford the Mystery

Which thou hast leaped across! [J1564, c1883; F1624, two mss: c1883 & c1885]

Dickinson wrote this poem at the end of a letter to her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson not long after the October 5, 1883 death of Susan's son Gilbert. ED begins this letter: "Dear Sue- The Vision of Immortal Life has been fulfilled--"; in further passages she calls little Gilbert "my ascended Playmate" whose "sweet velocity" she meets "in everything that flies" (Letters, 799). Later, ED again used this poem to conclude a second letter, one she wrote in February 1885 to

T. W. Higginson, not about a death, but about asking for and receiving his consent that he might accept a book (Letters, 863-4). In other words, she is letting Higginson know she feels great joy at his acceptance, for she uses Christianity's strongest image of joy: resurrected life in eternal union with the Divine, a familiar Christian notion of heaven. Perhaps this poem's contrast of quicksilver speed and dull delay, admits, for Dickinson, these two very different applications, one to a boy's death and another to a person's waiting for consent to be given a book, for the very reason that the poem is patterned after so powerful an archetype.

So much does the poem depend on the archetype of Christ's death on the Cross and Ascension to heaven that the poem invites reading as itself on one level an address to Christ and a visualization of the Ascension, as if that were actually happening at the moment. This is a technique seventeenth-century devotional poets employed, Donne for instance in his Holy Sonnets, and Herbert and Quarles, among others, who were following techniques of meditation advised in various texts. Most of these texts available in English were translations from French or Spanish or Latin originals. For instance, St. Ignatius Loyola's sixteenth-century *Spiritual Exercises* teaches "composition of place" according to which a person in meditation experiences a scene in the life of Christ by imagining it present before him, in the mind's eye, the eye of the heart. It is possible to read "Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light", I suggest, as if the speaker is experiencing a composition of place, whereby the speaker imagines the scene of Christ's Resurrection happening before her eyes.

At the same time, I suggest, it is possible to read the poem as a prayer, a direct address, beginning with the first line, "Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light". Beatific divinity is Love that is Light, in Christian mystical language and belief, as in the famous concluding lines of Dante's *Paradiso* where Dante's ascent is toward the Love that turns the sun and the other stars. Interpreted on one of its levels to visualize the Ascension, that "Rendezvous with Light", Christ bodily leaving Earth, shows the speaker feeling loss as one who is left behind. The Resurrection and Ascension is not conventionally thought to involve loss. But a person vividly (or a poet conceitedly) visualizing His ascending departure and missing His earthly presence, might say Christ's union with the Light of the Father is "Painless - except for us" who have to wait here. In the third line "Who slowly ford the Mystery" the concrete reference is first of all to the speaker and other ordinary people who must delay crossing the river--a double reference 1) to the River Jordan as the entrance to the Promised Land of the Hebrews, and that Promised Land as a figure for heavenly life, and 2) the ford of the River Jordan where Christ accepted baptism from his forerunner, John, at the beginning of His public life. Christ, as Redeemer, did not need baptism, and so it is at once witty and humorous and serious to say He "forded" the river of salvation (for mankind), swiftly by bodily ascension into heaven.

Evidence suggests that Dickinson grew to disbelieve the Calvinism she encountered in western Massachusetts. Nevertheless, her poem is not a theological tract; it is an emblem in which received report of concrete Biblical events is important as a way of pointing. Little Gilbert's swift ascent, as an innocent child, points emblematically to its archetype.

To "ford the Mystery" is the ordinary way human beings pass their lives, a slow movement from finite to infinite life. This slow "fording" by ordinary mortals contrasts with the young Gilbert's and with Christ's rapid ascent. (That a little boy such as Gilbert Dickinson can also be spoken of in a way usually reserved for Christ is a convention, the belief that young children are innocent). Consideration of the mystery of death, eternal life or immortality, and infinity is a central theme of ED's work as a whole. It is across gaps between life and death and eternal life that she visualizes the resurrected ascending Christ--and little Gilbert--going to this "Rendezvous" swiftly, by the mystery of His suffering and death on the Cross, which she includes in the final syllable of the punning line about the river of baptism and salvation: "Which thou hast leaped across!" A pun on "Thou hast leaped a Cross": that is, Christ did not die but after the Cross he rose.

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Emblems simultaneously reveal and conceal. The dandelion emblem we saw above disappears, by the flight of the "Ether hood", millinery in which the flower is for a time arrayed by the wisdom of "sagacious God". Likewise, in "Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light" Christ after death ascends and then cannot be seen. In each poem something is shown or revealed and something is concealed or hidden. One poem, about the dandelion, presents understanding gleaned from what medieval tradition called the book of Nature, the other "Rendezvous of Light" poem shows understanding gleaned from the other book, the book of Scripture (Heffernan, 1-28). Both poems, moreover, suggest the famous Biblical image that to bear fruit a seed must die. John 12:24 quotes Jesus as saying, "Unless a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

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