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# CULTUS IN DICKINSON GARLAND, PIAF AND WEIL

James M. Hughes

## I. Preface

Dorothy Parker created a heroine who responded to the ringing of her doorbell, "What fresh hell can this be?"<sup>1</sup> In a sense, Parker's question suggests the cultic appeal of women otherwise as diverse as Emily Dickinson, Judy Garland, Edith Piaf, and Simone Weil. Indeed, Dickinson's epigrammatic couplet, "Parting is all we know of heaven./ And all we need of hell,"<sup>2</sup> somehow describes the dilemma all four women confronted for their variously "admiring Bog[s]."<sup>3</sup> In 1938, Simone Weil wrote a letter to Georges Bernanos on the occasion of the latter's "Les Grandes Cimetières Sous la Lune," an account of France's offensive in Spain: "I recognized the smell of civil war, the smell of blood and terror, which exhales from your book; I have breathed it, too."<sup>4</sup> Knowing hell and telling is the somehow redeeming power of Garland and Piaf as well. The child Garland had helped inspire the words of "Over the Rainbow": "Fantasy had been for her the only reality she knew, and she was trying always to chase these fantasies and seize them—and what was fantasy at its most pure but yearning for what lay on the other side of the rainbow in the sky?"<sup>5</sup> For Piaf, the fresh terror of make-believe come *not* true nevertheless inspires the courage to sing:

No, nothing at all . . .  
No, I don't regret a thing!  
Neither the good that's been done me  
Nor the bad. It's all the same to me!<sup>6</sup>

All four women stress a brave continuity whatever the hellish discontinuities of life. The similarities of these four women will be defined according to Dickinson's terms. It is as if she were one of the very first of their modern kind of pop and/or high cultists.

## II. Cultus and the Oxymoron

Parker's possible word play in the phrase "fresh hell" is akin to the oxymoron that entitles Richard Schickel's study of "The Culture of Celebrity," *Intimate Strangers*. There is no need to document the pervasive power of the oxymoron in Dickinson. There is need, perhaps, to declare the relevance of notions of "cultus" and "celebrity" to a serious study of Dickinson. Indeed, there has been a tradition of carefully separating the wheat of objective studies of Dickinson's work from the chaff of impressionistic eulogies. I recall one of my own graduate professors apologizing for the scholarly indiscretion of having fallen in love with Dickinson, but then hastily assuring us that he had learned to deal with Dickinson objectively.

My own experience with popular culture studies and their importance suggests that scholarship must indeed be sensitive to those dimensions of creativity that

inspire personal commitments, the phenomena of readers and listeners as believers, as faithful fans. Such emotional appeals are intrinsic to the creative work itself. To dismiss them, to ignore them, is to limit the very nature of that creative power.

A recent *Magnum P.I.* program centered on the detective's re-encountering a former high school classmate whose devotion to Dickinson had inspired her own career of idealistic altruism. Similarly, it is known that Dickinson poems work well in the whole field of poetry as therapy.

Schickel himself warns against those celebrities who appear to "confer coherence on lives that are otherwise a shambles" removing "as if by magic all ambiguity, all doubts. . . ."7 But the peculiar power of the cultus of Dickinson *et al* is the recognition of ambiguity and doubt themselves as essential components of any hope of any kind of transcendence. Oxymoron persists.

### III. Singing the Dare Terrific

Emily Dickinson's life and work, especially as that life and work have necessitated a consistently cultic following, may provide perimeters—circumferences—within which to look at three other women: Edith Piaf, Judy Garland, and Simone Weil. Yes, women. One could perhaps add men like Thoreau and James Dean, Whitman and Montgomery Clift, perhaps even Nietzsche and Humphrey Bogart. But sensitive and creative women may best define a magnetic mix of lyric vulnerability and stubborn perversity. This mix seems similarly eccentric and central at once in a world in which masculinity is associated with all kinds of power, earthly and divine.

Emily Dickinson, Edith Piaf, Judy Garland, and Simone Weil: four women, two French, two American, two "serious" writers, two "pop" singers, all four celebrated cult figures, all four considered by some, in some respects, "cracked."

When Jimi Hendrix died, Janis Joplin was asked for some reactions in words. "'How 'bout, "there but for the grace of Go. . ." . . . then: "I was just thinking. . . I wonder what they'll say about *me* after I die." "'8 After her death in 1943, Simone Weil "has been variously described as a victim of spiritual delusion, a social prophet, a modern Antigone or Judith, and a new kind of saint."9 Remember the cultic veneration of Marilyn Monroe in one of the cathedral scenes in Ken Russell's film of *The Who's Tommy*. Emily Dickinson and Judy Garland too lived in a modern landscape where Weil, a European "displaced person, who resists both removal and absorption," can be considered "perhaps the greatest 'pilgrim of the absolute' of our time."10 Doesn't Dickinson resist removal from our consciousness even as she refuses to be absorbed by us? Doesn't she too seem a displaced modern even as she persists on pilgrimages of Calvinist absolutes? Doesn't she too seem impishly concerned with what we say to her of her after and about her death?

Five recent books about Emily Dickinson provide conveniently arbitrary ways of testing the alleged likenesses of four such different women.

### IV. Culture and the Soul's Society<sup>11</sup>

Whether the pressures are public or private, the sensitive individual must find

some way to withdraw. In a room of her own, in a cloistered contemplation, in drugs or alcohol, the retreating creativity waits for inspiration, for death, for a lover, even, as one of Simone Weil's books is titled, "waiting for God."—waiting for whatever restores the courage again to emerge. The richness of the waiting and the realistic appraisal of what one has withdrawn from make this withdrawal seem a riddle, an essentially hidden complexity. Thus Dickinson writes of "The Soul [which] selects her own Society—/ Then—shuts the Door—."<sup>12</sup> We are gathered together here to celebrate the fabled actualities of Dickinson's seclusion. Less well known are similar gestures in someone as public as Piaf. Simone Bertheaut describes her once "looking off into space . . . staring into space as if it held some sort of promise for her."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, John Gruen, interviewing Judy Garland, found her an electric yet somehow disconnected presence "in the chaotic shambles of her suite": "if I'm a legend, then why am I so lonely?"<sup>14</sup> Surely the answer is that creating legends like any other creative work must necessarily be isolating.

Simone Weil's "On the Fairy Tale of the Six Swans" explains the terrible magic of such lonely labor:

To act is never difficult; we always act too much and scatter ourselves ceaselessly in disorderly deeds. To make six shirts from anemones and to keep silent: this is our only way of acquiring power. . . .<sup>15</sup>

It may be safer in a mercenary world to keep the business of one's singing an "unnoticed hymn."<sup>16</sup> The personal tragedies of Garland and Piaf would have served as examples for Dickinson and Weil, would have been warnings against too public a courting of society at the expense of one's own soul. After all, the risks to the soul were great enough in any case.

## V. Strategies of Limitation<sup>17</sup>

Even to consider six years of silent flower shirtmaking is to limit one's range of the possible. Withdrawal limits one's range of experience. That limit occasioned Magnum's warning to his former high school classmate that Dickinson's example was a relatively dangerous one since she had so limited the range of her experience. Of course we know what Magnum did not know: that range of experience is not to be measured so quantitatively, that depth of experience is another factor that must in any case be considered. Furthermore, that limit of range may be a necessary strategy compelled by one's chosen craft and one's dedication to it.

Lacking whatever gifts are needed to write expansive, all-inclusive epic poetry, Dickinson limited herself to brief expressions of her native and learned way and wit with words. Lacking conventionally glamorous show business bodies, the American Piaf and the French Garland shared a legendary preference for basic black figures isolated dramatically on bare stages or runways. A kind of eruptive force enlarged their physicality.

Thus Dickinson, Garland, and Piaf would have understood the radical necessity of Simone Weil's artistic and political strategy of fasting: less can be more. For Simone Weil there was doctrine, one "of decreation, of disincarnation . . . devastating the 'I' in us. . . . 'a renunciation of the ego' pursuant to 'an ultimate trans-

figuration.”<sup>18</sup> Then I has described Piaf and Garland in terms of the same paradox of more art from less. Cocteau asks: “Have you ever heard a nightingale? She labors, hesitates, rasps, chokes. The notes rise and fall back. And then, suddenly, she sings.”<sup>19</sup> Mickey Deans describes Garland singing “Battle Hymn of the Republic” as a memorial for the late John Kennedy: “the sorrow and anguish in her own heart came through as she stood alone on the runway. . . it was a performance unequaled in the memory of many. . . .”<sup>20</sup>

Those who insist on a hierarchy of the arts might quote Dickinson’s “We play at Paste—/Till qualified for Pearl—”; but the point is that “The Shapes—though—were similar—,” and one’s “new Hands/Learned Gem-tactics—/Practicing Sands—.”<sup>21</sup> Sand is a seemingly limiting medium unless one’s strategies really are directed at gems. All four women teach others that necessary limitations may indeed give birth to an inspiring inventiveness.

## VI. The Problem of Others<sup>22</sup>

Readers and listeners have discovered the need to withdraw and somehow, by their writing and singing examples, learn to make the best of those limits best contemplated alone. Who can ever tell which comes first, being rejected, choosing to be alone? All sensitive souls create defenses that may encourage strategies of choice where only necessities had loomed.

We—sometimes merely their echoing others—persist in asking our defensive and defenseless stars for their alleged secrets of coping with the very others we ourselves represent. A book jacket quotes an audience chanting: “‘We love you, Judy baby!’ . . . the Judy of “drugs,” “gargantuan workload,” “tantrums and rages,” “many marriages. . . heartbreaks;” “Judy, the has-been making a sensational comeback” and the object of the mourning adoration of “more than twenty-one thousand fans” when she died.<sup>23</sup> A similar book jacket notes Piaf’s matchlessly “passionate intensity” whose songs “were but reflections of an intimate personal drama of dizzying triumphs and disastrous affairs”; “Forty thousand people crowded into Pere Lachaise cemetery.”<sup>24</sup>

The others in all four women’s lives seem to have felt that out of their own problems with others came an art which has as at least one of its aims “to stop one Heart from breaking.”<sup>25</sup> Dickinson’s troubled altruism is echoed by Simone Weil in wartime London: “I tenderly love this city with its wounds.”<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the cultic appeal of all four women comes from their various ways of projecting Weil’s wartime “feeling of fraternal and tender comradeship in a common ordeal.”<sup>27</sup> All three of the others somehow sing Weil’s aphorism that “love is a sign of our wretchedness.”<sup>28</sup> In one of her own poems, Garland even prays: “God above, call not your wrath upon me./Demand me not to hate my love.”<sup>29</sup> In “L’Hymne a l’amour” Piaf seems certain that at least in eternity “God rejoins those who love each other.”<sup>30</sup> Listen to Dickinson:

Far from Love the Heavenly Father  
Leads the Chosen Child,  
Oftener through Realm of Briar  
Than the Meadow mild.

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Oftener by the Claw of Dragon  
Than the Hand of Friend  
Guides the Little One predestined  
To the Native Land.<sup>31</sup>

## VI. A Voice of War<sup>32</sup>

Simone Weil's wartime catharsis reminds us that history sometimes underlines our personal problems with others. Pacifist and passive collaborator respectively, Weil and Piaf may be considered European war refugees. But Dickinson and Garland suggest the fact that conflicts may be no less severe behind the lines, away from the so-called front, back home. Wartime "Hollywood was as important a news center as New York, Washington, London, Berlin."<sup>33</sup> The battles uniformly ranged behind the "ancestors brocades" of Amherst's Homestead foreshadow O'Neill's uncivil warring in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. For all four women, warfare defined their limits as women and metaphorically extended their own strategic offenses and defenses with themselves and with others.

Weil once wrote about "the adolescent Trojan, sent against his will to Hades" and her being reminded of Christ telling St. Peter: "'Another shall gird thee and carry thee were thou would'st not;'" Weil concludes that "only he who knows the empire of might and knows how not to respect it is capable of love and justice."<sup>34</sup> Piaf's "Mon Legionnaire," "a song that was my story," expresses the role that love plays in war, love itself as war, the problem of others reduced or magnified to one other:

I don't know his name, I don't know anything about him.  
He made love to me all night long,  
My legionnaire!  
Leaving me to my fate,  
He left in the  
Bright morning light. . . .<sup>35</sup>

Again a Piaf song echoes a Garland poem, "Lover's Good-bye to a Departing Soldier": "How pitiful we are, my love,/How helpless against a world gone mad, with strife, struggle, selfishness and hate."<sup>36</sup> Passion is a force that can carry any one of us where, as Weil puts it, we "would'st not." Love is the domestic equivalent of the "empire of might's" forcing us to a re-evaluation of priorities of respect and allegiance.

'Tis Seasons since the Dimpled War  
In which we each were Conqueror  
And each of us were slain  
And Centuries 'twill be and more  
Another Massacre before  
So modest and so vain—  
Without a Formula we fought  
Each was to each the Pink Redoubt—<sup>37</sup>

The problem of others can be reduced to that terrific battle inside all of us which pits a creative need for safe isolation against the love of others outside that alone can give creativity lasting significance.

The centrality of a synthesizing consciousness alone can resolve the oppositions between others and self, unlimited art and limited labor. Piaf and Garland are two cultic legends of popular scandal and notorious celebrity. Weil and Dickinson are relatively obscure cult figures who have generated, posthumously, a scandal of critical perplexity. All four are stylists of strategic limitation. All four speak in voices of war. All four dramatize symptomatically soulful withdrawals from their own variously adoring and indifferent cultures. All four illustrate uncanny endurance. All four may be madwomen—of Chaillot, of Pigalle, of Bellevue, of the Popular Front, of Pocatella, of Oz, of Hollywood, of the Palace, of Amherst.

Simone Weil defines their common dilemma in Christian terms: “the knowledge of affliction is the key of Christianity. But that knowledge is impossible. . . . to be able to face affliction with steady attention when it is close one must be prepared, for the love of truth, to accept the death of the soul.”<sup>39</sup> Piaf, “who so often took refuge in a church, was not allowed to have a last mass said for her.”<sup>49</sup> Garland was “the legend/. . . often projected/in shades/of melancholy blue” who yet reminded audiences “of rainbows/and a little girl/who long ago/stole their hearts.”<sup>41</sup> Dickinson devoted herself and her art to the same paradoxically encouraging and impossible “knowledge of affliction.”

I never hear that one is dead  
 Without the chance of life  
 Afresh annihilating me  
 That mightiest Belief.  
 Too mighty for the Daily mind  
 That tilling its abyss,  
 Had madness, had it once or twice  
 The yawning Consciousness,  
 Beliefs are Bandaged, like the Tongue  
 When Terror were it told  
 In any Tone commensurate  
 Would strike us instant Dead.  
 I do not know the man so bold  
 He dare in lonely Place  
 That awful stranger Consciousness  
 Deliberately face—<sup>42</sup>

But Dickinson herself and the other three knew very well “the woman so bold,” and that knowledge at once explains and entitles others’ cultic veneration.

### VIII. Conclusion

June Brindel’s *Ariadne* records the systematic destruction of the mother goddess religion.

Every day new reports come in of fresh destruction of shrines,  
 new murders of priestesses. There is no distinction between

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those who are drugged and mad and those who are clear-eyed  
on their altars. They are called Monsters, Madwomen, Rag-  
ing Ones, Wierd Demons, Temptresses, Harpies, Sirens,  
Averigers, Daughters of the Abyss. . .

My mother is dead. My daughter is dead. Icarus, Merope,  
Minos. . . . And our story, like all others, is being told by liars.  
That is why I must write this for you. So that you will know  
what really happened. So that you will listen for Her voice.<sup>43</sup>

Drugged, mad, clear-eyed: Dickinson, Garland, Piaf, and Weil echo that voice, Her voice. One hears Dickinson's political but not very politick "Much Madness is divinest Sense—" <sup>44</sup> The catastrophic fates of many celebrities, male as well as female, warn us that economic and media power are no defenses against radical loneliness, supposed and real madness, sensitive alienation and temptingly self-destructive addictions.

Dickinson, Garland, Piaf and Weil share modern variations on that ancient voice. All four have captured followings somehow enabled to empathize with their expressions of a commonly perceived dilemma: the dilemma of being fully conscious of the affliction that goes with loving. Their beleaguered but courageous selves, soulfully withdrawing, re-emerge to confront once again their own limits—and ours—with teachable strategies that allow those limits themselves to become weapons appropriate to war, that war that is always being waged against the death of love and consciousness.

Cultus in these serious and popular women artists symbolizes the failure of societies at large to provide for many any meaningfully official community of faith. All four dedicated themselves to a deadly serious business of singing about their waiting for meaning. Such hymns do not go unnoticed even in the chilliest lands.<sup>45</sup> And, by virtue of the inspired and inspiring expressions, the chill is made to feel prophetically fresh.

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- 6 Simone Berteaut, *Plaf* (New York: Dell, 1974), pp. 423-424.
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- 30 Berteaut, p. 305.
- 31 Dickinson, Poem #1021.
- 32 Shira Walosky, *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
- 33 Frank, p. 233.

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- <sup>34</sup> Panichas, p. 181.
- <sup>35</sup> Berteaut, pp. 118–119.
- <sup>36</sup> Edwards, pp. 312–313.
- <sup>37</sup> Dickinson, Poem #1529.
- <sup>38</sup> Agneiszka Salska, *Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson: Poetry of the Central Consciousness* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).
- <sup>39</sup> Panichas, pp. 457–458.
- <sup>40</sup> Berteaut, pp. 462–463.
- <sup>41</sup> David Melton, *Judy* (New York: Random House, p. 172), last two pages of unnumbered book.
- <sup>42</sup> Dickinson, Poem #1323.
- <sup>43</sup> June Rachuy Brindel, *Ariadne* (New York: St. Martin's, 1981), pp. 239–240.
- <sup>44</sup> Dickinson, Poem #435.
- <sup>45</sup> Dickinson, Letter #269; Poem #254.

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