

Abortion and Emily Dickinson: Sex, Religion and Romanticism in the Marriage Group Poems

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ABSTRACT

William Shurr claimed that adultery with Rev. Charles Wadsworth, followed by abortion, gave Emily Dickinson poetic depth. His historically and psychologically improbable misinterpretation of the passionate language common in her correspondence, and of her poetry, stems from a hostility to an embodied rather than a “sovereign” self. The attitude was an attitude fashionable among literary critics in the late twentieth century. In many of her religious poems Dickinson did manifest, even cherish, rejection and despair, and she asserted a rebellious self. But her erotic poems celebrate fulfillment rather than abstinence. Her religious poems abandon a spirituality of denial and absence as they center on Christ the Bridegroom and embrace a regal identity as “wife.” She was hampered in this escape from the sovereign self by a *sola scriptura* Calvinism and aided by the Romantic approach to the intercourse between the imagination and the world.

EMILY DICKINSON RICHLY ENJOYS the pleasures of the senses, but abstinence is an overwhelming theme of her poetry—a “sacrament of starvation.”¹ She cherishes thwarted desire—no other poet so boldly declares herself “contented as despair.” Joanne Diehl thinks she flaunts her outcast status as part of a rebellion against “patriarchal tradition,” thus re-creating herself as a “conquering poet” with “secular and religious power”² that can “dissolve the relation between word and

¹ See the discussion of the pervasiveness of this theme in M.K. Louis, “Emily Dickinson’s Sacrament of Starvation,” *Nineteenth Century Literature* 43/3 (1988): 346-60. Accessed by JSTOR.

² Joanne Feit Diehl, *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), p. 111.

world” and that “enacts the appropriation of the natural world into the sovereign self.”³ Diehl’s “sovereign self” loves autonomy and indulges desire until it hates the physical world that hampers appetite— paradoxically, since the physical world is the only arena for the exercise of desire. Unbridled self-indulgence, such as is characteristic of the “sovereign self,” finally divorces the human person from the body. The belief that such a divorce is a spiritual victory led William Shurr to attribute Dickinson’s poetic power to hidden adultery and secret abortion.⁴ But Dickinson does not come to poetry seeking self-indulgence and domination. Richard Wilbur is more insightful in calling her “Sumptuous Destitution” an attempt to make herself “invulnerable” against a “God who does not answer.” Feeling cast out from Christian salvation, he believes, she forges her own.⁵ Indeed, Dickinson writes much of God’s absence and of frustrated desire, but one strand of her poetry is in vivid contrast to that perverse celebration of denial. Her erotic religious poetry is almost shockingly different. Resisting her culture’s sentimental spiritualization of marriage, she embraces the physicality of eros enacted in the natural world. There she ceases to idealize a resistance to natural appetites and embraces fulfillment, like the great Romantics. Conditioned to reject wedlock as a sacrament, she nevertheless is able to envision a mystical marriage to Christ, thereby discovering a kind of incarnation of eternal good in human marital joy.

Often called “the Maid of Amherst,” by her early thirties Dickinson dressed only in white and lived in such seclusion that she rarely left her house and usually hid from visitors. About thirty years ago, fashions in Dickinson studies ceased to attribute her poetic energy to sexual repression. Dickinson was duly claimed as a lesbian, a theory with some currency yet. She did write Emily Ford emotional letters like this:

³ Diehl, pp. 122-23.

⁴ This is the central argument of William Shurr, *The Marriage of Emily Dickinson: A Study of the Fascicles* (Lexington KY: The Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1983).

⁵ Richard Sewall, ed. *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays. Twentieth Century Views*. (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 130.

I miss you always, dear Emily, and I think now and then that I can't stay without you, and half make up my mind to make a little bundle of all my earthly things, bid my blossoms and home good-by, and set out on foot to find you...another spring, dear friend, you must and shall be here, and nobody can take you away, for I will hide you and keep you—and who would think of taking you if I hold you tight in my arms?⁶

Her frequent letters to her sister-in-law Susan are even more overheated. Then again, she sent this to a married couple, Dr. and Mrs. J.G. Holland: “All day I pray that I may walk with you, and gather roses again, and as night draws on, it pleases me, and I count impatiently the hours 'tween me and the darkness, and dream of you and the roses, and the basket never full.”⁷

To know that the emotionally overwrought tone is normal for Dickinson is important, because it undercuts William Shurr's interpretation of the sexual and spiritual imagery found in Dickinson's “fascicles”—groupings of unpublished poems that she gathered into little folded or sewn booklets, apparently for her solitary use. (Dickinson hardly published at all before her death.) Shurr reads these collections as a story of sexual desire, frustration, delay, and fulfillment, followed by renunciation and desolation. He thereby constructs an underlying narrative about how “the maid of Amherst” carried on a torrid affair with her correspondent, Rev. Charles Wadsworth, a married clergyman. Wadsworth lived in Philadelphia and, later, San Francisco. He may have met Dickinson up to three times over the more than twenty years of their correspondence—once in Philadelphia and twice in Amherst. Very likely infatuated with him, for years Dickinson seems to have written letters to Philadelphia that were mailed by intermediaries. It is likely that she was writing to Wadsworth. We have one letter from him to her, which I here quote in full. He misspells her name:

⁶ She soon slipped out of touch with this correspondent, Emily Fowler Ford. This letter was written in spring of 1854. *Selected Letters*, ed. Thomas Johnson (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1958, 1986), pp. 115-16.

⁷ Letter 175, written about 1854, in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, 3 vols. (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 309.

My dear Miss Dickenson,

I am distressed beyond measure at your note, received this moment—I can only imagine the affliction which has befallen, or is now befalling you.

Believe me, be what it may, you have all my sympathy, and my constant, earnest prayers.

I am very, very anxious to learn more definitely of your trial—and though I have no right to intrude upon your sorrow, I beg you to write me, though it be but a word—

In great haste, Sincerely and most affectionately yours.⁸

We may have drafts of three of her secret letters, omitting the addressee. Here's a sample, leaving out canceled words:

If it had been God's will that I might breathe where you breathed—and find the place—myself—at night—if I never forget that I am not with you...to come nearer than presbyteries—and nearer than the new Coat—that the tailor made...is forbidden me... I used to think when I died I could see you—so I died as fast as I could—but the “Corporation” are going to heaven too so [Eternity] won't be sequestered—now—say I may wait for you—say I need go with no stranger to the to me untried fold—I waited a long time—master—but I can wait more—wait til my hazel hair is dappled—and you carry the cane—then I can look at my watch—and if the day is too far declined—we can take the chances for heaven—what would you do with me if I came “in white”? Have you a little chest to put the Alive—in? I want to see you more—Sir—than all I wish for in this world.⁹

While dwelling on how thoroughly unfulfilled her longing is, the letter appears to plead for some meeting in the far distant future, perhaps after death. For comparison, here is one of the poet's love letters to her frequent visitor and acknowledged suitor, Judge Otis Lord, dated in the midst of her secret Philadelphia correspondence:

Incarcerate me in yourself—that will punish me—Threading with you this lovely maze which is not Life or death tho it has the intangibleness of one and the flush of the other waking for your sake on day made magical with you before I went to sleep—what pretty phrase—we went to sleep as if it were a country—let us make it one—we could make it one, my native land—my darling come oh be a patriot

⁸ Letter 248a in *The Letters*, ed. Johnson and Ward, p. 168.

⁹ Written about 1861. *Selected Letters*, p. 159.

now—Love is a patriot now gave her life for its country.¹⁰

The sexuality is franker, nor does she luxuriate in her outcast status. Moreover, this letter was eventually followed by one telling Judge Lord, “My Philadelphia has passed from earth”¹¹ after Wadsworth died. In other words, Otis Lord, her suitor, was aware of her correspondence with Wadsworth. Sturr’s theory would have required the poet not only to continue, as she was considering marriage with Judge Lord, a correspondence with a lover who had abandoned her when she was pregnant, but to have even made her present suitor aware of the continuing connection. It would take the cynicism of Mozart’s Don Giovanni for a man to continue professing love to a woman persisting in such a passion. But while Dickinson delayed and Lord did not press for an engagement, there is no sign of a break between them before his unexpected death. Besides slim epistolary evidence for the Wadsworth affair, Shurr found an announcement of sexual involvement in a poem that Dickinson sent to her family friend Samuel Bowles :

Title divine—is mine!
 The Wife—without the Sign!
 Acute degree—conferred on me—
 Empress of Calvary!
 Royal—all but the crown!
 Betrothed—without the swoon
 God sends us Women—
 When you—hold—Garnet to Garnet—
 Gold—to Gold—
 Born—bridalled—Shrouded—
 In a day—
 “My husband” —women say—
 stroking the Melody—
 Is this—the way?¹²

¹⁰ *Selected Letters*, pp. 244-45.

¹¹ *Selected Letters*, p. 278.

¹² Poem 199 in Johnson, Thomas, ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Johnson (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1979), pp. 142-43.

Bowles evidently queried if she was confessing a sexual relationship. I give her response in full:

Dear friend

If you doubted my Snow—for a moment—you never will—again.
 Because I could not say it—I fixed it in the Verse—for you to read—when your
 thought wavers, for such a foot as mine
 Through the strait pass of suffering
 The Martyrs—even—trod.
 Their feet—upon temptation—
 Their faces—upon God—

A stately—shriven—company—
 Convulsion—playing round—
 Harmless—as streaks of meteor—
 Upon a planet’s bond—

Their faith—the everlasting troth—
 Their expectation—fair—
 The Needle—to the North degree—
 Wades—so—thro’ Polar air!

Evidently Dickinson is referring to an “everlasting troth,” a “title divine” unseen by the world. Bowles was confused, but Shurr resists the poet’s explanation, though he never explains why Dickinson would send and then rescind an announcement of a sexual encounter. Shurr then takes up mournful imagery in more lyrics to suggest that Dickinson had an abortion, pointing out that Dickinson seems to have fallen ill and not called a doctor, and that abortion was legal in nineteenth-century America.¹³ Certainly the legality of abortion in nineteenth-century America is a fact. American feminists were working hard to stamp out abortion, seeing in the practice a means of sexually exploiting women. Statutory rape cases have emerged recently to show that the practice is still used for sexual exploitation today.¹⁴ Such is his insensitivity to the

¹³ Shurr, p. 179.

¹⁴See “*Man’s Inhumanity to Woman, Makes Countless Infants Die*”: *The Early Feminist Case against Abortion*,” ed. Mary Krane Derr (Washington, D.C.: Feminists for Life, 1991). In May 2007 Planned Parenthood sued Lila Rose of UCLA for exposing their notorious practice of advising underage girls to lie in

ethos of nineteenth-century American women, and indeed the relationship between pastor and congregation, that without disdain Shurr describes a married pastor bedding an apparently emotionally unstable spinster who comes to him for counsel. The historical record allows for perhaps two hours' acquaintance before the putative sexual involvement. Shurr sees such casual adultery, followed by pregnancy and abortion, as a source of depth in Dickinson's poetry and the key to understanding her emotional power.

Shurr ingeniously defends his case from its physical near-impossibility, but it is shaky psychologically too. Sociological and psychological data about *sequelae* of abortion were not available when Shurr published, but Dickinson's intensely sympathetic, sensitive personality would have made her most vulnerable to severe manifestations of the post-abortive psychological distress that strikes most aborting women. Women who are not thus affected tend to rank high in aggressivity and low in empathy.¹⁵ Dickinson was strange, but not abnormally aggressive, to say the least. Neither can she be accounted low in empathy. It is true that her agoraphobia worsened after meeting Wadsworth, but the deterioration was on a continuous curve; her emotional life took no sharp turn. Efforts to prove her anorexic have not succeeded, and what evidence has been found has never been correlated to her known meetings with Wadsworth.

In contrast to the usual clusters of symptoms for a woman in post-abortive distress, Dickinson underwent no emotional numbness, continuing to care passionately about her correspondents. She did not lose confidence in her self-worth. She did not lapse into lethargy but wrote with exacting excellence and sought professional contacts. She escaped irrational rage, uncontrolled weeping, addiction, and alienation from

order to avoid reporting statutory rape and releasing a video of it to the website Youtube. Although Rose withdrew the video, it remains widely available. Her campus newspaper reported the event. Julia Erlandson, "Planned Parenthood Threatens Legal Action for Youtube Videos," *Daily Bruin* (May 17, 2007), accessed online, Jan. 3, 2008.

¹⁵ David C. Reardon, *Aborted Women: Silent No More* (Westchester IL: Crossway Books, 1987) discusses the work of Conrad Baars in describing the personality characteristics of women who are likely and unlikely to experience postabortive distress. For the material about empathy and aggressivity, cf. pp. 115-43.

children.¹⁶ In fact, she was more willing to interact with children than with adults. She would lower them baskets of baked goods from her isolated quarters when they played in her garden, and once she broke her self-imposed geographical limits out of concern for her sick young nephew. Dickinson neither sought promiscuous sexual experiences nor revolted against her sexual feelings, as we see in letters to Otis Lord, and yet more vividly in poems.

Shurr makes much of there being a particular day that Dickinson seemed to celebrate as one of spousal dedication. When she wrote of this unknown but powerful emotional incident under the figure of wedlock, she tended to give it religious overtones. It would be a distortion unworthy of her honesty as a poet if these lyrics refer to the grave malfeasance of a preacher who had forced the painfully shy woman to seek out the associate of pimps and seducers—the advertising abortionist. The medical procedure was certainly no less dangerous and degrading in her day than in ours. One does not find visionary religious poetry about men who send women to abortionists in our day either.

The religious element alone is strong evidence against clerical sexual involvement. According to recent research, no matter whether the woman is approached with threats, pleas, or affectionate gestures, sex behind the presbytery desk with a woman who came for counseling is experienced at some level as an abuse of power rather than a love relationship.¹⁷ To appropriate religious trust for private pleasure is a peculiarly acute form of betrayal; the women who are thus exploited feel confused and blame themselves for tempting the man of God. Dickinson went to Wadsworth for counsel. It is true that her “master” letters—assuming they are written to Wadsworth—are full of bizarre self-deprecation. But she wrote letters just as strange to many people before and after the “master” letters. Abusive clerical relationships are kept secret not only for the safety of the

¹⁶ See the thoughtful summary of international research on abortion’s psychological *sequelae* in Elizabeth Ring-Cassidy and Ian Gentles, *Women’s Health after Abortion: The Medical and Psychological Evidence* (Toronto, Ontario: The deVeber Institute for Bioethics and Social Research, 2002), ch. 14. See esp. pp. 190, 192.

¹⁷ Rev. Pamela Cooper White, “Soul Stealing: Power Relations in Pastoral Sexual Abuse,” *Christian Century* (Feb. 20, 1991).

perpetrator but because of their emotional destructiveness for the victim. Dickinson did hide her communication with Wadsworth from some people, but not from her assistants in correspondence or even from the man who wanted to marry her. At any rate the connection with Wadsworth did not produce what feminist theologian Marie Fortune pronounces the inevitable “de-evangelization” that such abuse incurs.¹⁸ Simply put: when an aggressive clergyman’s casual adultery leaves a woman pregnant and she gets an abortion, she does not respond with poetry about mystical marriage to Christ.

It is well to ask why anyone would think otherwise. Shurr scored political points at the time of the rise of a unified anti-abortion movement in America by asserting that the achievement of a poet emerged out of adultery and abortion—or, in the jargon of the early 1980s, sexual freedom and self-determination. While deeply tainted with dated political advocacy, Shurr’s academic-press book is worth refuting, not just because it might be taken for responsible scholarship, but even more because of the fundamental assumption, shared with many other academics, that there is victory in asserting that the body only has meaning or worth only if we impose meaning upon it and that its fertility is one more arbitrary shackle to be shattered.¹⁹ But Dickinson does not hate authority as such; nor does she finally hold a vision of disembodied spirituality utterly divorced from the physical.

Nevertheless, the origins of her spirituality were somewhat hostile to an embodied religion. The Calvinism in which Dickinson was baptized and raised²⁰ involved a “properly basic” belief, to use Alvin Plantinga’s phrase, that God cannot be found by natural means, but only through scriptural revelation. Albert Gelpi speaks of how Dickinson evidences

¹⁸ Marie M. Fortune, “Is Nothing Sacred? The Betrayal of the Ministerial or Teaching Relationship,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10/1 (1994): 24.

¹⁹ For a very recent instance, see Harbour Fraser Hodder, “Girl Power: What has Changed for Women—and What Hasn’t,” *Harvard Magazine* 110/3 (2008): 34ff.

²⁰ Roger Lundin, who studied the church records, dates Dickinson’s baptism to 1831 in *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998), but Alfred Habegger, perhaps disapproving of infant baptism, refers to the event as a fiction in *My Wars are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York NY: Random House, 2001).

“the Calvinist mind turning against itself and its maker—a rebellion that is seldom whole-hearted.”²¹ She resents this absentee God’s unexplained treatment of Moses and Ananias—and herself—with epithets like “Burglar! Banker! Father!”—but the idea that the holy can only be approached verbally haunts her. Her intense, if idiosyncratic, spiritual life was centered on words—the words of scripture and the words of poetry. She provides a distorted parallel to the opening of John’s Gospel to meditate on the poet’s near-divinity:

A word made flesh is seldom
 And tremblingly partook
 Nor then perhaps reported
 But have I not mistook
 Each one of us has tasted
 With ecstasies of stealth
 The very food debated
 To our specific strength—
 A word that breathes distinctly
 Has not the power to die
 Cohesive as the Spirit
 It may expire if He—

“Made flesh and dwelt among us”
 could condescension be
 Like this consent of Language
 This loved Philology²²

Jesus had said in the sixth chapter of John, “My flesh is food indeed,”²³ but here that food turns into words. Words are not things; they can hold the place of things that are not present but do not satisfy the senses. In her family’s Congregational church, members were expected to make some sort of testimony to a conversion experience before they could be considered full members. Emily Dickinson never had the expected

²¹ Albert Gelpi, *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 41.

²² Poem 1715 in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1998).

²³ John 6:55, Revised Standard Version.

experience of conversion. The failure was a source of some anguish to her.²⁴ There is perhaps biographical significance in the fact that her poems constantly associate starvation with God.²⁵ After Christ, the only contact one could have with God was through His word in the Bible. Available only in words, never in flesh, God seems discarnate. Certainly her congregation believed in the Incarnation, but Jesus appears in Dickinson's poetry overwhelmingly as an example of patient human suffering.²⁶ His words, "This is my Body," indicated communion in a memorial of someone no longer present. Absence and frustrated desire characterize both her religious poetry and much of her poetry that is not overtly religious. Critics universally identify her as a Calvinist, and there is something extraordinary in her marriage group poems in the light of Calvin's assertion that matrimony is no more a sacrament than shoemaking or shaving; as a symbol of Christ's relationship to the Church, Calvin calls matrimony mere poetic "similitude."²⁷ But in the face of this low view of wedlock, she does not treat this religious metaphor like any of her other religious images. The most important trope of her religious poetry is usually to resist asking God for anything, to refrain from any fulfillment. That restraint breaks down in her erotic poems, especially poems using marital imagery about Christ.

Of course, Calvin's was not the only view of marriage the poet knew. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whom Dickinson much admired, treated earthly relationships as the stuff of heaven.²⁸ Barrett Browning's peculiar amalgam of spiritualism and Christianity had American counterparts in a

²⁴ The best discussion of Dickinson's religious development and surroundings is Roger Lundin's.

²⁵ I take some of my line of argument here from M.K. Louis.

²⁶ Dorothy Huff Oberhaus, "Tender Pioneer," *American Literature* 59/3 (1987): 345.

²⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. bound as one (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989), vol. 2, p. 647.

²⁸ M.K. Louis, pp. 348-49, oddly speaks of Elizabeth Barrett Browning as "idiosyncratic" but more orthodox than Dickinson. Barrett Browning was less conflicted, perhaps, but that most likely springs from Barrett Browning's feebler sense of urgency about clarity in doctrine.

fuzzy, sentimental notion of marriage as continuing in its erotic exclusivity even after death. Although the late poems are explicit about the bridegroom being Christ,²⁹ some early Dickinson poems imagine human erotic connection after death.³⁰ If a life event stands behind the notion of a special day in her “marriage group” poems, as Sturr insists, one might, according to the evidence that Dickinson left, perhaps posit a vow to be bound to Wadsworth in the afterlife. Her decision to dress exclusively in white follows her drafting the “Master” letter about going in white and those who are “going to heaven too.” Anglo-American culture in the nineteenth century cherished the idea of a kind of unconsummated “marriage” that transcends earthly love, ranging from Longfellow’s sentimental poem “Evangeline” to the play religion of Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel,” through the more serious variations of the theology of sex seen in the Shakers and the Mormons.

It is important to note that not all of the erotic imagery of Dickinson’s poetry refers to Christ. In one poem she envisions lovers meeting, somewhat defiantly, after the Last Judgment. Such works as “Wild Nights,” for instance, would be difficult to interpret as referring to mystical union. It is not necessary, however, to believe that they record direct personal experience any more than the poems about death record direct personal experience. Dickinson explained that her poems were dramatic monologues of “a supposed Person.”³¹ She writes of sexual relationships, especially marriage, from that distance. Her sense of what it is to be a wife remains somewhat hazy and theoretical. Yet her erotic imagery is consistently marital, never resembling the strategic cynicism of fornication or adultery. She writes about the most faithful and spiritual of matrimonial unions, yet Dickinson does not translate her sexual desire into

²⁹ This matter has been decisively presented by Michael Dressman, “Empress of Calvary: Mystical Marriage in the Poems of Emily Dickinson,” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 42/1 (1977): 39-43; see esp. the summary on p. 42.

³⁰ As argued by M.K. Louis, p. 353. But Louis takes these early poems as representative of the whole *oeuvre*.

³¹ The breadth of Dickinson’s intent can be seen in the context provided by her correspondent, Thomas Wentworth Higgins, in his October 1891 article for *The Atlantic*, accessed at <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/emilyd/edletter.htm>.

bodiless spirituality and emotionalism. The sexuality that distinguishes marriage she finds a physical good to be investigated for its spiritual value. In this she is in agreement with most of mankind. As a cultural institution, marriage is distinct from other forms of friendship in that it is physically manifested. Its physical element makes it, in a sense, independent of the feelings of the parties involved: an unconsummated marriage is everywhere subject to annulment. Although it may be invested with spiritual goods and religious awe, there is no reducing marriage to purely private sentiment. This “marriage group” poem testifies to the external, contractual understanding of sex in marriage:

I gave myself to him—
And took Himself, for Pay,
The solemn contract of a Life
Was ratified, this way—

The Wealth might disappoint—
Myself a poorer prove
Than this great Purchaser suspect,
The Daily own—of Love.

Depreciate the Vision—
But till the Merchant buy—
Still fable—in the Isles of Spice—
The subtle cargoes—lie—

At least—‘tis mutual—Risk—
Some—found it—Mutual Gain—
Sweet debt of Life—Each Night to owe—
Insolvent—every noon—³²

Dickinson does not mistake sexual desire for piety or sublimate her desires as religious experience. Yet she finds behind the earthly lover another kind of love, a love that is also behind the other beauties in her tiny world. When her poems are erotic, the emphasis is on consummation and marital faithfulness, and the imagery is laced throughout with eternity. Why should she choose matrimony as the only image for spiritual

³² Poem 426 in the Franklin edition, p. 451.

fulfillment? Except for Irish servants, she had little contact with a theology that made matrimony a sacrament in which the husband both symbolizes and enacts the sacrificial love of Christ.³³ More likely Dickinson reached her reconciliation of the spiritual with the physical through literary Romanticism. Poetry offered less tense discourse than religion. Keats might enthuse about the divinity of imagination without raising the specter of damnation. The poet's approach to earthly beauty through the medium of imagination may be exalted, but one can see it as purely natural.

Written language is, then, tremendously important, but Dickinson's poems show God starving souls by feeding them on tiny crumbs of words. Dickinson's religious poems evoke despair about access to ultimate good; but contact with nature through the imagination brings hope and something akin to the nature mysticism of the early Wordsworth.³⁴ She seizes the idea of the imagination's fertile union with nature and images it forth as both divine internal life and as marriage. In her poem about "sumptuous despair," Dickinson attributes to the poet some share of divinity and talks of how the privilege of being a poet is connected with a "Dower."³⁵

In connection with the Romantics' faith in the spiritual worth of the sensory world when wed to the human imagination, Dickinson explores the spiritual worth of marriage. Among the English Romantics she much favored Keats, and one can perhaps sense the influence of his intensely

³³ Her imagery of mystical marriage with Christ circumvents the Catholic tradition of St. Bernard and St. Bonaventure, according to Benjamin Goluboff, "'If Madonna Be': Emily Dickinson and Catholicism," *The New England Quarterly* 73/3 (2000): 355-85. Dickinson's only reading on mediaeval theology of sexuality was an account of Abelard and Heloise written by Orlando Williams Wight, a nineteenth-century Protestant polemicist. Offended by the idea of celibacy, Wight downplayed the monk's sexual exploitation of his female student and was delicately coy about how her brothers castrated him when they discovered Heloise was pregnant. Dickinson conducted herself less fearfully with her Irish Catholic servants than with wider public, but intellectual influence seems unlikely; her anti-Catholicism and the class barrier would have been difficult to overcome.

³⁴ She read Wordsworth and quoted his relatively obscure "Elegiac Stanzas," *Selected Letters*, pp. 191-92.

³⁵ *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 505.

sensual “Ode to Psyche.” That poem celebrates, under the figure of Cupid and Psyche, the intercourse of the mind with the world in the temple of imagination. Romantic truth requires that a perceiver should lovingly welcome an external world—natural, social, artistic—so as to fulfill its fullness of being. Like Dickinson, Romantic poets take the natural world very seriously, not abstracting it into general intellectual laws but seeing the mystery of the physicality as valuable in itself. Romantic poets at their best did not need to explain their symbols abstractly but were willing, as Keats put it, to rest in mysteries. We have in Dickinson a deep Romanticism, more physical than the solipsistic religion that Ralph Waldo Emerson tried to tease out of his own interest in the imagination’s connection with nature.³⁶ In the loose cycle of poems known as Dickinson’s “marriage group,” she confronts what amounts to a natural sacrament. Sexual union, essential to marriage, is not in any way a memorial, and so it cannot be misinterpreted as the replacement of a reality by a word. By taking up the Biblical language of matrimony with Christ, Dickinson discovers a sacrament that is not about symbols of absence, and her poetry flowers into images of physical fulfillment.

Shurr is right in seeing a startling sexual energy in scripture-spangled cycle of poems in which Dickinson writes of a marriage to Christ, rejoicing in titles of wife, queen, and even empress. But when Sturr drags her idea of mystical marriage into the muck of earthly adultery, he reveals more about his own culture than about the mind of Emily Dickinson. A curious phenomenon of late twentieth-century America manifests itself in his celebration of sexuality disconnected from external commitment, and of erasable pregnancy that manifests the power of the will over the fertility of the flesh. Literary scholarship becomes the one place wherein people long past puberty can indulge the fantasy that any and all sexual events, however abusive or degrading, are evidence of one’s superior depth and experience. The human person is fissioned; a gnostic violence ravenous for sexual experience renders even sexual desire meaningless in itself—unless the desire is invested defensively with a meaning chosen by a domineering sovereign self. A body riven from the spirit is the deadly

³⁶ Gelpi, p. 3, summarizes the Emersonian religion in relation to Dickinson in a few swift strokes, and then discusses the matter more fully in ch. 4.

product of this aberration. Dickinson values selfless dedication, suffering, renunciation and sacrifice. With piercing poet's honesty, she attributed these to the natural meaning of sexual union. That is why her imagery of matrimony is so often imagery of Calvary. As "empress of Calvary," she considers how earthly marriage is an embodiment as well as symbol of the Biblical encounter with Christ in the *parousia*. There the Christian is the bride and reigns with Christ—crowned not by a sovereign self but by Another. Dickinson finds in desire for an earthly bridegroom a deeper hunger for that eternal hope, a hope whose fulfillment she could glimpse nowhere else.