

Emily Dickinson and Social Class: Incorporating and Contesting

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Emily Dickinson was “a member of New England’s political—and Whig—elite” in the nineteenth century (Erkkila 2); her grandfather was a founder of Amherst College and both her father and brother were leading citizens of the surrounding town, spearheading the “institutional ordering and administration of church, college, and town over many years” (Erkkila 1). Her membership in the upper class and its ramifications and influence on her work has thus been a subject of great interest to critics and biographers over the years. Betsy Erkkila, in a 1992 article, described the Dickinson family as one that “enjoyed the status and rank of an aristocratic and feudal estate” (3) in their community. A decade later, Domhnall Mitchell explored the links between her social class and her work, perceptively noting that, while her poetry has been characterized as the work of a “literary subversive” (192), her political stance can be characterized as quite conservative. Dickinson’s well-known near-absence of any interest in politics, he writes, “can be formulated as a political relation or act, the absence of any serious treatment of social subjects a sign that these things were regarded as unimportant or irrelevant to a life of reasonable privilege” (192–193). Dickinson’s letters manifest “a confidence in history’s failure to interrupt the important aspects of an advantaged life” (193). Many women writers of the nineteenth century, such as Helen Hunt Jackson, Julia Ward Howe, and Lucy Larcom (Mitchell 192; Bennett 216), focused on liberal social reform in both their work and their lives; Emily Dickinson did neither. Mitchell, in fact, analyzes “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” as “profoundly reactionary and anti-egalitarian, for it establishes a hierarchy whereby public speakers of any kind are ridiculed at the expense

of the restricted, privileged company of the retiring writer and her private reader” (198–199). His placement of Dickinson, as “*both* a literary innovator *and* a political conservative” (202) is highly persuasive.

Yet Emily Dickinson’s poetry enacts something considerably more complex as well. Dickinson the person may have been positioned firmly within class privileges and strictures, but Dickinson the poet was a contesting angel. Her primary areas of contestation were her status as woman poet, during a time when intellectual life was not open to women and poetry not a women’s preserve; and her religious culture, as she refused the Congregational church not only during the extensive religious revivals of her youth but throughout her life, and helped to shift the Protestant-derived emphasis on the inner life to the wider spiritual and creative context of Romantic vision and poetry.

I will argue that these contestations place her outside her class in certain key ways. While her social and economic class was invested in conserving tradition and hierarchical order, Emily Dickinson subverted both. And while Emily railed at an invisible God, her incorporation of her religious culture’s foundational tenets positions her outside the exclusiveness Mitchell associates with upper class boundaries. Further, I will argue that the contestation itself opens up identification with Emily the poet to poets far removed from her privileged background, such as the contemporary Hispanic-American poet Sandra Cisneros. While Dickinson’s political views may not manifest a “sympathetic bonding [with] the politically disadvantaged” (Mitchell 199), her battles and strategies do enable such bonding to take place—*from* the politically disadvantaged side.

Emily as Poet and Woman

In her discussion of Dickinson’s “I’ve ceded—I’ve stopped being Their’s—,” critic Jane Donahue Eberwein observes that the poem is notable for its “renunciation of [...] parentally and socially imposed identity” (94). Eberwein’s essay centers around Dickinson’s Calvinism, but the renunciation (and reclamation) limned in its lines has “commonly been read in terms of marriage” or “a more general proclamation of mature status—as independent woman, as poet, or as saint” (Eberwein 95).

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace—
Unto supremest name—
Called to my Full—The Crescent dropped—

Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank—too small the first— [...]
But this time—Adequate—Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject
And I choose, just a Crown— (247)

None of these identities is, of course, mutually exclusive, and it is easy to read the “Adequate—Erect” portion as encompassing a fuller, more adult status as woman than conventional domesticity allows *and* a poet coming to know her power—the power expressed by the reiterated royal images of diadem, queen, crown. Indeed, Domhnall Mitchell perceptively observes that for Dickinson, “writing remained a spiritual calling” (201), which is evident in the poem’s overlaid linkage of baptism, election, renunciation of marriage, independent thought, and presumably the latter’s provenance and expression, poetry. To some degree, although the poem seems to have its locus in the real renunciation of religion, marriage, and social role that Dickinson performed, she is also actively *choosing* independent thought and poetry. This choice places her squarely in the “visionary company” of Romanticism (Galperin 113).

Yet although Emily claims authority in this poem, she was also subject to the “‘double-bind’ of the woman poet: ‘on the one hand, the impossibility of self-assertion for a woman, on the other hand, the necessity of self-assertion for a poet’” (Benfey 44, quoting Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Suzanne Juhasz). Her poetry is replete with evidences of this contestation, not only in the thematics and on the surface, as in “I’ve ceded—”, but in the construction of the poems themselves.

Critic A.R.C. Finch, in an insightful essay on Dickinson’s use of meter, believes that her choice of meter reveals a good deal about the meaning of the poems; that “iambic pentameter in itself functions as an expressive force within” them (166). Finch’s argument is predicated on the theory that “[t]here is more logic in the proposal that content can shed light on what a particular meter means to a poet than in the standard notion that meter illuminates content” (166). While his contention that “the choice of iambic pentameter constitutes a relation with tradition” (166) may not be entirely true for all poets on all occasions, his application of the argument to Dickinson is persuasive:

[i]ambic pentameter codifies the force exerted on Dickinson’s

poetry by patriarchal poetic tradition (she associates the meter with the power of religion and public opinion, with formality, and with stasis) and demonstrates her attitudes toward that tradition (she resists the meter, approaches it with tentative ambivalence, and sometimes gains power from it) (166)

Moreover, Finch argues that “iambic pentameter evokes patriarchal concepts, particularly Christianity and traditional patriarchal poetic and other ‘author’ity” (170) and that “Dickinson is the only canonical female poet before the turn of the century who resisted the authority of this meter” (169).

Her resistance took the form of “‘an anti-meter’ [... she] favored the hymn stanza” (168, quoting John Hollander). Hymns were used in Congregational churches extensively, and Dickinson would have known them simply by virtue of their ubiquity, despite her Sunday morning absences from the pew. But her use of them is imbued with a great deal of contestation; David Porter notes that

‘Inherent in the hymn form is an attitude of faith, humility and inspiration, and it is against this base of orthodoxy that she so artfully refracts the personal rebellion and individual feeling, the colloquial diction and syntax, the homely image, the scandalous love of this world, and the habitual religious skepticism’ (quoted in Finch, 168–169)

Finch is quite right to note that Dickinson’s use of hymn form contested her tradition in another way: “[b]y using the meter of the song sung rather than iambic pentameter—the meter of the poet as priest, the traditional singer—Dickinson’s poems self-consciously present themselves as harmless ‘objects’ [...] with an original voice, not a singer but a song singing” (169). Thus the hymn form juxtaposes and unsettles conformity and rebellion; it also, at the same time, juxtaposes Dickinson as author and the stanzas as markers of her poetic identity in a way that both advances and blurs her authorial identity.

The combined reification and unsettling is of a piece with a pattern of consonances and fractures in Dickinson oeuvre; for example, Shira Wolosky notes that throughout her work, the “promise or implication of systematic, tight, even highly ornate correspondences, however, is then stymied [...] what is experienced is a resistance to just such correspondences. Figural correlation becomes figural slippage” (130).

However, another observation about the hymn form, Emily's deployment of it, and her investment in social exclusion can be made. For the poems of course employ perhaps the most famous of her contrivances—the dash—in unusual and unsettling places, and their employment does have a political dimension. In the poem cited earlier, for example, the dash in the lines “consciously, of Grace—“ falls where a singing breath might be, and where—were the poem in fact a hymn—the stanza break might fall. However, in the line “But this time—Adequate—Erect,” the dashes are abrupt, and give the impression of both suppressed emotion and an unusual intake of breath, signifying what seems to be a drawing together, a girding up to take power (and some uncertainty about the capacity to do so, as well). Thus the poems are both “a song singing” (Finch 169) *and* a very specific singer. The former performs some blurring of exclusion simply because a certain congregationalism, with a small c, is inherent in the poems. Readers are invited to partake just as congregants are invited to join in hymn singing. However, in the latter, when the dashes are unusually placed, or seem to awkwardly break or suppress, the congregation of readers are—if they read attentively—more or less forced to breath along with the writer. This is more hierarchical. It enforces, though, a certain commonality between reader and writer that is at the opposite end of the exclusion spectrum in which Mitchell places Dickinson. It also opens a certain identification and participation with her that her exclusive provenance might be thought to suppress.

It should be noted that Finch's argument regarding meter's importance for the illumination of content contains a democratic dimension as well. In her recent work *Poets Thinking*, Helen Vendler observes:

All poems [...] contain within themselves implicit instructions concerning how they should be read. These encoded instructions—housed in the sum of all forms in which a poem is cast, from the smallest phonetic group to the largest philosophical set—ought to be introduced as evidence for any offered interpretation (5)

These implicit instructions place Dickinson's poetry, no matter how abstruse or elliptical, at least theoretically within an accessible framework.

Moreover, if Finch's insights themselves regarding Dickinson's use of hymn stanza form versus iambic pentameter are used, the thematic point of such poems as “Publication—is the Auction/ Of the Mind of Man—“ (348) becomes, in addition to the constellation of class tensions that Mitchell reads

(199–202), a lament for the selling short of the mind of man. The first, third, and fourth stanzas read

Publication—is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man—
Poverty—be justifying
For so foul a thing [...]

Thought belong to Him who gave it—
Then—to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal illustration—Sell
The Royal Air

In the Parcel—Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace—
But reduce no Human spirit
To Disgrace of Price— (348–349)

In Finch's parsing of another Dickinson poem, "The Soul selects her own Society--", he observes that, in the third stanza, "the short six-syllable line of the hymn stanza is replaced by two- or four-syllable lines" and that they refer, "both metrically and thematically [to] authoritative figures humbling themselves" (172). The third stanza of "Publication" also contains a four-syllable line contrasted with longer lines. It is "The Royal Air." In this case, the authoritative figure humbling itself is the art produced by the mind of man (and woman), and the humbling is viewed as a disgrace, not a rebellious lowering. The closing injunction, "reduce no Human Spirit/ To Disgrace of Price—", thus carries both a haughty overtone—Mitchell argues that the poem is concerned not so much with economic exploitation but the speaker's "potential contamination" by it (200)—*and* a leveling undercurrent. Hierarchy is undercut by "no Human Spirit." Mitchell is quite right to stress that, although some of the poem's lines might seem to support a liberal or radical agenda, its overall tone is quite conservative. But the equation of royalty and the mind of man—and an asperity over the truncation of both—is also not entirely without more democratic concomitants.

Dickinson's Religious Culture

The relationship between Dickinson's class exclusiveness and her religious culture, like that of her relationship between poetic tradition and herself as woman poet, is filled with slippages and fissures. Betsy Erkkila pinpoints this linkage when she writes:

Like nineteenth-century Whig political rhetoric, the language of Dickinson's poems slips between the old and the new, between an aristocratic language of rank, royalty, and hereditary privilege, and a Calvinist language of spiritual grace, personal sanctity, and divine election (9).

Erkkila also posits that the religious tenets were, in the case of Congregational Massachusetts, inseparable from a social order invested in exclusiveness. "For [Dickinson]," she writes, "as for other conservative New England Whigs, the notion of a divinely elected spiritual aristocracy predestined to power served ultimately to support a hierarchical social order against the more public, egalitarian rhetoric of the time [...] until the nineteenth century, in New England at least, the Calvinist notion of an aristocracy of the spirit had never existed apart from the fact of an economic elite who actually did rule politically, socially, and culturally" (9). Yet these linkages, no matter how undeniable, do not constitute the entire story of the influence of Puritan Calvinism upon Dickinson's thought.

Dickinson was not a congregant in Amherst, but, as her biographer Richard Sewall comments, she could no more escape the influence of Puritanism "than she could escape breathing the air" of her native town (20). And, as religious biographer Roger Lundin observes, Puritanism constituted a distinct break with the immanent hierarchy of the past: it "rejected the medieval model of the universal church in which an individual was simply born into the church. It replaced the biological model of membership with a psychological one" (49). To some degree, this opens a theoretical space for a model that does not stand on hierarchy alone; personal experience also has to be foundational. And, to some extent, this destabilizes a hierarchy based solely on social precedent; authority has also been located in a space beyond societal expectations. Indeed, Jane Donahue Eberwein observes that the religious revivals of the 1830s to the 1850s encouraged "insistence on experiential religion" (97). Emily Dickinson felt the pull of this brand of religion, writing a friend "How lonely this world is growing [...] Christ is calling everyone here [...] and I am standing alone in rebellion" (Lundin 52). Yet she resisted these conversions because she did not feel an internal conviction; Lundin believes that "as Emily examined her own experience,

she could not detect a similar joy or tranquility [to that described by the saved]" (53). In addition, Dickinson had imbibed "a highly romantic view of the person in her years after Mount Holyoke. That understanding of selfhood placed an inordinate emphasis upon the role of volition in the formation of beliefs [... i]n effect, it took to an extreme the Reformation's stress upon the necessity of the individual appropriation of beliefs" (Lundin 54). The spirit had to be indwelling, not imposed from the outside. This notion was extruded from the religious culture to the secular Romantic conception of the poet, and Dickinson made the most of it. Lundin writes that "[s]he pushed to the limit the Protestant tendency to shift the center of God's activity from the world outside the self to the spiritual word within it," in what "Charles Taylor has called the 'inexhaustible inner domain'" (5).

This strata of religious and secularized belief also undercuts a strictly hierarchical worldview; if the heart and mind must be examined for acceptance and volition, the heart and mind obtain a certain universality vis-à-vis examination, and a certain universal importance. As Erkkila notes, the social expression of it need not be democratic. But it need not be entirely exclusionary either. Mitchell analyzes one of Dickinson's poem, Fr 291A, and finds that the poem "privileged perception [...] and not usage," and further, that the speaker in the poem can see but not act (205), which he finds further evidence of her elitism. Yet the privileging of perception also contains a potential cross-class current; the religious privileging of inner experience ends up allowing—in fact, mandating—the opening of potential vistas. Indeed, in "I dwell in Possibility—A fairer House than Prose," which Mitchell to some degree sees as an analogue for the display of abundance not allowed the lower classes, Dickinson seems to offer not display, but the experience of vision as an analogue for abundance itself. And this abundance is open not only to herself, but to potential "Visitors" (Dickinson 327).

Poets From a Different Social Class: Sandra Cisneros

The experience of vision was arguably taken up by the Hispanic-American poet Sandra Cisneros. Cisneros's placement in her family of origin could not be farther from that of Dickinson's, as the former grew up in an economically disadvantaged inner-city Chicago neighborhood. Yet Cisneros's personal testimony indicates that Dickinson was a role model because of a certain rebel stance:

‘When I was growing up in Chicago, and going to college in Chicago, and not travelling anywhere except on CTA buses and subway trains but desperately wanting to break loose, I liked to think of my favorite American poet, Emily Dickinson [...] I liked to think of that extraordinary woman who in her later life never even strayed beyond the house and its gardens, but who wrote in her lifetime 1,775 poems. No one knew she was a poet until after she died, and then, when they discover these poems handwritten on sheets of paper folded and stitched together, the world rang like a bell’ (quoted in Sanborn, 1339).

The quotation is eloquent in its linkage of “wanting to break loose” with the extraordinary output of Dickinson’s work. In addition, there also seems to be an encoded meaning that the extraordinarily enclosed—whether through volition or disadvantaged circumstances—can contest their circumstances through poetry, and become dramatically voiced and dramatically heard. In that sense, Cisneros’s vision of Dickinson opens a space for Cisneros’s own authority. Her identification with the nineteenth-century poet does not rely on a Dickinsonian offer of sympathy, but on the possibility of deploying Dickinsonian strategies in her own life. As Cisneros herself puts it, the contesting Dickinson “proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible” (Sanborn 1341, quoting Gilbert and Gubar) and, in addition, her final output “gave me hope all the years in high school and the first two in college when I was too busy being in love to write” (Sanborn 1339, quoting Cisneros).

Moreover, Dickinson’s strategies of withdrawal, despite being made possible by her membership in an elite class, provide a model for the non-elite, one in which “a private space was practically impossible” (Sanborn 1337, quoting Cisneros). In “Four Skinny Trees”, from *The House on Mango Street*, which pays homage to Dickinson’s “Four Trees—upon a solitary Acre—”, “Cisneros pointedly evokes the influence of Dickinson, indicating that we cannot do without such models of creative privacy and private creation” (Sanborn 1336). Dickinson’s methods thus become potential prerogatives of any class rather than containing “the implication [...] that truly great literature remained the prerogative of a particular [elite] class” as Mitchell believes (202). Dickinson, who ceded being the “theirs” of family, husband, and church for the life of an intellectual woman poet, has, through these very contestations and her emphasis on vision, become the “theirs” of poets outside her social class adopting, and adapting, her contestations and creative strategies.

Conclusion

Domhnall Mitchell concludes that Emily Dickinson's work, for all its exclusionary emphases and placement, has "an astonishing adaptability or flexibility of reference. As the poems are read at further and further removes from [their] particular alignment of circumstances [...] different schemes and alignments of meaning are made available" (209). This astonishing range is partly the result of Dickinson's intelligence and craft; however, it is also amplified by the very contestations that place her outside her class, removed from a strictly defined hierarchical structure. Indeed, the contestation and slippages in Dickinson's work announce themselves through her thematics as women and poet, her choice and deployment of form, and a religiously-inflected emphasis on vision and perception. These contestations serve to remove her from being bound solely by class. They also serve to foster identification from a wide range of poets of widely varying circumstances. "The poems can be thought of as rogue satellites," Mitchell concludes, "that alter direction and attach themselves to different interpretive orbits and centers of gravity" (209). Although it is tempting to think of the poems as floating satellites, they are certainly not rogue; the contesting Emily Dickinson carefully crafted her poems on many different levels, and there they remain.

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