

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Vanderbilt University

The House of Possibility: The Literary-Theological Imagination of Emily Dickinson

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Lecture I., Part I. "No Coward Soul"

Poem 519.

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me –
The simple News that Nature told –
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see –
For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen –
Judge tenderly – of Me

Poem 381.

I cannot dance upon my Toes –
No Man instructed me –
But oftentimes, among my mind,
A Glee possesseth me,

That had I Ballet knowledge –
Would put itself abroad
In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe –
Or lay a Prima, mad,

And though I had no Gown of Gauze –
No Ringlet, to my Hair,
Nor hopped for Audiences – like Birds,
One Claw upon the Air –

Nor tossed my shape in Eider Balls,
Nor rolled on wheels of snow
Till I was out of sight, in sound,
The House encore me so –

Nor any know I know the Art
I mention – easy – Here –
Nor any Placard boast me –
It's full as Opera –

Poem 466.

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide of narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –

“No Coward Soul”

by Emily Brontë

No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:
I see Heaven's glories shine,
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.

O God within my breast,
Almighty, ever-present Deity!
Life – that in me has rest,
As I – Undying Life – have power in thee!

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts: unutterably vain;
Worthless as withered weeds,
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by Thy infinity
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality.

With wide-embracing love
Thy spirit animates eternal years,
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears.

Though earth and man were gone,
And suns and universes ceased to be,
And Thou wert left alone,
Every Existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void:
Thou – Thou art Being and Breath,
And what Thou art may never be destroyed.

(25 January 1846)

The American literary critic, Helen Vendler, the Porter University Professor, *Emerita*, at Harvard University, our finest living critic and champion of contemporary poetry, and who published ten years ago a brilliant study of Dickinson's poetics, describes Dickinson's verses as "epigrammatic, terse, abrupt, surprising, unsettling, flirtatious, savage, winsome, metaphysical, provocative, blasphemous, tragic, and funny."

Literature as a "verb" in the Dickinsonian context

"If I read a book, and if it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry." These are the only ways I know. Is there any other?"

(Emily Dickinson corresponding to Thomas Wentworth Higginson)

Writing as an Act of Resistance to The Five Points of the Synod of Dordrecht

TULIP

Total Depravity

Unconditional Election

Limited Atonement

Irresistible Grace

Preservation of the Saints

an excerpt from the poem "Autumn"
by Lydia Huntley Sigourney, the "Sweet Singer of Hartford"

Has it come, the time to fade?
And with a murmur'd sigh
The Maple, in his scarlet robe,
Was to the first to make reply;
And the queenly Dahlias droop'd
Upon their thrones of state,
The frost-king, with his baleful kiss,
Had well forestall'd their fate.

The vine that o'er my casement climb'd
And cluster'd day by day
I count its leaflets every morn,
See, how they fade away;
And, as they withering one by one
Forsake their parent tree,
I call each sere and yellow leaf
A buried friend to me.

The ripen'd rose, where are they now?
But from the rifled bower
A voice came forth, 'take heed to note
Thine own receding hour,
And let the strange and silver hair
That o'er thy forehead strays,
Be as a monitor to tell
The autumn of thy days."

Poem 278.

A word is dead, when it is said
Some say
I say it just begins to live
That day

Poem 1456.

Could mortal Lip divine
The undeveloped Freight
Of a delivered Syllable –
'Twould crumble with the weight –

The Prey of Unknown Zones -
The Pillage of the Sea
The Tabernacles of the Minds
That told the Truth to me -

Poem 1268.

A Word dropped careless on a Page
May consecrate an Eye
When folded in perpetual seam
The Wrinkled Author lie

Infection in the sentence breeds
We may inhale Despair
At Distances of Centuries
From the Malaria -

Poem 598.

The Brain – is wider than the Sky –
For – put them side by side –
The one the other will contain
With ease – and You – beside –

The Brain is deeper than the sea –
For – hold them – Blue to Blue –
The one the other will absorb –
As Sponges – Buckets – do –

The Brain is just the weight of God –
For – Heft them – Pound for Pound –
And they will differ – if they do –
As Syllable from Sound –