

Miss Emily's Fire

Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna



CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST ORTHODOX STUDIES

**Miss Emily's Fire:
The Orthodox Elements in Emily
Dickinson's Spirituality and Mysticism**

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Dickinson's Spirituality
and Mysticism*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My paternal grandmother, who wrote a number of beautiful and elegant poems in English and in Catalan, introduced me to poetry. A poem that she penned was the first poem in English that I ever read. She also made known to me her favorite poet: “A musician of words whose literary compositions were sonorous,” as she wrote on the fly-leaf of a book that she gave to me as a college graduation gift. It was a collection of poems by the “Belle of Amherst,” the name by which my grandmother’s late Victorian generation best knew Emily Dickinson. That book became part of my constant bedside reading throughout my subsequent graduate studies.

I was for many years embarrassed by my love of Dickinson, whose poems some dismiss as sentimental and eccentric. Then, about five years ago, I happened to send a short poem that I wrote about her to my friend, the poet and writer Christopher Merrill. Indulging my amateurish dabbling in an art where he reigns as a maven and master, he immediately responded with an affirmation of his great love for the poetry of Emily Dickinson. (On the dedication page farther on, I have reproduced—albeit with some disinclination—several lines from my poem in honor of the poetess, first written when I was a young layman and then emended and rewritten several times over the years.)

Thus, to my grandmother I owe a considerable debt of gratitude for teaching me to appreciate poetry and to revel privately in the “musical” creations of one of America’s finest poets. And to Christopher Merrill I owe my late-found intrepidity to admit an inexorable addiction to the poetry of my “Miss Emily,” as he, too, fondly calls her.

Archbishop Chrysostomos

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Archbishop Chrysostomos received his doctoral degree in psychology at Princeton University, where he taught as a Preceptor in the Department of Psychology. He was a Visiting Lecturer at the Ashland Theological Seminary and has held professorial posts at the University of California and Ashland University, as well as visiting professorships at the Theological Institute of the University of Uppsala in Sweden and, as a Fulbright Scholar in Romania, at the University of Bucharest, the University of Iași, and the Ion Mincu University of Architecture. He also served as Executive Director of the U.S. Fulbright Commission in Romania.

The author of numerous books, Patristic translations, and scholarly articles written in or translated into a number of languages, His Eminence has been a Visiting Scholar at the Harvard Divinity School, Pembroke College at Oxford University, the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, and the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle.

In the Winter of 2006, Archbishop Chrysostomos was the David B. Larson Fellow in Health and Spirituality at the Kluge Center of the United States Library of Congress. He is at present Senior Scholar at the Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, which has published a number of his books.

DEDICATION

To Miss Emily

Is she like me?
Did she fumble and soar?
Who makes such judgments?
Maybe God, if He has the time to see.
Just now, of course, she has His ear.

A.C.

PREFATORY REMARKS

I do not profess to be a poet, a literary critic, or an interpreter of the canon of Emily Dickinson's poetic works. I also do not aspire, in this short monograph, to present a critical biography of the poetess, hoping thereby to trace her religious sensitivities to various stages in her personal psychological development. Though my training in psychology might incline me to find such a pursuit interesting, there are already ample psychoanalytical profiles of "Miss Emily," ranging from the callow to the preposterous to the reasonably professional. It is also not my intention to examine her religious beliefs and spiritual and mystical experiences in terms of the traditional "hermeneutics" of literary analysis: discovering the intensity and nature of her faith by fathoming the complex dimensions, hidden allusions, multiple entendre, or linguistic paradoxes in her poetry. I would fall short of that task, anyway.

My purpose, here, is to take Dickinson's religious language for what it is, as naïve and ingenuous as that goal may seem to those schooled in poetic interpretation. My reading of her poetry, over some decades, has convinced me that her theological and spiritual intuitions are far more understandable to an Eastern Orthodox believer than to religious—and non-religious—scholars formed in the Western Christian spiritual milieu. The latter variously describe her as a self-proclaimed pagan, an atheist, or a believer with diverse confessional deficits, depending on the extent of their religiosity or their doctrinal persuasion. In discussing her poetry, I will quite simply explore what I see as Dickinson's clearly *Orthodox sensitivities*.



The only authenticated photograph (daguerreotype) of Emily Dickinson in her later teens, taken *circa* 1846 or 1847. The original is found in the Archives and Special Collections at the Amherst College Library. (The photograph as it appears here has been slightly retouched.)

*A Biographical Sketch of
Emily Dickinson*

Each Life Converges to some Centre —
Expressed — or still —
Exists in every Human Nature
A Goal —

Embodied scarcely to itself — it may be —
Too fair
For Credibility's presumption
To mar —⁷

Emily Dickinson (Poem 680)

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, the scion of a prominent New England family that moved to America from England as

⁷ See the full text of the poem in Thomas Herbert Johnson, Ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), p. 337. This omnibus volume by one of the foremost Dickinson scholars contains all of her poems and fragments, numbered in sequence from 1 to 1775 (which has set a standard convention). The editor also provides a date for the earliest known manuscript of each poem and its first date of publication. The reader should note that Emily Dickinson, with only a few exceptions—such as *Poem 277*, written in 1861, which she entitled “Baby” (see Johnson, p. 104)—did not give titles to her poetic compositions, which are almost universally identified by the first line of verse. All subsequent references to her poetry in this monograph are by the first line of a poem or by its standard number in Johnson’s 1960 collection.

*Emily Dickinson's Spiritual
Life and World*

To my small Hearth His fire came —
And all my House aglow
Did fan and rock, with sudden light —
'Twas Sunrise — 'twas the Sky —⁶¹

Emily Dickinson (Poem 638)

Save for the capitalization of the possessive determiner modifying “fire,” one might maintain that the poem cited above is an ebullient ode to romance, to the ecstasy sometimes triggered by the profound beauty of the natural world, or to endless other delights that such luxurious, expressive, and suggestive words might conjure up. But here, as in many of her other poems with religious content, Emily Dickinson’s own words bear witness to the fact that she was a spiritual woman, that she was not the agnostic or pantheist that some have firmly argued she was, and that she had, as her poetry avers, transcendent mystical experiences of a spiritual kind. In the words of a book inscription penned for me by my grandmother and cited in the “Acknowledgements” at the beginning of this monograph, Amherst’s ladylike songbird was “a musician of words whose literary compositions were sonorous”; and the music that Miss Emily made was that of the spheres, unremittingly yielding to the deepest sensitivities and elements of the spiritual life. Euterpe, the goddess of music

⁶¹ Johnson, *Complete Poems*, p. 316.

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St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite, Christian Morality

(Belmont, MA, Institute for Byzantine and
Modern Greek Studies, 2010)

with Hieromonk Patapios and Monk Chrysostomos

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Τέσσαρα Κείμενα ἐπὶ Ἐκκλησιαστικῶν Θεμάτων

(Etna, CA, Center for Traditionalist
Orthodox Studies, 2011)
in Greek*

•

The Evergetinos: A Complete Text (in 4 vols.)

(Etna, CA, Center for Traditionalist
Orthodox Studies, 2009)

with Hieromonk Patapios *et al.* *

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Guide to Orthodox Psychotherapy

(Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 2006)

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Manna from Athos

(Oxford, Peter Lang Publishers, 2006)
with Hieromonk Patapios

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Scripture and Tradition

(Belmont, MA, Nordland Publishing Company, 1982)
with Bishop Auxentios

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Orthodox Liturgical Dress

(Brookline, MA, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1980)

* Available from the Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies.

Emily Dickinson is one of America's more beloved poets. Better known in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth, when she lived, her fame has endured well into the twenty-first century. Archbishop Chrysostomos' short new book, an eloquent study, recounts her life and work and discusses her religious belief with finesse and insight, identifying *souçons* of Orthodox mysticism in what have at times been portrayed—wrongly, as His Eminence contends—as her anti-Christian religious ideas and spirituality.

Hieromonk Patapios