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*Immured in Heaven! The Distance of Love in European Beguine Mysticism and in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson.*<sup>1</sup>

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Emily Dickinson composed three poems obviously inspired by the beguines: poem numbers 1628 (*Immured in Heaven!*), 1675 (*Of God we ask one favor, that we may be forgiven –*) and 570 (*I tried to think a lonelier Thing*).<sup>2</sup> The first has been conserved as a letter that she gave to Susan Dickinson (Sue –, in the manuscripts). It says:

Immured in Heaven!  
What a Cell!  
Let every Bondage be  
Thou sweetest of the Universe,  
Like that which ravished thee!

As I, being an experienced historian and a medievalist, will try to show, only some of the beguines, the most radical among them, immured themselves in cells high up significant walls in order to intensify and enjoy their experience of Love and of the so called divine Love.

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<sup>2</sup> Emily Dickinson, *Poemas 1–600. Fue – culpa – del Paraíso; Poemas 601-1200. Soldar un Abismo con Aire –; Poemas 1201-1786. Nuestro Puerto un secreto*, prologues, translation and reading of the poems in Spanish by Ana Mañeru Méndez and María-Milagros Rivera Garretas, bilingual edition + CD mp3 format, Madrid, Sabina editorial, 2012, 2013 and 2015.

The beguines –called *beatas* (which means blessed) in the Kingdom of Leon-Castille and in Latin America from the fifteenth century until today– were women who were free of the sexual contract, the pact between men for access to fertile women’s bodies and control over their fruit, this being the foundation of patriarchy.<sup>3</sup> They are documented in Europe from the eleventh century, living alone or in small communities of two, three, five friends... in the so-called beguine houses or beguinages. In the Middle Ages up to ten might live together, that we know of, and in larger communities in the Modern Age, but they also lived, always singly and free, in the dwellings of their birth families. The beguines were not nuns; they did not belong to any Catholic monastic order.<sup>4</sup>

The beguines lived free of the sexual contract because they were women that, since Carla Lonzi, the great Italian feminist revolutionary thinker of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> we call clitoral. That is, they did not marry, nor were they mothers or dependent on men but were rather chaste, understanding chastity as it was understood then, and as Emily Dickinson also understood it. That is, as a connection with one’s own female pleasure, the clitoral pleasure, free of penetration and coitus. Neither did they seek what, in the twentieth century, was called “sexual identity” (of the kind lesbian / heterosexual, etc.); a male non-medieval notion that does not belong to women’s politics, because, as the well known and widely translated Belgian-French

contemporary philosopher Luce Irigaray wrote, woman is neither one nor two, she does not fit into this form of binary and antinomial classification that comes from Greek and European rationalism.<sup>6</sup> The beguines understood that Reason always has to be illuminated by Love.

The beguines invented a form of female life that ended up creating a big inter-class and international movement of feeling, of piety and mysticism

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<sup>3</sup> Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> On the beguines in general, Laura Swan, *The Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women’s Movement*, New York, BlueBridge Books, 2016. Emily Dickinson’s poetry has been seriously analyzed from the point of view of institutional Catholicism (Barton Levi St. Armand, Judith Farr, Angela Conrad), but the beguines never became neither an institution nor an order; they just invented a way of life, widely practiced for centuries both in Europe and America.

<sup>5</sup> Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti, 1970-71*, Milan, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1974, 77-140. See also, María-Milagros Rivera Garretas, *El placer femenino es clitorico*, Madrid and Verona, Edición independiente, 2020; Collection *A mano*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*, Paris, Editions Minit, 1977. See also, Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray. Philosophy in the Feminine*, London and New York, Routledge, 1991.

that, in its mysticism, was political. It was political because it intervened at the root of the sexual politics of medieval Europe and, later, the West, where it has lasted to the present-day in all its catholic territories. Even Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695) was educated as a little girl and shaped as a writer in a beguine school, schools that were called The Female Friend (La Amiga), in the locality of Amecameca, in New Spain, today Mexico.

The beguines were neither lay nor ecclesiastic, neither married nor single, they did not allow themselves to be marginalized or prostituted. They were not nuns nor either strictly religious women (*mulieres religiosae*), although it is often said, anachronistically, that they were, given that they never submitted to a rule (*religare*), not even the tertiary, although some of them were tertiaries as well as beguines, or at different moments of their lives. That is, the beguines did not answer to any of the gender stereotypes pertaining to the patriarchy, and neither were they condemned or excluded because of it. If they were condemned, such as for example the great Marguerite Porete, burnt in Paris in 1310, it was for heresy or another crime against dogma, not for being beguines. That is why they cannot be interpreted according to the category of “gender”. They loved and cultivated female freedom, a relational freedom neither reducible nor contrary to the supposedly neutral male freedom.

The beguines intervened in the sexual politics of their time through symbolic inventions –inventions or discoveries of meaning conceived and given birth to at the edge of what was unsayable– women whose bodies put into relief the crimes of patriarchal men against them. They were crimes that the feeling of the people knew to be such, but they were, paradoxically, upheld by the Law and, therefore, not punishable. The most important is the crime of adultery. Within marriage, adultery was considered an exclusively female crime. Punishment for the mere suspicion of it was the death penalty in life. Especially amongst noble class women, it happened that the accusation of the suspicion of adultery tempted and suited husbands who wanted to appropriate the assets, jurisdictions and properties of their wives without murdering them. From the Middle Ages, the Law, the writing of which women scarcely intervened in, condemned noble wives suspected of adultery to be walled up for life in a cell with an open window on the inside of their own house, in which they had to be fed by their husbands, who were prohibited from giving them anything to cause their death. In this way, the woman was a living dead woman. Feudal Law, pertaining to the period in which the beguine way of life was created and flourished greatly, stated that the cell of the adulteress should have certain conditions and size. For example, the *Constitutions of Catalonia* ordered that the wife suspected of adultery should remain at the disposition of the husband, who could have her

in his house sandwiched in a box (*domumculam*) “twelve spans long, six wide and two reeds high”, with a sleeping sack, a hole for her needs and bad smells, and a window through which the woman would be handed on a daily basis eighteen ounces of bread and the water she wanted, prohibiting her from being given anything that might cause her death (*Dominus rex, visa sententia*). The documentation of James II of Aragon (1267-1327) registers that the *infanta* Blanca, prioress of the monastery of Sigena, intervened in August 1321 before the King, her father, on behalf of the wife of Guillem of Montcada, governor of Catalonia, who this latter held prisoner accused of adultery. The King answered his daughter telling her that she should not interfere in the matter.<sup>7</sup>

The most radical beguines, the so-called “immured” or “anchorites”, who are those that inspired Emily Dickinson, transformed the punishment cell of adulterous women into the home and seat of their free existence, their pleasure, their visions and their politics. It was a chosen cell, not imposed by anything or anybody. They enclosed themselves out of their own decision in a cell of similar dimensions and shape to that of the women suspected of adultery, and they allowed themselves to be fed from the outside, dependent on the mercy of the people. But they put the cells in high places, inaccessible to men, oriented towards heaven and the infinite; the window of their cell opened to the outside, to the world, to conversation with whoever might come to visit them in search of advice in their spiritual exploration or help in their sufferings and pleasures of the soul. There, they became inviolable of body and spirit, being, at the same time, available for everyone. There, they began a new life, a happy and fulfilled life, which contrasted luminously with the prolonged horror of the living death of the noble wife suspected of adultery. In their new and full existence, the walled-in women sought and found their being as woman in love, Divine Love, infinitely superior to that of any man.

The beguines brought to the world symbolic inventions that dismantled the typically patriarchal public / private dichotomy, showing and expressing that their body was theirs and was, at the same time, open to the other, without artificial divisions and recognizing that the other is already within me. In this way, their soul placed itself beyond the law, not against the law, reaching full symbolic independence, free of antinomies of thought. The great beguine mystic Marguerite Porete left it said and written masterfully in her *Mirror of Simple Souls* (*Miroir des Simples Ames*), where Divine Love says: *Voyre, Sainte Eglise la Petite, dit Amour; celle Eglise qui est gouvernee de Raison;*

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<sup>7</sup> María-Milagros Rivera Garretas, *La política sexual* in María-Milagros Rivera Garretas, coord., *Historia medieval. Las relaciones en la historia de la Europa medieval*, Valencia, Tirant lo Blanch, 2006, 139-204.

*et non mie Sainte Eglise la Grant, dit Divine Amour, qui est gouvernee par nous* (“True for the Small Holy Church, says Love; that Church which is governed by Reason; but not for the Great Holy Church, says Divine love, which is governed by us”);<sup>8</sup> adding in the penultimate chapter of the book, the CXXI, before Soul sings her final song: *mais ceste est dessus la loy, non mye contre la loi* (but this is above the law, not in anything against the law).

That Emily Dickinson knew of beguine mysticism is evident in the three poems that I have cited and that my commentary deals with. Information about them, despite their always being catholic women, was significantly accessible in her evangelical cultural and religious context, as if the beguines were a Victorian literary topic or formed part of an international fashion with great political value (of sexual politics) connected to the female freedom and pleasure of the women of the nineteenth century, who were much less Victorian than the patriarchal cliché would have us believe. I consider it highly likely, if not certain, that Emily Dickinson would have read, as a little girl or teenager, the famous novel of the Irishwoman (Sidney Owenson) Lady Morgan (h. 1776-1859) titled *The Princess, or The Beguine*, published in 1835.<sup>9</sup> I also consider it likely that she would have read or heard read aloud the story of S. H., *The Beguine. A Tale of the Twelfth Century*, published in London in 1840 –when Emily was nine years old– in the journal *The Ladies’ cabinet of fashion, music, & romance*, led by Margaret De Courcy and Beatrice de Courcy. This number of the journal has on its cover the image of a beguine of luxury presented as a young woman with two red roses around each ear, with obvious connotations of the sensuality of the clitoris and the vulva, a sky blue headdress and dress (the color of the symbolic horizon of the mother and of the infinite), white cap (the colour of virginity that Emily Dickinson loved so greatly) and, over her dress, a dark brown cloak (a colour typical of the beguines), all of it elegant and discreet.<sup>10</sup> Her attention may also have been drawn to the beguine (“young Beguine”, “fair Beguine”) of the novel *Tristram Shandy*, and she may have had access to works that admired life in the beguinages of Flanders, such as that of John Coney, *Beauties of Continental Architecture*, published in London in 1840.<sup>11</sup> If, on

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<sup>8</sup> ‘*Miroir des Simples Ames*’, di Margherita Porete, in *Il Movimento del Libero Spirito. Testi e documenti*, curated by Romana Guarnieri, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1965, p. [151] 501- [285] 635; II.19, p. [189] 539.

<sup>9</sup> (Sidney Owenson) Lady Morgan, *The Princess, Or The Beguine*, 2 vols., London, 1835.

<sup>10</sup> S. H., *The Beguine. A Tale of the Twelfth Century*, “The Ladies’ cabinet of fashion, music, & romance” 3 (London 1840) 310-319.

<sup>11</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, London 1817, p. 534, 536, 538, 553. John Coney, *Beauties of Continental Architecture*, engraved by the late John Coney, London, M. A. Nattali, 1843, unpagged. It dedicates two engravings (one of the Tower of 1617, its two spirals in the upper part) to *The*

reading any one of these works, she had gone to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to check on their historical veracity, Emily Dickinson would have read the following in the entry *Beguins* [*sic*], already present in its first edition: “congregations of devout young women, who maintain themselves by the work of their hands, leading a middle kind of life between the secular and religious. These societies consist of several houses placed together in one inclosure...”.<sup>12</sup> That is, in the Victorian epoch the beguines were a literary topic of explosive political contents, original contents belonging to the politics of women and the female freedom of yesterday and today, ironically supported, in the background, by the prestige of the figure of the enormously powerful Queen Victoria of England.

What might it have been of the beguine way of life that called and inspired Emily Dickinson? In my opinion, the following: 1) symbolic independence from men, a symbolic independence founded on chastity, understood as the freedom to love who you wanted to, how you wanted to; 2) her understanding of Love as All, as *Amor Omnia*, in the way of the poem 1747, also a letter to Sue, which says:

That Love is all there is  
Is all we know of Love,  
It is enough, the freight should be  
Proportioned to the groove.

Living amongst women in “houses placed together in one inclosure” promised Emily Dickinson a life amongst women, free of incest, that committed by Edward Dickinson, her father, and by Austin Dickinson, her brother.<sup>13</sup> It allowed her to live with Susan H. Gilbert, her beloved since they met as adolescents as study companions. And it guaranteed her absolute freedom for poetic creation and the development of her inner life, the life of the soul. A letter to Susan Gilbert that has been dated 5th April, 1852 –when both were 21 years old– documents that Emily Dickinson wanted to live professionally as a writer. It says: “When I see the Popes and the Polloks, and the John-Milton Browns, I think we are liable, but I don’t know! I am

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*Beguinage, at Brussels*. It says: “There is scarcely a city in the Low Countries, which has not a Beguinage. [...] “Their number has amounted to seven or eight hundred, and sometimes more.”

<sup>12</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 3 vols., Edinburgh, A. Bell and C. MacFarquhar, 1771, vol. 1, p. 537. Also see the English / French / German or Italian dictionaries of the nineteenth century which include the word *Beguine*.

<sup>13</sup> Emily Dickinson, *Ese Día sobrecogedor. Poemas del incesto*, Bilingual edition, Madrid, Sabina Editorial, 2017.

glad there is a big future waiting for me and you.”<sup>14</sup> Before, on 9th October 1851, she had written to her: “but for our sakes dear Susie, who please ourselves with the fancy that we are the only poets – and every one else is prose, let us hope they will yet be willing to share our humble world and feed upon such aliment as we consent to do!”<sup>15</sup>

Another letter to Susan, written at the beginning of June of 1852, documents, in my opinion quite bluntly though usually ignored by literary criticism since it touches a historical issue, that Emily Dickinson wanted to marry Susan Gilbert, not just share an erotically charged relationship. She tells her:

“and I walked home with Mattie beneath the silent moon, and wished for you, and Heaven. You did not come, Darling, but a bit of Heaven did, or so it seemed to us, as we walked side by side and wondered of that great blessedness which may be our’s sometime, is granted now, to some. This union, my dear Susie, by which two lives are one, this sweet and strange adoption wherein we can but look, and are not yet admitted, how it can fill the heart, and make it gang wildly beating, how it will take us one day, and make us all it’s own, and we shall not run away from it, but lie still and be happy! You and I have been strangely silent upon this subject, Susie, we have often touched upon it, and as quickly fled away, as children shut their eyes when the sun is too bright for them.”<sup>16</sup>

Marriages between women are perfectly documented in the nineteenth century. Emily Dickinson clearly knew of them and desired them. The tradition of marriage between people of the same sex was very old; at the very least, medieval, there existing numerous Christian rituals from the eleventh century to hold them in church before a priest and with the holy bible on the altar, on which both parties placed their right hand. Too, in medieval Europe and the modern West they took the form in which Emily Dickinson knew of them: legal adoption (“this sweet and strange adoption”) as sister or brother of a woman or a man by another in order to found a home based on love, loyalty, fidelity and trust.<sup>17</sup> Precisely, the beguines formed

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<sup>14</sup> The Emily Dickinson Archives. Correspondence with Susan Dickinson, HL 13. The underlining is hers.

<sup>15</sup> The Emily Dickinson Archives. Correspondence with Susan Dickinson, HL 5. The underlining is hers.

<sup>16</sup> The Emily Dickinson Archives. Correspondence with Susan Dickinson, HL 20. The underlining is hers.

<sup>17</sup> See my *La política sexual*, in María-Milagros Rivera Garretas, coord., *Historia medieval. Las relaciones en la historia*, cit.; John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, New York, Villard Books, 1994; Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009; Laura Mercader Amigó, *Vivir y crear en comunidad: la Medusa*

part of the great non-organized political movement called *Fideles Amoris*, Faithful in Love, which crossed medieval Christian Europe and the modern West. It was made up of women and men politically faithful to Love, to its Signs, rather than feudal hierarchy or modern absolutism and their patriarchal laws. The Fidelity of Love was and is a modality of the life of chastity, wrongly understood by the feminism influenced by the May of 68, a chastity that the male culture and medicine of the twentieth century intentionally confused with the absence of sexual pleasure, with the more or less explicit aim of making heterosexuality obligatory, according to the in-depth study of Adrienne Rich.<sup>18</sup>

The medieval beguines invented a mysticism of Love, also called theology in the mother tongue:<sup>19</sup> it is in the mother tongue because Love cannot be spoken of in a dead language, like the scholastic Latin, dead since the seventh century, but rather in the mother tongue, the language that your mother teaches you to speak as she brings you the world to the world.<sup>20</sup> The beguines did not meditate on the pain of Christ nor on his wound in the side and, if they did, they turned the wound from horizontal to vertical, a clear sign of the vulva and its clitoral and chaste pleasure, faithful to the ancestral female caste itself, that of the Mother Goddesses without coitus, as the Indo-European root signals of the word “chastity”.

The most radical beguines in their mystical experimentation were, as I have said, the immured. They were women who, after a burial ritual dominated by the color black, enclosed themselves in the high part of a city wall, of the walls of a beloved church, or the structure of a bridge, places that were always passed through and visited by many people, who went to visit them and to ask them for advice in the practices of the life of the soul. In their cell anchored up high, the immured women devoted their lives to feeling the pleasure of union and to nurturing, intensifying and going deeper into their feeling of pleasure in the experience of the revelation of Divine Love; sometimes they wrote down their experience there, as did Julian of Norwich, anchorite at the church of Saint Julian of Norwich, author of *The Revelation of Divine Love in Sixteen Showings*, one of the master works of western

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*bella y libre de Harriet Hosmer*, “Per amore del mondo” 14 (2016)

[www.diotimafilosofe.it/larivista/](http://www.diotimafilosofe.it/larivista/)

<sup>18</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, in Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry. Selected Prose 1979-1985*, New York and London, Norton, 1986, 23-75.

<sup>19</sup> Luisa Muraro, *Margherita Porete teologa in lingua materna*, in her *Le amiche di Dio. Scritti di mistica femminile*, curated by Clara Jourdan, Naples, D’Auria, 2001, 96-105.

<sup>20</sup> On the maternal tongue and the divine, see Luisa Muraro, *Lingua materna scienza divina. Scritti sulla filosofia mistica di Margherita Porete*, curated by Clara Jourdan, Naples, D’Auria, 1995.



mysticism in the English language. Precisely the immured and their cells of love and freedom are the direct inspiration for the poem of clitoral love *Immured in Heaven! / What a Cell!* cited above, delivered to Susan shortly after Sue's son Gib's death. So too, of the love poem 1675, part of a letter drafted to Helen Hunt Jackson, which says:

Of God we ask one favor, that we may be forgiven –  
For what, he is presumed to know –  
The Crime, from us, is hidden –  
Immured the whole of Life  
Within a magic Prison  
We reprimand the Happiness  
That too competes with Heaven –

Finally, inspiration in the beguines and their mysticism can be perceived in the gloomy poem 570, in which Emily Dickinson alludes to the horror of the death of the soul using the expression "Opposing Cells" in her interior when soul and body do not connect, they do not transmit between each other the pleasure of feeling which is all the life of the soul. The third verse of this poem says:

I plucked at our Partition –  
As One should pry the Walls –  
Between Himself – and Horror's Twin –  
Within Opposing Cells –

Emily Dickinson transported beguine mysticism to her own life, concretely to her decisive and total love for Susan Gilbert / Susan Dickinson, a love of which her poetry was a magistral expression to the highest degree. Her mysticism was as unitive and as clitoral as the beguine mysticism or theology in the mother tongue. In this sense she was the "recluse of Amherst", and her house her Cell and magic Prison, not in the way it is usually said nor that of the women and men authors who now deny her reclusion. Like the immured or anchorites, Emily Dickinson stayed in reclusion in order to enjoy herself, intensify and express her own pleasure poetically, not to prohibit herself from it nor flee from it, should it present spontaneously.

The inner union in female pleasure was expressed in beguine mysticism (and not only), in particular in Marguerite Porete, with the paradox of *le Loingprès / the FarNear*.<sup>21</sup> This is the distance of Love, the appropriate distance, that of

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<sup>21</sup> Luisa Muraro has written on this expression: "by 'divine' I understand the movement whereby the *here-life* and the *afterlife* coincide, between transcendence and immanence, that immanence being that which saves the dynamism of transcendence", in *La*

the FarNear, a distance at once inexistent and total, without antinomy of thought because it is an experience of feeling, intimate and ubiquitous without contradiction or inner hierarchy. Precisely the “appropriate distance” is that which converts Love, my Love (not self-love), when it becomes Divine, in the All. The paradox of the “FarNear” makes it possible to think of and speak to a feeling, more of women than of men, that consists of experiencing that love –when you reach the unifying experience– is closed and protected in your intimacy, in the deepest part of your being and, simultaneously, it reaches and covers the distance, the distance of the infinite that coincides with the sensation of the All. It is, in my opinion, a feeling more of women than men because the female body is born with a capacity of its own to be two, to create and shelter another being within it, of being *capax Dei* (capable of God) in a sense of its own that goes beyond by far the binary dialectic of medieval scholasticism and modern and postmodern critical thinking. Without her capacity to be two determining anything (essentialism is a patriarchal sophism). The meaning of the poetry of Emily Dickinson is in itself, and at the same time, infinite, it is the All of the “FarNear”, the pleasure of feeling the divine within me and in the all, without a solution of continuity. Scholasticism and critical thinking believe the personal finite to be separate from the infinite God. However, beguine mysticism and the poetry of Emily Dickinson conceive of the finite and the infinite together, the intimate and the distant at the same time and in the same feeling. An example is the Bondage and the Universe of poem 1747, *Immured in Heaven*, a bondage of which Susan Dickinson is “sweetest”, that is, as finite as a sweet taste, and she is the Universe, as infinite as the All.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, from her magic Prison of Amherst, a Prison of Love and divine Love, Emily Dickinson, with her female writing, disrupted the enchained antinomical poles of western rational thought.

(Translated from Spanish by Caroline Wilson)

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*trascendenza nella tradizione filosofica e nel pensiero della differenza sessuale*, in her *Lingua materna, scienza divina*, 47-55; p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> Luisa Muraro, *Concepire l'infinito*, in her *Le amiche di Dio*, 232-238.