

## Jane Donahue Eberwein : On Emily Dickinson's Life

Dickinson, Emily (10 Dec. 1830-15 May 1886), poet, was born Emily Elizabeth Dickinson in Amherst, Massachusetts, the daughter of Edward Dickinson, an attorney, and Emily Norcross. The notation "At Home" that summed up her occupation on the certificate recording her death in that same town belies the drama of her inner, creative life even as it accurately reflects a reclusive existence spent almost entirely in the Dickinson Homestead. That home, built by her grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson, represented her family's ambition. Edward Dickinson's young family shared the Homestead first with his parents and (after Samuel Fowler Dickinson's financial collapse as a result of overextending his resources on behalf of Amherst College) with another family before moving in 1840 to the home on North Pleasant Street where Emily spent her adolescence and young womanhood. In 1855 Edward Dickinson celebrated the family's renewed prosperity by repurchasing the Homestead, where Emily Dickinson remained until she died. Although her father and grandfather held prominent places in the town as lawyers and college officers, it is indicative of changing reputations that the Homestead is maintained today by Amherst College as a memorial to this woman, who has become an American legend for the poems she wrote in its kitchen pantry and in her second-story chamber. Like the "Circumference"-seeking songbird of one of her poems, Dickinson is now as much "At home--among the Billows--As / The Bough where she was born--" (Poems 798 [P798], p. 604).

Dickinson grew up in a Connecticut Valley environment that drew close linkages among religion, intellectual activity, and citizenship. She studied at Amherst Academy, then greatly influenced by the scientist-theologian Edward Hitchcock of Amherst College, and worshiped at the First Church (Congregational) during the period of revivalistic evangelical Protestantism known as the Second Awakening. Her father played an active role in the town's political and business affairs, served as treasurer of the college, and was a leading figure in the church community even though not actually converted and eligible for membership until the revival of 1850. Her mother had joined the church when pregnant with Emily, her second child. The poet had an older brother, William Austin, and a younger sister, Lavinia, as well as a close circle of girlhood friends.

Letters written during Dickinson's one year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (1847-1848) reflect tendencies evident even in her academy years: maintenance of close family ties and intense friendships with chosen intimates, preference for solitude over society, intellectual curiosity, pride in her ability to write wittily, and hesitation to commit herself to Christ in the manner expected by her friends and spiritual counselors, including Mount Holyoke's redoubtable foundress, Mary Lyon. Those tendencies grew more pronounced when she returned home to Amherst and its lively community of young people. Although aware of local developments such as the coming of the Amherst-Belchertown Railroad and involved to some extent in reading groups and the cultural offerings of a college town, she increasingly narrowed her circle to family and a few friends--notably Susan Gilbert. When Austin Dickinson married Sue in 1856, Edward Dickinson built a house next door to the Homestead for the young couple, thereby squelching any impulses to move west. With her closest friend only a short walk away, Emily visited frequently for the next several years but apparently avoided most of her sister-in-law's ambitious social entertainments. Gradually she discontinued even

those visits but retained close ties to Sue as well as to some of Sue's and Austin's friends, notably Samuel Bowles of the Springfield Republican, his assistant Josiah Gilbert Holland, and Holland's wife, Elizabeth. Shrinking from public exposure, Dickinson also ceased going to church by the early 1860s and never attempted to join it through profession of faith. Nonetheless she maintained friendships with successive ministers of the First Church while pursuing her independent spiritual journey.

Two events impelled Dickinson beyond her domestic sphere. Her father's election to the U.S. House of Representatives precipitated family visits. Although Emily remained at home with Sue and a cousin, John Graves, when her mother and Lavinia visited Washington, D.C., in 1854, she did accompany her sister to the capital the following year, staying at Willard's Hotel and visiting tourist attractions such as the U.S. Patent Office and Mount Vernon. On the return trip the sisters visited their Coleman cousins in Philadelphia, where they probably stopped at the Arch Street Presbyterian Church and met its minister, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth. In 1864 and 1865 Dickinson required treatment by a Boston specialist, Dr. Henry W. Williams, for an eye disorder. While under his care Dickinson stayed at Mrs. Bangs's Boardinghouse in Cambridge with cousins Lavinia and Frances Norcross. Upon her return to Amherst, Dickinson confined herself to the Homestead, declaring, "I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town" (Letters 330 [L330], p. 460). Yet she kept up with current literature through extensive reading, chiefly in English and American Romantic writers, and maintained lively correspondences with many friends.

Unfortunately the record of that correspondence lapses from the mid-1850s to the early 1860s after Sue's return from teaching in Baltimore and Austin's from law school, even though that was when Dickinson wrote most of her poems. There had been some clever valentines and a few lyrics in the early 1850s as well as references in letters to Jane Humphrey and Abiah Root to some "strange things--bold things" that she had undertaken (L35, p. 95). Around 1858 she started copying poems and stitching them into little booklets now known as fascicles. These poems, remarkable for their distilled wit, ambiguous manner, and stylistic idiosyncrasies, were shared with friends but apparently not offered for publication. The ten that were printed in the Springfield Republican, in several New York and Boston journals, and in Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Masque of Poets* between 1852 and 1878 appeared anonymously and, it seems, without the poet's consent. Dickinson evidently valued her privacy too much to risk the fate of a nineteenth-century literary celebrity and protected herself by adhering to standards of genteel reserve imposed by society on ladies of her age and station. Nonetheless, she cultivated connections with literary figures in positions to promote her work, not only with Bowles and Holland but also with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom she appointed as her "preceptor" from 1862 until her death, and Helen Hunt Jackson, who had volunteered to serve as her reticent friend's literary executor because "you are a great poet--and it is a wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud" (L444a, p. 545).

Dickinson's poetry is remarkable for its emotional and intellectual energy as well as its extreme distillation. In form, everything about it is tightly condensed. Words and phrases are set off by dashes, stanzas are brief, and the longest poem occupies less than two printed pages. Yet in theme and tone her poems grasp for the sublime in their daring expression of the soul's extremities. Stylistic tendencies such as her inclination toward symbolically freighted words such as "Circumference," her ironic wit, her adoption of personae, her penchant for oxymoron ("sumptuous--Despair--" [P505, p. 387]; "Heavenly Hurt" [P258, p. 185]), her punctuation that withholds traditional syntactic markers, her omission of titles, her recording of poems in multiple versions with variant words and stanzas, her willingness to leave poems

unfinished, and even the distinctive amount of white space she left on the page force readers to involve themselves directly in this poetry in a way that forecloses definitive readings even while encouraging an exceptional degree of intimacy between reader and poet. Dickinson's imagery ranged widely from domestic and garden metaphors, through geographic and scientific references drawn from her education, to literary allusions (especially to the Bible, Shakespeare, Dickens, and the Brontës). The poems express extremes of passion--love, despair, dread, and elation--and do so in many voices (that of the child, for instance, or the bride, the nobleman, the madwoman, or the corpse).

Although these lyrics characteristically withhold evidence of the occasions that precipitated them, they suggest various narratives of religious searching and of romantic love reciprocated but unfulfilled. Consequently there has been much speculation about whatever crises in Dickinson's life may have spurred her to poetic expression: literary ambition in conflict with both societal restrictions on women and her own reticent disposition, the eye problems that threatened her lifelines of reading and writing, or perhaps a religious conversion or even a psychological breakdown. Much of that speculation focuses on presumed romantic attachments to Charles Wadsworth and/or Samuel Bowles, both married men and therefore unattainable. Whether either of these men was the "Master" she addressed in three passionate letter drafts apparently written in 1858 and 1861 remains a question. The only romantic attachment that has been documented was with Judge Otis Phillips Lord, a widowed friend of her father, from the late 1870s to 1884, many years after most of her poems were written. Other candidates for the role of Dickinson's forbidden lover include Susan Gilbert Dickinson and Sue's friend Kate Scott Anthon Turner. Letters as well as poems demonstrate the intensity of the poet's engagement with her friends while leaving to the reader's imagination whatever private dramas she may have concealed when telling Higginson that "my life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any" (L330, p. 460).

We do know that Dickinson took profound pleasure in her reading, her gardening, her friendships, and her share in nurturing Austin's and Sue's three children. She also devoted herself, as did her sister, to long-term care of their invalid mother. Her life was marked increasingly by deaths within the family (her father in 1874, her mother in 1882, and her eight-year-old nephew in 1883) and in her circle of friends. Samuel Bowles died in 1878, Josiah Holland in 1881, Charles Wadsworth in 1882, Otis Phillips Lord in 1884, and Helen Hunt Jackson in 1885. She felt bereaved by deaths of favorite authors also, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1861), George Eliot (1880), and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1882). Grief confronted her repeatedly with religious doubts she had coped with earlier in poems exploring her "Flood subject" of immortality (L319, p. 454), though Dickinson's late writings, especially letters, suggest an increasingly hopeful sense of her relationship with God. She suffered from kidney disease, perhaps associated with hypertension, for several years before she died.

Were Emily Dickinson known only by public achievements, she would soon have been forgotten. While the poet died, however, her poems lived. Back in 1862, opening her correspondence with Higginson, she challenged that man of letters to tell whether her verse "breathed" (L260, p. 403). Lavinia Dickinson, who came upon a box with the stitched fascicles and other poetic manuscripts while settling her sister's affairs, resolved to display Emily's genius to the world and eventually enlisted Mabel Loomis Todd, a friend and their brother's mistress, to edit them. Higginson assisted with publication and promotion of *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1890) and *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1891). Todd alone then responded to public interest by publishing an 1894 edition of selected Dickinson letters and a third collection of *Poems* in 1896. Roberts Brothers of Boston brought out all four volumes, the first of which

sold out rapidly with eleven editions printed within a year. A legal dispute between Lavinia Dickinson and Todd over Austin's estate then put an end to Todd's editing. No further Dickinson writings came to press until after Susan Dickinson's death in 1913, when her daughter, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, published a selection of poems her aunt had sent to her mother as *The Single Hound* (1914). Bianchi followed that with correspondence and biography reflecting her own sense of family tradition in *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1924), personal reminiscences in *Emily Dickinson Face to Face* (1932), and successive volumes of poems. After Bianchi died, Todd and her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, brought out the remaining poems in their possession as *Bolts of Melody* (1945). Gradually, as public acceptance of Dickinson's writing grew, editors represented poems more in accordance with her wording, spelling, and punctuation. When Thomas H. Johnson presented *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955) in a scholarly three-volume variorum edition, he was hailed for making her art available to readers in its full brilliance. Since then, however, Ralph W. Franklin's two-volume facsimile edition of the poet's fascicles in *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981) has shown that Dickinson's lineation was often less conventionally hymnlike than it appears in Johnson's edition, that the poems occupy space in more revealing ways than can be reproduced in print, and that variants play a significantly complicating role in an inherently ambiguous, open-ended poetry that resists editorial closure while demanding reader engagement.

From the first appearance of *Poems* during the 1890 Christmas season, readers have responded variously to Emily Dickinson. Arlo Bates, a Boston critic, remarked ambivalently that Dickinson's poetry was "so wholly without the pale of conventional criticism, that it is necessary at the start to declare the grounds upon which it is to be judged as if it were a new species of art." Yet William Dean Howells declared that "if nothing else had come out of our life but this strange poetry we should feel that in the work of Emily Dickinson America, or New England rather, had made a distinctive addition to the literature of the world" (Buckingham, pp. 29, 78). Dispraise of her style (initially perceived as crude and unpolished) and admiration for her daring treatment of subject matter--both religious and erotic (often in one poem)--was matched by popular curiosity about the poet's life. Attention focused early on the mysteries of her seclusion, with speculation about the romantic disappointment readers typically detect in Dickinson's poetry when they construct narratives to link her lyrics (a tendency first encouraged by the Todd-Higginson editions with a section of each book devoted to "Love" poems and later by Johnson's attempt to group poems chronologically in a way that makes them look autobiographical).

Although interest in one or more lovers continues, as does attention to the poet's religious quest and to her quiet subversion of gender assumptions, Emily Dickinson's poems steadily gain recognition as works of art, both individually and collectively, especially when read in her original fascicle groupings, which establish not just her unquestionable brilliance but her frequently underestimated artistic control. The regard Dickinson has won in the little more than a century since her poems introduced her to the world has established her as the most widely recognized woman poet to write in the English language and as an inspiration, both personally and in terms of craft, to modern women writers. As a voice of New England's Protestant and Transcendental cultures in fruitful tension and of the spiritual anxieties unleashed by the Civil War (during which she wrote the great majority of her poems) and as an avatar of poetic modernism, Emily Dickinson now stands with Walt Whitman as one of America's two preeminent poets of the nineteenth century and perhaps of our whole literary tradition.

## Bibliography

The two major collections of Dickinson manuscripts and other research materials are held by Harvard University's Houghton Library and Amherst College's Special Collections. Joel Myerson, *Emily Dickinson: A Descriptive Bibliography* (1984), records the publication history of her poems and letters. Thomas Johnson's editions of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955) and *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1958) remain the preferred scholarly editions, supplemented by R. W. Franklin's facsimile edition of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981). Critiques of Johnson's editing appear in Franklin, *The Editing of Emily Dickinson: A Reconsideration* (1967), and Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (1992). Although Dickinson's poems and letters have been released gradually and in varying forms since 1852, the Johnson editions are generally preferred to earlier printings as representations of the poet's intent.

Documentary materials providing a context for Dickinson's life may be found in Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (1960), and Polly Longworth, *The World of Emily Dickinson* (1990), which provides a pictorial record of the poet's environment. The most important biography remains Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974). Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (1986), combines biography with extensive critical analysis. Many critical studies of Dickinson attempt with varying degrees of plausibility to draw biographical insights from readings in poems, letters, and fascicle groupings. Among these are John Cody's psychobiography, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (1971), William H. Shurr's *The Marriage of Emily Dickinson: A Study of the Fascicles* (1983), and Judith Farr's *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* (1992). Willis J. Buckingham has collected early responses to Dickinson's poetry in *Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History* (1989). Bibliographic reviews of subsequent Dickinson criticism include Buckingham, *Emily Dickinson: An Annotated Bibliography--Writings, Scholarship, Criticism, and Ana, 1850-1968* (1970), and Karen Dandurand, *Dickinson Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography, 1969-1985* (1988). Joseph Duchac's two annotated guides to *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* trace commentary published on individual poems from 1890 to 1977 (1979) and from 1978 to 1989 (1993). Numerous articles appear in literary journals around the world, and the Emily Dickinson International Society sponsors two publications entirely focused on her work: the *Emily Dickinson Journal* and the *Emily Dickinson International Society Bulletin*.

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