

Final Harvest

EMILY DICKINSON'S
POEMS

selections and introduction
by Thomas H. Johnson



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— P O E M S —

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Biographical Note

EMILY DICKINSON was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830, daughter of a respected Amherst lawyer, Edward Dickinson, and his wife Emily Norcross Dickinson. She lived throughout her life in her father's house in Amherst, with her parents (until their deaths in her middle years) and younger sister Lavinia. Her brother William Austin Dickinson and his wife Susan Gilbert Dickinson lived next door.

She was educated in local schools and at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley. Her childhood and girlhood were active and social, but after a trip to Washington and Philadelphia in 1855 she settled into a quiet pattern of life, never leaving Amherst except for two trips (for eye care) to Boston, seeing fewer and fewer people outside her close family circle and old friends, and drawing gradually into seclusion.

She died, after a two-year illness, on May 15, 1886. Except for seven anonymous verses, her poems were unpublished during her lifetime. They were found after her death, and editions of sections of them have appeared over the years since then. A three-volume variorum edition of her complete poems (totaling 1775), derived from all known manuscripts and edited by Thomas H. Johnson, was published in 1955 by Harvard University Press; the standard one-volume edition of the complete poems, derived from the variorum edition and also edited by Mr. Johnson, was published in 1960 by Little, Brown and Company.

The best record of Emily Dickinson's appearance is in one of her

letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, to whom she had turned as a literary adviser: "I . . . am small, like the wren; and my hair is bold, like the chestnut burr; and my eyes, like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves."

The Vision and Veto of Emily Dickinson

WHEN EMILY DICKINSON in 1862 enclosed a handful of her poems in a letter to the essayist and reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson, inquiring whether her verses "breathed," she received a bewildered response. The man she would thenceforth ostensibly make her literary mentor thought their gait "spasmodic," but he wanted to see more, and asked about her reading. She replied: "For Poets, I have Keats, and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For Prose, Mr. Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations." The fragmentary selection is emblematic not only of the nature of Dickinson herself, but of her poetry as well, for it both conceals and reveals. The significant names, as a study of her poetry amply confirms, are the last two. Browne's concern with language and his solemn reflections on death and immortality are the heart of Dickinson's inner world; its soul is the ecstatic vision of John of Patmos.

Emily Dickinson loved words ardently. Her feeling about them amounted to veneration and her selection of them was ritualistic. "A Word made Flesh is seldom/And tremblingly partook," she begins one poem (no. 1651), and continues: "A Word that breathes distinctly/Has not the power to die." Is there any act, she asks, more blessed than the divine descent, the voluntary stooping of immanence, to reach the ear and heart of the creature, to make the Word live? Thoughts greatly conceived and expressed have sacramental efficacy. Almost all the poems touching upon the indwelling glory of language were written in 1862 and 1863, the years of flood creativeness. One

cannot escape the conviction that she is acknowledging the pervasive force of such inspiration in "The Soul that hath a Guest" (no. 674), one of her noble utterances. "A Word dropped careless on a Page" (no. 1261) breeds infection. Near the end of her life she wrote a close friend: "I hesitate which word to take, as I can take but few and each must be the chiefest, but recall that Earth's most graphic transaction is placed within a syllable, nay, even a gaze." As artist, Dickinson conceived of brevity, not as a way to sketch in miniature, but as a means of achieving the single moment of intensity. Her way of living, her isolation, she adopted out of necessity, for her nature like her poetry combined tenseness with exultation. After Higginson called on her in 1870 he wrote: "I never was with anyone who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her."

No one was more aware of the draining effect in personal contacts than Dickinson herself. Her poems expressing the need to be abstemious of friends are thoughts dictated by the forces that possessed her.

Who never wanted — maddest Joy
Remains to him unknown —
The Banquet of Abstemiousness
Defaces that of Wine —

Clearly she was possessed to a most uncommon degree by emotional responses so acute as to be painful to herself and others. One thus understands why letters increasingly became her chosen medium of communication.

The Soul selects her own Society —
Then — shuts the Door —
To her divine Majority —
Present no more —

The lines of course name a way of electing friends. But they also imply

the frugal doling out of emotions lest their intensity leave one bare and charred.

Emily Dickinson had no formal theory of poetics, but she had a consistent idea of the manner in which the poet is inspired, explicitly set forth in "Alone, I cannot be" (no. 298). Inspiration comes as a grace, overleaping regular channels; the poet is thus (like Keats perhaps) a being possessed, who reveals truth out of the agony of travail; and the anguish of such possession enables the receiver to partake of reality and reveal at least a fragment of the mysteries that the heart perceives.

Uncontrolled, such possession leads into the sheer nonsense of automatic writing, and Dickinson had no more success than any other artist has ever had in giving form to every creative impulse. But her successes, she seems to have felt when she wrote Higginson in 1862, were increasingly evident. She persistently labored to file her lines to sharpen the images. She was aware that form inheres in the created object, and she achieved control when her perceptions gave shape to the object before her pen touched paper.

An example of a failure is her poem about two butterflies (no. 533), in which she seems to have intended to portray their lightness and darting motion. But by the time she reaches the end, her focus is so blurred that the reader has forgotten what she is writing about. She was aware of the failure, and many years later began it over again. But inspiration was not with her. The penciled worksheet draft survives, and is rare in the degree of its complication. She never completed the poem, which remains a fascinating document of poetic creativeness in travail.

On one occasion, however, the muse sustained her in a similar attempt. She wished, sometime about 1862, to sketch the portrait of a hummingbird. She sees a vibration and hears a whirl so rapid that only the stir of blossoms after the bird's departure assures her of the truth of its presence. But the lines of "Within my Garden, rides a Bird" (no. 500) have been assembled laboriously and the figures remain awkward: the bird praises, and the rejoined dog is perplexed whether

he too (or the poet?) saw the bird. She never forgot what she wanted to express about the hummingbird, as sound, iridescent color, vibration; as instantaneous translation through space. Some eighteen years later she returned to the theme, reduced the twenty lines to eight, and created the superb poem about "A Route of Evanescence" (no. 1463), a creation which seems to have sprung fully armed from the brow of Jove. A similar achievement is the poem depicting frost, "A Visitor in Marl" (no. 391); and in it seems to coalesce all the virtuosity so signally her own: the wit of the keen phrase, brevity, and exact focus.

"If I read a book," she told Higginson, "and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can 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 it. Is there any other way?" To be sure there are other ways that poetry may be known, but there was no other way that she could successfully write it. One does not imagine that such masterpieces as *Lycidas* or *Alexander's Feast* were the performances of men who felt the top of their heads being taken off. Yet the end in view for Dickinson, as it had been for Milton and Dryden, was the creation of a work of art wherein the form and idea are one. Robert Frost has expressed the concept thus: "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove, the poem must ride on its own melting."

There is a further prospect from which Emily Dickinson's way of writing poetry may be viewed. Like many poets, during a period of composition Shelley set himself the task of writing a certain number of lines which he thereafter polished. Such poets visualize in panorama. They conceive spatially and wish to convey readers over expanse. Chaucer, Keats, and Byron expressed themselves notably in narrative poems. Dickinson on occasion tried to write narratively, but her genius was of a different order, and the few such poems that she wrote communicate at a pedestrian level. She is much more akin to such seventeenth-century poets as Donne, Vaughan, and Marvell in her ability to make the word itself become flesh, and she concentrated her effort to such a degree that she rarely wrote a poem of more than twenty lines. Her longest is fifty lines: "I cannot live with You" (no. 640).

As a prosodist experimenting in meters, rhyme, capitals, grammar, and punctuation, Emily Dickinson exhibited a boldness which doomed her to obscurity in her lifetime. Yet the stature she continues to take, merely as a technician, is notable in the history of literary reputations, and the full penetration of her accomplishment as a virtuoso is still a venture. Her manner of writing helps give assurance of the infinite adaptability of language. An innovator is of necessity unorthodox, and Dickinson's syntax forces the reader to unexpected levels of concept. She used dashes as a musical device and capital letters as a means of emphasis. Her readers are now gradually accommodating themselves to such eccentricities, since they know they are inheriting the legacy of a private poet who deliberately fractured grammar to achieve special effects. Indeed, an extraordinary achievement in the use of syntax to imply a meaning beyond the logic of relationships is the seventeen-line poem "I like to see it lap the Miles" (no. 585). Apparently it celebrates that exciting new form of transportation, the railroad. In structure it is but one sentence with a single subject and predicate (the first two words), which draw behind them an iron horse in a series of objective complements: *lap, lick, stop, step, peer, pare, crawl, chase, neigh, stop*. This happy journey is conducted without passengers; in fact the toy comes back to "its own stable door" at the end of its brief circuit. The satire on "progress" is the more biting in that it is masked by a child-like enthusiasm.

But the chief contribution of Dickinson to English prosody was the extension she gave to metrical and rhyme patterns. Her meters she derived from the hymn-book measures of her day,* adapted to her own requirements of suppleness and variety, retardment and acceleration. To exact rhymes and eye-rhymes (*come-home*), considered the only pairings allowable in English verse, she adds the constant use of identical rhymes (*stone-stone*), vowel rhymes (*see-buy*), imperfect rhymes (*time-thine*), and suspended rhymes (*thing-along*). The flexibility thus gained enormously extends the range of variations and creates rich overtones. For example, "We play at Paste" (no. 320), a poem of

* These I have discussed in detail in *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (1955), pages 84-86.

two quatrains, uses three varieties of rhyme: identical, suspended, and exact. The idea of the poem juxtaposes the tyro and the artist, and the form does likewise. The alternate iambic dimeter-trimeter regularity of the first stanza is abandoned in the second, where the meter follows its own convention, striking out in a new direction. Most interesting are the two final lines. The thought of line seven concerns the artist whose craft is mastered; that of line eight, the learner. The metric patterns of the two lines enforce the thought by reversing the beat (∪--∪|--∪∪-) and the hovering rhyme at the start alters to exact rhyme at the conclusion. This is but one among scores of poems in which the poet makes form and meaning inhere.

But it is not her achievement as a prosodist, substantial as it is, that gives high rank to Emily Dickinson. It is her tragic vision. She knew that she could not pierce through to the unknowable, but she insisted on asking the questions. Her agonizing sense of ironic contrasts; of the weight of suffering; of the human predicament in which man is mocked, destroyed, and beckoned to some incomprehensible repose; of the limits of reason, order, and justice in human as well as divine relationships: — this is the anguish of the Shakespeare of *King Lear*, and it was shared in like degree among nineteenth-century American writers only by Herman Melville, who also had his war with God. Yet, unlike Melville, she is willing to love the God with whom she is at war. Thus she is a closer spiritual neighbor to Jonathan Edwards, who believed (as she evidently did) that final judgment is not a foreseeable end, but a pronouncement renewed in all moments of existence.

Late in her life the death of her cherished eight-year-old nephew drew from her this moving statement, a summation in fact of her philosophy:

'Open the Door, open the Door, they are waiting for me,' was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium. *Who* were waiting for him, all we possess we would give to know — Anguish at last opened it, and he ran to the little Grave at his Grandparents' feet — All

this and more, though *is* there more? More than Love and Death?
Then tell me its name!

Emily Dickinson was an existentialist in a period of transcendentalism, a movement in her New England which saw the immanence of God in a buttercup, a state which she once or twice in poetry tried to envision. Yet her judgment persistently asserts that neither intuition nor reason can solve the riddle of existence, and in her lifetime only the actress Eleonora Duse lived with a similar artistic effectiveness for audiences. Dickinson assesses the problems of anxiety and loneliness, the extremity of pain and its duration and redemptive quality, and she thereby steadily participated in the issues of existing. "More than Love and Death?"

Her quest always involves time-theme ambiguities among the many paradoxes, and as a poet she adopts a variety of masks. There was the mask of little-girlhood, which gave her freedom to make such social commentary as "I like to see it lap the Miles." Her signature "Your Scholar" in her letters to Higginson followed a creative maturity which she knew he did not fathom. The mask hid the tragic vision in such patent mockery as "How happy is the little Stone" (no. 1510), and it gave her deeply religious nature the appearance of unorthodoxy. It was adopted in her whim of dressing in white and remaining physically out of sight of visitors. (Late in life she wrote to a new acquaintance: "In all the circumference of Expression, those guileless words of Adam and Eve never were surpassed, 'I was afraid and hid Myself.'") It appears consummately in such poems as "Title divine — is mine" (no. 1072), and "Mine — by the Right of the White Election" (no. 528), which seem intended to express both an earthly-heavenly marriage, and the agony of one who inevitably accepts the fact that a much desired human tie must be renounced: "Mine — here — in Vision — and in Veto!"

The subterranean vehemence of such poems as "Fame of Myself, to justify" (no. 713) and "Publication — is the Auction/Of the Mind of Man" (no. 709), written after she was convinced that during her

lifetime there would be no prospect of sharing her way of writing in any public way, suggests renunciation at another level. Love and Death! By placing "Because I could not stop for Death" (no. 712) beside "Behind Me — dips Eternity" (no. 721), one experiences the range of both her mortal consciousness and her beatific vision.

Publisher's Note

THE POEMS in this selection are numbered consecutively. The second number (in parentheses) is the number of the poem in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

The date at the left following each poem is that conjectured for the earliest known manuscript of the poem. That at the right is the date when the poem was first published.

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I
(7)

The feet of people walking home
With gayer sandals go –
The Crocus – till she rises
The Vassal of the snow –
The lips at Hallelujah
Long years of practise bore
Till bye and bye these Bargemen
Walked singing on the shore.

Pearls are the Diver's farthings
Extorted from the Sea –
Pinions – the Seraph's wagon
Pedestrian once – as we –
Night is the morning's Canvas
Larceny – legacy –
Death, but our rapt attention
To Immortality.

My figures fail to tell me
How far the Village lies –
Whose peasants are the Angels –
Whose Cantons dot the skies –
My Classics veil their faces –
My faith that Dark adores –
Which from its solemn abbeys
Such resurrection pours.

I never told the buried gold
Upon the hill – that lies –
I saw the sun – his plunder done
Crouch low to guard his prize.

He stood as near
As stood you here –
A pace had been between –
Did but a snake bisect the brake
My life had forfeit been.

That was a wondrous booty –
I hope 'twas honest gained.
Those were the fairest ingots
That ever kissed the spade!

Whether to keep the secret –
Whether to reveal –
Whether as I ponder
Kidd will sudden sail –

Could a shrewd advise me
We might e'en divide –
Should a shrewd betray me –
Atropos decide!

c. 1858

1914

The morns are meeker than they were –
The nuts are getting brown –
The berry's cheek is plumper –
The Rose is out of town.

The Maple wears a gayer scarf –
The field a scarlet gown –
Lest I should be old fashioned
I'll put a trinket on.

c. 1858

1890

4
(18)

The Gentian weaves her fringes –
The Maple's loom is red –
My departing blossoms
Obviate parade.

A brief, but patient illness –
An hour to prepare,
And one below this morning
Is where the angels are –
It was a short procession,
The Bobolink was there –
An aged Bee addressed us –
And then we knelt in prayer –
We trust that she was willing –
We ask that we may be.
Summer – Sister – Seraph!
Let us go with thee!

In the name of the Bee –
And of the Butterfly –
And of the Breeze – Amen!

c. 1858

1891