



EMILY DICKINSON

Joan Kirkby

Women Writers

EMILY
DICKINSON

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Joan Kelly
藏书章

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For the Busketts and the Shermans

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Editors' Preface

The study of women's writing has been long neglected by a male critical establishment both in academic circles and beyond. As a result, many women writers have either been unfairly neglected, or have been marginalised in some way, so that their true influence and importance has been ignored. Other women writers have been accepted by male critics and academics, but on terms which seem, to many women readers of this generation, to be false or simplistic. In the past the internal conflicts involved in being a woman in a male-dominated society have been largely ignored by readers of both sexes, and this has affected our reading of women's work. The time has come for a serious re-assessment of women's writing in the light of what we understand today.

This series is designed to help in that re-assessment. All the books are written by women, because we believe that men's understanding of feminist critique is only, at best, partial. And besides, men have held the floor quite long enough.

EVA FIGES
ADELE KING

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1 Emily Dickinson's Life: 'I dwell in Possibility –'

It is true that the unknown is the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God. (L 471)

For Emily Dickinson the Intellect was the 'Native Land' and 'the only Bone whose Expanse we woo –' (L 888). Everything she did was calculated to serve the largest need of the mind and soul; she had various words for it – 'Prospective', 'Immensity', 'Boundlessness', 'Expanse', 'Possibility' – but essentially her commitment to the unknown lead her to turn her back on 'the times, customs, graces, politics, or opinions of men'¹ in favour of what she called the 'Finite infinity' of 'A soul admitted to itself' (Poem 1695). From an early age she made the choices that would allow her to live as large a life as possible. 'Awe', she wrote, 'is the first Hand that is held to us . . . though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness –' (L 871).

For Dickinson this sense of possibility was inextricably related to writing and thought. Writing, the power 'to impel shapes to eyes at a distance', was the power of life or death. 'Yet', she wrote, 'not a pencil in the street but has this awful power, though nobody arrests it' (L 656). In Poem 569 she wrote:

I reckon – when I count at all –
First – Poets – Then the Sun –
Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –
And then – the List is done –

But, looking back – the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole –
The Others look a needless Show –
So I write – Poets – All – . . .

‘To Comprehend the Whole’ was the task she set herself. Nevertheless, Dickinson’s sense of the largeness of the life she elected contrasts markedly with the general view of the smallness of her life. The outline of Dickinson’s life, which can be summarised very quickly, suggests the barest bones of a mundane existence, practically devoid of external incident. However, Dickinson lead a visionary life where even the ordinary was translated into the extraordinary and her life justifies Emerson’s observation that great geniuses often ‘have the shortest biographies’ because ‘They lived in their writings . . .’² It is for this reason that we must turn to Dickinson’s letters to discover the underlying poetics of her life; the letters like the poems reveal the growth, the change and the varying intensities of the perceptions by which she lived; they reveal the nature and the quality of her attachments and the preoccupations of her imagination.³ Consequently, in the brief account of her life that follows her words will be used wherever practical.

Emily Dickinson was born on 10 December 1830 to a leading family of Amherst, Massachusetts, the middle child of Emily Norcross and Edward Dickinson, treasurer of prestigious Amherst College. She had an older brother Austin and a younger sister Lavinia. It was a close and formidably talented family of whom Dickinson said: ‘we’re all unlike most everyone, and are therefore more dependent on each other for delight’ (L 114). As Lavinia recalled, the family lived ‘like friendly and absolute monarchs, each in his own domain’ and they respected Dickinson’s choice of a contemplative life: ‘She had to think – she was the only one of us who had that to do.’⁴

The poet's view of her family was similarly frank. She said of her father: 'His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists' (L 418). Her special pain was for the small, timid, constrained life of her mother: 'My Mother does not care for thought' (L 261), preferring 'the stale inflation of minor News': 'I wish the Sky and she had been better friends, for that is "sociability" that is fine and deathless' (L 521). Dickinson said of her bond with her sister that it was 'early, earnest, indissoluble' (L 827). Lavinia, also noted for her wit and exuberant spirits, was a devoted sister who gave Emily the space she needed for her work, prompting the poet to remark: 'Vinnie is far more hurried than Presidential Candidates – I trust in more distinguished ways, for *they* have only the care of the Union, but Vinnie the Universe' (L 667).

Austin and Emily were the flamboyant Dickinsons. Austin wore a wide-brimmed planter's hat and loved racing his horses down Main Street for Emily's benefit. It is said that Emily increasingly wore white, a dramatic gesture which set off her titian hair and large brown eyes. 'My Hair', she wrote, 'is bold, like the Chestnut Bur – and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves –' (L 268).

The Dickinson domain consisted of 'the Homestead', the family home where Emily and Lavinia remained with the elder Dickinsons, and 'the Evergreens', the large elegant house next door that Edward Dickinson built for Austin when he married Emily's beloved friend Susan Gilbert. Dickinson had an excellent education at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Seminary, which was directed by Mary Lyon, whose motto was 'We can become almost what we will'.⁵ The family library was extensive and the Dickinsons subscribed to the leading periodicals of the day. Susan Gilbert became one of the most celebrated hostesses in New England and the intellectual life of the Evergreens was legend. Amherst itself was the

centre of a distinguished cultural life, with 'society equal to that in any city in culture & education.'⁶

From the letters it is obvious that Dickinson's first and enduring love was what she called 'the phosphorescence of learning' and 'Scholar' remained one of her preferred words for herself.⁷ At the age of fourteen she extolled her 'big studies' at Amherst Academy – 'Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin, and Botany – How large they sound, don't they?' (L 6). By the age of fifteen she was confirmed in a life of study and contemplation, lamenting to school friend Abiah Root of 'misspent time & wasted hours':

The ceaseless flight of the seasons is to me a very solemn thought, & yet Why do we not strive to make a better improvement of them? . . . For God has said. "Work while the day lasts for the night is coming in which no man can work." Let us strive together to part with time more reluctantly . . . (L 13)

This youthful remark echoes other nineteenth-century thinkers who valued the life of learning, in particular Thomas Carlyle, whose portrait hung alongside those of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot in Dickinson's room, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the New England seer revered by the Dickinsons. Carlyle urged his readers:

Produce! Produce! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it, in God's name! . . . Work while it is called Today; for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work.⁸

In 'Self-Reliance', Emerson similarly declaimed: 'But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself.'⁹

In her textbooks at Amherst Academy and Mount

Holyoke Seminary Dickinson found similar confirmation of the life of the mind, perhaps in none more than Isaac Watts' *The Improvement of the Mind* which was used at both Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke, where in the year Dickinson attended, it was required for admission.¹⁰ Watts encouraged the student to 'Let the enlargement of your knowledge be one constant view and design in life'. In what was virtually to become Dickinson's poetic platform, he exhorted the scholar to 'Fetch down some knowledge from the clouds, the stars, the sun, the moon, and the revolution of all the planets', to extract 'valuable meditations from the depths of the earth', 'the vast oceans of water', 'the wonders of nature among the vegetables, the herbs, trees and flowers', 'the birds, and the beasts and the meanest insect' – 'from a coffin and a funeral, learn to meditate upon your own departure.' He warned that 'a life of learning' was not 'a life of laziness and ease': 'Dare not give up yourself to any of the learned professions, unless you are resolved to labor hard at study and can make it your delight, and the joy of your life.'¹¹ Dickinson took the lesson to heart and was perhaps the one American poet to live out the Emersonian project:

Keep the intellect sacred. Revere it. Give all to it.
Its oracles countervail all. Attention is its acceptable
prayer. Sit low and wait long . . . Go sit with the
Hermit in you, who knows more than you do.¹²

To this trust Dickinson remained constant, refusing at the age of fifteen to give up her commitment to the unknown for a commitment to Christ (L 13). She was the only one at her school and in her family to reject conversion during the revivals: 'The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea – I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger!' (L 39). She later wrote of her

family, 'They are religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whom they call their "Father"' (L 261).

The next confirmation of her vocation came after she had left school and discovered the diminished life she was expected to lead as a woman, 'my time of so *little* account – and my writing so *very* needless' (L 30). At Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Dickinson had experienced a kind of ideal community, where learning and affection and large preoccupations were readily exchanged. It was a community of equals that allowed autonomy in relatedness and suggested the possibility of a life that might include both love and learning.

After leaving school she was disquieted by the alteration in her relations with her father and brother. Her father grew more severe – 'we do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that its pretty much all *real life*' (L 65) – and reprimanded her for disrespect to Austin (L 113). Austin with whom she had had a spirited, collegial relationship began to censor her 'fine philosophy' and to require 'correct ideas of female propriety and sedate deportment' (L 22) of his brilliant elder sister. To this affront she reacted with extreme indignation, contrasting his unassailable 'Jove-like' position 'a sitting on great "Olympus"' with the lowly state she was expected to assume: 'Permit me to tie your shoe, to run like a dog behind you. I can bark, see here! Bow wow! . . . Oh, "Jupiter"! fie!' (L 37). In response to his demand for a simpler style she announced that she would be:

As simple as you please, the *simplest* sort of simple – I'll be a little ninny – a little pussy catty, a little Red Riding Hood, I'll wear a Bee in my Bonnet, and a Rose bud in my hair, and what remains to do you shall be told hereafter. (L 45)

The letters are riddled with wry comments about marriage which she saw as an extinction of female autonomy. 'God keep me from what they call *households*' she exclaimed to Abiah Root (L 36). She directed Jane Humphrey to 'Keep a list of the conquests, Jennie, this is an *enemy's* Land!' (L 180). To Susan Gilbert, she wrote:

I do think it's wonderful, Susie, that our hearts dont break *every day*, when I think of all the whiskers, and all the gallant men, but I guess I'm made with nothing but a hard heart of stone, for it dont break any . . . (L 85)

The editor of the letters is finally impelled to remark after one letter that 'The tone of the message is one she adopted for those about to be married' (L 865).

In her early twenties Dickinson enjoyed a number of close friends with whom she spent pleasurable evenings of reading and discussion. She valued in particular her friendship with Benjamin Newton, who gave her a copy of Emerson's poems and encouraged her own study and writing: 'My dying Tutor told me that he would like to live till I had been a poet . . . ' (L 265). She remembered him as 'a gentle, yet grave Preceptor' and admired 'the strength, and grace, of an intellect far surpassing my own' (L 153). She was very fond of Jane Humphrey, a teacher at Amherst Academy, and confided to her the importance of her writing: 'I have heeded beautiful tempters . . . and life has had an aim, and the world has been too precious for your poor – and striving sister!' (L 35).

However the most intense relationship of these years, indeed of her life, was that with Susan Gilbert, later Susan Dickinson. Orphaned in her early teens, Gilbert was living with a married sister in Amherst when she met the Dickinsons. Like Dickinson Gilbert was intellectually

daring and loved literature and the two pleased themselves with 'the fancy that we are the only poets, and everyone else is *prose*' (L 56). Dickinson's letters to Susan Gilbert written over a lifetime have an intensity and passion that no other extant Dickinson letters have. In an early letter she invites 'Susie' to 'the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing and the preacher whose name is Love – shall intercede there for us!' (L 77):

. . . when he [the worthy pastor] said "Our Heavenly Father," I said "Oh Darling Sue"; when he read the 100th Psalm, I kept saying your precious letter all over to myself . . . I made up words and kept singing how I loved you, and you had gone, while all the rest of the choir were singing Hallelujahs. . . . I think of ten weeks – Dear One, and I think of love, and you, and my heart grows full and warm, and my breath stands still. (L 88)

From the repeated references she makes to the 'big future' awaiting them (L 85 and 102), it is evident that in the early days of her affection she imagined a future with Susan, perhaps a Boston marriage.

However, Susan Gilbert was being courted with equal intensity by Austin Dickinson and in 1853 the couple announced their engagement. This unsuspected alliance between her favoured people proved devastating. Subsequent letters to both Austin and Susan are distant and despondent in spite of her affirmation of 'the golden link which binds us all together' (L 113). The first letter to Austin conveys her sense of betrayal; she calls him a 'villainous rascal' who deserves 'hot irons', concluding:

Dear Austin, I am keen, but you are a good deal keener, I am *something* of a fox, but you are more of a hound! I guess we are very good friends tho',

and I guess we both love Sue just as well as we can.
(L 110)

To Susan she wrote:

I do not miss you Susie – of course I do not miss you – I only sit and stare at nothing from my window, and know that all is gone . . . I rise, because the sun shines, and sleep has done with me, and I brush my hair, and dress me, and wonder what I am and who has made me so, and then I wash the dishes, and anon, wash them again, and then 'tis afternoon, and Ladies call, and evening, and some members of another sex come in to spend the hour, and then that day is done. And, prithee, what is Life? (L 172)

After the marriage of Susan and Austin in 1856, Dickinson took sustenance in the fact that Susan was her 'precious Sister, and will be till you die, and will be still, when Austin and Vinnie and Mat, and you and I are marble – and life has forgotten us!' (L 177). Her attachment to Susan remained a dominating factor in her life. In 1864, she wrote, 'Where my Hands are cut, Her fingers will be found inside –' (L 288); in 1868, 'Susan's Idolator keeps a Shrine for Susan' (L 325); in 1869, 'To take away our Sue leaves but a lower World, her firmamental quality our more familiar Sky' (L 333). Susan was 'The Arabian Nights' (L 335), 'Spaciousness' (L 717), 'Imagination', 'a Dream', 'Depths of Domingo' (L 855). In 1882 Emily wrote to Susan: 'With the exception of Shakespeare, you have told me of more knowledge than any one living – To say that sincerely is strange praise' (L 757). In 1884 she ended a letter with the words: 'Remember, Dear, an unfaltering Yes is my only reply to your utmost question –' (L 908). Later that year she sent these simple lines:

Show me Eternity, and I will show you Memory –
Both in one package lain
And lifted back again –
Be Sue – while I am Emily –
Be next – what you have ever been – Infinity –
(L 912)

For a number of years after Austin and Susan's marriage Dickinson enjoyed the extensive social and intellectual life at the Evergreens: 'I think Jerusalem must be like Sue's Drawing Room . . . ' (L 189). It was during this period that Dickinson gradually evolved the lifestyle that she was to maintain for the rest of her life. She elected a life of solitude, amply interrupted by a number of passionate friendships ('My friends are my "estate"' – L 193); by letters ('A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend' – L 330); by books (she refers often to George 'Glory' Eliot, to 'gigantic Emily Brontë' and to 'the mighty metres' of Elizabeth Barrett Browning); and by writing – almost eighteen hundred poems and thousands of letters. It was precisely the life that Emerson had extolled in 'The Poet':

Thou shalt leave the world, and know the muse only.
Thou shalt not know any longer the times, customs,
graces, politics, or opinions of men, but shalt take all
from the muse . . . And this is thy reward; that the
ideal shall be real to thee, and the impressions of the
actual world shall fall like summer rain, copious, but not
troublesome to thy invulnerable essence . . . wherever
are forms with transparent boundaries, wherever are
outlets into celestial space, wherever is danger, and
awe, and love, – there is Beauty, plenteous as rain,
shed for thee . . . ¹³