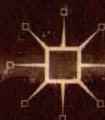


LINDA WAGNER-MARTIN

EMILY DICKINSON
A Literary Life



Emily Dickinson

A Literary Life

Linda Wagner-Martin

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*For Andrea Wagner Duff
and in the Memory of
Evelyn Welshimer Reiser*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Poetry in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries owes an incalculable debt to Emily Dickinson and her immensely original and revealing poems. As the flood of critical reaction that began midway through the twentieth century showed, Dickinson's work set a nearly unreachable standard for poets in both the United States and the world—the English speaking world and the world of other languages as well. Few constructions of language, either before Dickinson's poems or after, had such power to reach readers, or such enigmatic and evocative force to make readers create significant and individualized meaning.

Categorized as the poet of nature, Dickinson spoke for the simplicity of existence in the untouched, unspoiled natural world. Hailed as the poet of family, she, ironically, wrote seldom about relationships among parents, aunts and uncles, siblings, and cousins. Instead, she gave her reader the poet as *isolato*, as separable intent consciousness, able to perceive—and record—the best or most moving of human interactions. Described as a philosophical poet, Dickinson wrote a great deal about death but very seldom about either organized religion or happiness. Limned as the poet of simple verities, Dickinson yet employed a great amount of allusion and metaphor: a learned woman, she fought consistently for her human right to live in the family home and to benefit from the caretaking available to her there. As an unmarried woman, one who was never gainfully employed, Dickinson also became the prototype for the self-protective woman writer, a person whose love of language and ambition to create great art dominated much of her adult life. It is of Dickinson's mature life, and her daily dedication to her writing, that this study speaks.

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Note on Conventions

Because Emily Dickinson's poems were nearly all unpublished in her lifetime, and because she did not authorize the forms in which the printed poems appeared, there is no secure typography and punctuation. I use Ralph W. Franklin's three-volume variorum edition for all poem numbers, dates, notes, and formats.

I have maintained Dickinson's non-traditional use of the apostrophe, and her unique spellings ("opon" for "upon," for example).

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1

Reaching 1850

In the spring of 1850, Amherst, Massachusetts was a thriving if comparatively isolated town of 4000. When the three Dickinson children (Figure 1.1) were growing up there, the village was still reached from nearby communities only by stage which traveled the roads and under the covered bridges from Hadley. A resident of Springfield could have come the 18 miles by train to Northampton; then the stage would take over. Finally, in 1853, the Amherst-Belchertown Railway was completed (Ward *Emily Dickinson's Letters* 31). For all the difficulties of travel, however, the Edward Dickinsons were considered a family that did travel. It was the mark of their prestigious position in the traditional—and traditionally classed—town. Their journeys took them to the eastern coast, to Boston and Philadelphia and, occasionally, to Washington, DC. If they went abroad, which was unlikely, they traveled to England, France, and perhaps Italy: these were the countries they read about in the elite books of the English-speaking world. In effect, such patterns of travel reflected their intellectual interest: the white and educated New Englanders kept themselves surrounded by other white people. While some Amherst families employed African American household help, most residents who hired cooks, laundresses, and yard workers drew from the newly-arrived Irish population (Murray 3, 10).

In the spring of 1850, Emily Dickinson was approaching 20. William (usually called Austin) was already 22, a student at Amherst College; and Lavinia (Vinnie) was 17. Emily had already completed her studies at Amherst Academy, and had gone for most of a year to the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Sometimes her attendance was sporadic because Emily was considered fragile. In a century when deaths from tuberculosis decimated the population (deaths occurred among teenagers as readily as among parents), people who appeared to be frail, or who

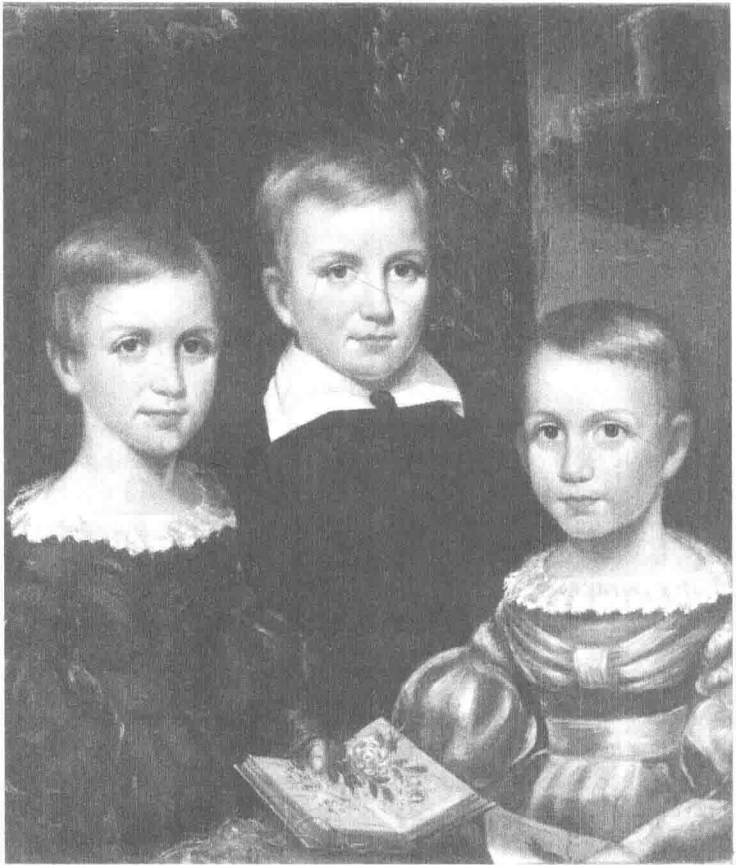


Figure 1.1 O.A. Bullard's painting of the three Dickinson children (*Dickinson Room*. By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University)

developed serious coughs with colds, were sheltered (Mamunes 3–4). It is thought that 22 percent of deaths in Massachusetts during the mid-nineteenth century came from tuberculosis (Habegger 640–1).

In 1850 Emily was a proud, talented, and (at times) self-satisfied young woman on the edge of adulthood, a woman trained into the dimity convictions of the so-called separate spheres of the nineteenth century. Upper-class women were protected from the hard work that many lower-class women were forced to undertake. Living in the comfort of their fathers' homes (at least until their marriages to equally well placed suitors), these middle- and upper-class women helped with

household tasks, had social lives with other similarly educated young people, and saw the way religious beliefs persuaded good young adults to behave (Kelley Ch 1). While not luxurious, this life of social propriety was coercive. Once Emily had finished her formal education, she realized how codified women's social roles were. As she wrote to Abiah Root, her former classmate from Amherst Academy, "I expect you have a great many prim, starched up young ladies there, who, I doubt not, are perfect models of propriety and good behavior. If they are, don't let your free spirit be chained by them" (LI 13).

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson from early on in her childhood considered herself a free spirit. She also seemed to grasp the role of observer, the role of Other. In the words of Charlotte Nekola, one of the issues in high relief during the mid-nineteenth century was "how to claim self within an ideology of self-denial . . . womanhood was defined as absence of self" (Nekola 148). Emily Dickinson recognized this inherent conflict: being female "hindered rather than fostered the development of ego, voice, and imagination" or, in other words, within the cult of true womanhood, the female imagination was, at times, equated with selfishness (Nekola 149). As a result, Emily looked on at accepted social behaviors—and she often participated in them during her late teens—but she also came to see herself as her father's daughter and Austin's sister: one of a family triumvirate of witty intellectuals. In that role, Emily became almost genderless.

Whether because of her own talents—among them her across-the-board academic competence—or because her parents had already tried to erase the parameters of gender difference for her, Emily felt as if she were Austin's equal. As her letters to him show, once he is away in college and then teaching school, she cajoles, jokes, and exaggerates with the perfect understanding that Austin loves her, as does her father, without making judgments. In the hierarchy of family power, Emily had early on become Edward's second son; it might well be said that she was his favorite son.

To identify as Emily did with men, and with the privileges of a man's education, was often a means of emphasizing the life of the mind rather than that of housekeeping. Judging from the periodicals and newspapers to which the Dickinsons subscribed, homelife was itself an intellectual pursuit. Amherst residents received two mail deliveries a day. The Dickinsons took three Northern newspapers as well as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, *Scribner's Monthly*, and—from its founding in 1857—*Atlantic Monthly* (Stewart 322). In the words of one historian, "the *Atlantic* was not a channel for American literature—it was American literature" (Pollitt 167). Staying abreast of national and state

news, as well as literary, scientific, and humanistic interests, was easy; it was also expected. But while the “men” of the family were reading the latest journals and papers, the routine housekeeping tasks were also ongoing. Much as she tried to avoid them, Emily still felt the conflict: should she be reading or should she be washing dishes? With what seems to be near derision, Emily jokes about her mother’s obsession with those perpetual household duties. She writes about the reason she could not send along her mother’s good wishes: “Mother would send her love—but she is in the ‘eave spout,’ sweeping up a leaf, that blew in, last November” (Habegger 63). As Dickinson’s recent biographer Alfred Habegger describes this extended joke, pointing out that the letter was probably written in August, long after the leaf got lodged in the roof gutter’s spout, he terms Emily’s drawing “an unforgettable picture of an obsessed New England housekeeper driven from the comforts of home and much too busy to send her love, let alone to write” (Habegger 64).

Critics often commented on the fact that the “quiet and self-effacing” Emily Norcross, the woman Edward Dickinson had chosen to be his bride, was “excellent at managing her household” (Longworth Amherst 22). She was responsibly educated and from a relatively affluent family in Munson. Yet as their correspondence from the several years of their engagement suggests, Emily was not a reader. She also seemed unwilling to write, or wrote with a practicality that expressed little romance: she was not a reader/writer as her daughter Emily Elizabeth would come to be, or was instinctively. Even as Barbara Mossberg contends that Dickinson’s relationship with her mother was much less distant than some critics have suggested (Mossberg 38), there are few references in Dickinson’s early letters that show any pride in either her mother or her role within the family. It does seem clear that the Norcross family, and perhaps eventually the Dickinson family in Amherst, professed the doctrines of the Popular Health Movement of the 1820s and the 1830s. Women understood that doing their own chores and cleaning—as well as gardening—could satisfy their physical need for exercise, and there are mentions—sometimes urgent—of the need for both Emily and Vinnie to get outdoors (Ehrenreich and English 69–70).

Longworth also speculates that Emily Norcross may have inherited her “fearful, anxious temperament” from her own mother, Betsey Fay Norcross (Longworth Amherst 22). Emily Norcross seemed to take immense pride in doing the housework and running the Dickinson house impeccably. As Habegger (62) points out, however, her life was marked by “her drivenness, her extreme thrift.” To illustrate these characteristics, he tells the story of Emily’s accepting boarders (boys who

were attending Amherst College and preferred staying with a reputable family), just a few months before her first child was due. The boys, a son and a nephew of a leading Springfield attorney, may have been seen as giving Edward Dickinson some sort of political advantage. But acknowledging the fact that throughout the Dickinsons' early years of marriage, the Norcross family worried about Emily—urging her to return home for rests, sending her girls from their family to help out—her decision to invite the boys to board seems foolhardy.

The truth about the Dickinson family was that poverty haunted their lives. Whereas critics have emphasized the fact that Emily Norcross insisted on being, literally, the maid of all work, seeing the family's financial situation whole excuses at least some of her obsessiveness. After Edward Dickinson had proposed to her and she had eventually accepted, he deferred their marriage for several years while he tried to pay off debts his father, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, had accumulated. Samuel was one of the founders of Amherst Academy; he was continuously in financial difficulties, although he wanted to be seen as one of Amherst's leading citizens. As he poured what resources he had into Amherst Academy and Amherst College, his children knew they would need to help with this task—and with his other projects. Finally a bankrupt, Samuel "left Amherst in disgrace" (Murray 65) and moved to northern Ohio for a position; he died there, miles from his family, and left a legacy of possible chicanery as well as bankruptcy. Eventually in 1825 the family had to sell the Homestead, which Samuel had built in 1813, and which they then rented a part of during their early married years (Longworth Amherst 15, Murray 65).

It also seems clear, because the Dickinsons never had a full-time maid (according to the 1850 federal census 7 records), that all the children helped with the housework, the laundry, the tailoring, the cooking, and the yard. Aife Murray (66) tells the story that Emily was to be apprenticed to a baker when she was 14; such a plan seems at odds with the fact that all three of the Dickinson children had the best possible educations, Emily and Vinnie as well as Austin. As Murray notes, Emily was "already accomplished in knitting . . . needlework and mending." She went to school and had piano lessons, had many indoor plants, and "privately arranged German lessons" (Murray 66). It was not until March 7, 1850 that Edward Dickinson ran an ad for "a girl or woman to do the entire work of a small family" (Murray 73). Meanwhile, in the 1850 census, Emily Dickinson had listed her occupation as "keeping house," and then in a later letter complains when Vinnie is away, "my two hands but *two*—not four or five as they ought to be; and so *many*

wants—and me so *very* handy—and my time of so *little* account—and my writing so *very* needless” (LI 82).

Alfred Habegger also traces the anxiety stemming from financial losses from early in the family’s history: putting off their wedding for several years, trying to maintain a house (or at least part of a house) with so little help, and infecting their children with their own financial worries. He believes that Emily especially felt “her parents’ anxiety about financial insolvency” (Habegger 57). It is probable that this financial worry helped to shape Emily’s choice of studies at both Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke. She turned again and again to scientific curricula. In college, she took “ancient history and rhetoric” as well as “all science courses: algebra, Euclid [geometry], physiology, chemistry and astronomy” (Gordon 42). The authority on the way Emily Dickinson both studied science and drew from it for her poetry is Robin Peel, whose 2010 book thoroughly discusses both the courses (and their texts and emphases) and relevant Dickinson poems. Peel’s aim is to present Emily as a “scientific investigator,” drawing on what she sees as the exciting new, scientific culture (Peel 13–14). He asks that readers see Emily Dickinson “as a concealed natural philosopher/scientist” working in ways that mimic scientists contemporary with her (14). (One thinks of Emily’s trip home from college in 1848 for the dedication of the telescope in the Amherst Observatory, installed as part of the Octagon Building, an excitement the whole town shared. The various segments of The Smithsonian Institute and Museum in Washington, DC, were not in place until a decade later, 1859, Peel 21).

The connection between Emily’s consistent interest in science and her family’s often precarious finances may be that she saw some opportunities for employment in the newly categorized field: Peel notes that some of her structures in her early poems were geared to making “scientific claims” and emphasizing scientific details; in fact, it could be that her creation of the fascicles (the small tied-together booklets of her poems) was a way of preserving field notes (Peel 17). To undergird this interest was the obvious fact that many of the journals carried essays about matters that were more scientific than philosophical: family discussion would have privileged “science” almost unconsciously.

Peel points out that the fascination with the new that marked the 1830s and 1840s changed during the later years of Emily’s education. Rather than just describing and observing, people interested in science were now applying the principles, especially in medical fields. Creating hypotheses became the standard for proving material learned, rather than memorizing the long blocks of information that had previously

marked science class methodology (Peel 78, 17). He notes how seriously Emily took her herbarium, and how often in her poetry she closely observed “flowers, insects, and birds . . . as if she were making a scientific record” (91, 172). Throughout her poems, Dickinson uses the metaphor of sight, as in “I see New Englandly” (Peel 81). There are also more volcanoes, winds, and storms in her poems than might be expected.

All the courses of study at Amherst Academy were more scientific than most curricula because the third president of the school was Edward Hitchcock, a well-known geologist with strong interests in paleontology. While Emily often followed the classes that Austin had chosen, Vinnie seemed to prefer a more humanities-based course of study. Again, Emily was no doubt aligning herself with Austin as a way of interesting her father in her intellectual prowess.

With the sometimes strange juxtapositions that occur in any culture, the impetus to study science came at a time when Massachusetts was overtaken with protestant revivalism. The coercion to accept Christ, to become a Christian and an active church member, was almost frenetic at mid-century. Cynthia Griffin Wolff acknowledges that despite Emily Dickinson’s comparatively wide knowledge of science and philosophy, all her educable life she struggled with the question of conversion (Wolff 87): “Even by the middle of the nineteenth century, Amherst—both college and town—still looked upon conversion as one of the crucial events that marked the division between carefree youth and responsible adulthood . . . [conversion] was a recognized public rite of passage” (Wolff 93).

Emily Norcross had converted in 1831, but no other family members had done so. It was, however, the revival meetings in the winter and spring of 1850 that succeeded in proselytizing much of Amherst. On August 11, 1850, Emily’s father converted; in November, Vinnie professed her faith (Wolff 104). Emily maintained the position that had grown during her months attending Mount Holyoke: she was a non-believer.

The Mount Holyoke experience was unexpectedly coercive. Mary Lyon, the head of the college and a protégé of Edward Hitchcock, created an atmosphere at the school that was “unremitting and incapable.” Women were recognized at assemblies on their standing as converts or non-converts; Emily Dickinson was grouped in the “No hope” category and saw many of her peers in that classification weeping because they were not saved (Wolff 100–1). (Habegger speaks about the non-believers having to attend what he calls the “painful collective inquiry sessions,” 199). In one instance, at the deathbed of a beautiful