



HELEN VENDLER

DICKINSON

Selected Poems and Commentaries

Dickinson

Selected Poems and Commentaries

HELEN VENDLER



The Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
LONDON, ENGLAND

2010

Copyright © 2010 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Emily Dickinson's poems are reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Trustees of Amherst College from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*

and *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*

edited by Ralph W. Franklin, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Copyright © 1998, 1999 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1951, 1955, 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dickinson, Emily, 1830–1886.

[Poems. Selections]

Dickinson : selected poems and commentaries / Helen Vendler.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-674-04867-6 (alk. paper)

1. Dickinson, Emily, 1830–1886—Criticism and interpretation.

I. Vendler, Helen, 1933– II. Title.

PS1541.A6 2010

2010007090

IN MEMORY OF JOHN KEATS

Should any one call my dedication of Chatterton affected,
I answer as followeth:
‘Were I dead, sir, I should like a Book dedicated to me.’

—Keats to his publisher,
with the original preface to *Endymion*

A Note on the Text

Quotations of Emily Dickinson's poems are drawn from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. Ralph W. Franklin (1998), but are cued to the poem numbers of Franklin's *Reading Edition* (1999). Following the text of Franklin's *Reading Edition*, the poems reprinted here retain Dickinson's dashes and capitals, using a shorter dash than the full modern one (her own dashes differ in length). I have included all of her dashes when quoting entire lines but not when quoting phrases; and I have placed my own punctuation (commas, periods) outside the quotation marks to preserve the integrity of Dickinson's own punctuation. I have allowed her misspellings to stand, with a few exceptions: in order to avoid confusing readers, I have printed "upon" for her characteristic "opon," and I have regularized her punctuation of possessives, since she normally writes "it's" for the possessive "its" and "your's" for "yours," etc. I have inserted apostrophes (to make her "cant" into "can't," for example), and I have added a grave accent (not in Franklin), when an "-ed" which is normally silent is to be pronounced aloud, thus sparing the modern reader the impression of a metrically defective line.

In 1955, Thomas H. Johnson published the first scholarly edition of Dickinson: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including Variant Readings Critically Compared with All Known Manuscripts*. Johnson took as his copy-text the earliest fair copy of a poem; Franklin, in contrast, takes as his copy-text the last fair copy. Either decision can be defended. The debates about the best editorial presentation of Dickinson's handwritten poems are acute and still in flux.

The identifying numbers of the poems cited throughout are those assigned by Franklin. However, I have given at the end of each Commentary the number of the poem in Johnson's edition (J) for the convenience of readers who may own the Johnson but not the Franklin.

Throughout the Commentaries in this book, the identifying numbers of the 150 poems (listed in the table of contents) which have received a full

Commentary bear an asterisk when the poem is mentioned. Other poems, when mentioned in a Commentary, bear no asterisk; they are, however, included in the Index of First Lines that follows that Commentaries.

Quotations from the letters of Emily Dickinson are drawn from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (1958). Such quotations are cited in parentheses by letter-number, preceded by L.

Biblical citations are taken from the King James Version, the text Dickinson would have known.

Contents

A Note on the Text xiii

Introduction: Dickinson the Writer 1

Selected Poems and Commentaries

23. In the name of the Bee -	27
32. The morns are meeker than they were -	29
90. An altered look about the hills -	32
122. These are the days when Birds come back -	35
124. Safe in their Alabaster Chambers -	38
129. Our lives are Swiss -	43
134. Did the Harebell loose her girdle	45
138. To fight aloud, is very brave -	47
165. I have never seen "Volcanoes" -	50
181. A <i>wounded</i> Deer - leaps highest -	54
187. Through the Straight Pass of Suffering	57
194. Title divine, is mine.	60
204. I'll tell you how the Sun rose -	64
224. An awful Tempest mashed the air -	67
232. He forgot - and I - remembered -	69
236. Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -	72
238. How many times these low feet staggered -	75
240. Bound a Trouble - and Lives will bear it -	78
243. That after Horror - that 'twas <i>us</i> -	84
256. The Robin's my Criterion for Tune -	86
259. A Clock stopped -	89
269. Wild nights - Wild nights!	93
276. Civilization - spurns - the Leopard!	95
279. Of all the Souls that stand create -	98
284. The Zeros taught Us - Phosphorus -	101

288. My first well Day - since many ill -	104
291. It sifts from Leaden Sieves -	107
294. A Weight with Needles on the pounds -	110
306. A Shady friend - for Torrid days -	112
312. I can wade Grief -	115
314. "Hope" is the thing with feathers -	118
319. Of Bronze - and Blaze -	121
320. There's a certain Slant of light,	126
325. There came a Day - at Summer's full -	130
330. He put the Belt around my life -	135
337. Of nearness to her sundered Things	138
340. I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,	141
341. 'Tis so appalling - it exhilarates -	144
348. I would not paint - a picture -	148
351. She sights a Bird - she chuckles -	151
355. It was not Death, for I stood up,	154
359. A Bird, came down the Walk -	157
360. The Soul has Bandaged moments -	161
365. I know that He exists.	165
372. After great pain, a formal feeling comes -	168
373. This World is not conclusion.	173
383. I like to see it lap the Miles -	177
401. Dare you see a Soul at the "White Heat"?	180
407. One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -	184
409. The Soul selects her own Society -	187
420. There are two Ripenings -	191
423. The first Day's Night had come -	194
425. 'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,	198
430. A Charm invests a face	202
439. I had been hungry, all the Years -	205
444. It would have starved a Gnat -	209
446. This was a Poet -	212
448. I died for Beauty - but was scarce	216
450. The Outer - from the Inner	219
466. I dwell in Possibility -	222

479. Because I could not stop for Death -	225
515. There is a pain - so utter -	231
517. A still - Volcano - Life -	234
519. This is my letter to the World	237
524. It feels a shame to be Alive -	239
528. 'Tis not that Dying hurts us so -	243
533. I reckon - When I count at all -	246
550. I measure every Grief I meet	250
558. A Visitor in Marl -	255
578. The Angle of a Landscape -	258
584. We dream - it is good we are dreaming -	261
588. The Heart asks Pleasure - first -	264
591. I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -	266
615. God is a distant - stately Lover -	269
620. Much Madness is divinest Sense -	272
633. I saw no Way - The Heavens were stitched -	275
647. To fill a Gap	278
664. Rehearsal to Ourselves	280
675. What Soft - Cherubic Creatures -	283
686. It makes no difference abroad -	286
696. The Tint I cannot take - is best -	289
700. The Way I read a Letter's - this -	293
706. I cannot live with You -	297
708. They put Us far apart -	304
729. The Props assist the House	307
740. On a Columnar Self -	311
747. It's easy to invent a Life -	314
760. Pain - has an Element of Blank -	316
764. My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -	318
772. Essential Oils - are wrung -	323
778. Four Trees - upon a solitary Acre -	326
782. Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue -	330
788. Publication - is the Auction	333
790. Growth of Man - like Growth of Nature -	336
796. The Wind begun to rock the Grass	339

800. I never saw a Moor.	343
830. The Admirations - and Contempts - of time -	345
836. Color - Caste - Denomination -	349
857. She rose to His Requirement - dropt	352
861. They say that "Time assuages" -	355
867. I felt a Cleaving in my Mind -	357
895. Further in Summer than the Birds -	361
905. Split the Lark - and you'll find the Music -	367
926. I stepped from Plank to Plank	369
930. The Poets light but Lamps -	371
935. As imperceptibly as Grief	373
962. A Light exists in Spring	378
983. Bee! I'm expecting you!	382
994. He scanned it - Staggered -	384
1010. Crumbling is not an instant's Act	386
1038. Bloom - is Result - to meet a Flower	389
1064. As the Starved Maelstrom laps the Navies	392
1096. A narrow Fellow in the Grass	396
1097. Ashes denote that Fire was -	400
1100. The last Night that She lived	404
1121. The Sky is low - the Clouds are mean.	409
1142. The murmuring of Bees, has ceased	411
1150. These are the Nights that Beetles love -	415
1163. A Spider sewed at Night	418
1218. The Bone that has no Marrow,	424
1243. Shall I take thee, the Poet said	427
1263. Tell all the truth but tell it slant -	431
1268. A Word dropped careless on a Page	434
1274. Now I knew I lost her -	437
1279. The things we thought that we should do	441
1311. Art thou the thing I wanted?	446
1325. I never hear that one is dead	449
1332. Abraham to kill him	452
1347. Wonder is not precisely knowing	455
1369. The Rat is the concisest Tenant.	458

1393. Those Cattle smaller than a Bee	462
1405. Long Years apart - can make no	465
1408. The Bat is dun, with wrinkled Wings -	467
1428. Lay this Laurel on the one	470
1474. The Road was lit with Moon and star -	475
1489. A Route of Evanescence,	479
1511. The fascinating chill that Music leaves	482
1513. 'Tis whiter than an Indian Pipe -	485
1539. Mine Enemy is growing old -	489
1577. The Bible is an antique Volume -	491
1581. Those - dying then,	496
1593. He ate and drank the precious Words -	498
1618. There came a Wind like a Bugle -	500
1668. Apparently with no surprise	504
1715. A word made Flesh is seldom	506
1742. In Winter in my Room	511
1766. The waters chased him as he fled,	515
1771. 'Twas here my summer paused	518
1773. My life closed twice before its close;	520
1779. To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,	522

Primary Sources Cited	527
-----------------------	-----

Acknowledgments	529
-----------------	-----

Index of First Lines	531
----------------------	-----

Introduction

Dickinson the Writer

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) bequeathed to us nearly 1,800 poems; in some passionate years she wrote almost a poem a day. Like all capacious writers, she baffles complete understanding: to enter her poetics entirely a reader would have to know by heart (and by ear) all her poems. Ideally, too, her reader should possess the King James Bible as firmly as she did, and should have read the poetry of the English past as fervently as she had: she knew Shakespeare, Herbert, Vaughan, Milton, Wordsworth, James Thomson, Keats, George Eliot, Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and others. She had also read the famous male and female American poets of her day, mentioning in her poetry and letters Longfellow, Whittier, and Bryant. (She even mentioned Whitman, but only to say she had not read him, having heard that he was “disgraceful.”)¹ Yet readers worldwide, even when they have lacked her background, have flocked to her poems, responding to her candor, her grief, and her wit. This selection of 150 poems by Dickinson, accompanied by a short Commentary on each, aims to bring readers to a deeper acquaintance with Dickinson the writer, the inventive reconceiver and linguistic shaper of her perennial themes: nature, death, religion, love, and the workings of the mind and of thought. This is a book to be browsed in, as the reader becomes interested in one or another of the poems commented on here.

The Dickinson household received the literary magazines of the day, and it was in one of these—the *Atlantic Monthly* of April 1862—that Dickinson read an article entitled “Letter to a Young Contributor,” written by Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Desperate for a literary eye to look at her poems, the

1. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 3 vols., L 261.

thirty-two-year-old Dickinson (representing herself as younger in the art of poetry than she actually was) wrote a letter (unsigned) to Higginson asking him to tell her whether her poetry “breathed” (L 260). She enclosed four poems on separate sheets of paper, and added, in a small envelope, her calling card. This brave act began her most important literary correspondence. Dickinson later told Higginson he had saved her life by responding to her plea.

Higginson, seeing the eccentricity of Dickinson’s poems, made (as she might have expected) editorial suggestions that she gracefully acknowledged but did not obey. When he hinted that she might be seeking publication, she said that publication was as foreign to her mind “as Firmament to Fin - ” (L 265). Even so, her longing for an audience is manifest in such poems as “This is my letter to the World” and in her dissemination of much of her verse in private letters. Her sense of her own genius led her to write to Higginson, “If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her - ” (L 265). But Dickinson’s suspicion that her poems would not please publishers was ratified when, after her death, her first editors emended her poems considerably—not only by substituting accepted punctuation for her running dashes and regulating her metrics, but also by flattening her uncommon diction and censoring her bolder speculations. In sending scores of poems to her extended family and friends, she carefully selected, among her poems, those that she allowed to be “published” in this intimate way; she did not forward her more irreligious poems, nor her most macabre or explicitly erotic ones. It was not until 1955 that a three-volume scholarly edition of Dickinson’s poems by Thomas H. Johnson appeared, and not until 2007 that Johnson’s chronology was corrected by the ingenious work of Ralph W. Franklin (who determined from watermarks and pinholes the order of the sheets of paper that Dickinson had folded and sewed together in the little booklets now called “fascicles”). My texts here follow, and are cued by poem number to, Franklin’s one-volume *Reading Edition* (1999); readers wishing to see the many arresting variants of the poems, some of which I quote in the Commentaries, should consult Franklin’s three-volume *Variorum Edition* (1998).²

2. Franklin’s *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, in two volumes (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), reproduces chronologically and in their original order the manuscripts of the poet’s forty sewn fascicles and fifteen unsewn “sets,” all presenting copies of poems of which

In choosing the 150 poems for inclusion here I wanted to exhibit many different aspects of the poet's work as a writer, from her first-person poems to the poems of grand abstraction, from her ecstatic verses to her unparalleled depictions of emotional numbness, from her comic anecdotes to her painful poems of aftermath. I have included many of the familiar poems, but I have wanted to make space, too, for daring poems that have rarely been anthologized or taught in school, and so have not reached a large general audience. There are poems of varying achievement here, the lesser ones included to show the conventional or occasional Dickinson, the greater ones to sustain her right to fame.

Dickinson the writer: How do we characterize her? She is epigrammatic, terse, abrupt, surprising, unsettling, flirtatious, savage, winsome, metaphysical, provocative, blasphemous, tragic, funny—and the list of adjectives could be extended, since we have almost 1,800 poems to draw on. What surprised (and still tends to surprise) readers was that Dickinson's mature poems were all so *brief*. Many of the writers admired by Dickinson had embarked ambitiously on epics, dramas, long narratives, sonnet sequences, and dramatic monologues, yet Dickinson never attempted such genres. Her tenacity in keeping to a miniature form caused some readers, even in the twentieth century, to patronize her work. She seems to have asked herself that fundamental question of the choice of size—why such short poems?—and answered it in a remarkable lyric, “Ashes denote that Fire was - ” (*1097). Her poems, she says—defending their reduced form—are the Ashes of a previous conflagration that destroyed “the Departed Creature” now dead (although that Creature, at death, had briefly “hovered” over the Ashes of her former self). To understand the vanished Creature of whom the Ashes are the residue, one must become a Chemist, and deduce from the remaining Carbonates the nature of the person consumed by the Fire:

Ashes denote that Fire was -
Revere the Grayest Pile
For the Departed Creature's sake
That hovered there awhile -

she had discarded prior drafts, although revisions continued to be inscribed in some of these fair copies.

Fire exists the first in light
And then consolidates
Only the Chemist can disclose
Into what Carbonates -

The original Creature was first illuminated by the “light” of some revelation; the revelation then kindled into a fiery conflagration, and the conflagration ended in a consuming. What is left does not resemble the past earthly being of the Creature: the Fire has done its work, leaving only the Ashes, the cremated “Carbonates” that we find in the poet’s pages. (Dickinson may have borrowed her Ashes and her deathbed from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73, recalling the fire “That on the ashes of his youth doth lie.”) Dickinson calls on us, as the forensic Chemists of verse, to reconstruct from a small heap of Ashes—her poem—the self originally nourished and then consumed by the light of insight and the Fire of emotion.

How is one to set about that reconstruction demanded by the artist? Because Dickinson is a poet of implication rather than of statement, she consistently provokes the reader’s intelligence into puzzled and active response. Although she may make distinct opening statements—“Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue - ” (*782); “I cannot live with You - ” (*706); “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died - ” (*591)—those explicit statements generally lead to later lines more perplexing both in language and in import:

Renunciation - is the Choosing
Against itself -
Itself to justify
Unto itself -

Who is “itself” and why is it called “it”? Is it single or dual? How can “itself” choose “Against itself - ”? Why is the choice so abstractly, even algebraically, expressed? What does such a choice lead to? And so the reader is led, here as elsewhere, into a thicket of speculation.

Dickinson’s verse was, in the past, sometimes considered amateurish because it is for the most part constructed within a single frame, the “childish” four-

line stanza of hymn-meter: 4 beats, 3 beats, 4 beats, 3 beats, with a single rhyme-sound linking lines 2 and 4. There are variations on this base (such as 3-3-4-3), but Dickinson rarely writes in pentameter or a consistent tetrameter. (Yet see the wonderful tetrameter of her dramatic sunset, “Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple” (321); there are such metrical experiments scattered throughout her poems, and my Commentaries point them out.) Because of the near-omnipresence of Dickinson’s hymn-meter, her ingenious and meaningful variations in rhythm and syntax within that frame have often passed unnoticed. We can view her marshaling of syntax, for instance, in “Bloom - is Result” (*1038), in which the Flower, to arrive at Bloom, must work intelligently and forcefully on many fronts: it needs

To pack the Bud - oppose the Worm -
Obtain its right of Dew -
Adjust the Heat - elude the Wind -
Escape the prowling Bee -

(This is comic, with its “prowling” Bee—but it is also mock-epic in its list of various dangers: the unjust opposing forces, the oppressors, the predators, the authorities’ refusal of necessary sustenance.) To represent the Flower’s struggle, Dickinson adjusts the Flower’s successive efforts to the length of the poem’s lines: in each of the four-beat lines there are two peremptory infinitives and nouns; and in each of the three-beat lines, one infinitive and one noun. After the first incisively monosyllabic verb, “pack,” the poet lines up all her verbs into two-syllable form, each (as she was well aware) presenting some form of a Latin prefix—*ob* (“against”), *ad* (“toward”), and *ex* (“out”): op-pose, ob-tain, ad-just, e-lude, es-cape. By the end, the marshaling of the Flower’s duties reads like a military field manual entitled, “Procedures Necessary To Achieve Victory.” If we recall the ancient pun of “poesy”/“posy,” we can also view this stanza as an allegorical manual for the construction of a viable poem. As we pursue its allegory, we intuit behind it a set of hinted-at procedures necessary to make a poem “bloom”:

To pack the Line - oppose Cliché -
Obtain its right of Song -

Adjust the Pace - elude the Coarse -
Escape the lurking Wrong -

We can see why Dickinson (like so many earlier poets) was drawn to the symbolic plane of the Flower: its maneuvers could present a light sketch of the strenuousness of self-authentication, which elsewhere—as in “Shall I take thee, the Poet said” (*1243)—she treated on an exalted religious plane, rewarding the Poet with a Vision endorsed by Cherubim, those angels nearest the seat of God.

Dickinson chose a secluded life; she never married, and lived till her death with her parents and her sister Lavinia in the family house in Amherst, Massachusetts. Only after her death, with the posthumous publication of her poems, did others become aware of her as an author. However, Dickinson knew that poetic influence does not die with the death of the writer. In one of her startling openings, she gestured away the importance of personal death:

The Poets light but Lamps -
Themselves - go out -

But—she continues—if “vital Light” is given off by those surviving Lamps, “Each Age [becomes] a Lens / Disseminating their / Circumference - ” (*930). Her own “Lamps,” from their first publication through the present, have shone through four such “Age[s],” interpenetrating ones, which might be named “The Age of Publication,” “The Age of Biography,” “The Age of Editing,” and “The Age of Commentary.” The poems appeared, from 1890 on, in several volumes but in regrettably emended versions; only in 1955 did Thomas H. Johnson establish a reliable text of the poems with variants.³ Jay Leyda’s book *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (1960) and Richard Sewall’s 1974 biography securely established for the first time the main life-events, family relations, and Amherst context of the poet. These books gave rise to a flood of commentaries, further stimulated by Ralph Franklin’s work on the manuscripts and his revisionary edition of the poems (1998). The bio-

3. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including Variant Readings Critically Compared with All Known Manuscripts*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955).