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The life and poetry of Emily Dickinson.

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THE LIFE AND POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

by

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THE LIFE AND POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"A mystic akin only to Emerson"[1] is an appellation which Emily Dickinson has received recently. Mr. Conrad Aiken calls her poetry "perhaps the finest by a woman in the English language."[2] When she appeared upon the literary horizon in this decade she was greeted in general as a discovery of twentieth century critics. The revelation of an overlooked genius is always pleasing since it implies the excellence of our taste as compared with that of our predecessars. We notice that book reviewers in 1924, when her "Complete Poems" made its appearance, were inclined to overlook the high tribute paid her work by William Dean Howells when in 1891 he wrote: "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, and could not be left out of any record of it. This poetry is as characteristic of our life as our business enterprise, our political turmoil, our demagogism or our millionaires."[2]

Her poetry is not of the type popularly associated with the

[1] Bianchi, Martha D., "Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson," page 1.

[2] Wells, Anna Mary, "Early Criticism of Emily Dickinson," American Literature, Volume 1, 1929-1930, page 242.

years 1830 and 1886 when she lived. Many modern characteristics are found in her daring attitude which sometimes verges on defiance; in the flippancy of many of her religious poems; in the epigrammatic brevity, and her mingling of sentiment and wit finds many parallelisms in the work of our contemporary poets:

"Heavenly Father, take to Thee
The supreme iniquity
Fashioned by thy candid hand
In a moment contraband

"Though to trust us seems to us
More respectful, we are dust.
We apologize to thee
For thine own duplicity."[1]

Transcendentalism was in its most flourishing period during the years in which she was growing to maturity and she seems to have absorbed something of its spirit, yet in a general way the writings of her contemporaries had comparatively little effect on her. Her taste seems to have been more catholic than discriminating.[2] "Dream Days" by Ik Marvel was one of her favorite contemporary books. She knew and enjoyed the Brownings, George Eliot, Poe, Hawthorne, Keats, DeQuincey, Tennyson, Plato, Dante Wordsworth, Dickens, and the Brontes.

Her poetry is unique for her period because of the self-delineation; we have a complete project of Emily, her heart, soul, her books, birds, housekeeping, influences, her bodily postures, tricks of thought, even her way of crossing a room and reading a letter. Emily lives for us through the medium of her poems, although among her apostrophes to bees, birds, life, railroads

[1]Dickinson, Emily, "Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson," page 298.
[2]Bianchi, Martha D., "Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson," page 239.

and eternity there are some of the greatest love poems ever written yet we have no hint of the lover. He is unnamed, undisclosed; it is Emily's soul alone that we see. Knowledge of life in its entirety seems to have been hers. Searching truths epitomizing the whole experience of life are revealed in such poems as:

"We play at paste
Till qualified for pearl;
Then drop the paste
And deem ourselves a fool.

"The shapes, though were similar
And our new hands
Learned gem-tactics
Practising sands."

While living, she appeared not to have desired publicity and her family was greatly surprised to find such a quantity of poetry in her room after her death. She had requested that all her papers and letters should be burned but one little note swung the decision and the poems were published. In her early twenties she had written to her sister: "Dear Sue: I like your praise because I know it knows. If I could make you and Austin proud some day, a long way off 'twould give me taller feet. Emily." This is the only mention of any secret ambition and upon this rested the decision for publication.

Her permanent place in American literature has not yet been assigned. Some critics feel that we are living in a period of too great literary upheaval to form any permanent judgment. Whatever her final place, she will undoubtedly remain one of our most interesting and unique poets.

CHAPTER TWO

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Emily Dickinson was born December 11, 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her father Edward, who was a graduate of Yale College, was a rather haughty, austere man demanding obedience from every member of the family. The neighbors feared and respected this man who always dressed in black broadcloth, and wore a glossy black beaver hat every day to and from his law office.

The Dickinson family has been distinctly traced for nine generations in America. Many of the ancestors of Edward were prominent in shaping the intellectual and political ideas of the towns in which they lived.

Emily seems to have inherited many of the qualities of her father, and few of her mother, who was Emily Norcross the daughter of Alfred Norcross of Monson. The family were well-to-do and Emily Norcross had been educated at a finishing school for young ladies at New Haven. Edward Dickinson, who became her husband was regarded by her with typical Old Testament fear and honor. It was said that she would flush, tremble and remain silent before him, under his rebuke.

Emily's brother Austin, and the younger sister Lavinia were the other children of the home. Austin graduated from Harvard Law School in 1854 and it was his wife who was the "Sister Sue"

referred to so frequently by Emily. These two sisters had a life-long adoration for each other. The sister Lavinia was a brilliant young woman with a keen wit, and a coquettish manner. It was upon her that the family obligations fell most heavily; the minute regard of household affairs was hers, while Emily lived in the unseen with an open disregard of all detail.

Emily's childhood was similar to that of any normal child; she had her pets and youthful amusements. She loved birds, bees, and flowers and when her father bought her a piano she was excited with joy. She went to singing school, was interested in local happenings, made herself an herbarium of great beauty and looked forward with pleasure to the day when she hoped that she would be the belle of the town.

Emily had no beautiful feature, but compensation lay in animation and a keen insight into life and nature. She wrote to a friend that her eyes were "the color of the sherry left in the glass."[1] Her hair was a bronze chestnut hue and her cheek a velvety white, never touched by a hint of color. The tendency toward asceticism in her was revealed by a rather long upper lip. She had a dramatic way of throwing up her hands at the end of a story, or at one of her own flashes of wit.

In the autumn of 1847 she entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. At first, she was extremely homesick and seemed to miss her father more than anyone else. She studied chemistry, physiology, Euclid and English composition, showing, in the latter course

[1]Bianchi, Martha D., "Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson," page 50.

considerable originality. Yet her life there was cramped and repressed in every natural instinct. A stipulation was made to the effect that no pupil could go home during the term and relative to that, tradition gives us an interesting anecdote. Miss Lyons announced at chapel that Christmas day would be recognized as a fast and asked that the school rise in token of responsive observation. Emily and her room-mate were the only two who did not rise. Miss Lyons, appalled at this, reiterated her program of piety at the end of which she added "that if there were any so lost to a sense of the meaning of the day as to wish to spend it otherwise, they might stand that the whole school could observe them."[1] Emily stood alone. There was great stir in the family when she unrepentantly returned home for Christmas, but the matter was finally arranged so that she returned to the Seminary.

Gamaliel Bradford in his "Portraits of American Women"[2] says that Emily Dickinson "couldn't fix her thoughts on politics. It was not concrete facts that interested her, and he refers to a letter written by Emily to her brother Austin:

"Please tell me who the candidate for President is! I have been trying to find out ever since your last visit, and have not succeeded. I know no more about the affairs of the outside world here than if I were in a trance. Was the Mexican War terminated? Is any nation about to besiege South Hadley?"[3] One wonders if the word "here" and the last question in the quotation, both of which are omitted by Mr. Bradford, are not significant. Isn't

[1]Bianchi, Martha D., "Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson," page 26.
[2]Bradford, Gamaliel, "Portraits of American Women," page 245.
[3]Bianchi, Martha D., "Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson," page 26.

Emily undoubtedly in one of her mocking moods? She was still at the Seminary where not only amatory inclinations were suppressed, but political interests were denied her. Wasn't she rather missing her father's table where discussions of politics and world affairs had formerly engrossed her keen mind and wasn't she now mocking at the cloistered femininity at South Hadley which seemed a bit narrow for her already broadened mind?

Despite Mr. Bradford's remarks, she evinced an interest in world affairs throughout her lifetime even though she secluded herself from them. She kept herself well-informed and the alertness of her mind kept pace with a man's world of reality. She wrote to her "Sister Sue" in 1856 "Why can't I be a delegate to the great Whig Convention? Don't I know all about Daniel Webster and the Tariff and the Law?"[1] Doubtless Emily was interested in politics despite humorous remarks to the contrary.

She left the Seminary in 1848, not to return and so from the age of eighteen to twenty-three she lived a mildly-social life at home. As yet, she gave no indication of her reclusive nature and at parties was frequently the cause of outbursts of laughter by her impromptu stories. She would often entertain her young friends by playing the piano and at such times would turn common airs into wild fantastic reveries, "One improvisation which she called The Devil was, by tradition, unparalleled."[2]

In a letter written just before her twentieth birthday to her "Sister Sue" she reveals some of her innermost thoughts,

[1]Bianchi, Martha D., "Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson," page 27.
[2]Bradford, Gamaliel, "Portraits of American Women," page 232.

which seem to be somewhat foreboding. She wrote "You have seen flowers at morning satisfied with dew, and these same sweet blossoms at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun,--think you that thirsty blossoms will need naught but dew? No, they will cry for light and pine for the burning noon, though it scorches them, scathes them; they have got through with peace. They know that the sun of noon is mightier than the morning and their life is henceforth for him."[1] Did she know by intuition all the possible devastation of love as well as all the loneliness without it or had she been in love with her young tutor Leonard Humphrey who died that same year, 1850? At any rate, the letter bears evidence that she had crossed the threshold from girlhood to womanhood. One biographer Madame Bianchi, who was her niece, says that "her intimate letters about this time, too sacred for revealing show her as one who fled from a suspected wonder lest seeing it she faint to possess it and be lost."[2]

She also wrote that the years following Emily's Mount Holyoke days were externally uneventful, until in 1853 Emily spent a winter in Washington with her father. He took his family and they stayed at the Willard where Emily acted as his hostess and where the scintillation of her wit greatly impressed men much her senior, even Chief Justices of the Supreme Court.

From Washington a visit was made to Philadelphia and it was there, wrote Madame Bianchi "that she met the fate that she had

[1]Bianchi, Martha D., "Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson," page 43.
[2] " " " " " " " " " " " 45.

instinctively shunned."[1] She says that Emily met a married man, and that love on both sides was instantaneous and overwhelming; that only a high sense of duty and the necessity for preserving love untarnished by the inevitable destruction of another woman's life, kept them apart; that Emily fled to her own home for refuge and that all that was ever told was in confidence to her Sister Sue who sacredly guarded it until death united them.

It is interesting to learn that a more recent biographer Genevieve Taggard gives an entirely different and apparently more creditable and convincing explanation of the renunciation of Emily's lover, which is considered in the following chapter.

[1]Bianchi, Martha, D., "Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson," page 46.

CHAPTER THREE

HER LOVE LIFE AND RENUNCIATION

Interest and fascination hover near anything mysterious, especially if love is known to lie within the mystery. Emily Dickinson's life was a mystery and in the words of Louis Untermeyer "Editors and biographers render little help in tracking her down. They dispute among themselves; instead of offering each other assistance they accuse one another of withholding or distorting events, and finally present wholly different stories."[1]

The most casual reader of Madame Bianchi's biography must certainly notice wide gaps in the story, important omissions, together with an annoying vagueness that could hardly have been accidental. Miss Taggard gives us a far better and more credible book[2]; she disposes of the possibility of a married inamorata, but mentions two other loves instead, those of Leonard Humphrey and George Gould. She gives good reason for her belief. Edward Dickinson was jealous of his children, especially of Emily and with incredible greed he began while Emily was still young to preserve her for himself. In her, he saw an embodiment of himself, and although there ever existed a strong mutual love between them, he tried to use her as an extension to his will, and many were the quibbles between them. One Sunday morning Edward announced that everybody in the house

[1] Untermeyer, Louis, "Emily Dickinson."
[2] Taggard, Genevieve, "The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson."

should be ready for church in ten minutes. Emily vanished and was found after the service in an entrance-way to the cellar, technically not "in the house."

This extreme jealousy of Edward's extended even to the playmates of Emily, the girls and boys, and later men and women and he was eagerly planting in her mind the suggestion that she could not live anywhere but at home; the world was too evil for his Emily. He wished his children to read nothing but the Bible, and was mortified when he learned that they had been reading Dickens and Longfellow. At times her young life must have been difficult for her to endure, because she had the normal instinct of any young woman, and the possibility of ever falling in love under her father's strictures seemed remote.

We learned that upon her return from Mount Holyoke Seminary a young man, Leonard Humphrey, became her teacher at Amherst Academy. He seems to have been devout and brilliant and a strong attachment arose between them. During this friendship Emily began to live as a poet. The young mind dreamed deliriously of its powers; it had a teacher, a trainer and friend. She was writing the humorous column for "Forest Leaves" the school paper at Amherst Academy.

About this time she wrote to a friend that someone asked her to go for a ride but she had to tell him that she couldn't go although she could hardly keep back the tears, and it all seemed so unjust to her. That fall, Leonard Humphrey went home

and twenty-four years later Emily wrote: "My earliest friend wrote me the week before he died, 'If I live, I will go to Amherst; if I die, I certainly will.'" He died soon after. Was it his spirit that lingered with Emily as she worked in her garden? Certainly he seemed to have been in some profound despair before he died and Emily gave evidence of being deeply affected by his death; she speaks of tears being the only tribute she can pay the departed Humphrey.

In Madame Bianchi's biography the story of Humphrey has been almost wholly omitted. It is hard to understand why, unless we agree with Miss Taggard that Humphrey's story was involved with another's. This would be a plausible reason for Madame Bianchi's avoidance of his story. To reiterate, Madame Bianchi's book is not only vague and misleading but actual discrepancies occur, such as the dramatic account of Lavinia's rushing over next door to Sister Sue crying "That man is here... and I am afraid Emily will go away with him."[1] This she relates as having occurred in 1854 although Austin was not yet married to Sister Sue, nor was the Italian villa across the hedge built so that Sue could not have been living next door. In view of such inaccuracies we do well to attach more significance to the accounts of others, although we must be wary of legend. One legend however, still extant in Amherst, says that Emily became a recluse on a vow taken in a moment of outraged pride. In the garden one evening Emily and a young man turned suddenly to see

[1]Taggard, Genevieve, "Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson," page 80.

Emily's father standing over them with a lantern, ordering her back into the house, to which Emily replied that if he couldn't trust her out of his sight, she would never leave the garden again. At any rate with Humphrey's death when Emily had just turned twenty she was ready to become a recluse. She was rather tired of life.

The year that Leonard Humphrey was graduated from Amherst College a tall slender freshman entered. His name was George Gould, and it is known that he showed a decided fancy for Emily and it is thought by many that she was referring to Humphrey and Gould when she wrote:

"My life closed twice before its close;
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me

"So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven
And all we need of hell."[1]

A sworn statement[2] in Miss Taggard's biography gives evidence that George Gould was Emily's lover and that she renounced life's activities for him, because her father forbade her to see the man. So Emily asked her lover to meet her in the garden after the annual College reception and there she promised to love him as long as she lived, that she would answer his letters as long as he wrote, arranged to have Mr. Sweetser receive and deliver the letters to Maggie, told him that she would dress in white, during spring, summer, fall and winter and never would go out-

[1]Dickinson, Emily, "The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson," page 52.
[2]Taggard, Genevieve, "Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson," page 108.

side the gate, but live the life of a recluse--for his sake. This promise she kept.

George went away to Union Seminary, New York City but in the middle of the year he left Union, to attend Professor Park's brilliant course on theology at Andover. Emily's letters show that she went to visit her brother, at Boston in 1851. Austin, who loved Emily and knew and doubtless liked George Gould, might have arranged a meeting for Emily and George in Cambridgeport, where the renunciation, usually thought of as occurring in Philadelphia may have taken place.

Emily returned home and George went West and later spent a good many years traveling in Europe. But after an absence of eight or nine years during which they had corresponded, he returned and Emily soon got the news that he was about to be married. It was about this time that Emily first mentioned the possibility of going mad, yet she continued to wander only so far as her garden, to tend her flowers for her "bright absente" and dress only in white until her death in 1886.

THE NATURE OF HER POETRY

CHAPTER FOUR

Too deep a concern about the man and the "mystery" would rob us of the beauty and value of her poetry. The determination beyond doubt of the man who was the provocation of her love poetry is not so important surely as the illumination that she gives to universal truths.

She wrote between eight hundred and two thousand poems of which only four were published during her life time as she persistently refused to publish. It is thought that the following poem is her answer to all those who encouraged her to give her poetry to the world:

"I'm nobody. Who are you?
Are you nobody too?
Then there's a pair of us--don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know.

How dreary to be somebody!
How public like a frog,
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog."[1]

Various interpretations have been put upon this; some think it is merely a half humorous contempt for humanity and the recognition of her own superiority. Some of her poems seem to reveal a sort of intellectual vanity; she doubtless had a fair notion of her own rarity. Others believe this poem refers to Colonel Higginson. She had ventured to send to him four poems asking for

[1] Bianchi, Martha D., "Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson," Page 50.

his honest appraisal of them. His initial appreciation seems to have been only lukewarm ; she may have felt a little chagrined and expressed her feelings in this poem--at any rate it seems a little impudent.

The critics have severely criticized her faulty rhymes, poor grammar and irregularities but her poetry was one of emotion unhampered by rules and her interest in form was only spasmodic. Her famous definition of poetry shows her emotional attitude: "If I read a book and it makes by whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know that it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that it is poetry. These are the only ways I know. Is there any other way?"

Her obscurity so often spoken of is not one of hazy ideas but rather of extreme condensation. In The Introduction to Poems of Emily Dickinson, First Series two very striking sentences are found--"Her verses are like poetry pulled up by the roots, with rain, dew and earth still clinging giving a freshness and fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed" and "When a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson in grammar seems an impertinence."

One reviewer, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, in an article in the Contributor's Column of The Atlantic Monthly[1] tried to show that by a very slight rearrangement of her verse a rhyme could often be secured. He takes one stanza--

"I taste a liquor never brewed
From tankards scooped in pearl

1
Atlantic Monthly LXIX, page 143, January, 1892.

Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol!"[2]

and changes it to:

"I taste a liquor never brewed
In vats upon the Rhine:
No tankards scooped in pearl could yield
an alcohol like mine."

Miss Anna Mary Wells[3] believes that the ease with which so many of Miss Dickinson's poems could have been conventionalized shows that she did not wish to achieve regularity of form. It might be interesting to read to a group the original and the revised stanzas above and learn if they would not vote for the former one. The eyes of the writer chanced to see them side by side on the page and read them before noting any comments and the former met with greater approval. The all too evident consciousness of rhyme in the latter brought about a diminution of the thought-content of the original. Perchance melody and rhyme are not necessitous merits of great poetry.

In some poems a beautiful aerial quality is noticed:-

"The nearest dream recedes unrealized
The heaven we chose
Like the June bee
Before the school boy
Invites the race
Stoops to an easy clover
Dips--evades--teases--deploys--
Then to the royal clouds
Lifts his light pinnace
Heedless of the boy
Staring, bewildered at the mocking sky.

Homesick for steadfast honey,-
Ah! The bee flies not
Which brews that rare quality."

[2] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 14.
[3] American Literature, Vol. I, 1929-30, "Early Criticism of Emily Dickinson", page 255.

And does not Emily herself possess some of the characteristics she attributes to the bee--does she not, heedless of our search for her and her meaning, leave us "staring, bewildered at the mocking sky"?

And no matter how much we cry out for the necessary rhyme she will not give it to us if she is to do so at the cost of missing her glittering phrase:

"Her favor is the best
Disdain
Toward artifice of Time
Or men
But her disdain--'twere
Cooler bear
A finger of enameled fire."

Surely the expression "a finger of enameled fire" is ever so much better than any rhyme she could have discovered for it.

For Emily poetry was creation; in it she has laughter, tears, scorn and beauty. Her poetry even in its tragedy has the beautiful gaiety of a rippling brook. She creates her own world of freedom and humor, beauty and delight. Warring articles have appeared from time to time, and biographers have been at complete variance with one another concerning the life and poetry of Emily Dickinson. Matthew Josephson's paragraphs[1] suggest that "her trances were touched to such a degree with fear, violence, cruelty that one is minded of the religious experiences which William James later dissected and suspects inevitably the working of a sublimated sex instinct." Amy Lowell sets out to prove that Emily Dickinson

1
Sat. Review of Literature, July 5, 1930, "Emily Dickinson", by Louis Untermyer.

was really dedicated to Imagism, but that too timid by nature she had no heart to fight. Thus interpretation has grown fabulous and legend run amuck. Emily has said "Surgeons must be very careful when they take the knife"--a sentiment we should remember as we dissect her poetry which rather naturally falls under the headings "Nature, Life, Love, and Religion."

HER NATURE POEMS

CHAPTER FIVE

The America into which Emily Dickinson was born was an America of the Puritan; it was a world blind to sheer beauty for its own bright sake or to the free play of the free spirit--a world of moral will, where as Emily says in one of her brilliant letters her family could pray every morning "to an eclipse which they call our Heavenly Father." This moralistic world did not narrow Emily as it did even the great Emerson until he could say that Shelley was no poet, yet fortunately she avoided the great danger of the way of all spirit, the great peril of the saint. She did not deny or renounce the outer world; she was alive to the beauty of the colored earth and used her inner power to enhance the outer world; she desired life more abundantly and was almost as sensuous as Keats; she loved the flesh, the rainbow, "Nature in her beryl apron, mixing fresher air," the sea--"That everywhere of silver with ropes of sand", joy and sunburnt mirth. She wanted life to be filled with splendid colors. Her imagery is a riot of color like the gorgeous chaos of one of Turner's sunsets. In her poetry there is splendor unashamed, the power and glory, the blinding loveliness of beauty loved for its own sake.

Her nature poems reveal keen perception and sympathy with

all living things about her. How minutely she had observed the actions of birds when she wrote:

"A bird came down the walk:
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angle worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.

And then he drank a dew
From a convenient grass,
And then hopped sidewise to the wall
To let a beetle pass."[1]

Her picture of a humming bird is superb. Perhaps nothing so condenses into a few words that gorgeous atom of life and fire of which she her attempts description:

"A route of evanescence
With a revolving wheel;
A resonance of emerald
A rush of cochineal;
And every blossom on the bush
Adjusts its tumbled head,--
The mail from Tunis probably,
An easy morning's ride."[2]

And what a characteristically true picture she gives of a snake crawling along:

"The grass divides as with a comb
A spotted shaft is seen
And then it closes at your feet
And opens farther on."[3]

And, who but Emily would consider a mere stone of sufficient importance to write a poem about, yet how pleasant is this:

"How happy is the little stone
That rambles in the road alone
And doesn't care about careers
And exigencies never fears;
Whose coat of elemental brown
A passing universe put on;
And independent as the sun

1 Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 91
2 " " " " " , page 86
3 " " " " " , page 92

Associates or glows alone
Fulfilling absolute decree
In casual simplicity."[1]

In another poem about the sun appearing after a storm she uses the apt expression "the sunshine threw his hat away" and what pleasantry lives in the lines beginning:

"A drop fell on the apple tree
Another on the roof;
A half a dozen kissed the eaves,
And made the gables laugh"[2] and later conjectures "were they pearls, what necklaces could be!"

Her flashes of wit and insight into nature are wholly original; her words and phrases exhibit an extraordinary vividness of description and imaginative power, yet the poem is often set in whimsical or rugged frame:

"A spider sewed at night
Without a light
Upon an arc of white
If ruff it was of dame
Or shroud of gnome,
Himself, himself inform.
Of immortality
His strategy
Was physiognomy."[3]

And she cannot refrain from mingling a little satire with her appreciation of nature:

"The leaves like women, interchange
Sagacious confidence;
Somewhat of nods, and somewhat of
Portentous inference,

The parties in both cases
Enjoining secrecy,--
Inviolable compact
To notoriety."[4]

[1] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 97.
[2] " " " " " " , page113
[3] " " " " " " , page 94
[4] " " " " " " , page 96:

To her the homely little mushroom was the elf of plants:

"Had nature any outcast face,
Could she a son contemn
Had nature an Iscariot
That mushroom,--it is him."[1]

and not even the disliked rat escapes her attention:

"The rat is the concisest tenant.
He pays no rent
Repudiates the obligation
On schemes intent."[2]

Her swift condensations have never been surpassed by the writer of any age; she lives in metaphor, in utterances naïve and pregnant with meaning:

"The pedigree of honey
Does not concern the bee;
A clover, any time, to him
Is aristocracy"[3] and again:

"God made a little gentian;
It tried to be a rose
And failed, and all the summer laughed."[4]

The ever-present beauty and value of life were with her each day; Heaven was not something remote to be entered into at last:

"God preached,--a noted clergyman,--
And the sermon is never long;
So instead of getting to heaven at last,
I'm going all along!"[5]

Her interest in Nature was not restricted to birds, bees and flowers that she saw in her own back yard, but she could by an act of the imagination be standing before the Alps--

"In lands I never saw, they say,
Immortal Alps look down,
Whose bonnets touch the firmament,
Whose sandals touch the town,--

[1] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 93
[2] " " " " " , page 98
[3] " " " " " , page 110
[4] " " " " " , page 105
[5] " " " " " , " 111

Meek at whose everlasting feet
A myriad daisies play.
Which, sir, are you, and which am I,
Upon an August day?"[1]

The Alps like Nature back home were eternal reminders of a greater Power of purity, aspiration and magnificence.

"Our lives are Swiss,--
So still, so cool,
Till some odd afternoon
The Alps neglect their curtains
And we look farther on.

Italy stands the other side,
While like a guard between,
The solemn Alps,
Forever intervene!"[2]

While the spirit of Emily dwelt far away at times she loved the solid earth and its fullness; the things she touched and handled, saw and heard and smelled were to her objects of almost ecstatic affection. Flowers and all growing things were more than lovely objects to her. They were a real solace, a solace she always wished to share. Her love for the Earth was expressed by her in these lines: "Oh Matchless Earth. We underrate the chance to dwell in thee."[3]

[1] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 164
[2] " " " " " , " 66
[3] "Emily Dickinson, Friend and Neighbor", page 124. MacGregor Jenkins, Boston, 1930, Little, Brown & Company.

HER POEMS OF LIFE

CHAPTER SIX

In the world of today the emphasis of value is upon external things. Everywhere there is little interest in, and understanding of the individual and the inner life. The mystic in religion as well as the poet in literature, is a man without a country. And for such, perhaps the life of Emily Dickinson--symbol of all such tragic lives--may offer helpfulness in its power of inner triumph.

The America into which Emily was born in 1830 was unsuited to an outwardly successful life of her spirit. America was still dominated by the pioneer, still provincial, still Puritanical. External things were of greater moment than the workings of the mind; America being still provincial could accept the gentle writings of Longfellow but the originality of a Whitman or an Emily Dickinson would meet either persecution or oblivion. What hope for Emily when those who loved her most lived in a world of creed and moral will, while she lived in a world of free intellect and flaming imagination?

Other geniuses had tried to bring a transvaluation of values to the America of that day and they had failed. Poe, Thoreau, Whitman and Melville faced misunderstanding, hostility and oblivion, and if these man-like spirits so lived and died, what might

be expected from a girl under dominating and hampering influences of home and town? Thus Emily Dickinson became our great American poet of exile--exile in a cloistered garden under that "little tent of blue which prisoners call the sky," in a cloistered house, at last in a cloistered room. And also just as in England, the greatest poets--Byron, Shelley, Keats, Browning left a cold and hostile England for an Italy possible to their spirits, so Emily sought and found the Italy of the inner life, of the intellect and the imagination.

The centre of her life, her poetry, her significance is in the poem:

"The soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend,--
Or the most agonizing spy
An enemy could send

Secure against its own
No treason it can fear;
Itself its sovereign, of itself
The soul should stand in awe."[1]

Again and again she refers to this as the basis of all her courage, her joy, her life, her world. She tells us--

"Reverse cannot befall that fine Prosperity
Whose sources are interior.
As soon Adversity
A diamond overtake
In far Bolivian ground;
Misfortune hath no implement
Could mar it, if it found."[2]

How fully she knew the meaning of success and failure in life when she wrote:

"Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed

[1] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 9
[2] " " " " " , " 259

To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need

Not one of all the purple host
Who took the flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear, of victory,

As he, defeated, dying,
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Break, agonized and clear."[1]

Hadn't Fate forbidden her to share a rich fulness of life that was longed for in agony? Who could tell better the definition of victory than one to whom it had not come?

A similar idea occurs in this:

"A wounded deer leaps highest,
I've heard the hunter tell;
'Tis but the ecstasy of death,
And then the brake is still.

Mirth is the mail of anguish
In which it caution arm
Lest anybody spy the blood
And "You're hurt" exclaim!"[2]

And in another, she gives us one of the greatest expressions of naked power in all American literature:

"To be alive is power,
Existence in itself,
Without a further function
Omnipotence enough.

To be alive and Will--
'Tis able as a God!
The Further of ourselves be what--
Such being Finitude?"[3]

In spite of being thwarted, cloistered and exiled Emily Dickinson was able to say that! Indeed in her own words, "The brain is wider than the sky"--and the soul more vast and potent than

[1] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 3
[2] " " " " " , " 6
[3] " " " " " , " 259

the earth

"The brain is wider than the sky,
For put them side by side ,
The one the other will include
With ease, and you beside."[1]

Thus she contradicts our conventional American credo that what we make or have matters most for life, and with audacity asserts that riches, power, joy, beauty come only from the soul's self. Yet none realized better than she how dangerous it was not to agree with the crowd. Her realization of this provoked her immortal exclamation:

"Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye.
Much sense the starkest madness;
'Tis the majority
In this, as all prevails.
Assent and you are sane--
Demur--you're straight way dangerous
And handled with a chain."[2]

Although seclusion was a necessity for her preternaturally sensitive soul yet at times she longed for an escape of some kind from the narrowness of her days in Amherst.

"I never hear the word "escape"
Without a quicker blood,
A sudden expectation
A flying attitude.

I never hear of prisons brood
By soldiers battered down,
But I tug childish at my bars,--
Only to fail again!"[3]

She fully realized that life takes its toll for its joys and pleasures:

"For each ecstatic instant

[1] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 67
[2] " " " " " , " 9
[3] " " " " " , " 22

We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy.
For each beloved hour
Sharp pittances of years,
Bitter contested farthings
And coffers heaped with tears"[1]

And doubtless while thinking of a love-life she could not share she wrote:

"Forbidden fruit a flavor has
That lawful orchards mock;
How lucious lies the pea within
The pod that Duty locks!"[2]

And in complying with Duty she rose as she tells us in the following:

"We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the sky."[3]

Her great strength lay in her searing introspection; hers was the inner life of intellect and imagination in an active and acquisitive world. Outwardly all that she most desired was denied her; everywhere in the outer world she was driven back upon herself; the one thing that remained to her was to pour the brilliant flower of her inner life into her poems. Thus outer tragedy became inner triumph; her seclusion stood as the one means at her disposal of preserving her personal identity and of expressing the genius with which she was endowed.

[1] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 22
[2] " " " " " , " 49
[3] " " " " " , " 53

HER LOVE POEMS

CHAPTER SEVEN

The love life of Emily Dickinson has been discussed in detail in Chapter III but through the medium of her love poems we are able to get an almost unbroken narrative of her personal experience. We have the whole story of her love, her first rebellious desire, her inner negation, her resignation and her waiting for re-union in Eternity.

"I took one draught of life
I'll tell you what I paid
Precisely an existence--
The market price, they said.

They weighed me dust by dust
They balanced film with film
They handed me my being's worth
A single dram of Heaven."[1]

What does it matter who caused "the immortal wound"; it may have been a Philadelphia minister, a married man with children, who according to tradition put the width of the continent between them because she would not give the one word he implored; it may have been a lover of her younger days, but whoever the man was, he took Emily's love with dignity very firmly, wanting it very much.

Doubtless their first meeting is recorded in a poem beginning:

"So the eyes accost and sunder

[1]Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 135

In an audience"

And again in:

"It was a quiet way
He asked if I was his
I made no answer of the tongue
But answer of the eyes."[1]

From that moment there could be no other for Emily:

"He put the belt around my life--
I heard the buckle snap."[2]

She is baffled by her inability to say how deeply she loves, and writes:

"The wind does not require the grass
To answer wherefore when he pass
She cannot keep her place!"

Home to her was not the place where one's body dwells but where one's heart and mind are:

"Where thou art, that is Home
Cashmere or Calvary--the same."[3]

Her declarations of love for him came direct from the heart; they are beautifully, candidly frank and child like, being in direct contrast to the adroit concealments of many women who love to a lesser degree. Love to her was not a game but a fire in the heart, knowing no change nor end:

"Alter? When the hills do
Falter? When the sun
Question if his glory
Be the perfect one
Surfeit? When the daffodil
Doth of the dew:
Even as herself, O friend!
I will of you!"[4]

But the troublesome fact remained that she could not look forward

[1] Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 137
[2] Complete " " " " , " 165
Further " " " " , "
[4] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, " 145

to the years when the fulfillment of love would be hers; no hope was in view, ever--

"If you were coming in the fall
I'd brush the summer by
With half a smile and half a spurn
As housewives do a fly"

and another stanza begins:

"If I could see you in a year
I'd wind the months in balls",

and yet another with similar expression:

"If only centuries delayed
I'd count them on my hand"

but no, not even when life was over could she be sure that she and her beloved would be together in Eternity--

"If certain when this life was out
That yours and mine should be
I'd toss it yonder like a rind
And taste eternity."[1]

In moments of mental anguish she felt that she could no longer endure it, that the way of escape sought by Juliet would be a welcome one:

"What if I say I will not wait?
What if I burst the fleshly gate
And pass escaped, to thee?
What if I fill this mortal off,
See where it hurt me--that's enough--
And wade in liberty?

They cannot take us any more,--
Dungeons may call and guns implore
Unmeaning now to me, -
As laughter was an hour ago
Or laces, or a travelling show
Or who died yesterday."[2]

Yet with a strange inconsistency she is able to argue both sides

[1] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 147
[2] " " " " " , " 166

of the question and say:

"We outgrow love like other things
And put it in a drawer"[1]

and then in what seems a more characteristic tone of flavor, she gives us:

"They say that Time assuages,--
Time never did assuage
An actual suffering strengthens
As sinews do with age.

Time is a test of trouble
But not a remedy
If such it prove, it prove too
There was no remedy."[2]

Certain it is that the pivot about which Emily's life revolved was Love, Physical habits and tasks as well as mental attitudes derive their significance from the depth of her affection.

In one little poem she gives us a picture of herself receiving surreptitiously one of her lovers letters:

"The way I read a letter's this:
'Tis first I lock the door
And push it with my fingers next
For transport it be sure.

And then I go the farthest off
To counteract a knock;
Then draw my little letter forth
And softly pick its lock.

Then glancing narrow at the wall
And narrow at the floor,
For firm conviction of a mouse
Not exorcised before,

Peruse how infinite I am
To no one that you know!
And sigh for lack of Heaven--but not
The heaven the creeds bestow."[3]

The abundance and variety of metaphor in her poetry is

[1] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 173
[2] " " " " " , " 226
[3] " " " " " , " 160

amazing. In one poem she pictures herself as a river running to meet her lover, the sea

"My river runs to thee
Blue sea, wilt welcome me?

My river waits reply
Oh sea, look graciously!

I'll fetch thee brooks
From spotted nooks--

Say, sea
Take me!"[1]

But while she here attributes to her lover greater strength in the figure of the sea, another poem gives us a vivid contrast between them when the great decision was made,

"I rose because he sank,
I thought it would be
Opposite
But when his power bent
My soul stood straight

And so with thews of hymn
And sinew from within
In ways I knew not that
I knew, till then--
I lifted him."[2]

Perhaps if her soul had not stood straight there would have been no separation; but if the union occurred it would be difficult to imagine Emily clamoring for the right to live her own life in her own way. She would have been content to have reflected the glory of the man she loved and to have merged her life quietly into his:

"Forever at his side to walk
The smaller of the two
Brain of his brain

[1]Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 150
[2]Further " " " " , " 93

Blood of his blood
  Two lives, one Being now."[1]

Complete identity with him was hers; there was no other possibility

"Empty my heart of thee--
 Its single artery,
 Begin to leave thee out--
   Simply extinction date.

Subtract myself in play
And not enough of me
Is left to put away
  "Myself" meant thee."[2]

Nor did this love need the watchful care of a weak plant--at its inception it was strong; it sprang out full grown; there was no quiet passing through stages of friendship with it concomitant of doubt. Its suddenness merely added to its surety and impressiveness.

Love comes

"As lightning on
 A landscape
 Exhibits sheets of place
 Not yet suspected but
   For flash and bolt and suddenness."

Love had come to her with finality and overwhelming possession of the soul. The intensity of her expression of it may appear almost sacrilegious to some as in:

"I love thee, then how well
   Is that?
 As well as Jesus.
   Prove it me
 That He loved men
   As I love thee."

She cannot live with her beloved, nor can she die with him, as

1Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 148
2 " " " " " , " 146

she expresses it in:

"Nor could I rise with you
Because your face
Would put out Jesus."

As the years passed on, what had been a voluntary renunciation passed into what she called "a threadless way" through which she pushed "mechanic feet."

In her secluded room Emily knew a great love and wrote some of America's greatest love lyrics--more passionate than anything in Whitman, more fierce and joyous than Edna Millay.. Always Emily Dickinson was fierce, burning, volcanic--she loved not only Life but Love. Though there are complexities and riddles in her love poems they have already imparted to American literature one of its chief glories, and to a new lyric generation a high and noble virtue.

HER RELIGIOUS POETRY

CHAPTER EIGHT

In our discussion of the life of Emily Dickinson it was inevitable that her ideas of faith, God and the creeds should be partially disclosed, but perhaps a close analysis of individual poems will enable one to see better her position. Her background was decidedly Puritanical and doubtless her "great abnegation" was based on purely religious motives, but Emily had no use for the tight bound creeds of her family and her community. Who can answer why she was such a rebel in thought as well as in verse form? Her introspection was bound up with astonishing mannerisms and perversities which were doubtless as strong in her personality as they are integrated in her style. It is not customary to converse athwart a door, nor listen to music in a dim hall just outside a brightly lighted drawing room while a dear friend plays to one, nor is it customary to refuse to see a friend without giving some reason, yet such were Emily's idiosyncracies, or marks of individuality as some would term them. Who can answer why she was the only one in her town to rebel against religious beliefs? We only know she had a questioning mind and feared not to exercise it upon even the Deity. She frequently reveals exasperation of Calvinistic doctrine so prevalent in her environment and asks:

"We prate of Heaven

We pray to Heaven
Relate when neighbors die
At what o'clock to Heaven they fled--
  Who saw them wherefore fly."[1]

Is there a little modern agnosticism revealed here and were the ways of God any clearer to her, than to many of our day? She cannot always commend Him, but boldly questions, and accuses him of injustice.

"Gods adroiter will
 On Moses seemed to fasten
 In taltalizing play
 As boy should deal with lesser boy
   To show supremacy--and ends in a burst of defense for Moses:

"Old Man on Nebo, late as this
 One justice bleeds for thee!"

And in another rebellious outburst she cries:

"I don't like Paradise
 Eden will be so lonesome
 Bright Wednesday afternoons--

Yet in spite of all her resentments there is ever in the back of her mind some of the old Puritanical fear of the Judgment day:

"If God would make a visit
 Or ever took a nap,
 So not to see us--but they say
 Himself a telescope
 Perennial beholds us
 Myself would run away
 From Him and Holy Ghost and All--
   But there's the Judgment day!"

Assuredly she was in earnest also, when she cries out from the depth of her heart and was met with no apparent response:

"Of course I prayed

[1] Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 48
[2] " " " " " , Introduction, page 9

And did God care?
He cared as much as on the air
A bird had stamped her foot
And cried "Give me"!"[1]

And at another time she accosts Deity even more pointedly:

"My period had come for prayer,
No other art would do,
My tactics missed a rudiment--
Creator, was it you?

Yet the last stanza carries a supreme and child-like conclusion

"The silence condescended
The heavens paused for me
But awed beyond my errand
I worshipped
Did not pray."[2]

Yet her child-like impulsive faith was ever on guard, for although God was sometimes just He was not always so, and she saw as she put it,

--the underside
Of His divinity,
too well to trust Him fully, and said
"But I, grown shrewder
Scan the skies
With a suspicious air."

With all her doubts, disappointments and sorrows, she felt that she had proper cause for grievance. God was at fault, and she was at His mercy:

"It's easy to invent a life
God does it every day
Creation but the gambol
Of His authority."[3]

She reproached Him for having made her to inhabit such a cruel world. She rebelled; she wanted to go back all the long way she

[1] Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 9
[2] " " " " " , " 47
[3] " " " " " , " 41

had come:

"My reason, life, I had not had
But for yourself, 'Twere better charity
To leave me in the atom's tomb
Merry and naught, and gay and numb
Than this smart misery."

No, her faith was not always a certainty. She often wanted proof by the cold scientific method:

"Faith is a fine invention
For gentlemen who see
But microscopes are prudent
In an emergency."[1]

Perhaps all who know her life will recall, upon reading the following poem, her days at Mount Holyoke when faculty and students alike prayed with her day after day entreating her to make a confession of her faith in God and join the Church, but Emily could not be made to have faith. Compulsion was an odious thing to her:

"Too much of proof affronts belief
The turtle will not try
Unless you leave him
Then return--and he
Has hauled away!"[2]

But later in life she evinces at times a humble faith, as shown in:

"I hope the father in the skies
Will lift his little girl--
Old fashioned, naughty, everything--
Over the stile of pearl!"

And is not her intimacy and fellowship with her Heavenly Father revealed in one of her best poems:

"The Soul's superior instants

[1]Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 32
[2]Further " " " " , " 11, Introduction

Occur to her alone
When friend and earth's occasion
  Have infinite withdrawn

Or she, herself descended
To too remote a height
For lower recognition
  Than her Omnipotent

Eternity's disclosure
To favorites, a few
Of the colossal substance
  Of immortality."[1]

Some believe that the final poem about to be quoted was written after 1884 when Emily was "smitten by a stroke" as Madame Bianchi puts it, but if written before this date, it would only mean that the close of life was merely less definitely dated not less definitely anticipated:

"A wife at daybreak I shall be
Sunrise hast thou a flag for me?
At midnight I am yet a maid--
How short it takes to make it bride!
Then Midnight, I have passed from thee
  Unto the East and Victory

Midnight, "Goodnight"
I hear them call
  The angels bustle in the hall
Softly my Future climbs the stair
I fumble at my childhood's prayer--
  So soon to be a child no more!
Eternity, I'm coming Sir--
Master, I've seen that face before."[2]

[1] Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, page 268
[2] Further " " " " , " 190

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