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Citation

Ward, Theodora. 1960. The finest secret: Emotional currents in the life of Emily Dickinson after 1865. Harvard Library Bulletin XIV (1), Winter 1960: 82-106.

Permanent link

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The Finest Secret

Emotional Currents in the Life of Emily Dickinson after 1865

I

EVERY child knows the value of a secret. For Emily Dickinson secrets never lost their fascination, and she was able to share the child's pleasure, not only in knowing something that was his alone to enjoy, but the equally alluring power to reveal to another person what he knew. In a poem beginning, 'Our little secrets slink away,' she spoke of 'the niggardly delight / To make each other stare.'¹ This crude satisfaction, however, was the most trivial of the emotions evoked by secrets, for at the opposite extreme she recognized with awe the explosive power contained in hidden knowledge. In the crucial year 1862 she wrote:

A Secret told –
Ceases to be a Secret – then –
A Secret – kept –
That – can appal but One –
Better of it – continual be afraid –
Than it –
And Whom you told it to – beside –

Above the personal level lay her frequent use of the word to express the mysteries inherent in human life and in man's relation to the infinite. Carrying with her always this high sense of mystery, she sometimes invested ordinary acts with a dramatic atmosphere.

¹The texts for all quotations from Emily Dickinson have been taken from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), and *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958); acknowledgment of permission granted by the Harvard University Press is hereby duly recorded. Acknowledgment is also made herewith for permission to publish three poems copyright by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and appearing in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson (Boston, Little, Brown & Company, 1937), pp. 251, 288–289, and 342.

After a visit from Mrs Holland in October 1870, Emily felt it necessary to explain to her friend why she had tried, apparently without success, to draw her away from the family group for a private interview. She wrote:

Perhaps you thought dear Sister, I wanted to elope with you and feared a vicious Father.

It was not quite that. . . .

Life is the finest secret.

So long as that remains, we must all whisper.

With that sublime exception I had no clandestineness.

The nature of life itself was her excuse. Its content was secret — unknown, in large part, to the involuntary bearers of it. The most we could do, she felt, was to share the knowledge of its secrecy reverently, lest we break the spell under which we live. If the meaning remained obscure, the emotional response to being alive was enough to bring a sense of supreme value into daily living.

When Thomas Wentworth Higginson had called on her, shortly before Mrs Holland's visit, her life appeared to him so restricted as to stifle the vital forces, and he was amazed to hear her say, 'I find ecstasy in living — the mere sense of living is joy enough.' 'Ecstasy' is a strong word, but Emily Dickinson chose her words with a poet's perception, and was fully aware of their power. She used the word many times in her poems, sometimes attributing the emotion, especially in the earlier poems, to the singing bird and the butterfly in flight, but finding it also in the agonized leap of a dying deer. To the human soul it came as an inner condition of unreasoning joy, in moments of sudden revelation of a spiritual nature.

These expressions of feeling about life were uttered at a time when, as an observer might look at it, Emily's figure was just emerging from the obscurity of shadows and coming out into the open sunlight. To those who try to reconstruct her life, the years 1866 to 1870 form a barren period, for the sudden decrease in the volume of her writing makes it clear that this was a time of withdrawal. There is little to indicate, either in the occasional poems or the few datable letters, a particular trend of thought or a special emotional drift, and the meaning of the blank interval can only be interpreted by the effects seen at its close.

One unfinished poem, however, written about 1867 — a year to which only ten poems and one letter have been attributed — suggests

the attitude she held toward her own way of life at the time. It is a rough worksheet, containing alternate words and lines, and seems never to have passed beyond the form in which she jotted it down under some compulsion to explain herself to herself.

I fit for them –
 I seek the Dark
 Till I am thorough fit.
 The labor is a sober one
 With the austerer sweet – an – this
 With this sufficient sweet
 That abstinence of mine produce
 A purer food for them, if I succeed,
 If not I had
 The transport of the Aim –

The first line, made obscure by the omission of 'myself' after 'fit,' and curiously awkward in its sound, may be read as a concise statement of the meaning carried out in the succeeding lines, in answer to her inner questioning as to her real motive in avoiding contact with the outside world. There are signs of a conscious struggle between the demands of her small circle and her own deep need for replenishment from a source unknown to the others. She loved her friends, but she must protect herself from the subtle draining of power that their society brought her. It is possible that her aim was not wholly personal, but that she was thinking of herself as a poet when she spoke of the 'purer food' she hoped to bring them as a result of her withdrawal. Her instinct was to follow the ways of nature, seeking the darkness of solitude and the hidden recesses of the mind where germination takes place, as the seed lies dormant under ground until conditions are right for its growth toward the sun. Resting after the long and intense experience of spiritual death and rebirth that came with the period of her greatest creativity in the early 1860's, she was feeling her way toward the establishment of a frame into which her life could fit, and where she could be most herself.

It is apparent that there was no distinct beginning or ending to this period of withdrawal, for the habit of seclusion came gradually and was never again broken, yet it becomes clear, as we read the poems and letters of the last twenty years, that life did not stop for her when she closed the door, but passed through as many phases as appear in the lives of those whose experience is in the active world of men and women. When she wrote to Mrs Holland in 1870, 'Life is the finest

secret,' the plant she had cherished in darkness was pushing with vigor into the light.

It is to her letters that we naturally turn to find the answers to our questions as to the development of her life within its self-imposed limits, for they became her chief means of communication as the years went on. We cannot rely on the memories of the few who saw her, for they were inevitably colored by their own views of life, and limited by the kind of experience they shared with her. Her elusiveness, her charm, her wit, and her delight in the spontaneity of childhood, which have taken a prominent place in all the descriptions we have of her, give only the outer aspects of the personality that beguiled and mystified her friends. The stark power of her thoughts amazed but seemingly repelled the feminist Higginson. Her niece and nephews and and their young friends found in her an ally who belonged neither to their own world nor to that of their parents, and whose mind stimulated their imaginations. Her devoted sister Lavinia saw her as a precious companion, close and dear as life itself, but something apart, to be cherished and protected along with the silver service and the fine china. It is doubtful whether her sister-in-law, Sue, whose independent intelligence and expansive nature had given her in earlier years the role of confidante and critic in matters of the mind and heart, had ever really shared Emily's point of view enough to understand the path she had chosen. To Sue, during the years of seclusion, she seems to have become a quaint relic of the ardent companion of the past, occasionally sending out from her retreat glowing words with which the guests next door could be regaled.

It is to Emily's own words, then, as found in the occasional poems and numerous letters of the last sixteen years, that we must look for signs of the ebb and flow in the life of the spirit. Even in the letters it is by no means easy to trace the basic pattern, for letters are the chosen expression of the writer in relation to a particular correspondent. Emily's letters to her younger cousins, the Norcross sisters, full as they are of an easy play of elder-sisterly affection, reflect chiefly her view of the matters of daily living that are of interest to members of the same family. The circumstances in which the many little notes to Sue were written are hidden from us, so that the philosophical character they often show is left suspended, without application. The warmly human freedom with which she wrote to Mrs Holland implies a background of mutual understanding in matters of the main issues and

motives that underlie the events of life, yet there remains a certain reticence in regard to her own inner world. The few letters she wrote to Samuel Bowles after 1870 are mainly ejaculations of gratitude to a man in whose company she always found delight, and who returned her deep admiration with affectionate sympathy. To Higginson, whom she saw only twice, she gave more of her mind, but toward him she maintained to the end the attitude — one might almost say the pose — of pupil to teacher. In the many gemlike notes to neighbors, written for the most part to fit an occasion in their lives, and directed wholly to that end, she withheld her own life as carefully as she withheld her physical presence from the eyes of Amherst.

Although no one series or group of letters can provide a picture of what Emily Dickinson's own life meant to her, yet the whole collection, read in its approximately chronological order, does provide a living source from which such a picture can be drawn. It is not so much to direct expression of thought or feeling, however, as to changes of style, choice of words, shifts of emphasis in the modes of expression that we must look for indications of where the emotional foundations lie and how they alter and develop as the steady flow of psychic energy carries her forward.

II

Before reaching maturity, human beings must pass through certain stages of development and change brought about by the natural events that come with the passage of time. Not all take the hurdles that have to be crossed in the same order, either because they are not presented to them in the same sequence or because of some lack of ability within themselves to take the leap. Emily was speaking of herself as a poet when she quoted in a letter to Higginson in 1866 a poem she had first drafted several years before, but the meaning she wished to convey was equally applicable to her personal life.

Except the smaller size
 No lives are round —
 These — hurry to a sphere
 And show and end —
 The larger — slower grow
 And later hang —
 The Summers of Hesperides
 Are long.

The custom of the time, the economic position of her family, the character of her father as its dominating member and her own need for outer security all combined to carry her into middle age without forcing her to take on the fundamental responsibilities of everyday life. Mr Dickinson not only provided a comfortable living for his wife and daughters, but warded off the assaults of the outside world for the one who chose to live vertically within the safety of his home rather than horizontally in a wider field. She had his protection as long as he lived, and under it she could develop her own outlook in perfect security. That she endured the torture of inner revolution during the critical years that made her a poet, while still revolving in the daily round of the small women's world of which Edward Dickinson was the axis, speaks not only for the spiritual stamina she inherited from her Puritan forebears, but for the freedom her father gave her to be herself.

Sharing her father's independence of mind, though it appeared in a wholly new pattern, she relied on his invincibility while she could smile at his foibles. During the years of readjustment, of which he probably knew little, she rested behind the defenses he had erected for her as one of the primary concerns of a man with a family. She filled the place of daughter as unconditionally as her father functioned in his own role, making his bread and giving him her companionship when he wished it, thus bringing a balance to the relation. When she wrote to Mrs Holland, just a year before Mr Dickinson died, 'I was thinking of thanking you for the kindness to Vinnie. She has no Father and Mother but me and I have no Parents but her,' she was indicating the remoteness she and her sister felt from their parents in matters touching their hearts. In a different area of their life, however, the father's place was as real as the sun in the sky, and was so completely accepted that it need not be thought of. She certainly was not aware that her tie to him was in any way inappropriate in a woman of forty-two. As long as his protective presence remained, she continued to live in the enclosed freedom it provided.

After the largely unrecorded years of the late 1860's a sudden expansion marks the beginning of a new period in Emily Dickinson's correspondence. The increase in the number of letters was partly due to external reasons, such as the return of the Hollands after two years in Europe and the stimulus given to her friendship with Higginson by her first meeting with him. Aside from this, an inner change is

suggested by a new trend that is noticeable in the letters themselves, not only in content but in form and appearance. The handwriting becomes larger and bolder, the paragraphs are shorter, often consisting of only a few words, and an aphoristic style develops, as if she were experimenting with new prose patterns. Each statement becomes emphatic. Whatever the subject, the main theme is Life — with a capital L — Life of which she is a part, which she sees in everything around her, but which she sees in perspective and in general terms rather than in particularities.

'Life is the finest secret' is followed during the next few years by such statements as the one with which she began a letter to Higginson in 1872: 'To live is so startling, it leaves but little room for other occupations.' To Louise and Frances Norcross she wrote in 1873, 'Life is a spell so exquisite that everything conspires to break it,' and to Mrs Holland in the same year, 'To live is Endowment. It puts me in mind of that singular Verse in the Revelations — "Every several Gate was of one Pearl."' In the protected world of her home, where her separateness was respected, she was able to observe life as if it were a mountain seen from the air. All the precipices, the gentler slopes, the inaccessible gulches, and the bold waterfalls could be seen at once. She was like a bird that could soar above or drop down at will to rest on a tree top or to drink from one of the mountain streams. Earlier she had climbed her own peak, step by step through bitter suffering, but it had proved to be only a spur of the range, and once she had reached its summit wider perspectives had opened before her.

What she saw there prompted such pronouncements as these, which she sent in little notes to Sue: 'Oh Matchless Earth — We underrate the chance to dwell in Thee,' and 'We meet no Stranger but Ourselves,' and in the letters to Higginson and Mrs Holland — her principal correspondents at the time — 'Even the Possible has its insoluble particle,' and 'Each expiring Secret leaves an Heir, distracting still.' Every small happening of daily life was fitted into the pattern of the great whole of which she was ever conscious, the infinite mystery of life and death.

There was a sharp increase in the number of poems that, according to the present chronology, may be credited to the years 1870-74, culminating in 1873 with fifty written in one year. This was not only the largest number in any year since 1865, but a larger number than she was to write in any succeeding year. There are few among them

of such emotional intensity as is felt in many of those that were distilled from the ecstasy and pain of the years of her awakening as a woman and a poet. She was no longer writing to save her life, but was using her gift with maturer insight as a means of expression for the many stimulations of mind and soul that came as the steady accompaniment of daily living. There are many poems of nature, poems about people, and philosophical observations. There are several poems of recollection and a few that seem specifically autobiographical. One of these, written in 1871, is indicative of the tone of the period:

I should not dare to be so sad
So many Years again –
A Load is first impossible
When we have put it down –

The Superhuman then withdraws
And we who never saw
The Giant at the other side
Begin to perish now.

The past has been assimilated, the terms it imposed accepted, and the way opened for a new relation to life, less acutely personal and more expansive in scope.

These were probably the least troubled years of Emily's life and her letters reflect many interests. There are frequent references to books, especially in the letters to Higginson, whom she considered her principal authority on literature in spite of her failure to agree with him on some of the authors he recommended. She read Darwin and the magazine articles that discussed his theories, speculating on the scientific thought of her day in relation to the values she cherished. There were friends to enjoy, for although she no longer went out to meet them there were always chosen spirits whom she welcomed within her own walls. She shared with her family a warm and growing friendship with the Reverend and Mrs Jonathan L. Jenkins and their children, who were playmates of her own cherished nephew and niece. The glowing presence of Samuel Bowles, who never failed to call on her when he went to Amherst, gladdened and stimulated her more, perhaps, than the company of anyone else she knew. She looked forward to the visits of her two younger cousins, the Norcross sisters, and maintained a warmly personal relation with Dr and Mrs Holland, though their visits became less frequent after they moved to New York in 1872. There were also visits from her father's friend, Judge Lord of Salem,

and his wife — a couple whose affectionate interest was shared by all the members of the family. It is probable that in these years she was corresponding regularly with Dr Wadsworth, who had returned from San Francisco to Philadelphia, for in later references to him it is clear that she had been in constant touch with him for many years. During these years the pattern of her way of life seems to have expanded and developed outwardly as the inner growth demanded expression.

III

The sudden, complete, and irrevocable cessation of a powerful force leaves a terrifying void where it has been active. When, in June 1874, Edward Dickinson died alone in Boston after a collapse in the legislative hall, the shock was too great to be experienced all at once. The circumstances of his death, away from home and, as the family believed, with inadequate medical care, must have added much to the cruel pain of the blow.

In one sense, no one could have been better prepared than Emily for a close encounter with sudden death. She had carried the burden of its mystery with her since adolescence, and as Thomas Johnson points out in his *Interpretive Biography*, she had 'drawn it into the texture of five or six hundred poems,' examining its effects on the dying and on those that were left. She had looked at her relation to her own death in several of its aspects, in poems of remarkable power and imagery. She had even admitted the possibility of her father's nearness to death three years earlier, when during his illness she wrote to Louise Norcross, 'I think his physical life don't want to live any longer.' But the actual effect of his sudden disappearance could not have been foreseen by the richest imagination. She wrote to the Norcrosses a few weeks after the event, 'Though it is many nights, my mind never comes home,' and in a letter to Higginson she spoke of 'that Pause of Space which I call "Father."' To follow the dead in their adventure into a new dimension seems to be a universal human instinct. They leave us, but for a time we cannot leave them. As late as August 1876 Emily was writing to her Norcross cousins: 'I dream about father every night, always a different dream, and forget what I am doing daytimes, wondering where he is. Without any body, I keep thinking. What kind can that be?'

Indeed, her letters show that for four years she was haunted by the thought of her father as she felt her way along in the strange new life of the house he had left. To Higginson in June 1877 she explained, 'Since my Father's dying, everything sacred enlarged so — it was dim to own.' And in January 1878 she wrote to her neighbor Mrs Hills, 'It is a little more than three years since you tried to help us bid Father Good-Night, which was so impossible that it has never become less so.'

It was not only the mystery of where her father had gone that filled her with awe and loneliness. After the first shock had passed her image of him had grown, as if his stature had become enhanced by removal. While he was alive she saw him in particulars. 'Father steps like Cromwell when he gets the kindlings.' After his death she saw him more wholly than she ever had before, and was able to say, in grander perspective, 'His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists.' As the person became separated from the parent in her recollection, she was able to speak of his lonely life and lonelier death with a tenderness of feeling that came from a certain detachment from the tie of a child to the father. At the same time his importance to her in another way seems to have grown. The father figure, disembodied, has sunk deep into the recesses of her mind, to appear as a living symbol in her dreams. 'Always a different dream,' she says, but gives us no light on the nature of the dreams, whose effect on her conscious preoccupation with the mystery of life after death must have been profound. It is only by tracing the changes in her outer life and their reflection in her letters that we can gather something of the meaning of the inner experience that brought them about.

Circumstances, of course, forced a change in the Dickinson family life. The main pillar was gone, and the structure must somehow be held up by those that were left. Austin took over the business affairs of his mother and sisters, who maintained during the first year a semblance at least of the character of the daily life they had pursued during Edward Dickinson's absences in Boston. Then Mrs Dickinson, whose dependent nature and lack of physical stamina made adjustment almost impossible, suffered a stroke and became permanently incapable of carrying her share of the load. Lavinia shouldered the responsibility in relation to the outside world, but it is clear that Emily not only took part fully in the practical affairs of the house, as she had always done, but considered herself as the elder sister the head of the house. In of-

fering help to Sue after her youngest child, Gilbert, was born in the summer of 1875, she assumed her authority when she wrote, 'Emily and all that she has are at Sue's service, if of any comfort to Baby - Will send Maggie, if you will accept her.' Six years later, in speaking of a new servant, she referred to herself as 'Head of the Nation' of which he was the foot. It was a normal response to the challenge of circumstances, and it marked a step in her progress toward absorbing her father's power into her own life.

Surprisingly, as one reads the letters of the middle seventies in the order in which they are now arranged, there is a subtle sense of lessening of tension in the structure and style. As in the case of changes in the handwriting, no sharp lines can be drawn marked by definite dates, but certain tendencies are apparent. There are fewer aphorisms and abstractions. The approach is more direct, more related to the particular persons and circumstances with which she is concerned than with the thoughts they have evoked. In a letter to Mrs Holland in 1877 she said, 'The vitality of your syllables compensates for their infrequency. There is not so much Life as *talk* of Life, as a general thing.' Although her own style had never lacked vital energy, her meaning is applicable to her own letters at this time, when a shift of emphasis brought her writing down to a more human level. The difference might be illustrated by two letters to Mrs Holland, each written after the latter had made a visit in Amherst. In 1873 Emily wrote:

Little Sister.

I miss your childlike Voice -
 I miss your Heroism.
 I feel that I lose combinedly a Soldier and a Bird.
 I trust that you experience a trifling destitution.
 Thank you for having been.
 These timid Elixirs are obtained too seldom.

In 1877 her letter began:

I miss my little Sanctuary and her redeeming ways. A Savior in a Nut, is sweeter to the grasp than ponderous Prospectives.

Come again, and go not - which when a faithful invitation, is the sweetest known!

Reduced to the simplest terms, both letters say, 'I miss you. Please come again,' but the first uses images to build a work of art around the friend, who remains as untouchable as if she were encased in crystal.

In the second the phrase 'my little Sanctuary' brings the writer into immediate relation with the friend. There is a vast difference between an invitation so oblique as 'These timid Elixirs are obtained too seldom,' and the direct approach of the 'faithful invitation' in the second letter, 'Come again, and go not,' which sets up a warm current of feeling flowing between the two friends.

Emily was now more deeply enmeshed in the fabric of life than she had ever been while her father lived. Two new relationships began to grow which, with the curious illogicality that often characterizes reality, fulfilled a similar emotional need, though one involved an older person and the other a child. So far in this study, little has been said of Emily's mother, and indeed it is very easy to overlook the fact that she had a mother, so strangely colorless Mrs Dickinson remains in the reader's imagination. Her portrait shows a face of gentle propriety with a deprecating smile. There are no contemporary accounts of her personality except the uncomfortably negative phrases Emily used in describing her to Colonel Higginson: 'I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled' and 'My Mother does not care for thought.' We see her in the letters of Emily's earlier years as an anxious housewife often stricken with illnesses that forced her daughters to take over her duties. She sends eatables to sick neighbors and persons in need, and her coming in from a walk with a burr on her shawl is a matter for comment. After she became paralyzed Emily wrote Mrs Holland, 'Mother misses power to ramble to her Neighbors - and the stale inflation of the minor News.' She seems the embodiment of country gentility, and one wonders how she could ever have felt at home in the company of her own husband and children with their strongly individual traits. It was, perhaps, inevitable that she should become helpless and reverse the relation to that of the child of her daughters. After her death Emily herself explained what had happened. 'We were never intimate Mother and Children while she was our Mother,' she wrote to Mrs Holland, 'but Mines in the same Ground meet by tunneling and when she became our Child, the Affection came.' Lacking a strong, positive experience of the mother-child relationship when she was young, Emily was slow in developing her own mother instinct, but when it came through life's strange reversal, she was able to look back and see that the two had lain 'in the same Ground.'

Emily not only devoted herself to the care of this elderly child,

but extended the feeling that began to live in the new relationship to others outside her home. The sudden increase in these years of the number of little notes to neighbors could not be wholly a matter of chance. Written at first, perhaps, on her mother's behalf, they came to be expressions of her own wish to share the significant events in the lives of those around her, many of whom she had never seen. It was a return after twenty years to a fuller participation in the life of the village, but on terms that she could control, since she now felt free and secure in the way of life her being had demanded.

While Mrs Dickinson was living out her defeated days as a cherished invalid, a new life was beginning to grow in Austin's house next door. During the eight brief years of little Gilbert's life he carried an unusual load of emotional meaning for those closest to him in both houses. His parents were middle-aged when he was born — his mother forty-five and his father a year older. Their other children, Ned and Martha, were fourteen and nine, and if he had not been a particularly winning child he might have suffered as an unwanted member. It was a difficult family situation into which he came, for tensions resulting from temperamental differences had already caused fissures in the fabric of his parents' marriage, and put a strain on the relations between the two houses. It is probable, however, that his very existence brought a measure of peace to the atmosphere, and he seems to have developed as a healthy, intelligent, and sunny child. For two years after his birth he is not mentioned in Emily's letters, and one may suppose that she saw little of him until he was able to roam across the lawn and his endearing personality began to find expression in speech. When she began to write of his exploits the references were all to 'Austin's Baby,' not Susan's, implying that his father took special comfort in his company. 'Vinnie rode last Twilight — with Austin and the Baby, but the latter cried for the Moon, which saddened their Trip.' "Home — sweet Home" — Austin's Baby sings — "there is no place like Home — 'tis too — over to Aunt Vinnie's." 'Austin's Baby says when surprised by statements — "There's — *sumtbn* — else — there's — *Bumbl* — *Beese*."'

Emily's affection and admiration for Sue were sadly torn by her loyalty to Austin, and the joy this little boy brought into his father's life must have been a special relief to her heart. His presence was like fresh air in both houses, but even his own baby charm and his special dearness to his father cannot fully account for Emily's deep attachment to him. It was not only as an adoring aunt that she sent a photo-

graph of him in a letter to Helen Hunt Jackson when he was three years old. It is unfortunate that the letter itself is missing, but its purpose is explained in Mrs Jackson's reply, which begins: 'My face was not "averted" in the least. It was only that I did not speak.' In the final paragraph she says: 'I send back the little baby face to tell you that I had not "averted" my face — only the habit of speaking. It is an earnest and good little face: your brother's child I presume.' Emily, fearing she had been forgotten, had sent Gilbert to plead for her, and Mrs Jackson, deeming his mission unnecessary, used him again as a messenger of reassurance, to speak for her in honest simplicity.

Emily was never possessive in her attachment to Gilbert, for the child's individuality was deeply respected, yet he seemed in a sense peculiarly hers, with a kinship that had its roots in the figure of the eternal child, the symbol of rebirth. Life, which constantly renews itself, had brought her through another cycle in the death of her father and the dependence of her mother, and ushered her into a new phase of her own being.

IV

Anyone who carefully examines the life and mind of Emily Dickinson is constantly checked in making statements about her by the appearance of the opposite characteristic to the one just noted. The fascination of her character is enhanced by paradoxes that continually baffle the observer. She had an extraordinary capacity for love and friendship, yet she shunned society. She was so absorbed in the spiritual world as to seem too ethereal for daily life, yet she could be as earthy as the bread, cakes, and puddings she made, and could turn instantly from a preoccupation with infinity to a playful and pithy humor. Full of tender sympathy for anyone she knew who was wronged, she could be merciless in her characterizations and was highly intolerant of stupidity. Although she was intensely concerned with the larger movements of life as they affected people she knew, she was seemingly unmoved by the predicaments of society in general. Her fear of contact with strangers was matched by the boldness of her thought, and her physical frailty by a vigor of spirit she could scarcely control. Perhaps the secret of her contradictions lay in the fact that she lived always so close to her own center that she maintained a tension between the opposites that left her free from domina-

tion by either side. If one is tempted by her failure to meet the world on its own terms to label her a neurotic, she suddenly blows away all categories by a revelation of how superbly she lived all that was vital within her chosen limits, never shirking or failing to meet whatever experience came to her in all its implications.

Opposites played an important part in her life, not only within herself but in the circumstances that affected her. The times of greatest vitality, when there was an upsurge of powerful emotions, provided the most violent contrasts of light and dark, joy and pain. Such was the case in the year 1878. The dullness of days spent in caring for her gentle but dependent invalid were relieved by the delight of surprises afforded by the budding personality of the little boy next door. At the same time a poignant grief had come in the death of Samuel Bowles at the beginning of the year. Although she felt herself to be 'strongly built' emotionally and able to meet the face of sorrow, the loss of this intensely admired friend not only hurt her deeply, but brought once more to the surface the unanswered questions of the meaning of death and the hope of immortality. In almost every letter of the time and in a number of the poems, these questions recur. Her feeling demanded that she touch those who were closest to the friend she had lost. She poured out her sympathy to Mrs Bowles, on whose friendship she had long ceased to count. She also opened her heart to Maria Whitney, a cousin of Mrs Bowles who had been much with the family, and whose congenial companionship with her husband Mrs Bowles had not always found acceptable. She was living in a world of uncertainty and pain, but of strong and deep emotion that in itself gave meaning to life. It was at this time, when all the avenues of her feeling were wide open, that a wholly new experience began to take place.

It was natural that the two sisters, Emily and Lavinia, should have turned after their father's death to his most trusted friend for the comfort and counsel that only a man of wisdom and understanding could give. Judge Otis Phillips Lord is the only man who has been spoken of as an intimate friend of Edward Dickinson's, and it is probable that no one else came so close to that 'pure and terrible' heart. Political and legal associates, neighbors and members of the Amherst College faculty deeply respected Mr Dickinson, but few saw him in any but the particular aspect in which they happened to have relations with him. Judge Lord, who had been a student at Amherst in the early years of

the Dickinsons' marriage, had been for most of his life on a standing of intimacy with the family, and as long as Emily could remember he and his wife had been annual visitors in their home. Since they were a childless couple, they became much attached to the young people as well as to their father, and Lavinia had often visited them in Salem.

Though his dignity carried great weight on the bench, Judge Lord's nature was warm and genial, and it was evident that a special sympathy was early established between him and Emily. She wrote of him after his death, 'Calvary and May wrestled in his Nature,' and her intuition was well fitted to bring the two into accord as she encountered them. Her mind, accustomed to cutting across all the conventional lines of thought in which his profession involved him, must have been both refreshing and stimulating to him. On her side, one can imagine, his keen and informed intelligence, lighted by the 'May' in his nature, drew her out and enhanced the iridescent play of her own thoughts. She probably counted him as a correspondent even before her father's death, and afterwards both she and Lavinia seem to have written to him with some regularity. None of the letters he received from them have been found, but a letter from him to Lavinia still exists that shows his attitude toward both sisters. It is undated, but can be quite accurately placed in March 1877 by the references it contains. Some excerpts follow:

There has not been a day since the receipt of your letter written in January, (I am ashamed to say) that I have not had it in my mind to write to you; but I have been either in court all [day] or in consultation with my associates or writing opinions and in the evening I have felt jaded with aching eyes and the listlessness and ennui of solitaire with one or more packs of cards has been the summit of my capacity; and I still have thought of you & of Emily, whose last note gave me a good deal of uneasiness, for knowing how entirely unselfish she is, and how unwilling to disclose any ailment, I fear that she has been more ill, than she has told me. I hope you will tell me particularly about her. . . .

I have felt anxious also about your health, for I know how wearing your incessant cares and the necessary anxieties of your situation are, but I hope that you will be able before a great while to run away from them and come and see us. Have you any idea how long it is since you have been here

Elizabeth [Mrs Lord] has had a great deal of rheumatism or neuralgia or of both and a great part of the time is quite lame; but she is as uncomplaining and as thoughtful of everybody's comfort except her own as she has ever been, and is the only "crown of glory" I have ever, thus far, had. . . . Elizabeth joins me in love to you, and to all. I wish you would give

me *full* accounts of the health of *each* of you. We often think and often talk of you if we do not to you. . . . With *much* love and *some* hope of amendment on my part, I remain

Affectionately

L.

Before the end of the year in which this letter was written, Judge Lord lost his 'crown of glory.' In his loneliness after the death of his wife, he seems to have been drawn more and more to the family at Amherst, and his special tenderness toward Emily deepened into another kind of love, which perhaps had long been latent in his feeling for her. It was probably less than a year after the death of his wife that Emily began a series of letters to him that remained as drafts and copies among her own papers when she died. There is no way of knowing how closely they parallel the actual letters she sent him, and nothing else remains that could throw light on the relation that brought them into being. It is only as they reveal her own feeling that we can in some measure reconstruct the story of one of the most important emotional experiences of her life.

It is with a sense of diffidence, almost with apology, that one approaches these intimate expressions of love from a sensitive woman of forty-eight, for whom privacy was a paramount requirement, written to a man of dignity and authority eighteen years her senior and newly widowed. Neither the romantic sentiment of her own time nor the baldly realistic approach of a later generation allows for uncharted adventures of love under such circumstances. But love appears in many guises, and that it was a deep mutual attachment cannot be doubted. Emily Dickinson, who lived always apart from the outer world's judgments and close to the essentials of the inner world, gave place only to the values that she could recognize as true for her, allowing life to happen as it would. The insistence of nature on trying to bring to completion and fruition each of its creatures is seen in the psychic realm in the tendency of each human being to find, at some time and in some way, an outlet for the various drives inherent within him. The time was ripe for Emily to find a kind of love she had not known before. Her earlier experience of love had been a part of her own psychic upheaval, and whatever the degree of mutual attraction may have been, a relation on the plane of reality had hardly existed. Her years of solitary exploration of the deeper places of the soul and her ability to transform into art what she found there had brought her at last more

fully into the stream of life itself. Her response to the loneliness of a man who had lost a loved partner of many years may have brought into flowering in him a renewal of an earlier passion, transforming the deep affection he felt for her, both as his friend's daughter and as a rare person in her own right, into the full love of a man for a woman. It is possible that he asked her to marry him, for the earlier letters show that an intimate relation had been discussed between them, and in a later letter she wrote:

You said with loved timidity in asking me to your dear Home, you would "try not to make it unpleasant." So delicate a diffidence, how beautiful to see! I do not think a Girl extant has so divine a modesty.

You even call me to your Breast with apology! Of what must my poor Heart be made?

From the first of the existing letters to those she wrote after four years of accepted love, freely expressed, it is clear that complete intimacy, either in marriage or without, was to be denied, yet the possibility of it was fully acknowledged between them. Even if the care of her invalid mother had not stood in the way of marriage, she probably would have found such a change impossible after so many years of personal independence. She knew that the best she had to give was of the spirit, and although she felt her attitude called for forgiveness on the part of her lover, she was certain that it was right to keep their relations within the area where she could move most freely.

The fulfillment that came to Emily Dickinson through this attachment cannot be explained on a basis of the usual patterns. The events and the relationships in her life can never be put into categories established by average experience. The friendship of these two was outside the conventions, and was understood by themselves alone, though its significance was accepted by her brother and sister. The Judge's niece, who was deeply suspicious and resentful of what she did not understand, was not entirely unjustified in declaring that Emily was immoral, for Emily was not guided by the tenets of accepted behavior. Her morality was based on the laws of the spirit.

Emily's letters to Judge Lord, often playful, sometimes extravagant, suggest a background of dedication close to that of marriage. Yet after four years of correspondence with him on such a level, it was of another man she wrote when she spoke of her 'closest earthly friend' at the time of Dr Wadsworth's death. To Judge Lord, whom she called in the earliest letter to him 'My lovely Salem,' she referred to Dr Wadsworth

as 'my Philadelphia.' No one could touch her on all sides, but her love could flow out to more than one man, each filling his own place in her life. Samuel Bowles had died before the beginning of the intense period in her friendship with Judge Lord, but her feeling for him too had been love of a special kind. She found in Bowles an enchantment of the spirit, a delight that was close to aesthetic emotion. On the other hand, her love for Lord was brought down to earth by mutual acceptance, and allowed to live on terms of personal attachment. Coming to her as he did in a period of transition, when she was still haunted by the memory of her father, and at first appearing in a fatherly aspect himself, he was able to bring her through to a new phase of experience by a love that was real, warm, and frankly of a sexual nature. Her emotional life now found a center outside herself on which she could focus all her womanly feeling. It was her refuge from the sameness of the daily round and the source of strength and warmth in her relations with others. When she heard of Higginson's engagement to his second wife she wrote, 'Till it has loved - no man or woman can become itself.' She was just then finding this sort of self-realization in her own life.

There was now a time of expansion, reaching its height in 1880 and 1881, when the letters show a busy life filled with work and daily cares, in which she was supported by her weekly letters from her lover while she reached out with hand and heart to family and friends. There is a gaiety in some of the letters of this period that is hardly matched in any others. Not only little Gilbert, but her older nephew Ned became a playfellow with whom she shared ideas that amused her, and some of her most brilliant shafts of humor run through other letters of these years. At the same time her sympathy to friends to whom sorrow had come never flowed more warmly or simply, and her letters to them must have carried healing in their wealth of human understanding.

The comfort and joy of emotional fulfillment were not to last many years. The high tide of life had come late in the day and the inevitable ebb began as night advanced. She felt the first pull of the retreating waters when, on the first of April 1882, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth died. In the feeling of insecurity that followed this loss, she wrote to Judge Lord on the thirtieth of the month:

I am told it is only a pair of Sundays since you went from me. I feel it many years. Today is April's last - it has been an April of meaning to me. I have been in your Bosom. My Philadelphia has passed from Earth,

and the Ralph Waldo Emerson – whose name my Father's Law Student taught me, has touched the secret Spring. Which Earth are we in?

Heaven, a Sunday or two ago – but that also has ceased –

Momentousness is ripening. I hope that all is firm. Could we yield each other to the impregnable chances till we had met once more?

Before the letter was mailed 'momentousness' had overtaken Judge Lord himself, for he was suddenly stricken with a serious illness from which he never fully recovered, and which marked the beginning of two years of declining powers. Six months later, when the mother whose little needs Emily had tended so long passed beyond her care, her death left Emily with more than a disengagement of the hands. It meant the loss of a tenderly cherished burden, such as a mother feels at the death of a hopelessly handicapped child whose going breaks the strongest tie to the reality of daily life. She wrote to Judge Lord:

I cannot conjecture a form of space without her timid face. Speaking to you as I feel, Dear, without that Dress of Spirit must be worn for most, Courage is quite changed.

Before another year had passed her courage was almost broken when the beloved child next door, eight-year-old Gilbert, was swept away in a violent illness of only a few days' duration. With his dearly loved person went far more of life than a child's experience could possibly encompass. To Emily his going meant not only the closing of a door to the bright region of childhood, where special values exist that are separate from those of the adult world, but the cutting off of the future with which he was her principal link. It was while she was still struggling to take up life again after the illness that followed this overwhelming blow that Judge Lord reached the end of his downward road and died, after a brief illness, in March 1884. Although the shock she felt at the time he was first stricken nearly two years before had probably been the greater, the event of his peaceful dying marked the culmination of her grief, made more poignant, doubtless, because its depth could not be disclosed to her friends. Life for her was now stripped of its creative relationships, and while she still had the warmth of family affection in her devoted sister and brother, and friends with whom she felt the ties of common experience, death had undermined the structure in which she lived.

In the letters that were written in the intervals between ensuing periods of illness, the themes of loss and the memory of those that

are gone lie heavily below the immediate concerns that occasioned the writing of them.

To attempt to speak of what has been, would be impossible. Abyss has no Biographer —

Every jostling of the Spirit barbs the Loss afresh — even the coming out of the Sun after an Hour's Rain, intensifies their Absence —

Show me Eternity, and I will show you Memory —
Both in one package lain
And lifted back again —

In one letter to an old friend whom she had not seen for many years, she said simply, 'The Dyings have been too deep for me.' Death, which in earlier times had plagued and followed her as a fascinating riddle, a distant terror, or a grim lover, was now a heavy encroaching shadow, immediate and inevitable, as great a mystery as ever, but unanswerable and all demanding.

Always deeply reticent, Emily did not write to her friends about the inner adjustments that must have come with failing health, and the record of her thoughts during the closing years is found oftener between the lines than in them. When the ill body made the spirit dim, she was, in her own words to Higginson, 'bereft of Book and Thought.' When she was able to take up her pencil again, her innate courtesy and consideration for others demanded that she write little notes of thanks to inquiring neighbors, or letters to friends that dwelt more on their concerns than her own. Among her papers, after her death, were many scraps and fragments of drafts for poems and letters, some of which may have been written during that time, but the handwriting of such notes and jottings shows less variation from year to year than that of letters actually sent, and consequently they have not been definitely dated. Such a fragment as the following could very well have been the substance of a poem projected in her later years but never written:

The consciousness of subsiding power is too startling to be admitted by men — but [best] comprehended by the meadow over which the Flood has quivered (comprehended perhaps by the Meadow, over which Floods have [quivered] — rumbled —), when the waters return to their kindred, and the tillage (acre —) is left alone —

Two poems that can with some certainty be dated about 1884 betray the despairing moments she passed through during that difficult year.

Oh Future! thou secreted peace
Or subterranean wo –
Is there no wandering route of grace
That leads away from thee –
No circuit sage of all the course
Descried by cunning Men
To balk thee of thy sacred Prey –
Advancing to thy Den –

In this poem she is still in the midst of a struggle, but in the second she has capitulated and gives herself up, while still alive, to the experience of death she can now share with those who are gone.

So give me back to Death –
The Death I never feared
Except that it deprived of thee –
And now, by Life deprived,
In my own Grave I breathe
And estimate it's size –
It's size is all that Hell can guess –
And all that Heaven was –

The dissolving world in which Emily now found herself brought her within two years into a position that is seldom reached at her age by those who live in the ever shifting circles of a broader environment. It is probable that a lifelong physical weakness began at this time to develop into the disease that brought about her death two years later, but in the finer adjustments of mind and body it is impossible to tell which is cause and which is effect. Death was now the medium through which she saw life. With the pervasion of a sense of finality there seems to have come no clear and steady vision of immortality such as sometimes illumines the last years of the aged. When at the time of Judge Lord's dangerous illness she had written to Washington Gladden, whose liberal preaching and writing had brought him into prominence, to ask if immortality were true, she was seeking help for herself, though she made her friend's peace of mind her excuse. After his death she made it clear in a letter to his friend Benjamin Kimball that he had found peace of mind in a different way.

Perhaps to solidify his faith was for him impossible, and if for him, how more, for us! . . .

Neither fearing Extinction, nor prizing Redemption, he believed alone.
Victory was his Rendezvous –

While Dr Wadsworth lived she leaned on the security of his faith when her own wavered, as she implied when she wrote to Charles Clark in October 1883:

These thoughts disquiet me, and the great friend is gone, who could solace them. Do they disturb you?

The Spirit lasts – but in what mode –
 Below, the Body speaks,
 But as the Spirit furnishes –
 Apart, it never talks –
 The Music in the Violin
 Does not emerge alone
 But Arm in Arm with Touch, yet Touch
 Alone – is not a Tune –
 The Spirit lurks within the Flesh
 Like Tides within the Sea
 That make the Water live, estranged
 What would the Either be?
 Does that know – now – or does it cease –
 That which to this is done,
 Resuming at a mutual date
 With every future one?
 Instinct pursues the Adamant,
 Exacting this Reply –
 Adversity if it may be, or
 Wild Prosperity,
 The Rumor's Gate was shut so tight
 Before my Mind was sown,
 Not even a Prognostic's Push
 Could make a Dent thereon –

The final quatrain, so forceful in its denial of the slightest possibility of finding an answer to her questions that she used it in slightly variant form in three separate poems, betrays the urgency of her search. She seemed to assume that for Dr Wadsworth himself the Heaven he believed in was realized at his death, but closer to her own mind was Judge Lord's open uncertainty. The glimpses of immortality she had been given all through her life in moments of ecstatic insight from an unknown source had never become for her a solid foundation for faith in conscious life after death. One of the last datable poems, left unfinished, as if the thought itself were never completed, is in a mood of protest against the inescapable, omnipresent concept of immortality.

Why should we hurry – why indeed
When every way we fly
We are molested equally
by immortality
no respite from the inference
that this which is begun
though where it's labors lie
A bland uncertainty
Besets the sight
This mighty night

The disjointedness of the last four lines, obviously jotted down for later testing, and the force of the word 'Tragedy,' underlined twice, standing in the center of the page, portray a mood in which the prospect of absolute extinction would be preferable to the torment of the unknowable.

It need not be assumed, however, that Emily lived in an atmosphere of gloom. On the contrary, when the ties that held her to life were cut one by one, she seemed to find new freedom and detachment that brought added meaning to the smallest events. She followed the happenings in the lives of friends and neighbors with as much concern as she had felt in earlier years, and in her letters to them was able to share their feelings and meet their moods, writing to each in the vein best suited to that one's age or type of mind. She never lost her joy in playing with words, and her sense of fun still lurked ready for provocation, even under grim circumstances. After a burglary had occurred at Austin's house in November, 1885, the month that marked the beginning of her last long period of illness, she wrote to Ned, 'Burglaries have become so frequent, is it quite safe to leave the Golden Rule out over night?' It was scarcely a month before she died that she gave her aunt Mrs Currier an account of a local scandal, commenting, 'Dont you think Fumigation ceased when Father died?'

There was even an intensification of perception in her last years, which she recognized when she wrote to Mrs Holland late in 1884:

All grows strangely emphatic, and I think if I should see you again, I sh'd begin every sentence with "I say unto you –" The Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference –

Everything was seen in the intensely clear light that sometimes occurs just after sundown. It is even possible that she came nearer than ever before to arresting the transitory ecstacy of which all her life she had

received fleeting experiences. One of the last poems she completed gives ecstasy a place of supreme value in a world from which everything else had been taken away. It seems to have had great meaning for her at the time, for she incorporated it into letters to three friends during the year 1885, in which it appears as verse in letters to Mr and Mrs Loomis and to Helen Hunt Jackson, and as prose in a little note to Samuel Bowles the younger, each time given a different connotation.

Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy,
 And I am richer then than all my Fellow Men –
 Ill it becometh me to dwell so wealthily
 When at my very Door are those possessing more,
 In abject poverty –

Her business was no longer Circumference, but, as she said of the Bible, the Centre. Of immortality as a future state she was never sure, and human love was too vulnerable to loss to be relied on as a force with which to encounter death. Ecstasy, the gift of the gods, was the living flame at the center of the poet's own being. After all else was taken away she found the spark still burning. It was as a poet that she must take leave of life, sure of nothing except the unnamed meaning at the core of life itself.

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