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Science and the Poet: Emily Dickinson's Herbarium and "The Clue Divine"

Richard B. Sewall

Take Emily's herbarium far enough, and you have *her*. It foreshadowed much of what was to come. To be sure, it was the product — and the delight — of her girlhood; after she turned fourteen, we hear no more about it. She soon graduated to a full-scale conservatory. But as Conrad wrote of one of his youthful characters, "Everything is inherent in the genesis"; and in the care she took in the herbarium, in the precise botanical knowledge it displays, in the fine composition of every page, the bent of her nature is clear: she was a "maker" from the beginning. At fourteen (we read in the letters) she was "working a beautiful bookmark" for a friend and making a pair of slippers "to adorn my father's feet." She made bread. (It is rumored that her father would eat none other.) She could draw reasonably well; her English compositions were famous at school; and as her skill on the piano increased, she delighted in improvising. Before long, she became the true maker, what the Greeks called *poietai* ("maker"), what we call poet. "We play at Paste," begins a poem of her maturity, "Till qualified, for Pearl —" (P320, c. 1862).¹

But the herbarium went beyond play. The delight she took in it was more than a matter of following a fashionable hobby, although she knew all about that, too. At fourteen, she wrote her friend Abiah Root, "Have you made an herbarium yet? I hope you will if you have not, it would be such a treasure to you; 'most all the girls are making one" (L6). And just as she boasted that her letters were the best in her group, you can be sure she intended first place for her herbarium. The word "treasure," though, cuts deeper. Hardly a letter of her early years fails to mention "my Plants," "our garden," the weather, or the look of the land. Once she regretted having no flowers before her to "inspire" the letter she was about to write (L7). Although she was more specific, later on, about color, fragrance, form, we can see even here, in this "treasure" of her girlhood, the beginnings of what was to become a lifelong passion and support.

The support had deeper sources than surface charms. Beauty became identified with truth, and the truth — hints of it, glimpses into it, the possibility of it — was

RICHARD B. SEWALL is Professor of English, *Emeritus*, at Yale University.

¹ Throughout, quotations from the poems are from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955). Quotations from the letters are from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).

I have followed the dates and the numbering of the poems and letters in these editions. (In my text, P and L stand for poems and letters, respectively, *Life* for my *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974.)

transcendent. Flowers, plants, grasses, lovely as they were in themselves, were more than the ample bounty of nature. They became emblematic. Blake saw “Heaven in a wild flower,” and so, *mutatis mutandis*, did she. Listen to the way she consoled her ailing “Master” in one of those greatest of all love letters (she is now close to thirty):

I would that all I love, should be weak no more. The Violets are by my side, the Robin very near, and “Spring” — they say, Who is she — going by the door —

Indeed it is God’s house — and these are the gates of Heaven, and to and fro, the angels go, with their sweet postilions — (L187)

She was seldom so mystical. Mostly, heaven was *there* (at least, in possibility) and earth was very much *here*. In her late twenties, she wrote Samuel Bowles, “The Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superceded I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally” (L193). Flowers helped mediate that troublesome distance between bush and hand; they were a continual reminder of what might be. They stood, not as in so much lyric poetry, as emblems of mortality (“And this same flower that smiles today/Tomorrow will be dying”) but as emblems of immortality — and this even though she often lamented their evanescence and feared the frosts that killed them. Once, her friend Mrs. Edward Tuckerman sent her half a bouquet that had come to her as a gift. Here is part of Emily’s note of thanks:

The immortality of Flowers must enrich our own, and we certainly should resent a Redemption that excluded them —

Was not the “Breath of fragrance” designed for your cheek solely?

The fear that it was — crimsons my own — though to divide it’s Heaven is Heaven’s highest Half.” (L528)

When she wrote this, she was in her mid-forties. The theme persisted to the very end. In one of her last letters, probably written during the last spring of her life, she wrote Mrs. Dickerman, wife of the pastor of the First Church (the “Dickinson church”), possibly to thank her for a bouquet of wild flowers:

Daphne always seems to me a more civic Arbutus, though the sweet Barbarian will forgive me if the suggestion is invidious, for are not both as beautiful as Delight can make them?

If we love Flowers, are we not “born again” every Day, without the distractions of Nicodemus? Not to outgrow Genesis, is a sweet monition — (L1037)

So the spirit of the herbarium — that device which gives flowers themselves a kind of immortality — spanned her life, a constant joy and inspiration. A closer look at what started it all — at the “genesis” — will bring us closer, in turn, to an aspect of her poetry that needs emphasizing. Granted that her love of flowers came naturally (it doesn’t always, even with country children). Add to that, the influence of her mother, who loved flowers and kept a fine garden. Her father must have been some help — he gave her the conservatory. Even as an early teenager, she could have imbibed much from her general reading. The “language of flowers” was a popular phrase of the day — and seldom neglected by poets of any day. There is plenty of botanical knowledge in Shakespeare, her favorite from the first; modern botanists wonder at the range and preciseness of his knowledge. The English romantic poets she loved were full of it, of course. (Their theorist, Rousseau, was among other things, a botanist.) There are several dozen flowers, “bowery clefts

Opposite page: Folio 27 from Emily Dickinson’s Herbarium. Photograph by David A. Loggie. By permission of the Houghton Library.

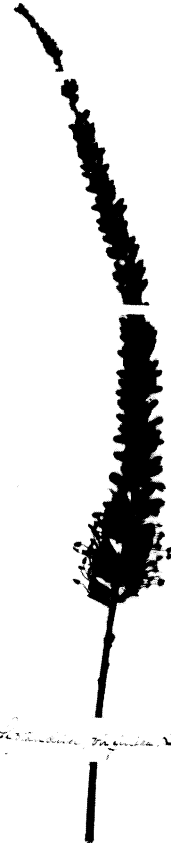




Trifolium repens L.



Lupinus albus L.



Antirrhinum majus L.



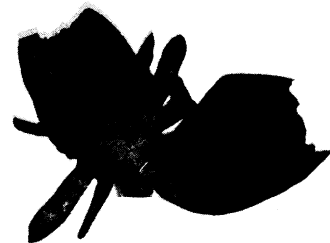
Carduus arvensis L.



Antirrhinum L.



Carduus pumiliatus L.



and leafy shelves," in Keats's "I stood tip-toe": marigolds, violets, bluebells, "lush laburnam." Shelley's Sensitive Plant (*mimosa pudica*) suffers the fate of all vegetation, come autumn, but stands for Shelley as an emblem of beauty that never dies. Closer to home, she could have read Emerson's meditation upon the beauty of the rhodora or thrilled to his mystic sense of oneness with the universe in *Nature* (we know she knew his essays). Why she said no more about Thoreau than a passing remark or two is a mystery, since of all these it is with him, I think, that she shows most affinity. The section, "Spring," in *Walden*, is part rhapsody, part hymn ("I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me"), and part geological/botanical report. Thoreau looked at nature poetically but with a trained eye — and (this is the point) so did she.

The training came during her seven years in Amherst Academy, which she entered in 1840, age nine. It was no ordinary school. Among its founders in 1814 — it preceded Amherst College by seven years — were Emily's grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, salutatorian of his class at Dartmouth, 1795, and Noah Webster, chairman of its first Board of Trustees. By the time Emily entered the Academy, the curriculum that accounted for her training was in full swing, the result of the influence on both college and school of one man, Professor Edward Hitchcock, geologist, astronomer, botanist, ordained Congregational minister, poet. Coming from Benjamin Stillman's laboratory in New Haven to Amherst in 1825, he established the reputation of the college as a leader in the natural sciences on a par with Yale and Harvard. His influence was pervasive. His lectures at the College were open to students of the Academy. Mary Lyon, a scientist herself, sat at his feet as she laid plans for Mount Holyoke. A robust, hearty man, he led young people of the town and college on nature excursions. (We know Austin went on one, and probably Emily did.) It could be said that he opened the minds — and sharpened the eyes — of a whole generation of Amherst youth. In 1845 when he was installed as President of the College, his Inaugural Address, while not overlooking matters moral and religious, was a paean of praise for the beauties of the Amherst countryside. In 1845 he began a series of lectures in the College which were published five years later under the title *Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons*. Emily could have heard the lectures or read the book. They were Hitchcock at his best, an extraordinary combination of orthodox piety, aesthetic delight, and sharp scientific observation. The frontispiece of the book, an engraving in color, depicts an idealized landscape, a little pond with trees and bushes, all burgeoning with the emerging life of spring — a butterfly coming from a cocoon, a frog from polywogs in the pond, a bird hovering about her nest, and spring flowers everywhere. The caption under the picture reads, "Emblems of the Resurrection." Years later, in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whose essays on nature she admired, Emily made this tribute to Hitchcock's influence: "When Flowers annually died and I was a child, I used to read Dr. Hitchcock's Book on the Flowers of North America. This comforted their Absence — assuring me they lived" (L488). In point of fact, the book was Hitchcock's *Catalogue of Plants Growing Without Cultivation in the Vicinity of Amherst College* (1829). Emily's mistake can be forgiven. To her at age nine, ten, eleven, the vicinity of Amherst College was North America.

The curriculum of Amherst Academy was rich in studies that would appeal to this young lover of nature. It was well beyond "the three R's" we usually associate with those supposedly unenlightened days. Listen to Emily, age eleven, describing

Opposite page: Folio 31 from Emily Dickinson's Herbarium. Photograph by David A. Loggie. By permission of the Houghton Library.

her studies to her older friend, Jane Humphrey: "I am in the class that you used to be in in Latin — besides Latin I study History and Botany. I like the school very much indeed" (L3). In a letter to Abiah Root, three years later, she boasted of her studies in "Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin, and Botany. How large they sound, don't they? I don't believe you have such big studies" (L6). From then on, it is not clear precisely what she studied of a scientific nature, but the curriculum included geography, natural history, physiology, chemistry, algebra, anatomy, and astronomy. Add Natural Theology, Ecclesiastical History, Ancient History, Greek, Logic, and English, and the Hitchcockian mix is obvious. No wonder she wrote to Abiah, "We have a very fine school."

Botany and horticulture were constants, then, both in her schooling and in her out-of-school pursuits, of which latter the herbarium and the conservatory are typical. They deserve a word more. She helped her mother in the family garden and, presumably, had one of her own. A letter of January 1846 (she had just turned fifteen) describes the "principal round of my occupation" as involving music lessons, two hours practice a day, German lessons, and "a large stand of plants to cultivate" (L9). From Mount Holyoke the next year, she asked about her plants at home: "How do the plants look now & are they as flourishing as before I went away? I wish much to see them" (L17). That spring was a fine one at Mount Holyoke. She wrote Abiah: "How glad I am that spring has come, and how it calms my mind when wearied with study to walk out in the green fields and beside the pleasant streams in which South Hadley is rich!" (L23). She reminded Abiah of the rambles they used to take in Amherst and the "beautiful children of spring," the wild flowers they found in such abundance "which I will mention," she wrote, "and see if you have found them, — the trailing arbutus, adder's tongue, yellow violets, liverleaf, blood-root, and many other smaller flowers." And five years later it's still the joy of spring, and the flowers, those "blessed, ministering spirits unto you and me, and us all" — quite literally, in Hitchcock's phrase, Emblems of the Resurrection:

Did you ever know that a flower, once withered and freshened again, became an immortal flower — that is, that it rises again? I think resurrections here are sweeter, it may be, than the longer and lasting one — for you expect the one, and only hope for the other. (L91)

(Theologically, she never got much further. "I dwell in Possibility," begins a later poem, "A fairer House than Prose —" [P657]. And flowers helped.)

Her studies in school and during her year at Mount Holyoke reinforced the piety she was brought up on but added an important dimension: the scientific. To be sure, the religious slant was everywhere. A history text (John Emerson Worcester, *Elements of History*) used in the school presented its subject "as an exhibition of the conduct of Divine Providence." Readings in literature were limited to those of orthodox teaching (even Shakespeare was suspect). The sciences were justified as ways of understanding the wonders and beauty of God's Creation. Emily's botany text, the enormously popular *Familiar Lectures on Botany* (Hartford, 1815) by Mrs. Almira H. Lincoln (Phelps) of the Troy Female Seminary, insisted upon this theme (it was Hitchcock's) throughout. Here is Mrs. Phelps's introductory note "To Teachers":

The Author indulges the hope that this book will not only afford assistance, but gratification, to Teachers in the pursuance of the severe and often *ennuyant* duties of their profession; — that it may serve to interest and quicken the dull intellects of

some pupils, to arrest the fugitive attention of others, and to relax the minds of the over-studious, by leading them all into paths *strewed with flowers*, and teaching them that these beautiful creations of Almighty Power are designed, not merely to delight by their fragrance, color, and form, but to illustrate the most logical divisions of Science, the deepest principles of Physiology, and the benevolence of God.

And to the students, as she came to the end of Lecture I, she offered these inducements:

The *vegetable world* offers a boundless field of inquiry, which may be explored with the most pure and delightful emotions. Here the Almighty seems to manifest himself to us, with less of that dazzling sublimity which it is almost painful to behold in His more magnificent creations; and it would seem, that accommodating the vegetable world to our capacities of observation, He had especially designed it for our investigation and amusement, as well as our sustenance and comfort.

There are some students, she admitted, who "seem blindly to overlook" these gifts.

But [she concluded] those who feel in their hearts a love of God, and who see in the natural world the workings of His power, can look abroad, and adopting the language of a christian poet, exclaim,
"My Father made them all."

And so it was throughout the *Lectures*. There are forty-seven in the 1845 edition, plus an elaborate section on Classification; a "Practical Botanist's Companion"; a guide to "The Symbolical Language of Flowers" (e.g., myrtle = Love; myrtle withered = Love betrayed); and a vocabulary of botanical terms. Hardly a lecture ends without some moral or religious sentiment, as in this tribute to Newton, Locke, Watts, and Paley, those "great and good men" who "made their treasures of knowledge subservient to one great design, that of learning the character of God, and their duty to him, and of instructing their fellow-men in these sublime and important truths." This is the essence of Mrs. Phelps's piety. It is always directed toward God the Creator, never to his Son.² It keeps clear of doctrines that, in her maturity, Emily Dickinson found unacceptable, like predestination and innate corruption (L193); or forever tantalizing, like the "Flood subject," immortality (L319), that kept her awake at night (L332). It is quite conceivable that, while relishing the instruction, she absorbed the piety without question. There was plenty to feed her young enthusiasms, like a paragraph on the delights of botanical excursions and careful instructions on preparing and preserving herbariums (all this in Lecture V). Mrs. Phelps asked nothing but diligence, a sharp eye, and a proper sense of love and wonder. When Emily, at age fifteen, wrote *Abiah Root*, "I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ" (L13), she described a sacrifice that Mrs. Phelps did not demand. When years later, she wrote her sister-in-law, "Oh Matchless Earth — We underrate the chance to dwell in Thee" (L347), she echoed a sentiment with which Mrs. Phelps and Edward Hitchcock would have entirely agreed. A remarkable passage in a book that must have been in the writing during Emily's years at Amherst Academy, Hitchcock's *Religion of Geology* (1851), describes almost rhapsodically what impelled these pious scientists as they practiced their profession:

² There is at least one exception. In a lyrical passage that begins Lecture XVII, Mrs. Phelps exclaimed: "How impressively is the reanimation of the vegetable world urged

by St. Paul, as an argument to prove the *resurrection from the dead!*"

All I contend is that scientific truth . . . ought to fan and feed the flame of true piety in the hearts of its cultivators. He . . . who knows the most of science . . . is not confined . . . to the outer court of nature's magnificent temple, but he is admitted to its interior, and is allowed to trace its long halls, and aisles, and galleries, and gaze upon its lofty domes and arches; nay, as a priest he enters the penetralia, the holy of holies, where sacred fire is always burning on the altars. . . . He ought to go forth from it among his fellow-men with radiant glory on his face. . . .

Something of this fervor, surely, was in her remark to Higginson in a letter of early 1863:

I was thinking, today — as I noticed, that the
 “Supernatural,” was only the Natural, disclosed —
 Not “revelation” — 'tis — that waits
 But our unfurnished eyes —

(L280)

Still later, in a conversation recorded by Higginson, she rejected utterly his suggestion that perhaps she was bored in Amherst, with no “employment, never going off the place and never seeing any visitor.” “I find ecstasy in living,” she replied, “the mere sense of living is joy enough” (L342a). And a good deal of this sufficing joy was generated in those early years when the “furnishing” of her eyes began.

Piety or no piety, joy or no joy, lessons had to be learned — in the early years, we can assume, mostly by rote. There is enough in Mrs. Phelps's second Lecture (the first was on the elevating uses of the study of botany) to keep a busy young memorizer engaged for some time. Derivations are insisted upon. To establish the proper perspective, Mrs. Phelps began with the noblest of all studies, Theology “from the Greek *Theos*, God, and *logos*, a discourse”; Metaphysics: “from *meta*, beyond, and *phusis*, nature.” Then comes Natural History: Zoology, “from *zoe*, life, and *logos*, a discourse”; Botany, “from the Greek, *botane*, an herb;” and Mineralogy, “of which Geology is a branch” [no derivation here]. All terms are defined: Zoology “treats of animals,” Botany “treats of the vegetable kingdom, including everything which grows, *having root, stem, leaf, or flower.*” The major categories for the study of botany are established: “Systematic and Physiological. Systematic Botany is divided into *artificial* and *natural* methods. . . .” There are twenty-one classes of plants: “Each class is divided into Orders, the Orders into Genera (the plural of genus, a family or tribe), and the Genera into Species. . . .” By the end of the second Lecture, Emily would have been introduced to the following: calyx, sepal, corolla, capsule, stamen, pistil, receptacle, pericarp, seed — and the function of these in the reproductive process. By the end of three or four years of such study, given her zeal for the subject, Emily must have emerged a fairly sophisticated young botanist. Certainly she must have mastered enough of the discipline to give her natural enthusiasm a solid basis in fact and method. A late poem (about 1873) may show how much this early study meant to her and how it became “absorbed” (Note: not eliminated) by the themes, human and divine, that occupied her mature creative years: in outline, (as Henry Adams might have put it) The Education of Emily Dickinson:

I thought that nature was enough
 Till Human nature came
 But that the other did absorb

As Parallax³ a Flame —
 Of Human nature just aware
 There added the Divine
 Brief struggle for capacity
 The power to contain

 Is always as the contents
 But give a Giant room
 And you will lodge a Giant
 And not a smaller man

(1286)

The question now is, how did all this — the piety, the joy, the science — affect her poetry? First, the science. Her poems, once she struck her stride, are not remarkable for their botanical lore. She mentions some thirty different species, a few appearing a number of times — daisies, roses, dandelions. Add twenty in the letters and about eighteen trees, shrubs, herbs and grasses, and her list is complete. Not remarkable, perhaps, but not many comparable lyric poets can equal it. What she got from her schooling is most noticeable in the characteristic use she puts to Mrs. Phelps's "vegetable kingdom." Flowers in the poems seldom function as decoration or for mood. For instance: in Wordsworth's lines, "And then my heart with pleasure thrills/And dances with the daffodils," the picture is invigorating, suggesting the vitality and joy that replace the poet's vacant and pensive mood. But it is a picture — the daffodils fluttering and dancing in the breeze. Emily Dickinson was more interested in process, how daffodils come to be and what the process suggests. Three years before she died, she wrote a friend, "I have long been a Lunatic on Bulbs, though screened by my friends, as Lunacy on any theme is better undivulged" (L823). Many years earlier she had celebrated the tubular process as a beautiful but hidden mystery in a little poem that coupled it with that other mysterious process, the transformation of the caterpillar into the butterfly, one of Hitchcock's "Emblems of the Resurrection." So here are two Emblems, hints — but hints only — of Resurrection. We "peasants" look on and wonder:

So from the mould
 Scarlet and Gold
 Many a Bulb will rise —
 Hidden away, cunningly,
 From sagacious eyes.

³ *parallax*: Emily's dictionary defines the term as follows: "In *astronomy*, the change of place in a heavenly body in consequence of being viewed from different points." (*An American Dictionary of the English Language*, by Noah Webster [Springfield, Mass., 1828]. I quote from the 1851 edition, revised by Chauncey A. Goodrich.) A variant for *parallax* in the MS of the poem is *firmament*, which makes less of a demand on the lay reader. Although Emily tended to play down her education, as in her famous letter to Higginson: "I went to school — but in your manner of the phrase — had no education," (L261) she was not above a bit of display. Another poem of about the

same time describes the failure of delight to live up to anticipation as "Enchantment's Perihelion" — that is, close to the sun but not the sun itself. In both these astronomical terms, which she turns off so casually, I detect the influence of Edward Hitchcock, who as a young man nearly ruined his health in his nightly study of the stars. The "Brief struggle for capacity" (line seven) describes with fine economy what she went through in her formative years to get her bearings as a poet. The last five lines indicate, I think, her sense of achievement. She did not underestimate herself.

So from Cocoon
 Many a Worm
 Leap so Highland gay,
Peasants like me,
 Peasants like Thee
 Gaze perplexedly!

(66, c. 1859)

Some years later, she was still baffled but still clinging to the hope — “the clue divine” — she saw in these transformations. This time, the caterpillar-to-butterfly is the sole vehicle:

My Cocoon tightens — Colors tease —
 I'm feeling for the Air —
 A dim capacity for Wings
 Demeans the Dress I wear —

 A power of Butterfly must be —
 The Aptitude to fly
 Meadows of Majesty concedes
 And easy Sweeps of Sky —

 So I must baffle at the Hint —
 And cipher at the Sign
 And make much blunder, if at last
 I take the clue divine —

(1099, c. 1866)

A more cheerful poem came still later about the lowly dandelion — more cheerful because the resurrection here is a simple, natural one: new life after a long winter. Still, it is the process that interests her and gives the poem its structure: from tube to bud to flower.

The Dandelion's pallid tube
 Astonishes the Grass,
 And Winter instantly becomes
 An infinite Alas —

The tube uplifts a signal Bud
 And then a shouting Flower, —
 The Proclamation of the Suns
 That sepulture is o'er.

(1519, c. 1881)

Nor is there any perplexity or bafflement in this triumphant (if slightly coy) little poem on the birth of a rose. It summarizes in five lines Mrs. Phelps's teaching (Lecture II) on the reproductive process in flowers.

A sepal, petal, and a thorn
 Upon a common summer's morn —
 A flask of Dew — A Bee or two —
 A Breeze — a caper in the trees —
 And I'm a Rose!

(19, c. 1858)

From her early years on, it was Emily's custom, certainly encouraged by her studies in school, to send flowers to her friends — often a single flower and often accompanied by a short poem. The Harvard edition of the Poems lists thirty-three such poems, ranging in dates from 1858 to 1884 (the dates are approximate). Even in these occasional pieces the tendency is the same: to construct the verses around a process or action; seldom is the thought merely "Here's something pretty" or "Sweets to the sweet." The process may have to do with where she picked the flower (or flowers), what the weather was doing, or where the flower was in its life cycle. A pleasant verse went to a visitor next door:

South Winds jostle them —
 Bumblebees come —
 Hover — hesitate —
 Drink, and are gone —

 Butterflies pause
 On their passage Cashmere —
 I — softly plucking,
 Present them here!

(86, c. 1859)

One went to Samuel Bowles. It may involve a story:

I stole them from a Bee —
 Because — Thee —
 Sweet plea —
 He pardoned me!

(200, c. 1860)

Was she asking Bowles to forgive her for some fault? If so, a strong accent falls on "He" in the last line.⁴ On New Year's Day, 1881, she sent Mrs. Edward Tuckerman, in whimsical tribute to the *old* year, the stem of a dead flower with this poem:

The stem of a departed Flower
 Has still a silent rank.
 The Bearer from an Emerald Court
 Of a Despatch of Pink.

(1520, c. 1881)

Again, as in the verses to Bowles, she posed as a thief:

Defrauded I a Butterfly —
 The lawful Heir — for Thee —

(730, c. 1863)

Once, she asked the (superior) language of flowers to speak for her. This to her cousin, Eudocia Flynt:

All the letters I can write
 Are not fair as this —
 Syllables of Velvet —

⁴ Cf. Ruth Miller, *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), p. 182.

Sentences of Plush,
 Depths of Ruby, undrained,
 Hid, Lip, for Thee —
 Play it were a Humming Bird
 And just sipped Me —

(334, c. 1862)

She knew that flowers required tending — they “importune” us, they’re often a nuisance. But the “Bliss” is worth it. This poem went to Mabel Loomis Todd:

Their dappled importunity
 Disparage or dismiss —
 The Obloquies of Etiquette
 Are obsolete to Bliss

(1611, c. 1884)

Twenty-five years earlier, she had developed the thought more fully. Here the bliss is “ecstasy”:

Flowers — Well - if anybody
 Can the ecstasy define —
 Half a transport — half a trouble —
 With which flowers humble men:
 Anybody find the fountain
 From which floods so contra flow —
 I will give him all the Daisies
 Which upon the hillside blow.

Too much pathos in their faces
 For a simple breast like mine —
 Butterflies from St. Domingo
 Cruising round the purple line —
 Have a system of aesthetics —
 Far superior to mine.

(137, c. 1859)

Such pieces, though hardly her finest poems, tell us a good deal about her day-to-day existence and may help explain why she was so positive in her rejection of Higginson’s suggestion that she might be bored in Amherst: “I find ecstasy in mere living. . . .” At Emily’s death, her sister-in-law Sue included in a fine and sensitive obituary (*Springfield Daily Republican*, 18 May 1886) this sentence: “So intimate and passionate was her love of Nature, she seemed herself a part of the high March sky, the summer day, and bird-call.” She might have added flowers — as, indeed, another friend, reminiscing about early days in Amherst, did:

I have so many times seen her in the morning at work in her garden where everything thrived under her hand, and wandering there at eventide, that she is perpetually associated in my mind with flowers — a flower herself.⁵

We owe to sister Lavinia a forthright statement about Emily’s life in the Homestead, which, though far from the whole truth, confirms Sue’s and Mrs. Ford’s

⁵ Emily Fowler Ford to Mabel Loomis Todd. (Cf. *Life*, pp. 369-376)

impressions. Vinnie had been shocked by a letter to the *Boston Transcript* for 29 July 1895, picturing Emily's life as cut in two by a tragic love affair and sustained from then on by sad, sweet memories. Vinnie's reply was a polite "Nonsense." Emily, she wrote, chose to stay at home, to take care of her mother, and "finding her life with her books and nature so congenial, she continued to live it . . ." (*Life*, pp. 152-153). Perhaps "books," to Vinnie, included writing; she must have seen Emily at work many times. As to "nature," we can be more specific: from Emily's late twenties or early thirties it meant, fairly exclusively, her father's grounds, her flowers, her conservatory, the view from her window. Flowers were surely central. Come frosty nights in October, she would "almost feel maternal, and wear the anxious aspect that careful parents do . . ." (L180). To her, the "language of flowers" went beyond Mrs. Phelps's list of popular symbolic meanings; it meant a profoundly felt empathy. She wrote to her Norcross cousins: "The career of flowers differs from ours only in inaudibleness. I feel more reverence as I grow for these mute creatures whose suspense or transport may surpass our own" (L388). A poem a few years earlier puts the career of flowers less portentously but with some of the same feelings — and with at least one phrase that calls for comment:

Bloom — is Result — to meet a Flower
And casually glance
Would cause one scarcely to suspect
The minor Circumstance

Assisting in the Bright Affair
So intricately done
Then offered as a Butterfly
To the Meridian —

To pack the Bud — oppose the Worm —
Obtain it's right of Dew —
Adjust the Heat — elude the Wind —
Escape the prowling Bee

Great Nature not to disappoint
Awaiting Her that Day —
To be a Flower, is profound
Responsibility —

(1058, C. 1865)

" . . . the Bright Affair/ *So intricately done* . . ." The implications of those last three words lead to our final synthesis. In her first lecture, Mrs. Phelps emphasized the easy access of the vegetable world to the process of dissection and analysis. "Animals," she wrote, "though affording most striking marks of designing wisdom, cannot be dissected and examined without painful emotions," whereas botany "offers a boundless field of inquiry, which may be explored with the most pure and delightful emotions." "The invention of the microscope," she wrote later in a section on the history of botany, "threw light upon the mysteries of nature, which, without this instrument, must ever have remained in obscurity." Her dissection of a lily in Lecture II is prefaced with this remark: "At first this flower is folded up in a green bud, by degrees it changes its colour, and expands into a blossom." The process — Emily put it in the poem — is thoroughly detailed, with engravings to illustrate corolla, calyx, stamens, filament, anther (which contains the pollen, "a

fine powder which serves to give life to the young seed”), pistil, ovules, cells, and receptacle. As always, each term is carefully defined. Mrs. Phelps had made a point of this in the preface “To Teachers”:

Technical terms should be explained as the pupil proceeds. The advantage in this kind of explanation, over that of any abstract idea, is, that it is manifested to the senses of the pupils by the object before them. If a teacher attempt to define the words reason, will, etc., or any other abstract terms, there is danger that the pupil may, from misunderstanding the language used in the explanation, obtain but a very confused and imperfect idea of the definition; — and, indeed, what two philosophical writers give to abstract terms the same definition?

A good deal is coming together here. First there is the training of the eyes, indispensable to any poet. When Emily wrote of the “Bright Affair/So intricately done,” we can now be sure that she knew whereof she wrote. She was on familiar terms with those intricacies, which, had you asked, she could have demonstrated with the help of scalpel and microscope. Second, in her study of botany and the other sciences, she had a sustained experience of a way of thinking, of approaching problems, that left its mark. It is not unreasonable, for instance, to suggest that Mrs. Phelps’s insistence on definitions had something to do with the mode that Emily was to make her own, the so-called “definition poems” that occur throughout her canon. Her dictionary helped — she said it was her “only companion” (L261) for a year or so after her formal schooling — but Mrs. Phelps came first, and Emily was a good student. That she by-passed Mrs. Phelps’s strictures about defining abstractions is a measure, among others, of her courage as a poet. She set out to give new life and meaning to the old counters — hope, love, glory, crisis, exhilaration, remorse, and many more. Third, there were those “pure and delightful emotions” that Mrs. Phelps predicted for the student of botany, emotions upon which Mrs. Phelps, sometimes in the midst of the most precise scientific exposition, did not hesitate to discourse. She quoted frequently from the poets. Emily could hardly have missed Milton’s Eve lamenting the loss of her flowers — Emily, who at fifteen wrote Abiah Root, “I have lately come to the conclusion that I am Eve, alias Mrs. Adam”:

Must I thus leave thee, Paradise?
 . . . Oh flowers
That never will in other climate grow
. . . which I bred up with tender hand,
From the first opening bud, and gave ye names:
Who will now rear ye to the sun, or rank
Your tribes? . . .

To embellish her description of the harebell (*campanula rotundifolia*), one of Emily’s favorites, and the heath flower (*erica cinerea*), Mrs. Phelps turned to Scott’s tribute to the light-footed Ellen Douglas, the Lady of the Lake:

A foot more light, a step more true,
Ne’er from the heath-flower dash’d the dew;
E’en the slight hare-bell raised its head,
Elastic from her airy tread . . .

Another favorite, the cowslip (*primula veris*), was given poetic status by recourse to the Fairy in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

I must go seek some dewdrops here,
And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear.

And all these, Eve's flowers, the harebell, the heath flower, the cowslip, and thousands of others that cram the pages of this notable textbook, inspired Mrs. Phelps to poetic composition of her own. (Did young Emily take a hint?) She concluded her final lecture with thirty-nine lines of blank verse in praise of the Creator, a poetic summary of the Great Idea that had informed her instruction. Emily eschewed the form, but the final sentiment she could have shared:

Then how should man rejoicing in his God
Delight in his perfection shadowed forth
In every little flower and blade of grass!
Each opening bud, and care-perfected seed,
Is as a page where we may read of God.

Recall Emily's remark to Mrs. Dickerman: "Not to outgrow Genesis, is a sweet monition —"

That Emily Dickinson's emotional life, so much of it centered on the great religious questions, was anything but serene has been pointed out again and again. She could not sustain the high assurance her teachers professed. If in one poem she could assert triumphantly "the Colossal substance/ Of Immortality" (306, c. 1862), another concluded with those questions that kept her awake at night:

Much Gesture, from the Pulpit —
Strong Hallelujahs roll —
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul —

(501, c. 1862)

In another, she casts her lot with the poets, they who can create a summer that "lasts a Solid Year," a heaven on earth; and she adds, a bit petulantly,

. . . if the Further Heaven —
Be Beautiful as they prepare
For Those who worship Them —
It is too difficult a Grace —
To justify the Dream —

(569, c. 1862)

The letters are full of her questionings, from the early "I often wonder how long we shall wonder; how early we shall *know*" (L190) to the plaintive, "I often wonder how the love of Christ, is done — when that — below — holds — so —" (L262). But while she closed the door on certain repellent doctrines, she never closed it on her characteristic realm of "Possibility." One of her most sustained botanical poems puts her position as well as any. It is a meditative poem, starting (as in the tradition) with a single visualized object — a lilac shrub in bloom, perhaps in Emily's own backyard and seen by her in the rays of the setting sun. Seen by her "furnished" eyes, it becomes, first, an image of the sunset itself and then, as she takes it apart with scientific precision (corolla, calyx, capsule, seed) a metaphor of the entire solar system, that miracle "unimpeachable/To Time's Analysis" we live with every day.

The Lilac is an ancient shrub
 But ancients than that
 The Firmamental Lilac
 Upon the Hill tonight —
 The Sun subsiding on his Course
 Bequeathes this final Plant
 To Contemplation — not to Touch —
 The Flower of Occident.
 Of one Corolla is the West —
 The Calyx is the Earth —
 The Capsules burnished Seeds the Stars —
 The Scientist of Faith
 His research has but just begun —
 Above his synthesis
 The Flora unimpeachable
 To Time's Analysis —
 "Eye hath not seen" may possibly
 Be current with the Blind
 But let not Revelation
 By theses be detained —

(1241, c. 1872)

The last nine lines of the poem represent Emily Dickinson's choice of pieties. She challenged the Scientist of Faith (the theologian) to have done with his "theses" (arguments, doctrines), to open his eyes to the wonders of Creation and himself to Revelation. (A variant for the last word of the poem is *profaned*.)

The opening of her own eyes began, it is not too much to say, with those studies of which the herbarium is sign and symbol. That we still have it, intact and reproducible, is some evidence, surely, of what it meant to her. Whether she ever achieved full, sustaining Revelation we do not know. Surely she had inklings. But, as Robert Weisbuch put it well, "to infer a far reality is not to own it or know it satisfactorily."⁶ She had written, "I thought that nature was enough." It turned out not to be. But when "Human nature came," with all its joys and agonies, its "Superior instants" (P306) and its dark nights, she had a purpose and a method. She put under the microscope of her extraordinary imagination the mysteries of human experience to illuminate them as best she could. Her "researches" never ended. The spirit of experiment — probing, testing — hovered about her quest for knowledge. She paid it this tribute in a late quatrain:

Experiment escorts us last —
 His pungent company
 Will not allow an Axiom
 An Opportunity

(1770, late 1870)

⁶ *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 162.