

Frontispiece 42 :

EMILY DICKINSON

His mind of man , a secret makes
I meet him with a start
He carries a circumference
In which I have no part

The genius of isolation is very rare : no other poet , not even Emily Brontë , seems so separate from us as Dickinson . We have no accurate approaches to her . If she was a kind of Emersonian , her difference from him is that she practiced the near - total autonomy that he advocated but could not live , since he was a cultural center in himself .

Emerson evades grief ; Dickinson knows it as her atmosphere . Both feared blindness , and had psychosomatic encounters with it . But Emerson's came early and departed ; Dickinson's was a deeper trouble .

One learns something of the self's power from Emerson ; Dickinson teaches the anguish of a sublime transport through pain . Emerson refused despair ; Dickinson is a master of every negative affect : fury , erotic destitution , a very private knowledge of God's exile from himself . Dickinson's is so original a genius that she alters one's sense of what poetic genius can be . She is recognizably a post - Wordsworthian poet , and yet the American difference is as strong in her as it is in Whitman or Melville .

It may be that William Blake , whose own genius was unique , is Dickinson's truest analogue . She is not a post - Protestant American religionist , like Emerson or Whitman , but a sect of one , like Blake . She upsets all our received ideas , as Blake does , without creating a supreme fiction of her own , as he attempted to do . Whether any poet really can start all over again , with each fresh poem , is disputable . Yet if anyone could do it , that poet is Dickinson .

EMILY DICKINSON
(1830–1886)

MY SUBJECT HAPPILY IS DICKINSON's genius , her originality both in cognitive awareness and in aesthetic stance. I myself do not regard either her personal religion (as much a sect of one as William Blake's) or her sexual orientation as vexed matters, though here , as in all things, I am now part of a minority in what still we pretend are institutions of higher education . One is told , these days , that " the evidence of asterisks " indicates a sexually passionate relationship between Dickinson and her sister - in - law , but I see only that her letters are prose poems , as carefully composed as her poems , and would be evidence for nothing , even if asterisks were something more than asterisks . Much the best biography of Emily Dickinson remains Richard B. Sewall's (1974) , which sensibly sums up the relationship between Dickinson and her difficult sister - in - law , Sue . Rather more crucially , Sewall charts Dickinson's frustrated love for Samuel Bowles , and her apparently fulfilled love for Judge Otis Phillips Lord , eighteen years older than herself . Lord died in 1884 , at seventy - two ; Dickinson was then fifty - four , and

lived only another two years , mourning for Lord and the rest of her dead . Since Mrs. Lord died in late 1877 , the close relationship between Dickinson and the Judge evidently dates from early 1878 on , when she was forty - seven and he sixty - five . Her letters to him , though composed with her usual preternatural skill at rhetorical elaboration , simply cannot be understood except as sexual passion , though certainly they constitute no evidence for consummation . Wary as one has to be with Dickinson , I follow Sewall in crediting her love for Bowles and what almost became marriage with Lord . We are still in the apprentice state in learning to read Dickinson's poetry , primarily because of her authentic difficulty . She is frequently more allusive than we tend to recognize , as here in a famous quatrain addressed to herself as Lord was dying :

Circumference — thou Bride of Awe
Possessing — thou shalt be Possessed by every hallowed
Knight That dares - to Covet thee
-Poem 1636 , Franklin's edition

EMILY DICKINSON

347

This , in aspiration anyway , could be called Dickinson's brief hymn to free love , following Shelley's ecstatic Epipsychidion , in which Emilia Viviani , Shelley's momentary beloved , is addressed as “ Emily . ” I expand upon Se wall here , for the Shelleyan allusion is a very deliberate shock conveyed to us by Dickinson . She , in her sublimely enhanced consciousness , is Circumference ; Awe is the dying Judge Lord , pragmatically her husband , and she declares herself open to every hallowed Knight that will dare to covet her . The relevant passage in Epipsychidion illuminates Dickinson's complex metaphor , “ Circumference , ” by showing its sexual nature :

Meanwhile

We two will rise , and sit , and walk together ,
Under the roof of blue Ionian weather ,
And wander in the meadows , or ascend
The mossy mountains , where the blue heavens bend
With lightest winds , to touch their paramour ;
Or linger , where the pebble - pavenshore ,
Under the quick , faint kisses of the sea
Trembles and sparkles as with ecstasy ,
Possessing and possessed by all that is
Within that calm circumference of bliss ,
And by each other , till to love and live
Be one : -

Shelley and his Emily , possessing and possessed by each other , also share that mutual possession with everything within the heightened state of their circumference . Turn back to the audacious Dickinson . As Bride of Awe (the Judge) she remains possessing , but after his dying , she anticipates further possession ,

depending upon the daring of those who will desire or covet her . The poet Dickinson gives us very little room to ironize or allegorize here ; she borrows possessing , possessed , and circumference from Shelley's most overt celebration of free love . Whatever enlarged state of being and imagination is involved in Dickinson's self - identification as Circumference , it cannot be taken wholly as metaphor , but implies also the difference in her that has resulted from her love affair with Otis Phillips Lord .

No one can read Dickinson long and deeply without being confronted by her extraordinary self - reliance as a poet , woman , and religious thinker . The expression of that self - trust is a pride in her own poetic authority , and in her highly individual spiritual autonomy . I use the Emersonian self - reliance and self - trust deliberately : what is her relation to her older contemporary Emerson?

348

Personally , she evaded him . On December 11 , 1857 , Emerson lectured regarded Golgotha as a Great Defeat , and as an American said , " We demand Golgotha , but only through her outrageous stance as " Empress of Calvary and so as Christ's bride . She intimates that she had married the Holy Ghost , again a very American realization . McIntosh , perhaps with a touch 348

Harold Bloom in Amherst , and then dined and stayed overnight next door to the poet , a her brother's and sister-in-law's house . At twenty - seven , Dickinson was no recluse ; presumably she attended the lecture , and dined with the sage . Sue , recalling the occasion , said that Emily said of Emerson , " As if he had come from where dreams were born." And yet she sent her poems not to Emerson but to Thomas Wentworth Higginson , a war hero but a third - rate man of letters . Writing to Higginson , she asked a question that must have baffled him : " With the Kingdom of Heaven on his knee , could Mr. Emerson hesitate ? " I take this as delicious wickedness , which we are slow to attribute to Dickinson . Confronted by the 1855 Leaves of Grass , Emerson's response was precise , critically superb , and a powerful encouragement . Faced by Dickinson's poems , would we have expected less of Emerson ? Her affinities with Emerson were manifold ; her difference ultimately larger than Hawthorne's or Melville's . Like Emerson , she had eye trouble , both literal and figurative . But she did not share his faithless faith , any more than she did the faith of her fathers . Self - reliance carried her a long way , but then failed her , or she it .

It is not possible to define Dickinson's private religion , partly because she followed Emerson in exalting Whim , which does not belong to the cosmos of Judaism , Christianity , and Islam . The most subtly intelligent discussion of Dickinson's spirituality is James McIntosh's Nimble Believing : Dickinson and the Unknown (2000) , which takes its title from one of the poet's letters to Judge Lord :

On subjects of which we know nothing , or should I say Beings — is " Phil " [the Judge) a " Being " or a " Theme " —we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour , which keeps Believing nimble

On that account , it keeps Disbelieving equally nimble , and no one including Dickinson herself - could be at all certain just what (if anything) she believed . I find little in the poems to indicate that she believed in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ , and she certainly did not accept him as her redeemer. But the sufferings of Jesus, and his triumph over them , were of extraordinary interest to her , while they meant nothing to Emerson , who regarded Golgotha as a Great Defeat, and as an American said, "We demand Victory , a Victory to the senses as to the soul . " Dickinson found a victory a Golgotha, but only through her outrageous stance as "Empress of Calvary," and so as Christ's bride. She intimates that she had married the Holy Ghost, again a very American realization. McIntosh, perhaps with a touch

349

More residual Calvinism than Dickinson possessed , thinks that Dickinson's " we " is a Calvinist inheritance , and yet it appears to be one of her private names for her near - husband , Judge Lord . And yet , though Dickinson's saying that it was not self - contradictory . She had worked out a personal religious myth , but she declined to express it fully or consistently , except by dramatizing her place in the myth in her poems . Her Awe , like her Trans Faulkner , Stevens , Eliot , Hart Crane among them . If asked the desert island question , and could have only one book by an American , I should have to

it mature spiritual position is indescribable , McIntosh is surely accurate in is High Romantic , and we still have not worked out her complex relation to Wordsworth , Shelley , and Keats .

Like Emerson , Dickinson somewhat disconcertingly worships Power , joking that Power stood in Scripture between the Kingdom and the Glory , because it is the wildest of the three . Her " wildness " is Emerson's and , like him , by it she means " freedom . " She revered Emerson , but unlike Whitman and Thoreau she cannot be considered Emersonian , because she took such care to keep the sage at a distance. Her supposed struggle with Calvinism , where is it ? -has little to do with her wariness . Emerson was too close already , both as a poet and as a reconceptualizer . Some of their poems could be assigned to either poet , hardly a pleasure for Dickinson . To go without models is Emerson's own advice , which Dickinson scarcely needed . Yet both are poets of sudden epiphanies , far more benign in Emerson's case .

How should we confront Dickinson's genius ? That shades into : how can we describe a genius so volatile , capricious , conceptually original ? Her definitive editor , Ralph Franklin , reminds us that we must go through her idiom to enter her work , as she conducted no negotiation toward public norms for her poetry . " The most useful statement that I have ever read about Dickinson is Franklin's :

A good citizen of the age of print , she was a committed reader of newspapers , magazines , and books but could not undertake the commercial , impersonal , and fundamentally exposing act of publishing her work . This is the poet who , knowing her boundaries , said , " I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or Town . "

I take from this the hint that one had better know one's own boundaries when reading this formidable woman , and when trying to apprehend her genius . How

many other American writers are of her eminence ? I would say just three : Emerson, Whitman, Henry James. There are others only a touch of two short of that fourfold : Hawthorne , Melville , Mark Twain , Frost ,Faulkner, Stevens, Eliot, Hart Crane among them. If asked the desert island question, and could have only one book by an American, I should have to

350

answer Whitman , but Dickinson or Emerson would more than suffice . No one should be foolish enough to condescend to Dickinson , or to enlist her for any ideology or creed whatsoever . Hazlitt rightly said that in Wordsworth cognitive originality she surpasses any Western poet except for Shakespeare 350

Harold Bloom you seemed to start anew on a tabula rasa of poetry . That is not as strictly true of Dickinson's poetry as of Wordsworth's , but she comes close . And in and Blake . She can think more lucidly and feel more fully than any of her readers , and she is very aware of her superiority . So I am very cautious when , in what follows , I attempt to track her genius .

Though Dickinson is exuberant, and can be comically exhilarating , she is a poet whose central mode is an intense suffering , at times so painful and demanding that she affords only the most difficult kind of pleasure , traditionally associated with the Sublime . When I read her for a prolonged time , and whenever I teach her , the experience exhausts me , the way reading and teaching King Lear devastates me . A poet who says that she likes a look of agony , because she knows it is true , risks misprision , as in Camille Paglia's enlisting Dickinson in the ranks of the divine Marquis de Sade . I remember arguing the issue with Paglia (a superb reader) but failing to persuade her . In Dickinson , very difficult pleasures and pains oxymoronically inter mingle , and it is also always worth remarking that Dickinson , her reputation aside , can be a very erotic poet , though her genius flourishes wildly in celebrating / lamenting the erotics of loss . Death and passion debate in her , and death necessarily wins .In 1863 , Dickinson reached the Christological age , and experienced the most fecund year her poetry was ever to know . Why it should have been her annus mirabilis , I can only surmise . In late April of 1864 , she went to Boston for eye treatment , and returned to Amherst on November 28, but the previous year was spent peacefully at home , without major personal losses . In 1862 , she chose Higginson as preceptor , long before he went off to be colonel of a black regiment . Her major losses cluster later : her father in 1874 , Samuel Bowles in 1878 , Charles Wadsworth in 1882 , her mother later that year , Judge Lord in 1884 , Helen Hunt Jackson in 1885 , until on May 15 , 1886 , Dickinson herself died . With so incredibly inward a genius , as unknown to us as Shakespeare remains , an outward stimulus appears quite unnecessary to prompt the imagination . I take 1863 not quite arbitrarily , since it comprises Poems 499 through 793 in Franklin's edition , nearly three hundred poems and fragments out of 1,789 . Its major lyrics include : " A Pir - but Heaven over it " (508) , "This is my letter to the World " (519) , " It always felt to me -- a wrong " (521) , " I tie my Hat -- I crease my Shawl " (522) , " I reckon - when I count at all " (533) , " I measure every grief I meet " (550) ,

351

" I heard a Fly buzz - when I died " (590) , " The Brain - is wider than the sky " (598) , " Much Madness is divinest Sense- " (620) , " The Soul's Superior instants " (630) , " I saw no Way - The Heavens were stitched " (633) , EMILY

DICKINSON

351 No Rack can torture me- " (649) , " I started Early - Took my Dog- " (656) , " A Tongue - to tell Him I am true ! " (673) , " What Soft - Cherubic Creatures— " (675) , " The Tint I cannot take - is best— " (696) , " I cannot live with You " (706) , " My Life had stood — a loaded Gun- " (764) , " Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue— " (782) , " Publication — is the Auction " (788) . I choose those twenty arbitrarily , following personal taste , and omit many of singular value , but those twenty alone are a body of great poetry . How did they emerge from an outwardly quiet year ? Glancing back a year in Franklin's superb edition , one wonders if 1862 isn't almost as rich , with " Going to Him ! Happy letter ! " (277) , " Of all the Souls that stand create— " (279) , " I should have been too glad , I see- " (283) , " Of Bronze — and Blaze— " (319) , " There's a certain slant of light " (320) , " Before I got my eye put out— " (336) , " I felt a Funeral , in my Brain " (340) , " ' Tis so appalling it exhilarates— " (341) , " It was not Death , for I stood up " (355) , " After great pain a formal feeling comes " (372) , " I cannot dance upon my Toes- " (381) , " Dare you see a Soul at the ' White Heat ' ? " (401) , " One need not be a Chamber -- to be Haunted " (407) , " The Soul selects her own Society— " (409) , " ' Twas like a Maelstrom , with a notch " (425) , " This was a Poet— " (446) , " I died for Beauty -- but was scarce " (448) , " Our journey had advanced— " (453) , " I dwell in Possibility " (466) , " Because I could not stop for Death— " (479) , " From Blank to Blank— " (484) . That is twenty - one more , each as strong as the twenty after . In 1864 , Dickinson suffered extensive eye treatments , and was away from home . The year indubitably shows a falling - off , but one poem at least is equal to any she ever wrote : " This Consciousness that is aware " (817) . The antithetical effect of the Civil War upon Dickinson's flowering in 1862-63 has been argued by Shira Wolosky , who sees the further internalization as a response to national crisis . That seems persuasive , and yet we cannot know . Why did she wane as a poet after 1875 ? Her last eleven years give us only about three hundred poems , and they read like the work of an imitator , a disciple of the great Dickinson . Only one matters , at least to me : " The Bible is an antique Volume-- " (1577) . Among the poems Franklin cannot date , there is the wonderful " A word made Flesh is seldom " (1715) and the outrageously erotic " In Winter in my Room " (1742) , but little else . One can surmise that her father's death , in 1874 , may have destroyed her motive for metaphor . A month after Edward Dickinson's death , she famously wrote to Higginson : " His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no

352

other like it exists . " Their relationship had been overtly remote and profoundly repressed ; and perhaps her poetry , at its best , was engendered by the need to people a void .

Yet I chafe even at so obvious a surmise : Amherst , and New England , were replete with Calvinist fathers working themselves to death for their spinster daughters , but yet we do not have a school of Emily Dickinsons but only this unique genius . Her sister Lavinia was also a spinster , but was not a Charlotte or Anne Brontë to her Emily . With so vastly innovative a consciousness , we need to change completely our usual procedures , and concentrate on the influence of the work upon the life ,

rather than the reverse . Everything and everyone , Judge Lord and sister - in - law Sue , failed Emily Dickinson except her poetry . Like William Blake and Gerard Manley Hopkins , she had only a handful as audience , and she benefited by this isolation , as Blake and Hopkins did also .

Clearly there is an element in lyric poetry that can prosper without an audience , and that is strongest where society is excluded . I think of African American poetry , where much the greatest figure is the reclusive Jay Wright , who is almost unknown to the reading public , and who is totally free of all ideological and political cheerleading , unscarred by nationalist rant . Emily Dickinson was not only a religion of one , but I cannot find in her poetry a single trace of the Whig politics of her father and of her lover , Judge Lord . You can observe , if you wish , that only the Dickinson fortune and social position made her possible , but that leaves you exactly nowhere , as Lavinia Dickinson and so many others show . The academic world , which rewards cheerleading and loathes genius , is the worst possible audience for , or authority upon , Emily Dickinson , as the vast mass of current contemporaries pathetically demonstrate . " Hurrah for Emily ! " the pom - pom wavers cheer : " She slept with sister - in - law Sue ! "

Very briefly , I will set down what I think I comprehend of Dickinson's genius . Like several other major American poets - Whitman , Frost , Wallace Stevens - she made a relatively late start . Had she died at thirty , we might not remember her . There are a few poems that matter before 1861 , but her power is not yet present . There are remarkable scattered phrases , and some mischievous lyrics of true wit . But , by the conclusion of Poem 243 , we recognize her :

The possibility -- to pass
Without a moment's Bell –
Into Conjecture's presence
Is like a Face of Steel -

353

That suddenly looks into ours
With a metallic grin -
The Cordiality of Death-
Who drills his Welcome in -

" Conjecture " here is what Stevens meant by an abstraction blooded , as a man by thought . " What Dickinson particularly blooded , by her thought , were the hymns of Isaac Watts , though her project was the reversal of the church hymn . She attracted Paul Celan , who translated her beautifully , because in her hymns of negation he recognized something of his own enterprise , though he addresses " No one , " and Dickinson makes it difficult to know just whom she invokes . Some of the difficulties of interpreting Dickinson , as I think Celan saw , are surprisingly akin to Kafka's refusal to be interpretable .

There are no daemons or demons in Dickinson (though she has some goblins) , and the word " genius " would not be easy to fit into her hymn metric ; she uses it only once in a late (1873) comic poem about a spider , no . 1373 :

The Spider as an Artist

Has never been employed
Though his surpassing Merit
Is freely certified

By every Broom and Bridget
Throughout a Christian Land
Neglected Son of Genius
I take thee by the Hand

One thinks of Whitman's similarly late " A Noiseless Patient Spider , " but this is hardly vintage Dickinson , whereas Poem 381 of 1862 certainly is :

I cannot dance upon my Toes
No Man instructed me
But oftentimes , among my mind ,
A Glee possesseth me ,

That had I Ballet Knowledge
Would put itself abroad
In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe
Or lay a Prima , mad ,

354

Harold Bloom

And though I had no Gown of Gauze
No Ringlet , to my Hair ,
Nor hopped for Audiences — like Birds
One Claw upon the air

Nor tossed my shape in Eider Balls ,
Nor rolled on wheels of snow
Till I was out of sight , in sound ,
The House encore me so

Nor any know I know the Art
I mention - easy – Here
Nor any Placard boast me
It's full as Opera

She celebrates her own genius , the daemonic exuberance she calls " A Glee , " and she means " possesseth . " " Glee " and " possession , " in the second word's various forms , are her personal equivalents for genius and the daemonic . " Transport , " in its variants , is her favorite term for the Romantic or daemonic Sublime , though she also plays with the word " Sublime . " The High Romantic " joy " and " delight " are

everywhere in her , as legacies from Wordsworth and Coleridge , Shelley and Keats , but " glee " has a particular twist for her . One of my secret favorites is Poem 317 of 1862 , which I did not list earlier , because some of my students resist it , yet here is her distinct genius , in a wonderful play - poem :

Delight is as the flight
Or in the Ratio of it ,
As the Schools would say
The Rainbow's way ,
A Skein
Flung colored , after Rain ,
Would suit as bright ,
Except that flight
Were Aliment

" If it would last
" I asked the East ,
When that Bent Stripe
Struck up my childish

355

Firmament
And I , for glee ,
Took Rainbows , as the common way ,
And empty skies
The Eccentricity

And so with Lives
And so with Butterflies-
Seen magic - through the fright
That they will cheat the sight
And Dower latitudes far on
Some sudden morn
. ∴ ∴ portion — in the fashion
Done

The Glee that possesses her in " I cannot dance upon my toes " becomes her motive for metaphor here when , " for glee , " she manipulates the heavens . A late (1879) fragment , no . 1508 , has stayed in my memory since I first read it in Franklin's edition :

His voice decrepit was with Joy
Her words did totter so
How old the News of Love must be
To make Lips elderly
That purred a moment since with Glee
Is it Delight or Woe

Or Terror - that do decorate
This livid - interview

This almost certainly depicts the erotic relationship with Judge Lord , capturing a privileged moment with Dickinsonian detachment . The Glee , her daemonic intensity , had radiated out to her lover , only to render them both even older , since the irony of the News of Love " is its eternal antiquity . " Lived " is appropriate , whether Delight , Woe , or Terror " decorate " this erotic interview . I know of no one else who writes like this , except for the final Shakespeare in his part of The Two Noble Kinsmen . Shakespeare and the Bible , both transvalued , are Dickinson's truest precursors , with whom her mature contest is waged . I return to the Dickinsonian glee for a final time , in regard to the difficult Poem 365 , which I again failed to list , because of student resistance to what some regarded as opacity :

356

I know that He exists
Somewhere - in silence
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes .

" Tis an instant's play "
Tis a fond Ambush
Just to make Bliss
Earn her own surprise !

But - should the play
Prove piercing earnest
Should the glee – glaze
In Death's - stiff - stare

Would not the fun
Look too expensive !
Would not the jest
Have crawled too far !

I don't know whether " He " is Jesus Christ , Charles Wadsworth , or Samuel Bowles , but I don't think that matters . The central word again is " glee , " and its origin is in Dickinson , and not in Jesus or in a human love not - to - be . Whether divine or human , He is an alien or alienated god - man , startled by the glee of her " fond Ambush , " and yet she fears that the glee , natural to her , but too strong for him , may be a fatal jest . Part of our trouble in reading such a poem is its unprecedentedness . Dickinsonian " glee " is an intoxication of unprecedentedness , her joy and delight in her own autonomy and inventiveness . Did she , after all , turn recluse because she feared her own erotic power ? Her idiom was self - consciously gnomic , becoming more difficult as she proceeded . Her poetic power is beyond

doubt , as is the Bible's , Shakespeare's , Blake's , Whitman's . She will become only more challenging as the decades and centuries pass . Like Whitman , she stops somewhere waiting for us .