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978-0-521-10907-9 - Emily Dickinson: The Poet on the Second Story

Jerome Loving

Excerpt

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Chapter 1

RUBICON

When Austin Dickinson wrote the word “Rubicon” in his diary for September 11, 1882, the act was far more symbolic than he probably ever realized. For Caesar the Rubicon had marked the point of no return in the conqueror’s illegal entry into Italy in 49 B.C. For the brother of Emily Dickinson it marked an equally important and “illegal” juncture in his psychic landscape – the point at which he declared his love for Mabel Loomis Todd. At age fifty-two Austin was not yet ready to see himself, as his sister had written of those who had seen through the theoretical life of illusions, “As he defeated – dying.” He was in love really for the first time, in love with love in the shape of a beautiful woman twenty-seven years his junior and, to make matters worse, the wife of a young instructor of astronomy at Amherst College. It was the first time he had felt this way since beginning what became his unhappy marriage with Susan Gilbert back in 1856. It was the first time, he thought with confidence, that he could define “Victory.” This was doubtless the tenor of his conversations with Emily and Vinnie in the Homestead, a door away from his own. Neither sister could do anything but silently approve, for each had been disappointed by her “pseudo Sister.” Yet it was Emily who saw the larger significance of Austin’s determination to love a woman other than his wife, for it was this same need for “God’s Adversary” that she had been trying to define in her poems.

Mabel had become Austin’s “Christ,” but the trinity was a *ménage à trois*. “Do be careful of this note,” she urged Austin early in their relationship. “It frightens me when I think of your having it with you when you come home.” Austin preserved most of her letters (with his own) but asked Vinnie to burn them after his death – “without opening.” Fortunately, Vinnie was curious and the letters, unlike too many of Emily’s, survived the fire. The correspondence reveals all the passion and high sentence we would expect from such an affair. But we can also manage with the distance of a hundred years the kind of objectivity Emily man-

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aged in her own observations of the pact. Doubtless, she saw the pathos long before Austin ever did.

Her brother had not experienced the thrill of “unselfish” love since the birth of young Gilbert, his third child, in 1875. Perhaps an unwanted child come late to Sue, a rival sibling to Mattie and Ned, Gilbert had probably awakened in Austin the same feelings Mabel was now waking. In both cases there seemed to be a rebirth of the spirit. But Gilbert suddenly died, barely a month after the first anniversary of “Rubicon.” If Austin saw the loss as ominous, it did not outwardly affect his infatuation with Mabel. Emily, on the other hand, surely saw the import of Gilbert’s death with regard to Austin’s new reason for living. For the first time in fifteen years, she crossed the hedge that separated the two houses to console the child’s parents. In a subsequent letter to Sue she described the eight-year-old as her “prattling Preceptor.” This was not the first time she had used the word “preceptor – or its synonym “tutor” – so paradoxically. Apparently in reference to Benjamin Franklin Newton, a friend of her adolescence, she found the real lesson of life in his death: “I had a friend, who taught me Immortality – but venturing too near, himself – he never returned.” Another “preceptor,” Thomas Wentworth Higginson, taught her not by his death but by his (literary) deafness. He taught her, albeit unintentionally, that a poem had to be as ragged as life itself in order for it to approach truth. Gilbert’s death was but another indication of the strange balance between success and failure.

The loss no doubt shook Austin’s confidence in the possibility of a second chance in life, but he never got beyond the particular grief. Gilbert had simply left the life before it was over. It was Emily who could wade through that particular to see the universal pattern. She could see Austin’s folly. Perhaps in Boston, now freed from Calvinistic gloom and guilt and in the heyday of Emersonian idealism or even Unitarianism, such an infatuation with life was worth trying. But in the Connecticut Valley, only a few miles from Northampton and the center of resistance to Arminian reform, it hardly seemed possible. Here in 1750 the great theologian Jonathan Edwards had been dismissed by his congregation for insisting that the quest for God’s election begins anew with every day. Having succeeded Solomon Stoddard in the Northampton pulpit in 1730, he eventually tried to rescind his grandfather’s compromise of the Half-way Covenant of 1662. No longer, Edwards argued, could church membership alone earn one the privilege of receiving the Lord’s grace. “Mr. Stoddard’s Way” was no longer the way to heaven.

Edwards had been a stern “preceptor,” but his lesson was the same one Emily Dickinson had been relearning all her life. Indeed, no family in the Connecticut Valley had more fully absorbed it. Samuel Fowler Dickinson, the poet’s grandfather, had absorbed it and so helped to found

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Amherst College as an intellectual monument to the rigors of Christianity. The poet's father, Edward Dickinson, had absorbed it and thus did not think himself worthy of church membership until the age of forty-seven. "Presidents come and go," the Amherst saying went, "but Dickinsons go on forever." And so Austin Dickinson succeeded his father as treasurer of the college his grandfather had begun. But he was now refusing to follow what Jonathan Edwards, their first preceptor, had begun. With his Amherst "membership," he wanted the sacrament as well. Austin wanted a secular salvation – indeed, a secular trinity in the here and now. "I look after David – as part of my charge," he told Mabel in reference to her husband while she was abroad in 1885. "I think we three would have no trouble – in a house together – in living as you and I should wish." Sue was naturally excluded as the agony that made the ecstasy possible. She was the reason for this "pseudo-trinity" or triangle, and Emily must have seen the allegorical possibilities: Austin at the apex, Mabel and her husband at the feet. The condescension of it all seemed right for a Dickinson. In control not only of David Peck Todd's salary and chances for "tenure" but also of his wife, Austin Dickinson was turning the clock back to 1750, for the husband of Mabel, now a cuckold by Austin, was also a descendant of Jonathan Edwards.

Edwards, however, could not be cheated. No one in New England knew this better than Emily Dickinson, whose muse – like Melville's Ahab – walked on the legs of life and death. "I never lost as much but twice," she wrote around 1858. Ever since, readers have sought to identify two possible lovers – as if that would tell us any more about the meaning of the poem. Regardless of their names, the number could never exceed two, as Austin would learn from his *second* attempt at love. There was only one "affair" that allowed the lover to emerge with his illusions intact. Austin had already had it with his wife. The second time was the "second story," the fiction that tells the truth about life. It was Hawthorne's "second story" in *The Scarlet Letter*. "Twice have I stood a beggar / Before the door of God!" Hester Prynne might well have said. And with the statement she would have recorded, as Emily did, the full circle of experience – the "Zero at the Bone" that results from the attempt at a secular election.

What makes the Dickinson "second story" even more tantalizing is the fact that while Austin was pouring out his heart to Mabel, Emily was having her own "affair" with Judge Otis P. Lord. Indeed, as Richard B. Sewall tells us, "At least in this instance it is clear that Emily Dickinson was in love and that she was loved in return." Dickinson's letters to Lord confirm the fact of their mutual attraction, and there is even hearsay evidence that Sue Dickinson came upon the couple in a passionate embrace. Yet we can be fairly sure that the poet who had, vicariously or

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otherwise, already gone full circle in the lover's quest did not quite lose herself in the kind of romantic diction that Austin was exhausting on Mabel. Emily had already "scalped" her soul in the "Master" letters of the early 1860s. "Master," Otis Lord was not – her "church" perhaps for a time but never her "Christ." And so she could tell him in 1878, "Dont you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer – dont you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to Language?" Far from Melville's "No! in thunder" (and indeed his fiction about Hawthorne's quarrel with God), it is as inscrutable as the White Whale itself, for "No" negated the "second story" – that fairy tale whose import was nevertheless true. Austin could not fall in love forever, but he could lose love forever.

There could be, in other words, no spiritual catharsis in Austin's symbolic suicide in "Rubicon." There was only life and then death, not life through death. This was the human condition, and in the face of it one could either retreat to the second story of the self or cling to the objective perceptions of the world. Emily chose the first while also mocking the second with her bridal-colored dress. Austin chose Mabel while also trying to people the void that his sister had already confronted in her poetry. He found in Mabel, he told her in a letter that reads more like a prayer or a confession of faith, a "perfect soul-mate, for time and eternity." Austin prayed to Mabel when he might have prayed to Jonathan Edwards. But Edwards had responded to Austin's notion of life with the wildest word we can consign to language; he had said no to his plea for life-in-life instead of loss-in-life.

We know from Edwards's *Personal Narrative* (c. 1740) that he had learned early in life that religion or the quest for "election" had to be a solitary experience; else it was meaningless and misleading. Emily learned the same lesson. And like Edwards, who retreated to the woods and his "booth" to pray, Emily retired to the second story of the Dickinson Homestead – but to sing, not to pray. "Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray," she told her Norcross cousins in 1863. She had indeed begun singing the past two years, her strongest as a poet. No longer the victim of the kind of infatuation Austin would find in Mabel, Emily had grown even bolder than Edwards himself. As she told her cousins in the same letter:

'Tis not that Dying hurts us so –
 'Tis Living – hurts us more –
 But Dying – is a different way –
 A Kind behind the Door – (J. 335)

Living was in fact losing, and prayer – no matter how solitary – was an attempt to go "behind the Door" of such a life. It dwelt entirely on the

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“first story.” Poetry, on the other hand, used the fiction of the “second story” to experience the first. Poetry was a way of dying without death. It rejected in its celebration of the tensions of life any and all notions of catharsis or redemption through death. It rejected the existence of a “heaven” as any more real or attainable than “success”:

Is Heaven a Physician?
 They say that He can heal –
 But Medicine Posthumous
 Is unavailable –
 Is Heaven an Exchequer?
 They speak of what we owe –
 But that negotiation
 I’m not a Party to – (J. 1270)

Like “success” heaven was a “Medicine Posthumous,” another oxymoron to explain the fate of the “corporeal friend.”

Poetry celebrated the Fall of Man, that continuum of loss that forced Dickinson to come to psychic grips with the paradox of existence. It is in this context that we should read or reread her so-called “Master” letters. In doing so we might follow our example in the consideration of “I Never Lost As Much But Twice” and resist the urge to play the biographical guessing game. These letters, like her poetry, are not ultimately addressed to Samuel Bowles, Charles Wadsworth, or anybody else. They are dialogues with that elusive self whose identity or very conception depends upon the fact of death. As in her poetry, Dickinson engages here in the semiotics of survival: symbol hunting or myth making in the face of certain annihilation. In this sense there can be said to be an actual flesh-and-blood correspondent; yet his identity – like that of Mabel and Austin today – is finally irrelevant. Dickinson is singing to the self fated for oblivion: “As the Boy does by the Burying Ground.”

It might be said that the “emergency” of the present never allowed this poet the luxury of transcendental correspondence with the other half “behind the Door.” Unlike either Emerson or Whitman, she could not become “part or parcel of God” or render Him “the hugging and loving bed-fellow.” The sights of her “Loaded Gun” were firmly set on the here and now – on that chimera known as experience. Rather than follow her American contemporaries in their celebration of man’s “election” or her preceptor Edwards in his study of man’s “damnation,” ever and anon she strove to measure the ratio between election and damnation, life and death.

This sense of ratio animates her poetry, and our best introduction to

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her work is to be found in the “Master” letters. Three in number and addressed to an unidentified lover, they mark off the point where Dickinson first became seriously interested in writing poetry (1858) and the point where her power as a poet reached its zenith (1861–2). In the first letter we encounter experience in fragments, as it were. On the surface a “get-well” note, the underlying theme is the difficulty of shaking off the ennui of experience. The clue comes in the penultimate sentence: “How strong when weak to recollect, and easy, quite, to love.” The desire to love stems from our relentless endeavor to *recollect* – to collect the fragments that were scattered with the “fall of man.” She asks her “master” to instruct her in the rearrangement of experience. Where are the wings of love? Or, to put the matter another way, how can the “eye” repaint the “I”? How does the poet unlock the mirror image of experience, so that the two – the eye and its object – are once again correctly aligned? It was this paradox that she was beginning to study in her poems. An early one, written around 1858, shows that Dickinson was already concerned with the problem of recollection:

If recollecting were forgetting,
Then I remember not.
And if forgetting, recollecting,
How near I had forgot.
And if to miss, were merry,
And to mourn, were gay,
How very blithe the fingers
That gathered this, Today! (J. 33)

Like the letter, this poem is on the surface merely another “get-well” message, in this case a valentine’s sentiment (or note to accompany flowers sent). But the affection it speaks of is curiously described by its opposite. “How strong when weak,” she writes in the letter. Man is strongest when weakened by the loss of living. He responds to the tensions it produces. Life depends upon the possibility of loss, recollecting upon the chance of forgetting.

Reading the poem today, we cannot escape the sense that its voice is somehow disembodied. We are touched, perhaps, by the fact that its youthful owner has faded with the flowers she sent so long ago. The poem in one way is tied to the occasion of its composition: “How very blithe the fingers / That gathered this, Today!” But disembodiment was a necessary part of Dickinson’s art. “You ask me,” she told her “master” in the first letter, “what my flowers said. . . . I gave them messages. They say what the lips in the West, say, when the sun goes down, and so says the Dawn.” In the subsequent “Master” letters and in her poems,

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Dickinson refers to herself as “Daisy,” the flower of love that dies in the West with a rhythm as punctual as the falling of the sun and the rising of the dawn. “The Daisy follows soft the Sun,” the poet wrote in 1859:

And when his golden walk is done –
 Sits shily at his feet –
 He – waking – finds the flower there –
 Wherefore – Marauder – art thou here?
 Because, Sir, love is sweet!
 We are the Flower – Thou the Sun!
 Forgive us, if as days decline –
 We nearer steal to Thee!
 Enamored of the parting West –
 The peace – the flight – the Amethyst –
 Night’s possibility! (J. 106)

This was Emily Dickinson’s “personal narrative.”

When Jonathan Edwards rode out into the woods to pray, he tells us, he “had a view . . . of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man.” He felt, he continues in an often quoted passage from the *Personal Narrative*, “an ardency of soul to be . . . emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone.” The androgynous imagery in this “Second Coming” is hard to miss. Ejaculation and impregnation, or Christ as copulation, the “Mediator between God and man.” But for Dickinson’s persona the copulation is also the crucifixion. “You are my Christ,” Austin had exclaimed to Mabel, but his sister knew that the transubstantiation of body and blood into ecstasy was but a dress rehearsal for the death throes. “One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy’s bosom – then would you *believe?*” she asks her “master” in the second letter to herself. Loving was the act of trying to *live*, but living required the slow death of crucifixion.

Disembodiment is the final result of the quest for love, and no American voice is more disembodied than Dickinson’s. Recently, it has been suggested that Dickinson (as a feminist) goes beyond the nature of Emerson to “unnamable nature,” that because God gave language to Adam and not directly to Eve, the female poet’s muse must take her beyond the limits of language. The argument may depend more on critical tropes than textual evidence, but it is true that Dickinson pushed her “lexicon” to its limits. She nevertheless explored the same nature that Whitman, Emerson’s poet, explored. Their achievements differ only in approach. It has been generally observed that whereas Whitman dilates, Dickinson compresses thought. But the differences run deeper than that. Unlike Whitman’s persona in “Song of Myself,” who is excited by the touch of his own body, Dickinson’s persona is as disembodied as was the poet

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herself when her voice trailed down the staircase or from within the foyer to visitors to the Dickinson Homestead. It is somehow appropriate that we have a good many photographs of Whitman and only one of Dickinson – and this taken before she had become a poet. Dickinson's poetry is the poetry of disembodiment: "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" she exclaims, and there is no use in looking for her under our "boot-soles."

"If recollecting were forgetting," Dickinson is saying, we would be able to reach back to the wellspring of memory. Her poetry, as it were, speaks the language of oblivion. As with the narrative voice in *Moby-Dick*, Dickinson's voice becomes so disembodied that it might as well be the voice of God we hear. It is not the voice of the Christian god; as she tells us in a poem already quoted, "That negotiation / I'm not a Party to." Rather, it is the voice of memory. Her words go after the body, or nature, of course, but not exactly the body contained between her hat and boots. For Dickinson the body is better described in a Russian translation of Whitman's disclaimer about not being exclusively contained between his hat and boots: "a cloud in trousers." In this sense, she is the poet of the "mind alone," and not really the poet of the body – or the soul, for that matter. Her brother Austin was (at least in his infatuation) the "poet" of the body, but *her* heart, as she told her "master" in the second letter, simply outgrew the body: "Bye and bye it outgrew me – and like the little mother – with the big child – I got tired holding him." In her poetry we hear that heart ever trying to break through the silence of memory – the Pompeii of life's eruption so long ago. "Vesuvius dont talk – Etna – dont," she told her "master" in the second letter. "One of them – said a syllable – a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever." Dickinson's poet is always in danger of the fate of Pompeii, always in danger of a premature burial. Her poetry takes her to the brink of disaster, to the point where the body fails and the "eye" becomes the "I." It is as if she spoke that syllable of truth and, in a fitting epitaph to her existence in Amherst, "could'nt look the world in the face, afterward."

In a poem written about 1861 Dickinson wrote, "The very profile of the Thought – Puts Recollection numb." The closing stanza more than explains her preoccupation with recollection:

The possibility – to pass
Without a Moment's Bell –
Into Conjecture's presence –
Is like a Face of Steel –
That suddenly looks into our's
With a metallic grin –

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The Cordiality of Death –
 Who drills his Welcome in (J. 286)

The word “nails” appears as an alternative for “drills” in the packet copy of this poem, and it may make the statement more effective, for the fear described is that the present negates our true identity in the irrecoverable past and that we will pass nameless and without a “Moment’s Bell” into oblivion. No wonder Dickinson put so much energy into her “book-making” on the second story. Life for her was the act of recollection; it was the attempt to tame the muse – the one who taunts her with the possibility of a knowable past and who is indeed the addressee of the “Master” letters. In this regard, the third and final letter is quite revealing. As Sewall observes, the first two “address a man to whom Emily can speak eye-to-eye, but here she writes in abject humility, ‘smaller,’ ‘lower,’ an offender and a blunderer, not even knowing her fault.” Here we sense the exhaustion that creeps over her after recording in her poetry a “love so big it scares her, rushing among her small heart – pushing aside the blood and leaving her faint and white.” The third letter records the numbness finally brought on by such intense recollection. One is ultimately turned back in his quest for “Rubicon.” This letter marks that point in Dickinson’s development as both poet and person.

It is no coincidence that the poet’s emotional crisis occurred at about this time. Nor was it accidental that it culminated the period in which her best poems were produced. The lives of the poet and the person had finally converged on the second story. It makes little difference, of course, whether the crisis involved a particular lover, as critics have suggested. One or another individual would have inevitably produced the same effect: At about age thirty Dickinson simply hit the wall of experience. She had already measured it in her poems and now had no place to hide, for after the “second story” or loss in life, one looked not *for* love but through it to the last illusion. It was a shotgun wedding of illusion and reality:

Title divine – is mine!
 The Wife – without the Sign!
 Acute Degree – conferred on me –
 Empress of Calvary!
 Royal – all but the Crown!

Life was just possibly that kind of marriage – the act of being “Betrothed – without the swoon.” Or “Born – Bridalled – Shrouded / In a Day” (J. 1072).

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This poem was written about the time of her crisis, and copies were sent to Samuel Bowles and Susan Dickinson, two of the biographers' and critics' candidates for the object of Dickinson's unrequited love. The search for the poet's lover began when her first books appeared in the 1890s. And despite the recent critical vote for a psychological "other" as the object of her intensity, the myth about a real-life lover persists. It survives because it contains, as all myths do, the germ of truth. No doubt Dickinson had a lover, or at least a "gentleman caller," in the late 1850s. Study of her early letters will bear out the fact that she entertained the expectations of a middle-class woman coming to maturity in Amherst society. It is not, therefore, wishful thinking to suspect that she enjoyed the normal adolescent experiences with the opposite sex – or either sex, for that matter. The important difference is that she learned from the experiences that each lover had to be embalmed in the memory of her songs in order for her to keep him. Indeed, he had to go the way of Homer Barron in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." It was the poetry of disembodiment that leaves not even that "long strand of iron-gray hair" the townspeople in Faulkner's story find after *their* Emily's death. Later in the decade, as already noted, she told Higginson, "A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend." Only the lover's "spectral power" kept pace with the pace of one's experience. All else faded with the changes of time.

Faulkner surely knew the value of a myth. In the opening of his story the narrator tells us, "When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house." Doubtless, it was the same mixture of respect and curiosity that drew the townspeople of Amherst to Emily Dickinson's funeral in 1886. And the curious have been drawn in ever since, not to Amherst but to the poetry, which is haunted with the "spectral power" of their own experience:

Pursuing you in your transitions,
 In other Motes –
 Of other Myths
 Your requisition be.
 The Prism never held the Hues,
 It only heard them play – (J. 1602)

In 1884 Dickinson sent a copy of this poem to Helen Hunt Jackson, then the more famous Amherst-born poet, during her recuperation from a hip injury. One of her biographers suggests that the poem pays tribute