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Emily Dickinson

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Le Dieu envolé by Camille Claudel.

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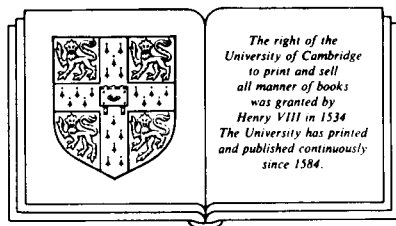
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The Poet on the Second Story

JEROME LOVING

Texas A&M University



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Jerome Loving

Frontmatter

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To the Memory of My Mother

NANCY MacNEILL LOVING

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Frontmatter

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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!

Because I Could not Stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

.....

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were toward Eternity –

CONTENTS

Preface	page ix
Acknowledgments	xv
1. Rubicon	1
2. Called Back	14
3. The “Hansom” Man	32
4. Father Emerson and Emily	49
5. <i>In Medias Res</i>	66
6. The Master’s House	84
7. The Leaf-Fringed Legend of Emily Dickinson	103
Notes	114
Index of Poems Discussed	123
General Index	126

PREFACE

On a June day in 1869 Emily Dickinson gave possibly the surest clue to the riddle of her life and work. She told Thomas Wentworth Higginson a “Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend.” Higginson missed the meaning of the remark (which could have been easily quartered into another of her famous apothegms), and we as her future readers have missed much of her meaning ever since. She meant that her life and work combined to reveal what the poet John Keats called a “Cold Pastoral.” The oxymoron derives, of course, from “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Dickinson listed Keats as one of her “Poets,” and his phrase comes closest to identifying the voice we hear in her best poetry. Often posthumous, as in “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” (J. 712), it dwells on the forgotten promise of life much in the fashion of the scenes described in “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” As Dickinson hinted to Higginson, the voice in her “letter to the World” was the sound of the mind fated to contemplate the dissolution of its “corporeal friend.”

She had read, as she also told Higginson, Sir Thomas Browne and much preferred the metaphysicality of the seventeenth-century English poets to the “disgraceful” physicality of Walt Whitman, her American contemporary in the making of what Ezra Pound called the “new wood.” But she wrote unlike Whitman’s “master” as well, for Emerson had used “mind” and “soul” synonymously and seen the life as finally “whole” only when it was completed. As poet of the post-American Renaissance, Dickinson could not rely on either body or soul, but only on the “supposed person.” This was projected by the “mind alone,” or the disembodied voice whose claim to immortality rested upon perceiving the ratio between life and death. That voice remains for us today in the poems and letters Emily Dickinson wrote in the nineteenth century in her father’s house on Main Street in Amherst, Massachusetts.

She wrote her “letter to the World,” it should be remembered, on the

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second story; and we are not amiss to observe the double and often multiple meanings of such a circumstance, for the meanings of her poems are often as reclusive as the life she led. In both cases the sign over the stairway seems to read *Passage Interdit*. Her poems often keep as much out of sight as she did. Their themes reject or challenge the “first story” of Whitman’s body and Emerson’s nature as easily perceived correspondents of something spiritual. Her “mind alone” was never “in harmony” with either, for she knew that to become so – to focus on the beginning and end of life instead of its inevitable middle in experience – was to court the destruction of the “supposed person.” In the poems her persona will “not stop for Death,” but only for a life worth dying for. This was to be found in the “mind alone” on the second story, the subject of this book. It was suspended somewhere between the flesh and the spirit, beyond the talk “indebted to attitude and accent” and before the silence that absorbs individuality. Only the mind, or its poems, possessed – as she told Higginson – “a spectral power . . . that walks alone.” It walked a fine line between life and death – or “Beauty” and “Truth,” which we will remember from reading her poem on the subject, “talked between the Rooms” until the “Moss” had covered up their names (J. 449).

Dickinson wrote in the spirit and not the letter of the law which says that every existence has a beginning and an end somewhere outside the mortal coil. As in the case of Hester Prynne’s letter “A” in *The Scarlet Letter*, her “letters” signified and authenticated the life in the here and now. In reading her today, we feel the “spectral power” of the woman who no longer exists. And yet the poems were just as disembodied in the nineteenth century as they are in the twentieth, for they issued from the mind that studied itself from the second story. It is little wonder that Dickinson’s fugitive life has posed so many problems for biographers. Richard B. Sewall found the best solution or “key” to her mystery when he wrote first of the lives her life surveyed. Indeed, it was through this biography that I first saw the possibility of my own book on the elusive poet. Sewall’s approach to her biography suggested a life hidden away on the second story of art. Her poetry, one might say, is made up of “sorties” over the lives of those around her, particularly those of her immediate family in the Homestead and in those of her brother’s family living next door in the Evergreens. It is a psychological survey of those existences as they redounded upon her own on the second story.

Dickinson began her poetry on the first story, writing valentine’s poems to possible suitors and girlfriends. In the earliest known exercise she writes that “the Earth was *made* for lovers,” but even at this stage in her development (c. 1850) there is an awareness that the mad coupling of lovers (“Adam, and Eve, his consort, the moon, and then the sun”) also includes “The *worm* [that] doth woo the *mortal*.” From the beginning she

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PREFACE

xi

includes the puritan “*application*” that despite her “reading of the roll” of lovers at all levels of nature, the addressee of the poem is nevertheless “a *human* solo, a being cold, and lone.” Since this is a lover’s or valentine’s poem, however, he is offered the opportunity of enjoying the “happy, happy love!” of the two lovers described in Keats’s ode. As Dickinson states the option in another valentine’s greeting:

Put down the apple, Adam,
And come away with me,
So shalt thou have a *pippin*
From off my father’s tree! (J. 2)

Her father’s fruit is not forbidden, and he may choose among six golden-red apples:

There’s *Sarah*, and *Eliza*, and *Emeline* so fair,
And *Harriet*, and *Susan*, and she with *curling hair*!
.....
Six true, and comely maidens sitting upon a tree; (J. 1)

The nameless one “with *curling hair*” is obviously Dickinson herself, who remains safe from the “harmony” of nature as long as she writes as the vicarious child of her father.

In other words, her retreat to the second story of her father’s house allowed her to lock the camera eye on nature’s possibility in the way Keats’s scene on the Grecian urn freezes his two lovers at the height of desire. In both scenes the action stops short of consummation and fulfillment. Psychologically, Emily Dickinson never came down from the second story; she never left home to marry. Rather than join the pageant of lovers who passed under her window, she chose to “sculpt” them in their various attitudes and accents. What matured and advanced was not the father’s daughter but the vicarious daughter of the father, the one who “acts out” in the poems the ratio or delicate balance between love and death.

An illustration of her theme is perhaps found in the work of another female recluse, the French sculptor Camille Claudel (1864–1943). Mistress of the more famous Auguste Rodin and sister of the Catholic apologist and poet Paul Claudel, she spent the last thirty years of her life locked away in an insane asylum. In her most productive years, however, she began to rival Rodin – with such now famous works as “Abandon” and “The Waltz.” Her best known piece (because of its autobiographical parallel) and the one most suggestive of Dickinson’s identity-theme is *Le Dieu envolé* (alternately called *L’Implorante*, *Implora-*

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Frontmatter

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tion, and *La Suppliante*). Roughly translated as “The God Who Flew Away,” the sculpture is a new and tragic version of Keats’s ode. It portrays a beautiful naked young woman kneeling with hands outstretched. The object of her *imploration*, in the final variation of the statue completed years later, is a large male figure carrying an aging female on his back as he turns away. Claudel entitled the final version “Destiny” because it was her own to be rejected by Rodin after a fifteen-year love affair in favor of the older Rose Beuret, whom the sculptor eventually married. After completing her best work at the turn of the century, Claudel became reclusive and paranoid, convinced that Rodin was stealing her ideas for his creations. We will probably never know the extent to which Rodin was indebted to his competitor and lover. She was so convinced of his exploitation that she began regularly to destroy her works as soon as she had completed them. By 1913 she was considered insane by her family, who feared the social consequences of her erratic behavior, and – despite her repeated protests – shut her away for the rest of her days.

Full of pathos, it was her story as much as her art that drew record numbers to the Rodin Museum in Paris when an exhibit of her work was unveiled there in 1984. But the real story of Camille Claudel, like that of Emily Dickinson, is to be found on the second story of art. Looking at *La Destinée*, one sees the complex drama of humanity played through to its inevitable denouement. The kneeling lover has come so close to fulfillment and yet is already fated for disappointment. Imploring in vain, she is another of those

. . . defeated – dying –
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear! (J. 67)

The god departing is a victim as well because he leaves for old age, his passion spent and an old woman on his back. Sexless in her clothing, she represents the death of a scene that without her would become as pastoral with possibility as that of Keats in his poem. It was this possibility as seen in retrospect that became Dickinson’s lifelong subject. In poem after poem we learn what might have been: Her life “had stood – a Loaded Gun” (J. 754) or had “closed twice before its close” (J. 1732). So much possibility and absolutely no probability. This was the object of her study on the second story.

Her argument with herself, however, is different from that found in, say, Whittier’s sentimental poem “Maud Muller,” because it focuses not on what “might have been!” but on the balance between success and failure. True “success” for Dickinson lay not in achieving the object of

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

xiii

one's desire but in discerning what made the object so desirable in the first place. One could see so clearly only from afar, on the second story of life. As she wrote:

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed. (J. 67)

One had to lose in order to win.

The “winning” consisted of weaning the self of the first story in order to write about it on the second. This is why the myths and legends about Dickinson's life are important for an understanding of her poetry. Her conduct of life in her father's house is full of suggestive contradictions – scenes as oxymoronic as Keats's famous carving on the urn. The most compelling is the fact that after thirty she wore nothing but white. Today in her second-story room in Amherst, the visitor will find one of those dresses hanging neatly in the closet. It resembles with its generous embroidery a rather simple wedding dress, as if the one “with *curling hair*” were always about to join the mad coupling that Emerson called the harmony of nature. In the poems this figure is always poised at the very moment of heightened expectation. Like Claudel's kneeling supplicant, he – or she – finds “success” in a “Cold Pastoral.” Sculpture-like, the poems freeze the various attitudes and accents of the human endeavor at the point where life is always most intense. By this it is meant that the poems address themselves almost invariably to the ratio between success and failure, life and death – or what might best be described as the inevitable conflict between beauty and truth. Dickinson knew what Keats knew: that beauty and truth are ultimately the same, because the first is always to be consumed by the second. That was all we could, as he warned, “know on earth.” And *knowing* it meant comprehending the ratio between the two.

This book is about Dickinson's success in appreciating failure. The very paradox of that achievement has forced me to adopt something of her “slant” perspective in order to get inside the echo chamber of her metaphors. Following the poet's own example, I have recombined Dickinson's life and art in the hope of demonstrating that the seeming dissonance of her words and images is really resonance, if not consonance. My argument, therefore, is cumulative, if not linear, in its interiorized approach. In Chapter 1 I begin at the end – or near it, in 1882 – and look back on the life that Dickinson looked back on in her poetry. Her “second story” begins with the story of her brother Austin's extramarital affair and the problems of commitment to love (and a lover) in the present instead of in either the undefinable past or future. For Dickinson,

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

experience was uroboric, and in this study I have sought to follow her charting of it. Chapter 2 deals with our beginning in an unknowable but nevertheless unforgettable past, and Chapter 3 deals with the end and the inevitable arrival of the “hansom” man. The remaining chapters grow out of this paradigm almost as organically as her poems grew out of the realization that life could be fully experienced only in the subjunctive or on the “second story.” There her art became the “lie” that told the truth. If this approach appears to be intuitive, it is to some extent. And yet the careful reader will soon realize my indebtedness to the body of fine scholarship that precedes me. It has both schooled me in the wide range of possibilities in her poetry and allowed me the opportunity to read that poetry with the full seriousness it surely demands. By immersing myself in the indirections of Dickinson’s life and language, I have tried to experience the depth, intricacy, and (finally) concentricity of her “second-story” point of view.

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[More information](#)

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As I stated in the Preface, it was Richard B. Sewall's biography of Dickinson that initially inspired me to write this book. That inspiration got its first focus from a conversation (one of the many during his semester visit to my university) with James M. Cox on the "second-story" aspect of *The Scarlet Letter*. He also read one of my chapters and heard another. Indeed, one particular fortune I had in writing this book was the frequent opportunity to try out drafts of various chapters in this country and abroad. At Dartmouth the poet Richard Eberhart told me a story that led to the opening of Chapter 4. At the Sorbonne I received advice and encouragement from Roger Asselineau and Giliane Morell. In Hamburg I got the reaction of Charles R. Anderson, and in Vienna that of Waldemar Zacharasiewicz.

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