Emily Dickinson

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Notes
Note on the Author and Editor
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Chronology of Dickinson's Life

Year	*Age*	*Life*
1830		Emily Dickinson born 10 December in Amherst, Massachusetts, USA, the second child, after Austin (1829–95), of lawyer Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross Dickinson
1833	3	Lavinia ('Vinnie') her sister born (d. 1899)
1840	10	Grandfather Dickinson moves to Ohio; Edward sells his half of the family home, The Homestead, and the family move to another house in Amherst. Emily and Lavinia enter Amherst Academy, where students are taught a 'modern' curriculum including astronomy and pre-Darwinian geology
1842	12	Her father elected State Senator; re-elected 1843
1846	16	Religious revival in Amherst; Dickinson expresses doubts to her friend Abiah Root
1847	17	Enters Mount Holyoke Female Seminary
1848	18	Withdraws from Mount Holyoke

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1850	20	Another religious revival in Amherst; her father and Lavinia and her friend, Susan Gilbert (1830–1913), join First Church of Christ
1851	21	Travels with her sister to Boston
1852	22	Her father, standing as a conservative Whig candidate, is elected to the US House of Representatives
1853	23	Amherst–Belchertown railway opens, promoted by her father
1854	24	Family visits Washington DC
1855	25	Visits Washington and Philadelphia with her sister
		Edward moves his family back into The Homestead; Dickinson will stay here for the rest of her life. Defeated in November's election, Edward sets up law partnership with Austin
		Health of mother declines; henceforth Dickinson and Lavinia run household
1856	26	Austin joins First Church and marries Susan Gilbert who becomes intimate friend of Dickinson's
1857	27	Emerson lectures in Amherst and stays with Austin and Susan; Dickinson does not attend and gradually begins to withdraw from society
1858	28	Writing poetry seriously
1859	29	Meets Catherine (Kate) Scott (later Anthon); they are close friends for six years
1860	30	Rev Charles Wadsworth visits her
1861	31	*Springfield Republican* prints poem 'I taste a liquor never brewed' altered and titled

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		‘The May-Wine’
1862	32	In 1862–3 writes about 300 poems but undergoes a personal crisis. Shares Amherst’s grief for loss of men killed in the Civil War
		Thomas Wentworth Higginson discourages her from publishing her poems
1864	34	In Boston for seven months for eye treatment. Two more poems printed
1865	35	About a thousand poems written by the end of this year
1866	36	*Springfield Republican* prints ‘A narrow Fellow in the Grass’ in a much-altered form
1867	37	Austin supervises building of new First Church opposite his house
1872	42	Edward Dickinson resigns as Treasurer of Amherst College and Austin succeeds him
1873	43	Edward elected to Massachusetts House of Representatives as independent candidate
1874	44	Edward dies suddenly in Boston. Austin and Susan’s third child Gilbert, born
1875	45	Mother Emily henceforth bedridden with paralysis
1876	46	Helen Hunt Jackson (1830–85), Amherst-born poet, becomes literary friend and begs her to publish
1878	48	‘Success is counted sweetest’ published anonymously at Jackson’s urging
		Samuel Bowles, editor of *Springfield Republican*, dies

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1880	50	Judge Otis Lord calls frequently at The Homestead and discusses marriage but is turned down
1882	52	Mother Emily dies
		Rev Charles Wadsworth dies
		Austin begins long affair with Mabel Loomis Todd
1883	53	Nephew Gilbert dies
1884	54	Judge Lord dies
		First attack of kidney disease
1885	55	Helen Hunt Jackson dies
1886	55	Dies of kidney disease
1890		First selection of poetry published

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Chronology of her Times

Year	*Literary Context*	*Historical Events*
1830	Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le noir*	Revolutionary uprisings in central Europe
		William IV King of England
		Louis-Philippe crowned
1831	Whittier, *Legends of New England*	Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia
		Revolutions suppressed by Austria
1832	Death of Scott	President Andrew Jackson re-elected
	Death of Goethe	
1833	Balzac, *Eugenie Grandet*	Telegraph invented
1835	de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*	John Quincy Adams elected President
1836	Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature'	Texas declares independence
		People's Charter in England
1837	Emerson, 'The American Scholar'	Queen Victoria crowned
		Morse's electric telegraph
		American business collapse
1838	Poe, *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*	First Atlantic steamships
1840	Dana, *Two Years Before The Mast*	Opium War
	Cooper, *The Pathfinder*	US population reaches 17 million
1841	Emerson, *Essays, First Series*	John Tyler elected President

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1842	Longfellow, *Ballads and Other Poems*	Chartists' second petition
1843		Texas annexed from Mexico
1844	Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*	Oregon boundary dispute between Britain and the US
	Emerson, *Essays, Second Series*	Telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore
1846	Melville, *Typee*	US-Mexico War
		Oregon settlement
1847	Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*	Mormons settle in Utah
	Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*	Irish Potato Famine
	Longfellow, *Evangeline*	American troops occupy Mexico
	Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*	
1848	Death of Emily Bronte	Mexico cedes Texas and California to US
	Lowell, *Poems and Biglow Papers*	California Gold Rush
1849	Thoreau, 'Civil Disobedience'	Zachary Taylor elected President
	Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*	
	Death of Poe	
1850	Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*	Death of President Taylor
		US population reaches 23 million
	Tennyson, *In Memoriam*	Fugitive Slave Law passed
1851	Melville, *Moby Dick*	*Coup d'e´tat* in Paris
1852	Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*	
1853	Dickens, *Bleak House*	Franklin Pierce elected President
		Railway from New York to Chicago
1854	Thoreau, *Walden*	Kansas–Nebraska Act
	Dickens, *Hard Times*	Outbreak of the Crimean War
1855	Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*	

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	Longfellow, *Song of Hiawatha*	
	Death of Charlotte Brontë	
1856	Turgenev, *Rudin*	End of Crimean War
	Elizabeth Barrett Browning,	James Buchanan elected President
	Aurora Leigh	
1857	Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*	Indian Mutiny
	Lowell, Editor, *Atlantic Monthly*	
1858		*Great Eastern* launched
		First marine cable to Europe
1859	Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*	Burning of Summer Palace, Beijing
1860	Death of Schopenhauer Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*	Abraham Lincoln elected President
1861	Dostoevsky, *Notes from the House of the Dead*	Outbreak of American Civil War
	Death of Elizabeth Barret Browning	
1862		Homestead Act
1863	Tolstoy, *The Cossacks*	Emancipation proclamation
		Battle of Gettysburg
1864	Death of Hawthorne	General Sherman captures Savannah
1865	Kipling and Yeats born	Civil War ends Lincoln assassinated
1866	Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*	Fourteenth Amendment
		Transatlantic cable laid
		Ulysses S. Grant elected President
1872	Eliot, *Middlemarch*	

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1874	Frost, Lowell and Stein born	
1876	Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*	Bell's speaking telephone
	Twain, *Tom Sawyer*	Battle of Little Big Horn
	Death of George Sand	
1879	Ibsen, *A Doll's House*	Einstein and Stalin born
1880	Wallace Stevens born	Boer uprising in Transvaal
	Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*	
1881	James, *Portrait of a Lady*	
1882	Death of Emerson	
1885	Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*	Grover Cleveland elected President
	Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*	Statue of Liberty
1886	Ezra Pound born James, *The Bostonians*	Completion of Canadian Pacific Railway

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Introduction

The poetry of Emily Dickinson seems to write itself before our eyes as work of the present. Direct, passionate and highly condensed, it has the immediacy of the modern. Yet Dickinson wrote in the middle of the nineteenth century: born in 1830 and writing most actively in the 1860s, she died in 1886, almost twenty-five years before Virginia Woolf decided that human nature had changed, and slightly longer until the poetic revolution of Imagism, which her work often anticipates. Dickinson wrote about some of the great Romantic and Victorian topics: love, loss, death, Nature and God, and she lived out the restricted life expected of a woman of good family in a New England town. The vital difference is that Dickinson didn't write about her topics as fixed or known entities. Her poetry and her letters look at every experience, every object, every emotion as if it were wholly new. Every word, every punctuation mark, even every word left out counts for something in Dickinson.

Titles can replace the process of experiencing the poem: Dickinson doesn't use them, and her poems are now usually referred to by number or by their first line. Punctuation, capitalization, slant rhyme and irregular metre were part of her poetic tools. When editors insisted on conventionalizing her work, she felt her poems 'robbed' from her and withdrew from publishing: 'Publication – is the Auction/ Of the Mind' (709). Only about one per cent of her 1,775 known poems were published during her lifetime. Abstractions often replace the felt experience of the real, in life as well as in poetry; Dickinson does use them occasionally, but mainly to anatomize or critique: ' "Heaven" – is what I cannot reach!' (239); 'Civilization – spurns – the Leopard!' (492). Dickinson is more interested in her Leopard: 'Tawny – her Customs . . . Spotted – her Dun Gown'.

If the habit of Victorian poets such as Tennyson and Swinburne was to envelop the reader or listener in a comforting blanket of language, then Dickinson tears that blanket and exposes us to her stark, distinct, jewel-like world. 'Bright Flowers slit a Calyx/ And soared upon a Stem/ Like Hindered Flags' (606) she writes, creating the detailed movement of a flower's thrust upwards into blossom. 'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,/That nearer, every Day,/ Kept narrowing its boiling wheel' (414), she writes, combining imagery of a whirlpool, a wheel of torture, and a boiling pot to concentrate a precise sensation of agony. In an age of oratory with 'Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –' (501), she chose the near-silence of the terse poetic script. The poems are short: a number are only eight lines long. But they are a slow read, and the after-shocks last indefinitely.

When Emily Dickinson was growing up in New England, the United States still laboured under a sense of cultural inferiority to Britain, even while it revelled in the freedom of being the 'first new nation', a democratic republic. English writers such as Wordsworth, Keats and Dickens, and the Scot Burns, were all read eagerly by Dickinson (though she disliked Wordsworth). Boston, New England's largest city, was the cultural capital of the United States, and its intellectual ferment gave rise to Tanscendentalism, a literary and social movement which mingled European Romanticism, philosophical idealism, and religious and social reform. Essays such as 'Nature', 'The American Scholar' and 'The Poet' made Ralph Waldo Emerson the foremost cultural figure of his age, but an ambiguous model for Dickinson, who tried out Emerson's Orphic generalizations in some poems and sharply rejected them in others. Henry David Thoreau's meticulous observations in *Walden* parallel Dickinson's; Margaret Fuller, co-editor with Emerson of the transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*, wrote the dashing feminist tract *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Nathaniel Hawthorne satirized Fuller cruelly in *The Blithedale Romance* (a warning to the female intellectual),

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but his 1850 'romance' *The Scarlet Letter* castigated the New England Puritan past for its persecution of extraordinary women and its hostility to the heart. Dickinson became a poet at a place and time when romanticism, a weakened but still powerful Puritanism, and the emergent power of women all converged.

Educated in the rigorous modern curriculum of co-educational Amherst Academy, where she studied sciences as well as arts, and then attending for one year Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, one of the first degree-granting colleges for women in the world, Dickinson was unusually well-prepared to play a cultural role; her classmates became wives of ministers or lawyers, and one, Helen Hunt Jackson, became a popular writer who championed Dickinson's work. Dickinson became invisible, and sent her poems to friends or self-published them in folded-over booklets or 'fascicles' (this edition contains the entire Fascicle 17). Throughout her work a kind of investigative confidence, a wide-ranging vocabulary, and a high productivity stand in apparent contradiction to an imagery of anguished withdrawl.

Dickinson was an omnivorous reader all her life, devouring magazines, popular writing and new writing as well as the accepted canon. For her books are food, or a frigate or a 'frugal' 'Chariot/ That bears the Human soul' (1263). In her poetry and letters the most visible influences are the Bible and Shakespeare: these two central texts of literary English centre her work in turn. Shakespeare is used allusively, as when 'Ceaseless Rosemary' carries the scent of Ophelia, death and memory (675). Dickinson's beloved sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson is told, 'Egypt, thou knew'st –' in a coded reference where Sue is Cleopatra and Emily Anthony. The allusive phrase packs into the poem or letter a characterization or an image-based insight that may range through an entire play in the original. Dickinson's use of the King James (Authorized) version of the Bible, tends more towards direct quotes, whose import is restricted or altered. The Gospels and the Revelation of St John of Patmos act as a shorthand for sacrifice, passion, revelation. Other phrases are ironized after being set apart by inverted commas. Yet Dickinson was not a bookish writer. She didn't go through a phrase of writing imitations, and her poetry is not dependent upon learned reference. Shakespeare was her model for linguistic richness and he is absorbed into her work (she once reportedly remarked that no other book was needed). The Bible was common cultural currency, to be valued, traded, or devalued.

When lines from George Herbert's 'Matins' were found in Dickinson's handwriting after her death, her first editors thought she had written them herself. The homely imagery of emblem books like Quarles's *Emblems*, the spiritual eloquence of Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (both of which Dickinson read) and American Puritan poets like Anne Bradstreet and the baroque Edward Taylor (almost certainly also read) all derive from the same biblical sources. Arguably these seventeenth-century writers and translators gave Dickinson her metaphysical love of paradox, her willingness to push metaphor to its limits in metaphysical conceit, and her sense of the physical world as a book of revelation. The meditative quest for wisdom animates the Dickinson poem, but her poems usually end on a modern note of surmise or doubt, marked by conditional verbs and a concluding dash.

Dickinson's uncanny resemblance to William Blake (whose *Songs of Innocence and Experience* weren't available for her to read) arises from their shared inheritance of radical Protestantism. For Dickinson, doubt and suffering are what 'gave me that precarious Gait/ Some call Experience' (875). For both writers, what Blake called the 'minute particulars' of the perceived world are hugely important, though of the two Dickinson is more likely to stay with the luminous detail. Both Blake and Dickinson also wrote in the deliberately humble, even childlike tetrameter hymn quatrains of Isaac Watts, meanwhile adapting and playing upon his conventional piety. Dickinson's doubts about religion didn't lead her to construct an alternative mythology, as Blake did, or to turn to classical myth, as Shelley did, although she notes crisply that in contrast to the Bible, 'Orpheus'

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sermon captivated – /It did not condemn –' (1545). Her subjectivity stays with the process, trying to pin down how our experience creates 'internal difference/ Where the Meanings, are' (258). This 'difference' places Dickinson close to twentieth-century poets who also looked back to the seventeenth century, such as the otherwise very different T. S. Eliot and Elizabeth Bishop.

What Dickinson sees, she sees clearly. Like her older contemporary Walt Whitman, she often sets the distinctness of the real against the fuzziness or trickery of the transcendent. Although she uses metaphor, she often chooses to display the comparative process at work by using simile. 'I would not talk, like Cornets' (505). Her work is striking for its use of the tropes of metonym and synecdoche. In synecdoche the part represents the whole. In metonym a type or instance represents the entity of which it is an example; it isn't analogous to or 'like' it. Geographical images such as 'Himmaleh' (252) (the Himalayas) are used this way by Dickinson. There seems an effort in this figurative language to preserve the integrity of the signifier. The object which is in the poem must be respected as itself rather than simply as an element in a comparison. Dickinson sets apart important objects or concepts by dashes, enthroning them in the midst of the poetic line. In her honouring of the humble object, and in her sense of poetic duty and work (the poem enhancing and replacing the woman's 'work' of needlework), Dickinson seems to me to initiate a possible American poetic of pragmatism, of seeing the world as it is, heightened through provisional figurative structures. There is something of this in Emerson, in William James, and in the line of modernist realism marked by Robert Frost, Marianne Moore and (again) Elizabeth Bishop. These are also the markers of post-Puritan New England culture. Dickinson is acutely aware of spatial proportions, and of specificity of place. 'The Robin's my Criterion for Tune –' (285) Dickinson writes pragmatically, because she grew up around robins, not nightingales. Everyone, even the Queen of England, 'discerns provincially', because everyone comes from a specific cultural and physical topography. In her case, inevitably, 'I see – New Englandly'.

Yet although Dickinson arose from a Puritan culture, in certain essential ways her thought is not 'Puritan'. She never accepted the doctrine of Original Sin, according to which all children of Eve are born sinful. Nor did she embrace the Calvinist division of humankind between the many Reprobate sinners and the few Elect or Redeemed. The 'visible Saints', always church members, usually a rich and powerful male elite, were for Dickinson the fraudulently 'meek members of the Resurrection –' (216), blind even to the collapse of the universe. In the majority of her poems she is deliberately reprobate, likely to be excluded for the slightest murmur: 'Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven? / Did I sing – too loud?' (248). Some of her most bitterly sardonic poems attack a cruel God who traps us in a 'magic prison' of the imaginary until we have been trained to 'reprimand the Happiness/ That too competes with Heaven' (1601). Nor does 'election' guarantee bliss: 'Far from Love the Heavenly Father/ Leads the Chosen Child' (1021). Sometimes the critique is gentle, couched in the apparent innocence of Dickinson's child persona: 'Some keep the Sabbath going to Church/ I keep it, staying at Home –' (324). But the tension remains between the drive for happiness and a religion based upon sin.

To most twentieth-century readers, Dickinson's rage against the Law of the Father feels familiar. But she was attracted also to the feminized Christ of her era, as in the passionate fragment 'Jesus! thy Crucifix' (225). In her most Emersonian poems, the Nature we see is a symbol for the presence beyond: 'Apprehensions – are God's introductions –' (797). For Dickinson, each must have his own different 'Opinion' of the meaning of the 'Sea – with a Stem' that Dickinson sees from her window. For Emerson, particulars must flow together into the single transcendent symbol of the Emersonian Oversoul. Death is the moment when immortality is tested. In her struggle to know, Dickinson places her speaker at or, eerily, *beyond* the moment of death: 'I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –' (465). While the others at the deathbed await 'that last Onset – when the King/ Be witnessed – in the Room –', Dickinson elides part of the verb: '*will* be witnessed'? '*may* be witnessed'? to make

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the case conditional. The drive to know death can arouse an almost sadistic curiosity: 'I like a look of Agony/ Because I know it's true –' (241). When Dickinson inverts the gendered Romantic theme of Death and the Maiden by giving the maiden a voice, the result is an uncanny convergence of wit and terror: 'Because I could not stop for Death – / He kindly stopped for me –' (712). The poem may also be a riposte to her contemporary Edgar Allan Poe, whose gothic tales she found excessive.

Women writers in the nineteenth century were expected to conform to appropriately feminine topics and to express genteel attitudes. The ones who broke out were heroines, 'sisters', 'queens', for Dickinson, who was almost as interested in their lives as their works. The third largest group of allusions in Dickinson is to the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, especially *Aurora Leigh*, her novel in verse about female creativity. When Barrett Browning died in 1861. Dickinson wrote three homages, 'Her – "last Poems" –' (312) and the famous 'I died for Beauty – but was scarce' (449) in which Barrett Browning is mingled with Keats references and with Dickinson herself as 'kinsmen' who have died for Truth and Beauty. 'I think I was enchanted' (593) is Dickinson's credo as a woman writer. Having read 'that Foreign Lady' 'When first a sombre Girl', Dickinson's speaker finds the world transformed 'For very Lunacy of Light'. Offered 'The Danger to be Sane', Dickinson turns instead 'To Tomes of solid Witchcraft', identifying herself with the witches persecuted by the New England Puritans, and with their work, the female poetic texts. Dickinson admired George Eliot: ('Her Losses make our Gains ashamed –' (1562) she wrote in 1882 after Eliot's death,) also George Sand, Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Bronte¨ sisters. Probably the closest nineteenth-century parallel to Dickinson poems of anguish such as 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' (280) or 'Pain – has an Element of Blank –' (650) is the breakdown endured by Charlotte Brontë's heroine Lucy Snowe in *Villette*.

In an 1862 letter to her sometime literary 'preceptor' Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson warned against reading her poetry personally: 'When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person'. Dickinson seeks to avoid the author–reader intimacy of Romanticism, and asks for an almost modernist distancing of her speaker. In some poems the Dickinson 'I' (her most frequently used word after 'a' and 'the') is a mask or persona performing the act of the poem. 'I'm Nobody! Who are you?' In a number of poems Dickinson miniaturizes herself: 'I was the littlest in the house', or she wears the mask of the innocent or false-naive little girl: 'The little tippler/ Leaning against the – Sun –' (214). In the past, Higginson's anecdotes, the prevalence of the 'girl' poems in early anthologies, and the knowledge that Dickinson never married combined with the cultural assumption that women writers only write about themselves to create a false Dickinson of personal pleading, a shy little woman dressed in white. Only recently has this figure been dislodged, though the fruitless game of hunt-the-lover, in which I myself have taken part elsewhere, continues apace.

The beloved of the poems and of the abject letter-drafts known as the 'Master' letters may have been Samuel Bowles, editor of the *Springfield Republican*; it may have been the charismatic preacher Rev Charles Wadsworth, or it may have been 'sweet Sue', her sister-in-law and Dickinson's lifelong preferred first audience for her poems. There is certainly one poem expressing lesbian desire for a 'Bride': 'Her sweet Weight on my Heart a Night' (518). Or it may have been Kate Scott (Anthon). What must be remembered is while the beloved of the biographical Emily Dickinson may have been one or some or even all of these people, in the poem the love-object seen by the reader has been enlarged and set at an angle to whatever happened in life by the speculative strengthening of emotions that constitutes lyric poetry. Just as the novelist assembles character from mixtures of friends, people observed, and literary characters, amplifying, suppressing or inventing traits to make the picture sharper, so the lyric poet uses the raw material of biography as the starting point for greater or lesser transformations. Since no poem, no linguistic structure, can ever convey precisely an emotional state or 'be' an emotion that it is not, no speaker is ever

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precisely the author. Dickinson sent the same apparently intimate and personal poems to more than one recipient: some poems have versions for 'Him' and 'Her', and some poems have a male speaker. Even in the intensely personal poems of Sylvia Plath, who once wrote to her mother that any similarities between her poems and those of Dickinson were purely intentional, the stance of the speaker is worked up to fulfil the dramatic role assigned to it.

I have seen one of the notorious white dresses that Dickinson emblematically wore in her later years. It isn't a dress for a large woman, but it isn't small either. Size is something Dickinson the poet put on and took off, as in the astonishing shifts in proportions of so many poems. When we find ourselves attributing the feelings of the 'I' in a Dickinson poem to a real person, I suspect this is not so much Dickinson herself as ourselves, her readers, entering into the situation of the 'I' as we work through the poem's vividly imaged emotions. The 'I' of Dickinson's emotive poems is the agency not so much of a self as mere agency itself – the force driving the act of the poem, and then driven by the agency it has established. The tantalizing difficulty in establishing what many Dickinson poems are 'about' arises because the drive of the poem towards the process, rather than the goal. In poem 320, 'We play at Paste –', the lesson of learning value from the ordinary is clear; whether the 'Pearl' of the poem is love, heaven, poetic accomplishment or none of these, the process still applies equally. Dickinson knew, however, that in a patriarchal culture a poetics of pure agency had a price: agency for whom? In 'My life had stood – a Loaded Gun' (754) the speaker channels her explosively violent desire for expression into service for a Master: she is a gun, a volcano, a witch of 'Yellow Eye'. Yet when she has turned herself into her work she must recognize that 'I have but the power to kill,/ Without – the power to die –'

When Dickinson writes of joy, she uses active physical imagery. In the erotic 'luxury' of 'Wild Nights – Wild Nights!' (249), the speaker is the boat aiming for the port of the beloved. Once the port is known the journey itself is ecstatic; 'Rowing in Eden – / Ah, the Sea!' As in early mystical religions, she wants the ecstasy of revelation – particularly an erotic revelation – in this life, not the next: 'Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat*?' (365). In 'Come slowly – Eden! (211) she is the 'fainting Bee' who in a Keatsian synaesthesia of the senses, sinks into the flower's nectar: 'Enters – and is lost in Balms'. One of Dickinson's most rewarding poems sets together the questing woman, the dissenter and the artist: 'I'm ceded – I've stopped being Theirs –' (508), she writes, adapting the language of secession of the Civil War raging in the American South. She discards the dolls, the sewing kit, and above all 'The name They dropped upon my face' when she lay 'Crowing – on my Father's breast –'. Instead, she embraces 'Existence's whole Arc, filled up'. Now, able to choose for herself, she chooses, with a lightly ironic arrogance, 'just' to be queen of herself and of her world: 'With Will to choose, or to reject,/ And I choose, just a Crown'.

HELEN McNEIL

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A Note on This Text

Emily Dickinson published fewer than twenty poems during her lifetime (the number has risen gently as a result of recent intensive scholarship). Instead she sent her poems in letters and *as* letters, and she self-published by copying out her poems in eight-page booklets (called 'fascicles' by her editors), which she folded and bound herself. When she died her sister Lavinia discovered that hundreds of poems had been preserved in the fascicles and in manuscript; she took the poems to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, Dickinson's sister-in-law and preferred inner audience. After eighteen months of inaction, Lavinia retrieved the poems and offered them to Mabel Loomis Todd, who was the lover of Austin Dickinson, Emily and Lavinia's brother and Susan's husband. Mabel Loomis Todd brought in Dickinson's former literary mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and they co-edited the 1890 *Selected Poems*. Higginson's comments established the public myth of Dickinson the eccentric recluse, and the edition altered words, added titles, regularized metre and 'corrected' punctuation, but it did bring Dickinson's work into view and it went through six editions. Other selections, some including Dickinson's sparkling letters, followed up until 1945.

Only in 1955, however, were Dickinson's poems finally published as she wrote them, without alterations to vocabulary, capitalization and punctuation. *The Complete Poems* edited by Thomas H. Johnson, has remained standard, and it is used for the text of almost all the poems in the present edition. Dickinson didn't, as a rule, title her poems, so Johnson numbered her poems in rough chronological order. This edition keeps Johnson's numbering for convenience, although it does *not* always print the poems in Johnson's sequence. To give a sense of how Dickinson organized and self-published her work in fascicles, this edition includes the complete Fascicle 17 (1862–3?) in Dickinson's original order as part of its selection. Dickinson continued to revise her poems after copying them into the fascicles or sending them to friends, and the revisions sometimes amount to substantial changes in meaning. Johnson's practice was to use the fascicle text without the revisions Dickinson added at the bottom of the page or on the line, but to prefer another text where that text was sent in a letter. When I have felt Dickinson's revisions amount to alternative readings, I have noted the revision, working from Carl Franklin's facsimiles in *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981). To help the reader to follow Dickinson's creative process, I have also noted Dickinson's revisions to her poems in Fascicle 17.

Notes are to be found at the end of the collection, listed according to poem number.

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Poems

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67

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host 5
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated – dying –
On whose forbidden ear 10
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

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187

How many times these low feet staggered –
Only the soldered mouth can tell –
Try – can you stir the awful rivet –
Try – can you lift the hasps of steel!

Stroke the cool forehead – hot so often – 5
Lift – if you care – the listless hair –
Handle the adamantine fingers
Never a thimble – more – shall wear –

Buzz the dull flies – on the chamber window –
Brave – shines the sun through the freckled pane – 10
Fearless – the cobweb swings from the ceiling –
Indolent Housewife – in Daisies – lain!

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193

I shall know why – when Time is over –
And I have ceased to wonder why –
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky –

He will tell me what "Peter" promised
– And I – for wonder at his woe –
I shall forget the drop of Anguish
That scalds me now – that scalds me now!

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199

I’m “wife” – I’ve finished that –
That other state –
I’m Czar – I’m “Woman” now –
It’s safer so –

How odd the Girl’s life looks 5
Behind this soft Eclipse –
I think that Earth feels so
To folks in Heaven – now –

This being comfort – then
That other kind – was pain – 10
But why compare?
I’m “Wife”! Stop there!

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211

Come slowly – Eden!
Lips unused to Thee –
Bashful – sip thy Jessamines –
As the fainting Bee –

Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums –
Counts his nectars –
Enters – and is lost in Balms.

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214

I taste a liquor never brewed –
From Tankards scooped in Pearl –
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air – am I –
And Debauchee of Dew – 5
Reeling – thro endless summer days –
From inns of Molten Blue –

When 'Landlords' turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door – 10
When Butterflies – renounce their "drams" –
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats
And Saints – to windows run –
To see the little Tippler 15
Leaning against the – Sun –

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216

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –
Untouched by Morning
And untouched by Noon –
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection –
Rafter of satin, 5
And Roof of stone.

Light laughs the breeze
In her Castle above them –
Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence – 10
Ah, what sagacity perished here!

VERSION OF 1859

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –
Untouched by Morning –
And untouched by Noon –
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection – 15
Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone!

Grand go the Years – in the Crescent – above them –
Worlds scoop their Arcs –
And Firmaments – row –
Diadems – drop – and Doges – surrender – 20
Soundless as dots – on a Disc of Snow –

VERSION OF 1861

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225

Jesus! thy Crucifix
Enable thee to guess
The smaller size!

Jesus! thy second face
Mind thee in Paradise
Of ours!

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228

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple
Leaping like Leopards to the Sky
Then at the feet of the old Horizon
Laying her spotted Face to die
Stooping as low as the Otter's Window
Touching the Roof and tinting the Barn
Kissing her Bonnet to the Meadow
And the Juggler of Day is gone

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239

"Heaven" – is what I cannot reach!
The Apple on the Tree –
Provided it do hopeless – hang –
That – "Heaven" is – to Me!

The Color, on the Cruising Cloud – 5
The interdicted Land –
Behind the Hill – the House behind –
There – Paradise – is found!

Her teasing Purples – Afternoons –
The credulous – decoy – 10
Enamored – of the Conjuror –
That spurned us – Yesterday!

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241

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true –
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe –

The Eyes glaze once – and that is Death –
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung.

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243

I've known a Heaven, like a Tent –
To wrap its shining Yards –
Pluck up its stakes, and disappear –
Without the sound of Boards
Or Rip of Nail – Or Carpenter – 5
But just the miles of Stare –
That signalize a Show's Retreat –
In North America –

No Trace – no Figment of the Thing
That dazzled, Yesterday, 10
No Ring – no Marvel –
Men, and Feats –
Dissolved as utterly –
As Bird's far Navigation
Discloses just a Hue – 15
A plash of Oars, a Gaiety –
Then swallowed up, of View.

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248

Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven?
Did I sing – too loud?
But – I can say a little "Minor"
Timid as a Bird!

Wouldn't the Angels try me – 5
Just – once – more –
Just – see – if I troubled them –
But don't – shut the door!

Oh, if I – were the Gentleman
In the "White Robe" – 10
And they – were the little Hand – that knocked –
Could – I – forbid?

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251

Over the fence –

Strawberries – grow –

Over the fence –

I could climb – if I tried, I know –

Berries are nice!

But – if I stained my Apron –

God would certainly scold!

Oh, dear, – I guess if He were a Boy

He'd – climb – if He could!

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252

I can wade Grief –
Whole Pools of it –
I'm used to that –
But the least push of Joy
Breaks up my feet – 5
And I tip – drunken –
Let no Pebble – smile –
'Twas the New Liquor –
That was all!

Power is only Pain – 10
Stranded, thro' Discipline,
Till Weights – will hang –
Give Balm – to Giants –
And they'll wilt, like Men –
Give Himmaleh – 15
They'll Carry – Him!

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254

“Hope” is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops – at all –

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard – 5
And sore must be the storm –
That could abash the little Bird

That kept so many warm –
I’ve heard it in the chillest land –
And on the strangest Sea – 10
Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of Me.

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258

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us – 5
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair – 10
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance 15
On the look of Death –

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Note on the Author and Editor

EMILY DICKINSON was born in the United States in 1830, the second child of Edward Dickinson, a lawyer and politician in the western Massachusetts town of Amherst. Unusually for a young woman of the period, she received a challenging education in the modern curriculum of co-educational Amherst Academy. She then went on to study at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, one of the first degree-granting institutions for women, but she returned home after one year. Except for visits to Washington, Philadelphia, and Boston, Dickinson spent the rest of her life at home in Amherst. She enjoyed a passionate friendship with her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson, who was the preferred first reader of her poetry, and in the early 1860s she suffered some emotional torment, possibly connected to a figure she called the 'Master'. But it is the story told by the poetry which is the story worth reading.

Dickinson began writing poetry seriously in the late 1850s, and during her flood period of 1862–3 (also a time of crisis for the nation, plunged into a bitter Civil War) she was writing more than a poem a day. Her refusal to compromise her highly condensed expression and idiosyncratic punctuation meant that her works were mangled by editors until she withdrew from the 'auction' of publication. At the time of her death in 1886 only about one per cent of her 1,775 known poems had been published. In 1955 an accurate edition finally appeared.

The strongest influences on Dickinson's poetry are the Bible and Shakespeare. As a religious sceptic since adolescence in a community whose social and spiritual life was based on churchgoing and revivalism, she wrote many poems about being shut out of a lost heaven. As an innovative woman poet in a male literary culture, she sought out literary 'sisters': Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Bronte¨s, George Eliot, George Sand. She herself has in turn become a guiding figure for recent women's writing. One of the two great nineteenth-century American poets (together with Walt Whitman), Dickinson looks startlingly modern today: her pure, fierce complexity seems the missing link between the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century and the fragmented demands of the modern.

HELEN McNEIL is the author of the critical and biographical study *Emily Dickinson* (Virago and Pantheon, 1986). Amongst other critical works and broadcasts, she has published on Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath (Plath explicitly acknowledged her debt to Dickinson). An American who has worked in Britain for some years, she is a lecturer in American Literature at the University of East Anglia. She edited Edith Wharton's short stories, *Souls Belated and Other Stories* for Everyman.

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