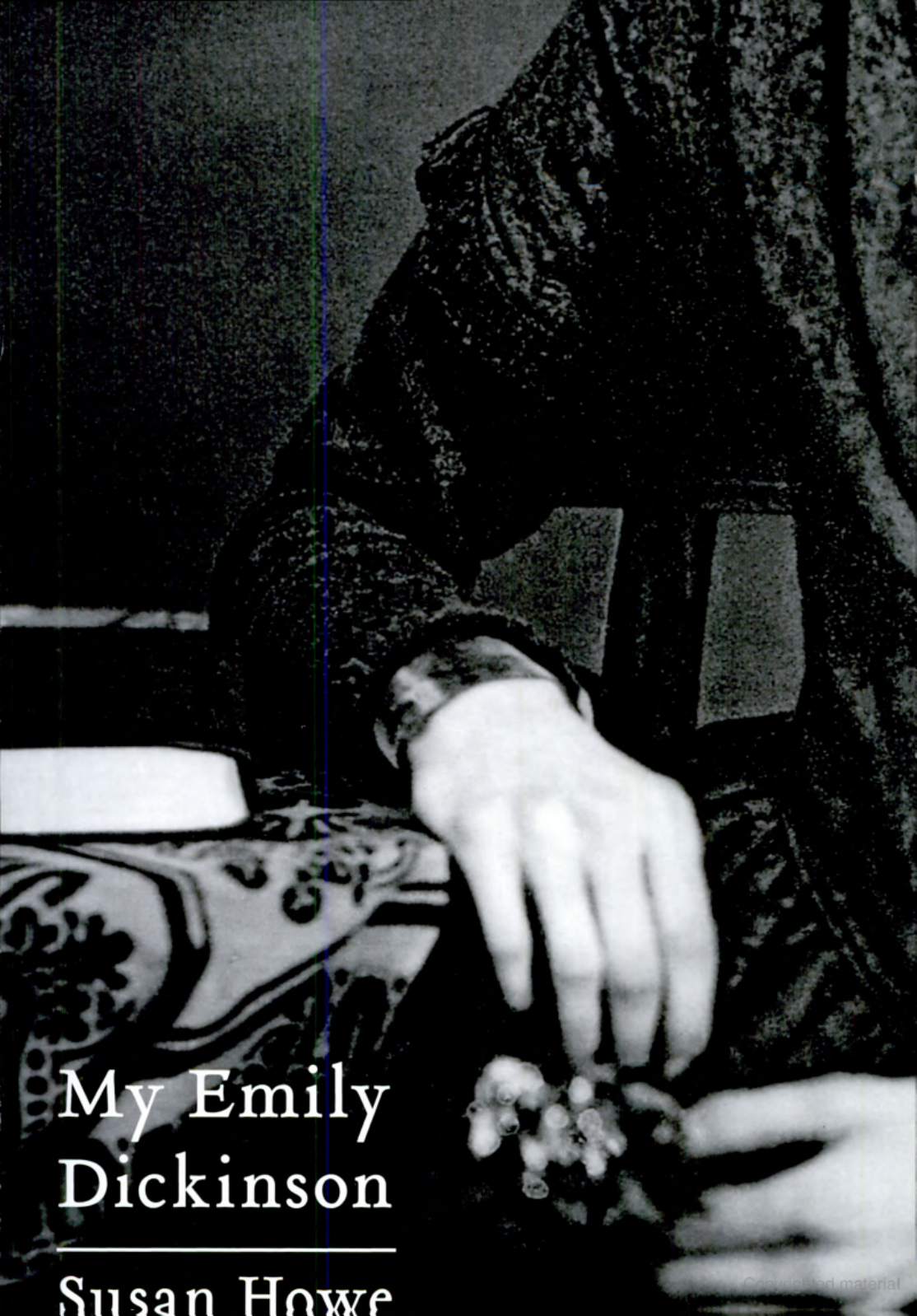

My Emily Dickinson

Susan Howe

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My Emily Dickinson

With a preface by
Eliot Weinberger

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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Author's Note: In 2007 I wouldn't rely on Thomas H. Johnson's editorial decisions for Dickinson's line breaks or variant readings. But the book is a product of the spiritual and textual scholarship of the early 1980s.

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PREFACE

"I'm Nobody!" – and it is indeed difficult to recuperate how much of a nobody Emily Dickinson once was. Take two classic literary histories: The 560 pages of Van Wyck Brooks' *The Flowering of New England* (1936) mention her only twice in passing. In the 660 oversize pages of F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941), she is allotted a short paragraph: The "compressed form" of her poems "resulted from her need to resolve conflicts," which Matthiessen does not detail. "Her ideals of language, indeed her very tricks of phrase, seem indistinguishable from those" of Emerson, though she "does not have any of his range as a social critic." Even as late as 1980, she does not appear at all in John T. Irwin's *American Hieroglyphics*.

D.H. Lawrence doesn't mention her in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923). Ezra Pound found room for John Greenleaf Whittier and James Whitcomb Riley in his anthology *From Confucius to Cummings* (1958), but did not include her. The once-important Georgian poet Harold Monro declared in 1925 that she is "intellectually blind, partially dead, and mostly dumb to the art of poetry": "Her tiny lyrics appear to be no more than the jottings of a half-idiotic school-girl instead of the grave musings of a full grown, fully educated woman." George Whicher, who cared enough to compile a Dickinson bibliography in 1930, stated that "art forms were totally unknown to her":

> Her inadvertencies and slipshod lapses have been soberly defended as beauties beyond the comprehension of the vulgar, and her name has been invoked to support the predilections of her critics for movements in verse that she could never have heard of.

In the most influential essay of the time, Allen Tate in 1932 compared her to John Donne – the New Critics compared everyone to John Donne – in that she "*perceives abstraction* and *thinks sensation*," but writes that the difference is her "ignorance, her lack of formal intellectual

training. . . . She cannot reason at all. She can only *see.*" Even more: "Her intellectual deficiency was her greatest distinction." Charles Olson refers to her only once, in an early draft of *Call Me Ishmael* (1947): "Dickinson loved Christ but jilted Him and married Death. Her stretch and yawn for the grave strained her nature, poisoned it."

Robert Duncan writes to Denise Levertov in 1960:

> Have you seen the new edition of Emily Dickinson's poems, restoring her punctuation? So that we see she was nearer akin than we might have suspected. The dashes (are spaces) articulate the line. And what a lovely measure, what an immediate thing comes out!

Levertov replies:

> You know, actually those dashes bother me – it seems to give a monotony of tone. I can't quite explain it. . . . There's something cold and perversely smug about E.D. that has always rebuffed my feeling for individual poems of hers extending itself to her work as a whole. She wrote some great things – saw strangely – makes one shudder with new truths – but ever and again one feels (or I do) – "Jesus, what a bitchy little spinster."

Duncan answers: "I'll not give at all on your sense of Emily Dickinson . . . her work comes thru to me without any interfering about her personality." And, a few years later, Levertov has changed her mind – at least about the dashes – and reports to Duncan on an evening with Robert Lowell:

> Imagine, it had *never occurred* to him to think of Emily Dickinson's dashes as aural notations, rests or rallentandos. He had supposed them to be merely a sort of scribbles, meaning nothing, presumably intended by E.D. to be *filled in* with "proper" punctuation later. At first in a prideful immodest way he vigorously denied they could be anything more. Eventually tho', he evidently decided to mull over this "new idea."

Robert Creeley and Louis Zukofsky, though fellow masters of compression, did not write about her. (Zukofsky wanted three poems for his 1948 anthology, *A Test of Poetry*, but thought the permissions fee too high: $25.) Kenneth Rexroth declared that Dickinson "is the equal of any woman poet of the century except Christina Rossetti and the Bronte sisters." But Lorine Niedecker – who would be compared to Dickinson far too often – included her among the ten writers in her

"immortal cupboard," and cited an 1891 letter from a prescient Alice James: "It is reassuring to hear the English pronouncement that Emily Dickinson is fifth-rate – they have such a capacity for missing quality." Marianne Moore, in a 1933 review of the *Letters*, praised Dickinson in her fashion:

> Dickinson has been accused of vanity. A certain buoyancy that creates an effect of inconsequent bravado – a sense of drama with which we may not be quite at home – was for her part of that expansion of breath necessary to existence, and unless it is conceited for the hummingbird or the osprey to not behave like a chicken, one does not find her conceited.

Others saw themselves, or what they wanted to see. Hart Crane to Gorham Munson, 1928: "Some of Blake's poems and Emily Dickinson's seem more incontrovertible than ever since Relativity and a host of other ideologies, since evolved, have come into recognition." H.D. to Bryher, 1924: "Really very nice crystalline stuff." Moore again, complaining of the characterization of Dickinson as a "rare thing, the truly unartificial spirit": "One resents the cavil that makes idiosyncrasy out of individuality." Allen Ginsberg, 1980: "a fly buzzing when you died like Emily Dickinson brings you back mindful to the room where / you sit and keep breathing aware of the walls around you and the endless blue sky above your mind."

And then there is William Carlos Williams – with Olson and Susan Howe herself, the most Americanist of American poets – whose lines from the "Jacataqua" section of *In the American Grain* (1925) are the epigraph to this book, and against which, we learn in the first sentence, this book is written. In Williams' prose, it is often difficult to know what he means, as the sentences, passionate and enthusiastic but often abstract, tend to undermine or contradict one another. "Jacataqua," a simultaneous jeremiad and reverie on, among other things, the American woman, is no exception. Elsewhere in the essay he refers to Dickinson as "about the only woman one can respect for her clarity."

Four years later, reviewing Kay Boyle's *Short Stories*, he writes:

> *Awake*, Emily Dickinson was torn apart by her passion; driven back to cover she imprisoned herself in her father's garden, the mark of the injury she deplored, an opacity beyond which she could not penetrate. And in literature, since it is of literature that I am writing, it is the mark of our

> imprisonment by sleep, the continuous mark, that in estimating the work of E.D., still our writers praise her rigidity of the sleep walker – the rapt gaze, the thought of Heaven – and ignore the structural warping of her lines, the rhymelessness, the distress marking the place at which she turned back. She was a beginning, a trembling at the edge of waking – and the terror it imposes. But she could not, and so it remains.

In 1934, in an essay on "The American Background," he writes: "[Emerson] was a poet, in the making, lost. His spiritual assertions were intended to be basic, but they had not – and they have not today – the authenticity of Emily Dickinson's unrhymes. And she was of the same school, rebelliously." (The next sentence, beginning a new paragraph, reads: "It is impressive to experience the reflection of the American dearth in culture among women.") Two years later, in correspondence with the young poet Mary Barnard, he complains that Barnard's poems are too delicate:

> I don't ask anyone to be indelicate. That isn't it. But when a person has little actual experience of bodily contacts, when we can't get to the world hard enough or fast enough – and yet we must write – then we are likely to draw out a fund of material and make it do – and do too often – over and over – and it gets hard to keep from getting brittle. Emily Dickinson (I swore I wasn't going to use her name) succeeded by hammering her form obstinately into some kind of homespun irregularity that made it do – but even at her best – it is too far gone to heaven – too much the wish for what it might have been – to be an example for many.

[A strange conjunction: In 1979, a Japanese scholar, Hiroko Uno, claimed that the frontispiece of Volume II of Richard Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* is not a photograph of the poet, but rather of Williams' maternal grandmother, "born in England about the same time," and whose name was Emily Dickenson.]

By the time of the writing of this book, in the early 1980s, Dickinson's complexities tended to be lost, as Howe says in an interview, "in the reductive portrait of a spinster genius clothed in white à la Miss Haversham . . . a spidery recluse, a Queen at Home, sewing." Criticism concentrated on "neurosis, repression, rejection." Dickinson was, in the title of a popular feminist critique, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, driven there by the society-at-large, inhabiting the only space allowed an intelligent and sensitive woman.

Howe's mission was to avoid further psychological speculation and revisionist politics to present Dickinson in the kind of literary, intellectual, and historical context in which male poets are routinely considered. Against the cliché of Dickinson as some sort of Rousseauian natural spirit, producing quirky, unlettered effusions, Howe's Emily Dickinson is an erudite, and she tracks the poems through a vast amount of reading: Shakespeare, the Brontes, the Brownings, Spenser, Shelley, Keats, Blake, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson, James Fenimore Cooper . . . the company in which, from the distance she did not perceive as a distance, Dickinson thought she was writing. Against the isolated neurotic, Howe's Dickinson is fully aware of events, including the Civil War, in the world outside. Howe goes backward, down into the roots, to show Dickinson's as a sensibility and intelligence formed by Puritanism, the New England frontier, Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening. And against the image of the naïve artist, the homebound stitcher of "inadvertent" words, Howe – as Williams had hinted at and Duncan had perceived – claims Dickinson as consciously a revolutionist of the word: with Stein, one of the two great American women avant-gardists.

It is astonishing that Howe accomplishes all this in less than 150 pages, but this is a poet's book, a classic of writers writing on writers (and others), on that short shelf with Lawrence's *Studies*, Olson's *Ishmael*, Williams' *American Grain*, Duncan's still-uncollected *The H. D. Book*, Simone Weil's *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*, H. D.'s *Tribute to Freud*, Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare* – all of which Howe has noted as inspirational in the writing of this book. In the endless dialogues of literature, *My Emily Dickinson* seems to be talking most to *Call Me Ishmael*. Olson/Melville and Howe/Dickinson form a yin and yang beyond male and female: Olson's Figure of Outward against the Figure of Inward: the Amherst attic where Olson's famous first sentence ("I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America . . .") does not apply.

Howe would go from here to the well-known essay, "These Flames and Generosities of the Heart" (in *The Birth-Mark*, 1993), which demonstrated how the standard "stanzaic" transcription of Dickinson's poems is an editorial invention quite different from the way she actually laid out the lines on the page. Poets got it immediately; the Dickinsonians found it scandalous.

The writing of writers on writers tends to last longer than standard literary criticism, and not only because it is better written. Critics

I have retained Emily Dickinson's eccentricities of spelling and punctuation. All texts for her letters and poems are taken from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson. I have used his numbering throughout. I believe, and Ralph Franklin's edition of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* now shows, that her carefully marked variant suggestions for wording certain poems are quite deliberate. Again I have used Johnson's method of listing and numbering her suggestions for word changes.

I have used the letter L after quotations from the letters to distinguish the letters from the poems.

I have used the 1855 edition of Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

Text for Shakespeare quotations is from the edition edited by Charles Knight. The Dickinson family owned the eight volume Knight edition.

I want to thank Quincy Howe, Barbara Folsom, and Maureen Owen for their help in correcting and proof-reading the manuscript.

It is the women above all – there never have been women, save pioneer Katies; not one in flower save some moonflower Poe may have seen, or an unripe child. Poets? Where? They are the test. But a true woman in flower, never. Emily Dickinson, starving of passion in her father's garden, is the very nearest we have ever been – starving.

Never a woman: never a poet. That's an axiom. Never a poet saw sun here.

(William Carlos Williams,
In the American Grain.)

INTRODUCTION:

My book is a contradiction of its epigraph.

Emily Dickinson once wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson; "Candor–my Preceptor–is the only wile." This is the right way to put it.

In his Introduction to *In the American Grain*, William Carlos Williams said he had tried to rename things seen. I regret the false configuration–under the old misappellation–of Emily Dickinson. But I love his book.

The ambiguous paths of kinship pull me in opposite ways at once.

As a poet I feel closer to Williams' writing about writing, even when he goes haywire in "Jacataqua," than I do to most critical studies of Dickinson's work by professional scholars. When Williams writes: "Never a woman, never a poet. . . . Never a poet saw sun here," I think that he says one thing and means another. A poet is never just a woman or a man. Every poet is salted with fire. A poet is a mirror, a transcriber. *Here* "we have salt in ourselves and peace one with the other."

When Thoreau wrote his Introduction to *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he ended by remembering how he had often stood on the banks of the Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River English settlers had re-named Concord. The Concord's current followed the same law in a system of time and all that is known. He liked to watch this current that was for him an emblem of all progress. Weeds under the surface bent gently downstream shaken by watery wind. Chips, sticks, logs, and even tree stems drifted past. There came a day at the end of the summer or the beginning of autumn, when he resolved to launch a boat from shore and let the river carry him.

Emily Dickinson is my emblematical Concord River.

I am heading toward certain discoveries. . . .

Part One

When I am through the old oak forest gone–
(John Keats, from "On sitting down to read *King Lear* once Again." The sonnet was included in a letter to his brothers, George and Tom Keats, Friday, 23rd January 1818.)

Little Cousins,
Called back.
Emily.
(Emily Dickinson's last letter, written to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross, May 1886.)

In the college library I use there are two writers whose work refuses to conform to the Anglo-American literary traditions these institutions perpetuate. Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein are clearly among the most innovative precursors of modernist poetry and prose, yet to this day canonical criticism from Harold Bloom to Hugh Kenner persists in dropping their names and ignoring their work. Why these two pathfinders were women, why American–are questions too often lost in the penchant for biographical detail that "lovingly" muffles their voices. One, a recluse, worked without encouragement or any real interest from her family and her peers. Her poems were unpublished in her lifetime. The other, an influential patron of the arts, eagerly courted publicity, thrived on company, and lived to enjoy her own literary celebrity. Dickinson and Stein meet each other along paths of the Self that begin and end in contradiction. This surface scission is deceptive. Writing was the world of each woman. In a world of exaltation of *his* imagination, feminine inscription seems single and sudden.

As poetry changes itself it changes the poet's life. Subversion attracted the two of them. By 1860 it was as impossible for Emily Dickinson simply to translate English poetic tradition as it was for Walt Whitman. In prose and in poetry she explored the implications of breaking the law just short of breaking off communication with a reader. Starting from scratch, she exploded habits of standard human intercourse in her letters, as she cut across the customary chronological linearity of poetry. Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), influenced by Cézanne, Picasso and Cubism, verbally elaborated on visual invention. She reached in words for new vision formed from the process of naming, as if a first woman were sounding, not describing, "space of time filled with moving." Repetition, surprise, alliteration, odd rhyme and rhythm, dislocation, deconstruction. To restore the original clarity of each word-skeleton both women lifted the load of European literary custom. Adopting old strategies, they reviewed and re-invented them.

Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein also conducted a skillful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history. Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence? What inner articulation releases the coils and complications of Saying's asser-

tion? In very different ways the countermovement of these two women's work penetrates to the indefinite limits of written communication.

* * *

"The Laugh of the Medusa" by the French feminist Hélène Cixous is an often eloquent plan for what women's writing *will* do. The problem is that *will* too quickly becomes *must*. She writes. "I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man."

> We don't fawn around the supreme hole. We have no womanly reason to pledge allegiance to the negative. The feminine (as the poets suspected) affirms: " . . . And yes," says Molly, carrying *Ulysses* off beyond any book and toward the new writing; "I said yes, I will Yes."
> ("Utopias," *New French Feminisms*, p. 255)

But Cixous, the author of *The Exile of James Joyce*, ignores Gertrude Stein, whose *Three Lives* published in 1908, and *The Making of Americans* written between 1907 and 1911, had already carried their author beyond any book before *Ulysses* and after. In the 765 pages of Richard Ellmann's exhaustive biography of Joyce, there are only three brief references to Stein. The first, on page 543, puts her down at once. Mary Column reports that Joyce, when asked his opinion of his famous contemporary and neighbor, answered. "I hate intellectual women." What a world of irony lies under that remark. *Ulysses* was published by Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company; all but four episodes had first appeared in Margaret Anderson's *The Little Review*, and Harriet Weaver financially supported the writer and his family during the years he worked on the book. All three were intellectual women. Molly Bloom may have said "Yes" to the future of new writing, but she was a character not an author. For her author, the intellectual future was masculine. All the elements that Cixous longs for in the writing women *will* do, can be found in Stein, who clearly broke the codes that negated her. Why has she even here been "omitted, brushed aside at the scene of inheritances?"

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar are perceptive about the problems and achievements of nineteenth century British novelists who were women. Sadly their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer*

and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination, fails to discuss the implications of a nineteenth century American penchant for linguistic decreation ushered in by their representative poet Emily Dickinson. For these two feminist scholars a writer may conceal or confess all, if she does it in a logical syntax. Emily Dickinson suggests that the language of the heart has quite another grammar. This acutist lyric poet sings the sound of the imagination as learner and founder, sings of liberation into an order beyond gender where "Love is it's own rescue, for we–at our supremest, are but it's trembling Emblems–" (L522)

Givens of Dickinson's life: her sex, class, education, inherited character traits, all influences, all chance events–all carry the condition for her work in their wake. To release those gestures of intention that make her poems great, she chose for some reason to shut herself inside her childhood family constellation. This self-imposed exile, indoors, emancipated her from all representations of calculated human order. Most literary criticism is based on calculations of interest. The reductivist approach to writing signalled by the title of their book forces Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar to worry unnecessarily that Dickinson chose not to celebrate and sing herself with Whitman; nor could she declare confidently with Emerson that " . . . the Poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre." She said something subtler. "Nature is a Haunted House–but Art–a House that tries to be haunted." (L459)

Yes, gender difference does affect our use of language, and we constantly confront issues of difference, distance, and absence, when we write. That doesn't mean I can relegate women to what we "should" or "must" be doing. Orders suggest hierarchy and category. Categories and hierarchies suggest property. My voice formed from my life belongs to no one else. What I put into words is no longer my possession. Possibility has opened. The future will forget, erase, or recollect and deconstruct every poem. There is a mystic separation between poetic vision and ordinary living. The conditions for poetry rest outside each life at a miraculous reach indifferent to worldly chronology.

* * *

> Where the stitching of suicide simply gathers the poet's scattered selves into the uniform snow of death, the spider artist's artful stitching connects those fragments with a single self-developed and self-developing yarn of pearl. The stitch of suicide is a stab or puncture, like a "stitch in the side." The stitch of art is provident and healing, "a stitch in time." Stabbing, wounding, the stitch of suicide paradoxically represents not just a unifying but a further rending. Healing, the stitch of art is a bridge. . . . But the cleaving of "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind" and the chasm of "This Chasm, Sweet," are patched and mended, seam to seam, by the magical stitchery of art.
>
> (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 639)

Who is this Spider-Artist? Not *my* Emily Dickinson. This is poetry not life, and certainly not sewing. Over a hundred years ago Dickinson marked this passage in her copy of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*:

> By the way,
> The works of women are symbolical.
> We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
> Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,
> To put on when you're weary–or a stool
> To stumble over and vex you . . . 'curse that stool!'
> Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean
> And sleep, and dream of something we are not
> But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!
> This hurts most, this–that, after all, we are paid
> The worth of our work, perhaps.
>
> (*Aurora Leigh*, 3, ll. 455–469)

The Spider-Woman spinning with yarn of pearl, whose use of horizontal dashes instead of ordinary punctuation in her poems is here described as being "neater and more soigné in manuscript than in type . . . tiny and clear . . . fine thoughts joining split thoughts theme to theme," was an artist as obsessed, solitary, and uncompromising as Cézanne. Like him she was ignored and misunderstood by her own generation, because of the radical nature of her work. During this Spider's lifetime there were many widely read "poetesses."

* * *

SHE]DICKINSON
1864

This Chasm, Sweet, upon my life
I mention it to you,
When Sunrise through a fissure drop
The Day must follow too.

If we demur, it's gaping sides
Disclose as 'twere a Tomb
Ourself am lying straight within
The Favorite of Doom.

When it has just contained a Life
Then, Darling, it will close
And yet so bolder every Day
So turbulent it grows

I'm tempted half to stitch it up
With a remaining Breath
I should not miss in yielding, though
To Him, it would be Death–

And so I bear it big about
My Burial–before
A Life quite ready to depart
Can harass me no more–

(858)

In 1864 was marriage Epithalamion or entrapment? Is Death a soothing mother or a mastiff-father? Is Awe Nature; and destruction the beginning of every Foundation? Do words flee their meaning? Define definition.

1864]

Love–is anterior to Life–
Posterior–to Death–
Initial of Creation, and
The Exponent of Earth–

(917)

Initial of creation. In the beginning was the Word. Relation of opposition; misprision–double meaning and uncertain.

TITANIA But she, being mortal, of that boy did die, . . .

QUINCE Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated.
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II, i, & III, i.)

sightings of HE. Emily Dickinson constantly asked this question in her poems.

> In lands I never saw–they say
> Immortal Alps look down–
> Whose Bonnets touch the firmament–
> Whose Sandals touch the town–
>
> Meek at whose everlasting feet
> A Myriad Daisy play–
> Which, Sir, are you and which am I
> Upon an August day?
>
> (124)

Is this a poem about writing a poem or cosmic speculation? Is the space of time constantly changing?

> Staking our entire Possession
> On a Hair's result–
> Then–Seesawing–coolly–on it–
> Trying if it split–
>
> (971, v. 4)

Spenser made Mutability a woman. Staking and seesawing. To balance on a precipice of falling into foolishness was often the danger of opening your mouth to speak if you were an intellectually ambitious person with a female education. Emily Dickinson chose to stay at home when Ralph Waldo Emerson visited her brother's house next door. One unchosen American woman alone at home and choosing. American authors reverently swept the dust of England's intellectual domain. Meek at whose feet did this myriad American Daisy play? August sun above, below the searing heat of a New England summer. "*Salad days when I was green in judgement . . .* " silent judgment of the august past might challenge you if you challenged it. Might and might . . . wandering through zones of tropes, World filtered through books–*And I and Silence some strange race–Wrecked solitary here–* I, CODE and SHELTER might say one thing to mean the other. An American woman with Promethean ambition might know better than anyone how to let the august traces (domain of dust) lie.

* * *

> The look of the words as they lay in the print I shall never forget. Not their face in the casket could have had the eternity to me. Now, *my* George Eliot. The gift of belief which her greatness denied her, I trust she receives in the childhood of the kingdom of heaven. As childhood is earth's confiding time, perhaps having no childhood, she lost her way to the early trust, and no later came. Amazing human heart, a syllable can make to quake like jostled tree, what infinite for thee?
>
> (L710)

Dickinson said this in a letter to her Norcross cousins after she had seen the death notice in the paper of one of her favorite authors. Earlier she had said of George Eliot: "She is the lane to the Indes, Columbus was looking for" (L456). What did this female Columbus crossing an uncharted fictive ocean find in George Eliot that made her the lane to the Indies rather than Harriet Beecher Stowe or Margaret Fuller, her own country-women, or even Elizabeth Barrett Browning, her fellow poet?

George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) was raised in a strict evangelical household. Later in life, she refused to attend church, a rebellion taken very seriously by her family. Although their disapproval cost her great emotional suffering, she remained an agnostic, despite her deep sympathy for the strength of religious motives and her fascination with the history of religion. George Eliot laboriously educated herself, and came late to her calling as a novelist. Eliot maintained her unwavering skepticism, even after reaching the pinnacle of literary celebrity in her lifetime, skepticism so strong that it forced her time and again to pull the rug out from under her most appealing heroines. George Eliot was a brilliant scholar, linguist, and critic; but her fictional scholars wander through a wasteland of languages to encounter only reversals and false definitions. Eliot defied Victorian convention by openly living with a married man. She was furious at the double bind an educated woman, given intellectual aspiration, was placed in by being expected to efface her intellectual drive in the role of servant/mother to the reigning male culture. George Eliot believed that there were different voices for both sexes, and scorned women who congealed into the literary mold men made for them.

> By a peculiar thermometric adjustment, when a woman's talent is at zero, journalistic approbation is at the boiling pitch; when she attains mediocrity, it is already at no more than summer heat; and if ever she reaches excellence, critical enthusiasm drops to the freezing point. Harriet Martineau, Currer Bell, and Mrs. Gaskell have been treated as cavalierly as if they had been men. . . . In the majority of women's books you see that kind of facility which springs from the absence of any high standard; that fertility in imbecile combination or feeble imitation which a little self-criticism would check and reduce to barenness. . . .
>
> Happily we are not dependent on argument to prove that fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men. A cluster of great names, both living and dead, rush to our memories in evidence that women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest;–novels, too, that have a precious specialty, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience. No educational restrictions can shut women out from the materials of fiction, and there is no species of art which is so free from rigid requirements. Like crystalline masses, it may take any form, and yet be beautiful; we have only to pour in the right elements–genuine observation, humour, and passion.
>
> ("Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," pp. 322–325)

Emerson said the American scholar "must be an inventor to read well. . . . He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." Emily Dickinson across the ocean from George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning was isolated, inventing, SHE, and American. Isolation in nineteenth century England and America was spelled the same way, but there the resemblance stopped. Poe, Melville, and Dickinson all knew the falseness of comparing. Stevens and Olson later–the boundless westwardness of everything. Ancestral theme of children flung out into memory unknown.

> Four Trees–upon a solitary Acre–
> Without Design
> Or Order, or Apparent Action–
> Maintain–
>
> The Sun–upon a Morning meets them–
> The Wind–
> No nearer Neighbor–have they–
> But God–

The Acre gives them–Place–
They–Him–Attention of Passer by–
Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply–
Or Boy–

What Deed is Their's unto the General Nature–
What Plan
They severally–retard–or further–
Unknown–

(742)

3. Action] signal–/notice
4. Maintain] Do reign–
13. is Their's] they bear
15. retard–or further] promote–or hinder–

This is the *process* of viewing Emptiness without design or plan, neighborless in winter blank, or blaze of summer. This is waste wilderness. Nature no soothing mother, Nature is annihilation brooding over.

* * *

Emily Dickinson took the scraps from the separate "higher" female education many bright women of her time were increasingly resenting, combined them with voracious and "unladylike" outside reading, and used the combination. She built a new poetic form from her fractured sense of being eternally on intellectual borders, where confident masculine voices buzzed an alluring and inaccessible discourse, backward through history into aboriginal anagogy. Pulling pieces of geometry, geology, alchemy, philosophy, politics, biography, biology, mythology, and philology from alien territory, a "sheltered" woman audaciously invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation. HESITATE from the Latin, meaning to stick. Stammer. To hold back in doubt, have difficulty speaking. "*He* may pause but *he* must not hesitate" –*Ruskin*. Hesitation circled back and surrounded everyone in that confident age of aggressive industrial expansion and brutal Empire building. Hesitation and Separation. The Civil War had split American in two. *He* might pause, *She* hesitated. Sexual, racial, and geographical separation are at the heart of Definition. Tragic and eternal dichotomy–if we concern ourselves with the deepest Reality, is this world of the imagina-

On this heath wrecked from Genesis, nerve endings quicken. Naked sensibility at the extremest periphery. Narrative expanding contracting dissolving. Nearer to know less before afterward schism in sum. No hierarchy, no notion of polarity. Perception of an object means loosing and losing it. Quests end in failure, no victory and sham questor. One answer undoes another and fiction is real. Trust absence, allegory, mystery–the setting not the rising sun is Beauty. No titles or numbers for the poems. That would force order. No titles for the packets she sewed the poems into. No manufactured print. No outside editor/"robber." Conventional punctuation was abolished not to add "soigné stitchery" but to subtract arbitrary authority. Dashes drew liberty of interruption inside the structure of each poem. Hush of hesitation for breath and for breathing. Empirical domain of revolution and revaluation where words are in danger, dissolving . . . only Mutability certain.

I saw no Way–The Heavens were stitched–
I felt the Columns close–
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres–
I touched the Universe–

And back it slid–and I alone–
A Speck upon a Ball–
Went out upon Circumference–
Beyond the Dip of Bell–

(378)

* * *

Did you ever read one of her Poems backward, because the plunge from the front overturned you? I sometimes (often have, many times) have–A something overtakes the Mind–

(Prose Fragment 30)

We must travel abreast with Nature if we want to know her, but where shall be obtained the Horse–

A something overtakes the mind–we do not hear it coming

(Prose Fragment 119)

Found among her papers after her death, these two fragments offer a hint as to Emily Dickinson's working process. Whether 'her' was

> Day and night
> I worked my rhythmic thought, and furrowed up
> Both watch and slumber with long lines of life
> Which did not suit their season. The rose fell
> From either cheek, my eyes globed luminous
> Through orbits of blue shadow, and my pulse
> Would shudder along the purple-veinèd wrist
> Like a shot bird.
> (*Aurora Leigh*, 3, ll. 272–279)

'You'll take a high degree at college, Steerforth,' said I, 'if you have not done so already; and they will have good reason to be proud of you.'

'*I* take a degree!' cried Steerforth. 'Not I! my dear Daisy–will you mind my calling you Daisy?'

'Not at all!' said I.

'That's a good fellow! My dear Daisy,' said Steerforth, laughing, 'I have not the least desire or intention to distinguish myself in that way. I have done quite sufficient for my purpose. I find that I am heavy company enough for myself as I am.'

'But the fame–' I was beginning.

'You romantic Daisy!' said Steerforth, laughing still more heartily; 'why should I trouble myself, that a parcel of heavy-headed fellows may gape and hold up their hands? Let them do it at some other man. There's fame for him, and he's welcome to it.'

(*David Copperfield*, ch. 20)

Much discussion has centered around the three enigmatic "Master" letters written in the early 1860s and found among Dickinson's posthumous papers. There is no evidence that these letters, written when she was at the height of her creative drive, were ever actually sent to anyone. Discussion invariably centers around the possible identity of the recipient. More attention should be paid to the structure of the letters, including the direct use of ideas, wording, and imagery from both *Aurora Leigh* and *David Copperfield*; imagery most often taken from the two fictional characters, Marian Earle in Barrett Browning's poem and Little Em'ly in Dickens' novel, who are "fallen women." Dickinson's love for the writing of Charles Dickens has been documented, but not well enough. It is a large and fascinating subject, beginning with the chance

similarity of their last names, and the obsession both writers shared for disguising and allegorical naming. Her letters to Samuel Bowles, in particular, are studded with quotations and direct references to characters and passages from Dickens. There is only space to touch on certain echoes here. In *Aurora Leigh*, Marian Earle describes her passion for Romney:

> She told me she had loved upon her knees,
> As others pray, more perfectly absorbed
> In the act and inspiration. She felt his
> For just his uses, not her own at all,–
> His stool, to sit on or put up his foot,
> His cup, to fill with wine or vinegar,
> Whichever drink might please him at the chance,
> For that should please her always: let him write
> His name upon her . . . it seemed natural;
> It was most precious, standing on his shelf,
> To wait until he chose to lift his hand.
> (*Aurora Leigh*, 6, ll. 904–905)

In *David Copperfield*, Little Em'ly writes three disjointed, pleading letters after eloping with Steerforth, addressed to her family, Ham, and possibly Master Davy/David/Daisy–the recipient is never directly specified, and the letters are unsigned:

> Oh, if you knew how my heart is torn. If even you, that I have wronged so much, that never can forgive me, could only know what I suffer! I am too wicked to write about myself. Oh, take comfort in thinking that I am so bad. Oh, for mercy's sake, tell uncle that I never loved him half so dear as now. Oh, don't remember how affectionate and kind you have all been to me–don't remember we were ever to be married–but try to think as if I died when I was little, and was buried somewhere. . . . God bless all! I'll pray for all, often, on my knees.
> (DC, ch. 31)

To recipient unknown *early 1862(?)*

> Oh, did I offend it– . . . Daisy–Daisy–offend it–who bends her smaller life to his (it's) meeker (lower) every day–who only asks–a task–[who] something to do for love of it–some little way she cannot guess

to make that master glad–. . . .

Low at the knee that bore her once unto [royal] wordless rest [now] Daisy [stoops a] kneels a culprit–tell her her [offence] fault–Master–if it is [not so] small eno' to cancel with her life, [Daisy] she is satisfied–but punish [do not] dont banish her–shut her in prison, Sir–only pledge that you will forgive–sometime–before the grave, and Daisy will not mind–She will awake in [his] your likeness.

(L248, from third "Master" Letter)

Attention should be paid to Dickinson's brilliant masking and unveiling, her joy in the drama of pleading. Far from being the hysterical jargon of a frustrated and rejected woman to some anonymous "Master"-Lover, these three letters were probably self-conscious exercises in prose by one writer playing with, listening to, and learning from others.

* * *

The Martyr Poets–did not tell–
But wrought their Pang in syllable–
That when their mortal name be numb–
Their mortal fate–encourage Some–
The Martyr Painters–never spoke–
Bequeathing–rather–to their Work–
That when their conscious fingers cease–
Some seek in Art–the Art of Peace–

(544)

3. name] fame
8. Some] Men–

In some sense the subject of any poem is the author's state of mind at the time it was written, but facts of an artist's life will never explain that particular artist's truth. Poems and poets of the first rank remain mysterious. Emily Dickinson's life was language and a lexicon her landscape. The vital distinction between concealment and revelation is the essence of her work.

* * *

For a Tear is an Intellectual thing;
And a Sigh is the Sword of an Angel King
And the bitter groan of a Martyrs woe
Is an Arrow from the Almighties Bow!
(Blake, *Jerusalem*, ch. 2 "To the Deists")

HER INTELLECTUAL CONSCIENCE

Must never be underestimated. A tear is an intellectual thing. Dickinson ignored the worst advice from friends who misunderstood the intensity of her drive to simplicity, and heeded the best, culled from her own reading. Her talent was synthetic; she used other writers, grasped straws from the bewildering raveling of Being wherever and whenever she could use them. Crucial was her ability to spin straw into gold. Her natural capacity for assimilation was fertilized by solitude. The omnivorous gatherer was equally able to reject. To find affirmation in renunciation and to be (herself) without. Outside authority, eccentric and unique.

To T. W. Higginson *November 1871*

I did not read Mr Miller because I could not care about him–
Transport is not urged–

Mrs Hunt's Poems are stronger than any written by Women since Mrs–Browning, with the exception of Mrs Lewes–but truth like Ancestor's Brocades can stand alone–You speak of "Men and Women." That is a broad Book–"Bells and Pomegranates" I never saw but have Mrs Browning's endorsement. While Shakespeare remains Literature is firm–

An Insect cannot run away with Achilles' Head. Thank you for having written the "Atlantic Essays." They are a fine joy–though to possess the ingredient for Congratulation renders congratulation superfluous.

Dear friend, I trust you as you ask–If I exceed permission, excuse the bleak simplicity that knew no tutor but the North. Would you but guide

Dickinson

(L368)

* * *

Part Two

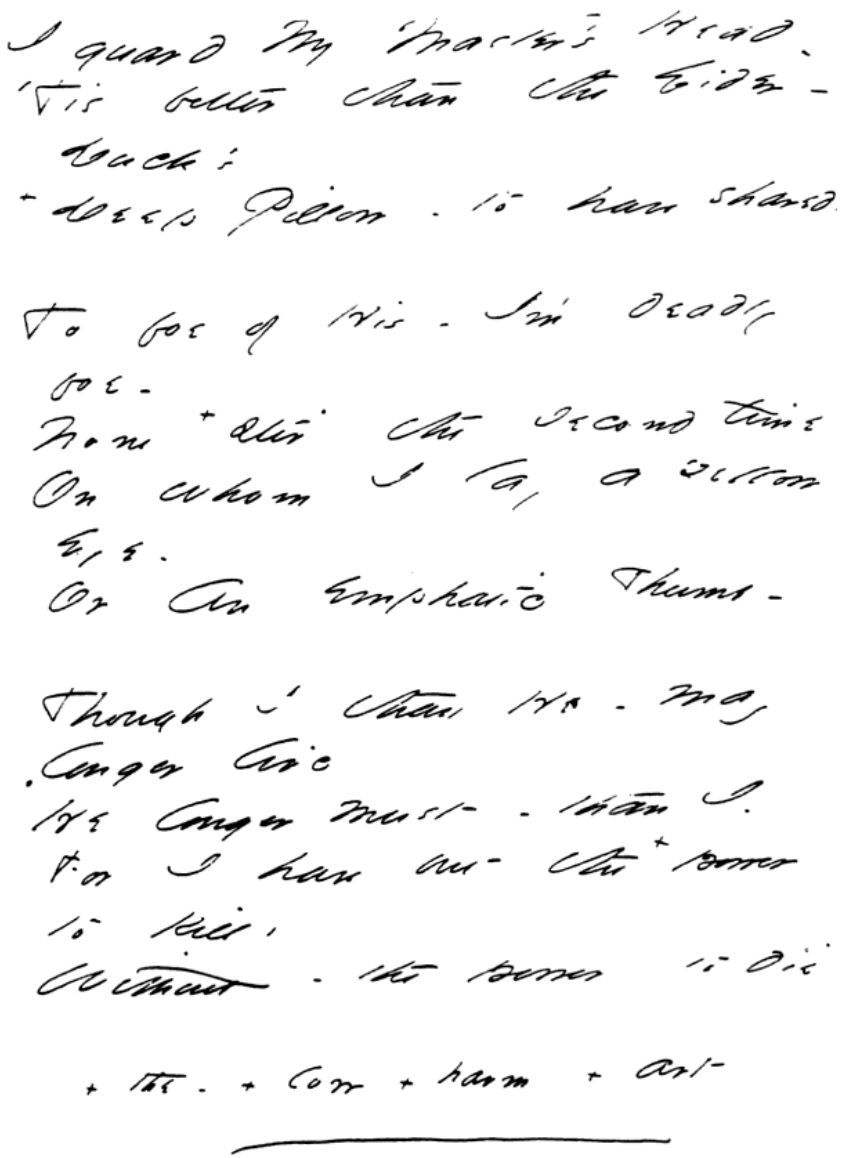
Childe Emily to the Dark Tower Came

My life had stood - a
loaded Gun -
In Corners - till a Day
The Owner passed - identified -
And carried Me away -

And now We roam in
Sovereign Woods -
And now We hunt - The Doe.
And every time I speak
for Him
The Mountains straighter grow -

And do I smile, such
Cordial light
Upon the Valley glow -
It is as a Vesturian face
Had Her - if Pleasure Things

And when at Night - Our
Good day done -



Ninth Poem in Fascicle 34.

My Life had stood–a Loaded Gun–
In Corners–till a Day
The Owner passed–identified–
And carried Me away–

And now We roam in Sovreign Woods–
And now We hunt the Doe–
And every time I speak for Him–
The Mountains straight reply–

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow–
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let it's pleasure through–

And when at Night–Our good Day done–
I guard My Master's Head–
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow–to have shared–

To foe of His–I'm deadly foe–
None stir the second time–
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye–
Or an emphatic Thumb–

Though I than He–may longer live
He longer must–than I–
For I have but the power to kill,
Without–the power to die–

(754, *about 1863*)

5. in] the–
16. Deep] low
18. stir] harm
23. power] art

The poem has no title. Thomas H. Johnson dates it about 1863 on the basis of her handwriting. In Ralph Franklin's recent facsimile edition of the forty fascicles as Dickinson arranged and bound them, this from the thirty-fourth, occurs ninth in a series of eighteen. The fact that "My Life had stood–a Loaded Gun–" is placed dead center may be chance or choice. It consists of six four-line stanzas loosely rhymed.[1] Written in the plain style of Puritan literary tradition, there are no complications of phrasing. Each word is deceptively simple, deceptively easy to define. But definition seeing rather than perceiving, hearing and not understanding, is only the shadow of meaning. Like all poems on the trace of the holy, this one remains outside the protection of specific solution. "My Life had stood–a Loaded Gun–," written in a time of civil war, by a woman with little formal education in philosophy, carefully delineates and declines all aspects of the "Will to Power" nearly twenty years before Friedrich Nietzsche's metaphysical rebellion. Emily Dickinson's intellectual vigilance allowed very little to escape her without notice.

* * *

This is a frontier poem. Forester of New England wayward pilgrim. Trees have been stripped to the root by a seer on her path across circumference of intellection. This is a tragic poem. A pioneer's terse epic. Sorrow's melody is magic. Pitch of vowels, cadence of consonants, sound fused with sense–asceticism. For years I have wanted to find words to thank Emily Dickinson for the inspiration of her poetic daring. I hope by exploring the typology and topography of one singularly haunting work to make her extraordinary range perceptible to another reader.

1. Johnson breaks the lines into four per stanza, as Dickinson must have known would happen if they were ever printed. In her own handwriting the line-breaks are somewhat different. Although I have used the Johnson numbering for convenience, it should be remembered that she never numbered her poems. The Franklin edition is huge, Dickinson's handwriting is often difficult to decipher, and the book is extremely expensive. Few readers will have a chance to use it for reference, which is a pity, because it is necessary for a clearer understanding of her writing process.

Emily Dickinson was born exactly two hundred years after the Great Migration led by John Winthrop brought her ancestors to America. Like Hawthorne, and unlike Emerson, her conscience still embraced the restless contradictions of this Puritan strain. Her ancestors, rigid Calvinists determined to walk the ancient ways and not to stumble on the path of Righteousness, voluntarily severed themselves from their origins to cross the northern ocean on a religious and utopian errand into the wilderness. Calvinism grounded in the Old Testament, through typological interpretation of the New, was an authoritarian theology that stressed personal salvation through strenuous morality, righteousness over love, and an autocratic governing principle over liberty. God's infinite and absolute sovereignty were conceived in terms of legal authority. Divine judgment and a moral law were necessary for a fallen humanity. Rage and rigor in the name of Jehovah, larded with threats and dire prophesies from the Books of Jeremiah and Hosea, required unswerving submission to HIS absolute dominion.

> And *at what* instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy *it*;
>
> Because my people hath forgotten me, they have burned incense to vanity, and they have caused them to stumble in their ways *from* the ancient paths, to walk in paths, *in* a way not cast up;
>
> To make their land desolate, *and* a perpetual hissing; everyone that passeth thereby shall be astonished, and wag his head.
>
> I will scatter them as with an east wind before the enemy; I will shew them the back, and not the face, in the day of their calamity.
>
> (*Jeremiah*, 18:7, 15–17)

The vivid rhetoric of terror was a first step in the slow process toward American Democracy.

* * *

> . . . –that man, being taught that he has nothing good left in his possession, and being surrounded on every side with the most miserable necessity, should, nevertheless, be instructed to aspire to the good of which he is destitute, and to the liberty of which he is deprived:
>
> (Calvin, *Institutes*, II, ch. 2, i)

LITERATURE

My Emily Dickinson

Susan Howe

With a new preface by
Eliot Weinberger

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