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The Enigma of Emily Dickinson

By JULIA KELEHER

THE personal affairs of Emily Dickinson have in recent years aroused as much controversy among her biographers as her verse. The life she led was as distinctive as the poetry she wrote, and modern psychiatry has wormed into both in an effort to reconcile or at best relate the two. The hypothesis has been generally accepted that the seclusion of Emily, her verse of renunciation, and her devotion to a buried desire are the spiritual facsimiles of an actual experience. Reading Mr. This or Mr. That as the shadowy lover behind the lines of Emily's lyrics has kept busy her admirers; it has led many of them into an almost morbid determination to show her as a figure sacrificed on the altar of renunciation of worldly passion by one set of external circumstances or another.

Without controverting known facts, one may still object to the numerous conclusions drawn from them. In a relatively normal period of the poet's youth, she knew a number of men for whom her affection was a natural one. Was it necessary for there to have been a tragedy in her rejection of any one of them, to account for the passion of the later love verses? Isn't Emily simply in the stream of the mystic poets who wooed the creations of their own minds as did the Catherine of Sienna, the Dante of Florence, the Petrarch of Padua?

Traditional evidence indicates that she had a suitor, but no positive evidence can be found in any of her published correspondence to support such a theory. There is abundant proof that she was an extremely sentimental individual with an unlimited capacity for showering affection on all her friends, men, women, and children, irrespective of age or nearness to her. The tragedy of her life was the recognition of her own unfitness for normal marriageable existence. The positive side of that negative character was

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her genius for poetry, her genius for realizing a lover of her imagination more powerful than any lover of her experience, and an analysis of the facts of her biography will support this interpretation.

On her father's side the genealogical background is an interesting one. In an unbroken line for nine generations in America, the Dickinsons are comparable to the Adams family for ability, strength, and moral righteousness. The maternal tree, however, is kept in the offing, undoubtedly because insanity was said to have run in it. Whether Emily's complexes came by way of the queer neuralgic mother, or by way of the uncle who only laughed once in his life and whose diet consisted of apples and cheese, is a moot question. Certain it is that stories of her idiosyncracies which arose in the little village during her life bear out the abnormality of her way of living. Was this unbalance the result of the frustration of love, or was it rather the central channel of her genius which deviated from a normal love affair and directed its powerful and singular energies into poetry?

Only a few facts stand out clearly in the seemingly colorless and sentimentalized pattern of her existence, one of the most important of which is that she led a perfectly normal girlhood. She attended The South Hadley Seminary for Girls and later Amherst Academy, where she attracted attention because of her cleverness and wit. About the age of twenty, however, she began to show signs of dissenting from customary ways. She refused to go to church, although the Dickinsons had acted as The Courts of Last Appeals in every matter pertaining to Puritanism for generations. Her father was the most representative lawyer in Amherst as well as the Treasurer of Amherst College, but his daughter refused to take part in any social activities incident to his position. Tradition has it that she affected a white dress summer and winter, and for this reason is commonly referred to as The White Nun of Amherst.

The real nun in this household, however, seems to have been the sister Lavinia, who, along with being the family doormat, shielded and protected Emily to such an extent that she eventually became the poet's only direct contact with the outside world. After the age of thirty, Emily's visits with village friends and callers took place behind the barriers of intervening walls. Mabel Loomis Todd, Miss Dickinson's first editor, and her recognized biographical authority, never had a face to face conversation with her.

In her own little world Emily turned with passionate absorption to her flowers. An old fashioned garden guarded by bird and bee received her lavish care in the summer. In the winter a little conservatory furnished refuge for her beauty loving soul. Here rare and exotic flowers bloomed, all unmindful of the bleak and frozen hills of Amherst. And, although her extreme sensitiveness in meeting people crystalized with the years into an obsession, she by no means kept out of touch with her friends. Her greatest delight was in sending them gifts of flowers or fruit, to which were often added gay little poems. The verses were laughed over and regarded as being as queer as their author.

The fact that this poet became such a recluse is attributed by her niece and only surviving relative to a frustrated love affair. The man in the case seems to have been a fashionable minister whom Emily met on her one trip to the world outside of Boston. The story has it, "love at first sight," but the preacher had a charming wife, and therefore because of "high ethical reasons" Emily put him out of her life. Genevieve Taggard, a modern poet who spent ten years in collecting data for her recent book, *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson*, claims that Edward Dickinson, Emily's father, had a father complex and wouldn't allow his daughter to marry her suitor. Josephine Pollit, another recent biographer, states that Lieutenant Hunt, the husband of Helen Hunt Jackson, was the hypothetical lover. The Bianchi version, washed of its highly colored sentiment-

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talism, dovetails to some extent with the story fluttering so obviously behind the lines of Emily Dickinson's love poems, for they are in substance a seemingly sincere recital of an unconsummated passion held in bonds of loneliness and desire by the shadowy barrier of a moral code. But was this barrier actual or assumed? How much of Emily's poetry rings with the sincerity of personal passion? What notes linger in the letters of an attachment more definite than that of ardent friendship? What strong evidence rests in her verse of the true mystic and recluse, burning the fuel of her own spirit before an image in the mind's eye?

The poems upon which Emily Dickinson's fame chiefly rests and the matter in which we delve for her spiritual biography were found in a bureau drawer where they had been placed, neatly tied and labelled, to be burned after her death. Written upon old paper sacks and envelopes, they were evidently surreptitiously composed at all hours of the day and night, serving as an outlet for all the emotions pent up in her soul. The poems are all short, have no titles, and have been divided into four classifications, namely, Time, Nature, Love, and Eternity. Thus far, seven hundred and seventy-two have been published, and hundreds, for some reason, have been withheld from publication.

Could any poem hold more of the hint of self-willed exile, of the true necessity of isolation for the soul so constituted, than the following?

There is a solitude of space,
A solitude of sea,
A solitude of death but these
Society shall be,
Compared with that profounder site,
That polar privacy,
A soul admitted to Itself,
Finite infinity.

Emily Dickinson was a convert to the transcendental ideas of Emerson. Perhaps more completely than any of

the disciples of transcendentalism, she grasped the two cardinal principles, the one, the fundamental truth for man of the intuitive perceptions of the mind, and second, the supremacy of the individual to himself, the oneness of the individual self with the greater whole.

It is the fundamental character of all minds of the mystic type to be able to lose themselves in a higher mode of being. The ladder of the mind is not worth climbing if it leads nowhere but back into oneself. Emily Dickinson took herself away from Emily and Amherst to infinity, to God, to pure poetry, to her ideal lover by means of her poetry. Poetry was the steed which she rode in the wide spaces of her world. The mount would have been unbridled and stamping in its stall if Emily had admitted the world over her threshold. Only in the solitude of her garden could she wear the habit of her calling and remain the shepherdess of her thoughts. Books were not denied her and through them she left her home at will.

There is no frigate like a book
To take us lands away,
Nor any courser like a page
Of prancing poetry.

This traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress or toil;
How frugal is the chariot
That bears a human soul!

Her prison house was utter and riotous freedom when imagination could carry her off into such debauchment as the following:

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,

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Reeling through endless summer days,
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee
Out of the foxglove's door,
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
Leaning against the sun.

Through all her poetry there runs the realization of God through nature. Beauty in nature can transfix, can heal, can gladden. Did any earthly love or pang of love bring the magic of this moment alone with the wonder of the spirit?

The murmur of the bee
A witchcraft yielded me.
If you ask me why,
'Twere easier to die
Than tell.

The red upon the hill
Taket away my will;
If anybody sneer,
Take care, for God is here,
That's all.

Although Emily Dickinson walked down "the threadless way," a seemingly detached spirit from another world, she had a breadth of vision universal in its scope. She believed that it was "finite to fail, but infinite to venture," that experience is the angled road preferred against the mind by paradox, that growth of man like growth of nature gravitates from within. She theorized on life with heart and mind held free from bitterness and hatred, and evi-

dently wanted to be nearer people in spirit if not in actual presence. This is evident from her letters and from the great amount of her poetry sent directly to individuals. No doubt she wrote this, her most popular little poem, as both a proclamation of her humanity, and a direct denial of her non-social way of living.

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
 I shall not live in vain;
 If I can ease one life the aching,
 Or cool one pain,
 Or help one fainting robin into his
 Nest again,
 I shall not live in vain.

Emily Dickinson's greatest appeal will probably always be her genius for condensing in a quatrain the old, old truths of life; her power of analyzing the fundamental abstractions with a deftness of touch, a surety of vision, indicative of thinker, poet, and artist.