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EMILY DICKINSON
1830–1886

A Brief Biography

Vivian R. Pollak and Marianne Noble

In the spring of 1862, Emily Dickinson read an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* that was destined to make a distinct mark on American literary history. “Letter to a Young Contributor” was by the former Unitarian minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and this compendium of practical and moral advice caught her eye. A few days later, on April 15, Dickinson sent him four poems and a letter of her own. It began:

Mr Higginson,

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?

The Mind is so near itself—it cannot see, distinctly—and I
have none to ask—

Should you think it breathed—and had you the leisure to
tell me, I should feel quick gratitude—(L 260)¹

She did not sign her name but included it on a calling card and intimated that she’d like him to keep it a secret.

Higginson responded quickly and generously. He expressed interest in who she was, how long she had been writing verse, and how she understood her relationship to conventional literary forms. He asked questions about her reading and education, as well as her “Companions.” Responding ten days later “from [her]

pillow" (she had been ill), Dickinson adopted a deferential stance toward her potential mentor, who was a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School and a renowned advocate for radical political causes. She explained, "I went to school—but in your manner of the phrase—had no education." Although she had been writing poetry for many years, the thirty-one-year-old Dickinson chose to represent herself as a neophyte: "You asked how old I was? I made no verse—but one or two—until this winter—Sir." And then, she added dramatically, "I had a terror—since September—I could tell to none—and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground—because I am afraid" (L 261). The likelihood is that her terror of September 1861 was real, that something happened which endangered both her peace of mind and her writing life. The two were intertwined.

In any event, this mysterious terror captured Higginson's attention, and as Dickinson sent him further poems, her cover letters continued to stimulate his interest. For example, in early June she explained her terror as follows: "My dying Tutor told me that he would like to live till I had been a poet, but Death was much of Mob as I could master—then—And when far afterward—a sudden light on Orchards, or a new fashion in the wind troubled my attention—I felt a palsy, here—the Verses just relieve" (L 265). In the next month, however, the Dickinson who had initially emphasized the autotherapeutic value of her project was cautioning Higginson against biographical literalism: "When I state myself as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person" (L 268). The poems, she suggested, were not necessarily about herself as most people understood her to be.

By the end of the year, Higginson was in South Carolina, distinguishing himself as the colonel of a black regiment.² He had less time to consider remote and possibly fantastic terrors. Dickinson continued the correspondence, telling him less about her life but alluding to previous losses that heightened her nervousness about his safety. "Perhaps Death—gave me awe for friends," she wrote, "striking sharp and early, for I held them since—in a brittle love—of more alarm, than peace" (L 280). When the war ended, she continued to express interest in meeting Higginson. He pressed her to come to Boston, where he could introduce her

to his literary friends. Dickinson declined, making up face-saving excuses (L 316, L 319) and eventually stating categorically, "I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town" (L 330). She pressed him to come to Amherst, as she had done previously, and while revealing nothing particular about her terror, she indicated both that he had saved her life and that "My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any" (L 330). Puzzled, Higginson continued to hope that a face-to-face interview would explain the "strange power" of Dickinson's letters and verses and prove that the reclusive and mysterious correspondent who "enshroud[ed]" herself in a "fiery mist" was "real" (L 330a). These epistolary friends met for the first time in August 1870 in Amherst, in a "parlor dark & cool & stiffish" (L 342a), and when Higginson wrote to his wife the next day, he remarked, "I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her. She often thought me *tired* & seemed very thoughtful of others" (L 342b). Recalling the interview after the poet's death, Higginson concluded, in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "The impression undoubtedly made on me was that of an excess of tension, and of an abnormal life" (L 342b).

Nothing specific had been said about her terror, but Higginson was well aware that in 1864 and 1865 Dickinson feared that she was losing her eyesight. During their interview, she said to him, "'When I lost the use of my Eyes it was a comfort to think there were so few real *books* that I could easily find some one to read me all of them'" (L 342a). Although she was nervous, it appears that her sense of humor was much in evidence. There is no reason to believe that her terror of September 1861 was related to eye problems. Rather, it is more likely that in September 1861, an event transpired that Dickinson experienced as a death, conditioned to such traumas as she had been by a history of "brittle love" (L 280).

The relationship between the historical Emily Dickinson and her Supposed Person(s) can never be fully demystified. But when she described her life as "too simple and stern to embarrass any," she was hinting at desires which, if revealed in their riotous complexity, would discomfort many. Dickinson refused to be con-

fined by the normalizing realities of her time and place and struggled against the narrowing demands of her immediate environment. Yet in some measure she had internalized an ideology that confined women to the domestic sphere, and she deflected opportunities to publish during her lifetime: only ten of her poems were published before her death in 1886. Idealistically, as she explained in her poem "I dwell in Possibility," Dickinson committed herself to the power of poetic vision, which was "More numerous of Windows - / Superior - for Doors." In its limitless amplitude, this alternative world of possibility was also "Impregnable of eye" (Fr 466).³ It allowed her to think independently beyond the withering scrutiny of a judgmental society. Ideally, then, the poet's imagination could liberate her from public history and personal fate. Ideally, poetry had the power to transform the self.

Yet if "spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise" was Dickinson's goal (Fr 466), her mission was often thwarted, and biographies of her imagination have been more successful in defining Dickinson's frustrations than in explaining how she kept her faith in "Paradise"—whatever that meant to her, and however much her imagination of "Paradise" changed during the course of her writing life. Dickinson's personal paradise could not be represented in traditional terms, and in a poem perhaps written in 1861, she asked jocosely

What is - "Paradise" -
 Who live there -
 Are they "Farmers" -
 Do they "hoe" -
 Do they know that this is "Amherst" -
 And that I - am coming - too -

 Do they wear "new shoes" - in "Eden" -
 Is it always pleasant - there -
 Wont they scold us - when we're hungry -
 Or tell God - how cross we are -

 You are sure there's such a person
 As "a Father" - in the sky -

So if I get lost - there - ever -
 Or do what the Nurse calls "die" -

I shant walk the "Jasper" - barefoot -
 Ransomed folks - wont laugh at me -
 Maybe - "Eden" a'nt so lonesome
 As New England used to be! (Fr 241)

Dickinson's imagination of paradise was structured by competing and even inconsistent grammars, as exemplified in the lines just quoted by her startling use or nonuse of apostrophes. The traditional Eden, the "Eden" in quotation marks, could not contain her. Dwelling in possibility and thinking independently, Dickinson, who was schooled in New England traditions of *self* definition, resisted social and literary pressures to conform.

This is not to deny that as a person Dickinson puzzled many people, including herself; her writings are at once self-revealing and biographically elusive. Perhaps her deepest authorial consistency was her desire to connect with "the rare Ear / Not too dull" (Fr 945), and she was a generous and inspiring letter writer, if somewhat opaque. People who received letters from Emily Dickinson tended to save them: her friends appreciated the brilliance of her language, even if they felt partially shut out by the ellipses of her style. Despite, then, the difficulty of identifying the real Emily Dickinson through her letters, in one of her signature poems, she famously referred to her project as a "letter to the World" (Fr 519). For much of her adult life, she was reclusive and homebound and letters provided her with a social context that was otherwise lacking. Her poems include poignant descriptions of herself as sending and receiving letters in particular ways. Consider the following example, which is conventionally dated 1863, a year in which Dickinson drafted, revised, or transcribed close to three hundred poems:

The Way I read a Letter's - this -
 Tis first - I lock the Door -
 And push it with my fingers - next -
 For transport it be sure -

And then I go the furthest off
 To counteract a knock -
 Then draw my little Letter forth
 And slowly pick the lock -

Then - glancing narrow, at the Wall -
 And narrow at the floor
 For firm Conviction of a Mouse
 Not exorcised before -

Peruse how infinite I am
 To no one that You - know -
 And sigh for lack of Heaven - but not
 The Heaven God bestow - (Fr 700)

Reading such a poem, we wonder about its occasion: What inspired it? And is Dickinson describing an actual or imagined event? If, as seems likely, she is combining fact and fiction, history and prophecy, what are the facts? Assuming that someone wrote to her, who was it? And was the poem *written* in 1863 or transcribed in that year? Was she writing or rewriting her history? While Dickinson's letters facilitate biographical inquiry—three volumes have been published—there are demonstrable exaggerations and ellipses in some of her most widely quoted correspondences, including her correspondence with Higginson. Thus, the relationship between Dickinson's poems and letters is controversial, and for some readers the idea of dwelling in possibility, or, as she also phrased it, "invent[ing] a Life" (Fr 747), gets at her refusal to respect the lines that traditionally separated fact from fiction, history from prophecy, poetry from prose.

In varying degrees, Dickinson's letters, so essential for her biography, are marked by humor and anger and eagerness and traumatized self-representations. Beginning in 1842 with a long letter to her brother Austin, these remarkable addresses to family and friends and potential friends show the young Emily Dickinson as first engaged with the social world of Amherst and then, as she turned toward poetry in the 1850s, stylistically more withdrawn. That is, the letters of Dickinson's maturity provide further evidence of her quarrel with dominant literary histories, es-

pecially those that privileged goals such as publication and marriage and motherhood and formal traditions, including formal religious traditions, that she was unwilling to claim as her own. Perhaps only an inconsistent outsider *could* defiantly dwell in possibility, but in ways that we shall describe, Dickinson was an insider as well. Her education was special, as were her friendships. And despite some lapses, real or imagined, she was a dutiful daughter.⁴ So when we refer to social goals that Dickinson was unwilling to claim as her own, we mean that, as expressed in the poetry of her maturity, her claims on ordinary happiness were partial, oblique, discontinuous. She was always looking for something less lonesome, more permanent, and, paradoxically, more intense. Her project, while gloriously selfish, was also capacious. When she spoke of "internal difference, / Where the Meanings, are" (Fr 320), she was extrapolating from her own experience and wanted to create a history more universal than her own. Ironically, then, Dickinson's understanding of community was founded on her awareness of difference and was often linked in her poetry to a seemingly personal experience of exclusion from grace, joy, wild nights, freedom, nation, even from life itself. The vocabulary is wonderfully varied.⁵

As the "Representative of the Verse" (L 268), Dickinson was not only describing her own experience, she was scrutinizing public definitions of failure and success and testing them against her own realities. As a woman poet, she probed the gender conventions that both sustained and traumatized her. She continues to be read as a great poet of the almost, of desire deferred, of ecstatic possibility that is never (or rarely) realized. Why was happiness so difficult to attain? For all her boldness, Emily Dickinson was often conflicted about her own ambitions. In part, she wanted to be empowered in conventional terms: to close the gap between romance and reality. In part, she was cynical about reality and refused to be satisfied with metaphors of fulfillment that sustained others. Oscillating between "heaven" and "earth," she refused perfectionist religious culture, which she associated with the repression of glorious, sensuously gratifying particulars, and with death. "Their Hight in Heaven comforts not - / Their Glory - nought to me," she wrote, "'Twas best imperfect - as it

was - I'm finite - I can't see" (Fr 725). Similarly, she resisted normative definitions of citizenship, writing to Higginson, "To an Emigrant, Country is idle except it be his own" (L 330). Emily Dickinson never emigrated but she often wanted to do so. "Dwelling alone" on her own hard-won premises, what forms of perfection and imperfection did she settle for?

For those inclined toward literary pilgrimages, the actual house in which Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, remains a popular tourist attraction. It was built by her paternal grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, in 1813, was supposedly the first brick house in Amherst, and is still one of the most elegant homes in the town. A victim of his own enthusiasm, Samuel Fowler was a problematic ancestor. The son of a prosperous Amherst farmer, he entered Dartmouth College at sixteen and graduated in 1795 as the salutatorian of his class. He then studied for the ministry with an older brother, but as Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes, "His restless ambition chafed under the scholarly contemplative mode of life, and he soon abandoned it to study law." Samuel Fowler married outspoken Lucretia Gunn in 1802, set up his law practice, and speculated successfully in real estate on the side. But as Wolff further notes, "He did nothing by halves."⁶ A founder of Amherst Academy in 1814 and of Amherst College in 1821, Emily Elizabeth Dickinson's paternal grandfather was a schemer and dreamer whose career got off to a fast start and then disintegrated, as his enthusiasm outstripped his prudence. Amherst College survived its difficult opening years and eventually flourished, but in the end her grandfather's affairs were in a "sorry mess."⁷ In 1833, he was forced to emigrate to Cincinnati, Ohio, then the raw West, followed by his disgruntled wife Lucretia Gunn (1775-1840) and their two unmarried daughters. He went because of the promise of a steady job at a theological seminary, and they went because they saw no alternative.

Edward Dickinson (1803-1874) was determined not to repeat his zealous father's mistakes. He too furthered religious and educational causes, but he took fewer risks. Edward's goal was to re-

coup the family name and fortune, to (re)establish himself and his growing family in the community, the region, and the state. In the event, these goals were realized and as early as the spring of 1830, he was able to purchase half of The Homestead, as the brick mansion came to be called, moving in with his wife and one-year-old son, while his father's family continued to occupy the other side in their reduced circumstances as tenants. His wife Emily Norcross Dickinson (1804-1882) also came from a family that valued education and religion, but compared to Squire Dickinson (as Edward's father was called), her prosperous father, who was a shrewd farmer, businessman, and investor, was a model of cautious consistency in his philanthropic ventures. He was not universally beloved, however, and when he died, the principal of Monson Academy, which he had helped to create, remarked that it was "pretty generally conceded that Monson has lost a benefactor in Mr Norcross though many hated him heartily while he lived."⁸ For all his virtues, plainspoken Joel Norcross frequently stepped on other people's toes.

Unfortunately, the Norcross children were not robust, and when Emily Norcross Dickinson's mother died in 1829 at the age of fifty-two after a terrible illness, an obituary notice remarked on the "severe afflictions, which she was called repeatedly to endure in the sickness and death of children," four of whom had predeceased her.⁹ (Both Emily Norcross and Edward Dickinson came from large families—there were nine children each.) Her mother's illness and death, together with the deaths of four of her siblings, affected Emily Norcross Dickinson deeply and reinforced her tendency toward anxiety and introversion. Her father remarried in 1831 and her younger, more outgoing sister Lavinia, after whom she named her own daughter, was not pleased.¹⁰ Characteristically, Emily Norcross Dickinson kept her own counsel; her response to her father's remarriage is unrecorded.

The poet Emily Elizabeth Dickinson inherited some of her father's energy and some of her mother's shyness. The middle child and close in age to both her older brother Austin and younger sister Lavinia, she took pride in their accomplishments and was fiercely loyal to them throughout her life. Toward the end, she was especially close to Lavinia, who was to all intents

and purposes her literary executor. Without Lavinia's efforts, Dickinson's "letter[s] to the world" would not have been published. Moreover, Mabel Loomis Todd, the editor who did so much to publicize Dickinson's poems and letters in the 1890s, was for many years involved in an adulterous liaison with Austin.¹¹ In both its public and private dimensions, Emily Dickinson's career cannot be separated for very long from the history of her family, which was further inflected by Dickinson's relationship to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson. We will hear more about the forceful and mercurial Susan and her controversial role in inspiring and disseminating Dickinson's letter(s) to the world later on.

When the future poet was nine, the Dickinsons moved into an undivided home, a spacious wooden one on Pleasant Street. The brick mansion on Main Street continued to haunt Edward, though, and in 1855 he repurchased, refurbished, and added onto the house that his father had built and lost. Although recently defeated in his bid for reelection to Congress, Edward's property romance had been realized.¹² Emily Dickinson was more ambivalent about the move, referring to herself as an emigrant with a "*gone-to-Kansas* feeling." "They say that 'home is where the heart is,'" she wrote to her close friend Elizabeth Holland in January 1856. "I think it is where the *house* is, and the outlying buildings" (L 182). Later that year, Edward consolidated his gains when, on a building lot adjacent to The Homestead, he financed the construction of The Evergreens, a fashionable Italianate villa, which became the residence of Austin and Sue after their marriage that July. Austin had been restless, but the house was a powerful inducement to remain in Amherst and Edward offered to make him a partner in his law practice. Austin acceded and he did.

Real estate romance and family romance diverged, however, for the 1850s played out very differently for the poet's parents. Leaving the Pleasant Street house, where she had raised her family, unsettled Mrs. Dickinson both physically and emotionally. Her daughters were proving to be capable housekeepers, and after Austin's marriage to a highly literate and socially poised daughter-in-law, with whom she had little in common, her list-

lessness deepened. One biographer (Alfred Habegger) has suggested that she may have been suffering from a blocked grief reaction, that, in her prosperity and comparative leisure, the family deaths she had had to put behind her as a busy young wife and mother had finally caught up with her.¹³ This seems as good an explanation of her midlife crisis as any, although it makes the most sense if we factor in her growing estrangement from Edward, or her need for more emotional support from him, which was probably not forthcoming. Whatever the causes of her discontent, after the move, Emily Norcross Dickinson, whose life had been her home and family, was feeling displaced. Her daughter Emily was sensitive to her feelings, writing poignantly in 1858 of depression that seems a combination of her mother's and her own (L 190).

Writing to her uncle Joseph A. Sweetser in the early summer of 1858, Dickinson explained both frankly and evasively:

Much has occurred, dear Uncle, since my writing you—so much—that I stagger as I write, in its sharp remembrance. Summers of bloom—and months of frost, and days of jingling bells, yet all the while this hand upon our fireside. Today has been so glad without, and yet so grieved within—so jolly, shone the sun—and now the moon comes stealing, and yet it makes none glad. I cannot always see the light—please tell me if it shines. (L 190)

Dickinson was already commenting on her reluctance to leave home in 1854, when she declined an invitation to visit her pious friend Abiah Root, identifying herself as "your quaint, old fashioned friend," and explaining, "I dont go from home, unless emergency leads me by the hand, and then I do it obstinately, and draw back if I can. Should I ever leave home, which is improbable, I will with much delight, accept your invitation; till then, my dear Abiah, my warmest thanks are your's, but dont expect me. I'm so old fashioned, Darling, that all your friends would stare" (L 166). With one exception, Dickinson was true to her word.¹⁴ As far as overnight travels were concerned, she journeyed only when "emergency" took her by the hand, as it did in 1864, when

she spent seven months in Cambridge, Massachusetts, returning to Cambridge for another extensive stay the following year. She was receiving medical treatment for her eye problems and after her return to Amherst in the fall of 1865, she never left the town again.¹⁵ Nor did she usually visit *in* the town, not even at The Evergreens. Nor did she freely receive visitors at home.

Before moving on, we should note one happy offshoot of these medically mandated sojourns "in the wilderness," as Dickinson called them, which was that she developed one of the most important relationships of her life, with her cousins, Frances and Louisa Norcross. She lived with them at Mrs. Bangs's Boardinghouse in Cambridgeport, one mile from Harvard College, while she was undergoing her eye treatments. Fanny and Loo were the daughters of Dickinson's Aunt Lavinia—her mother's sister, who died in 1860, while their grieving father died in January 1863. The recently orphaned Norcross sisters were seventeen and twenty-two years old at the time of Dickinson's first boardinghouse stay, while Dickinson herself was thirty-three. Over the years, she maintained an extensive correspondence with these "Little Cousins" (L 1046), in which she described her feelings and day-to-day experiences with unusual candor and clarity. The sisters later moved to Concord, where they participated in the Concord Saturday Club, a small group devoted to the study of literature, whose members included Louisa May Alcott, William Ellery Channing, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. As these impressive acquaintances indicate, among the reasons Dickinson may have valued her relationship with her Norcross cousins was their intelligence and their interest in literature.

As previously noted, after 1865 Emily Dickinson was homebound. According to a plausible legend, one evening, probably in September 1868, she went with her brother "as far as a certain tree in the hedge in order to see the new church."¹⁶ (Her father had spoken at the dedication ceremony, and the pastor and his family were her friends.) According to an equally plausible legend, when she visited her dying nephew Gilbert in 1883, she was paying her first call to The Evergreens in fifteen years.¹⁷ Yet this is the poet who could write, "Doom is the House without the Door" (Fr 710), and "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul

to sea" (Fr 143), and "I never hear the word 'Escape' / Without a quicker blood" (Fr 144). Dickinson repeatedly suggested that "Water, is taught by thirst" (Fr 93), and that we "learn the Transport by the Pain - / As Blind Men learn the sun!" (Fr 178). She wanted to believe that there was value in deprivation and that her imagination of freedom was intensified by her physical confinement, in what toward the end of her life she described as a "magic Prison," which by then was earth itself, in its aspect of nonheaven:

Of God we ask one favor, that we may be forgiven -
For what, he is presumed to know -
The Crime, from us, is hidden -
Immured the whole of Life
Within a magic Prison
We reprimand the Happiness
That too competes with Heaven - (Fr 1675)

Elsewhere, she wrote that "A Prison gets to be a friend" (Fr 456).¹⁸

Why *did* Emily Dickinson shut herself up in The Homestead and leave the wider social world behind? In various forms, this question has haunted Dickinson's biography. Writing in 1918, for example, the Imagist poet Amy Lowell asked pointedly, "I wonder what made Emily Dickinson as she was. She cannot be accounted for by any trick of ancestry or early influence." Lowell was certain, however, that Dickinson was the victim of some undiagnosed nervous disorder, and that "All her friends were in the conspiracy of silence":

As the years went on, she could scarcely be induced to leave her own threshold; what she saw from her window, what she read in her books, were her only external *stimuli*. Those few people whom she admitted to her friendship were loved with the terrible and morbid exaggeration of the profoundly lonely. In this isolation, all resilience to the blows of illness and death was atrophied. She could not take up her life again because there was no life to take. Her thoughts came to be more and more preoccupied with the grave. Her letters were

painful reading indeed to the normal-minded. Here was a woman with a nice wit, a sparkling sense of humour, sinking under the weight of an introverted imagination to a state bordering upon neurasthenia; for her horror of publicity would now certainly be classed as a "phobia." The ignorance and unwisdom of her friends confused illness with genius, and, reversing the usual experience in such cases, they saw in the morbidity of hysteria, the sensitiveness of a peculiarly artistic nature.¹⁹

Lowell dreamed of breaking through this conspiracy of silence by writing a Dickinson biography, but as she predicted in a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd, it never materialized.²⁰

Although Dickinson did not shut herself up "in Prose" (Fr 445), she certainly shut herself up in a particular house and with a particular family for most of her adult life. There is a high probability that she suffered from agoraphobia. At the very least, she suffered from extreme social shyness.²¹ Her father, however, was often in the limelight, and he figured prominently in early accounts of her life. She was thought to have a father complex. Her relations with her father were considered "peculiar." She said on one occasion, "I am not very well acquainted with father."²² Under the pressure of feminist inquiry, in the 1970s and 1980s Dickinson's mother was increasingly written into the picture, as were her brother Austin (1829–1895) and sister-in-law Sue (1830–1913). Mother. Father. Older brother. Younger sister. Mercurial sister-in-law. The sister-in-law who taught her more about people than anyone except Shakespeare. "To say that sincerely is strange praise" (L 757).

The Dickinsons were one of the most important families in Amherst, Massachusetts, population 3,057 in 1850 and 4,298 in 1880. They were part of an economic, political, and philanthropic elite. In 1871, when *The Amherst Record* published "Pen Portraits of the Prominent Men of Amherst," they included the following notice about Emily's father:

HONORABLE EDWARD DICKINSON. If there is a native of Amherst to whom the name at the head of this article is a stranger, he must indeed be a curiosity. . . . The name of Dickinson . . . is so identified with everything that belongs to Amherst, that any attempt to speak of town history in which that name should not appear the most prominent would be impossible.

Curiously, *The Record* suggested that under the circumstances, Edward Dickinson was something of a shrinking violet, certainly "averse to notoriety, and were the choice left with him [he] would have avoided all contact with affairs which we class as *political*." The writer further described him as "A gentleman of the elder school" and suggested that

he is by no means a fogy . . . we believe we transgress no law of propriety in claiming him to be the most prominent of the living men of Amherst. . . . Inheriting an integrity that was in itself a fortune, he has ever maintained it in its purity, hence the wealth he is now possessed of does not contain within it the gall of a wrong inflicted or the curse of another's sigh. . . . Mr. and Mrs. Dickinson have been blessed with three children—one son and two daughters. We hope he will pardon our intrusion upon him.²³

Edward was a lifelong trustee of the Amherst Academy, the secondary school which Emily attended, and he was treasurer of Amherst College for thirty-seven years.²⁴ Deeply involved in local affairs, Edward frequently served as moderator of the Town Meeting and was active in the First Church Parish Committee, the Temperance Society, the Hampshire Colonization Society, the Agricultural Society, and was on the board of the Northampton Lunatic Asylum. These are only some of the positions he held. Devoted to sound financial management of public institutions, Edward was also committed to solid Whig politics and was active at the state level beginning in 1838, when he was a representative to the Massachusetts legislature. After further service to the state, in 1852 he was elected by a narrow margin to the United States Congress, where he was a one-term Whig in

the House of Representatives, from 1853 to 1855, at the time of the debates over the Kansas-Nebraska bill, which “finished off the Whig party and gave birth to a new, entirely northern Republican party.”²⁵ A faithful Whig, Edward did not adapt to new times and except for a return to the state legislature during the last year of his life, his political career was effectively over. It is no accident, however, that when he returned to Boston in the spring of 1874, he did so to help bring a larger railroad line to Amherst, since one of his passions had been linking Amherst to other parts of the region and state. Previously, he had been an organizer of and shareholder in the Amherst and Belchertown Railroad, and when this nineteen-mile line opened in June 1853, a crowd came up from New London, Connecticut, to celebrate. As Emily explained to Austin, who was attending Harvard Law School,

Father was as usual, Chief Marshal of the day, and went marching around the town with New London at his heels like some old Roman General, upon a Triumph Day. . . . Carriages flew like sparks, hither, and thither and yon, and they all said t’was fine. I spose it was—I sat in Prof Tyler’s woods and saw the train move off, and then ran home again for fear somebody would see me, or ask me how I did. (L 127)²⁶

While on such occasions Edward was in his element, at age twenty-two Emily was already removing herself from crowds and was uncomfortable at the thought of a casual hello.

But this model of civic virtue was less comfortable with his children, who found him stern and regimented. In a December 1851 letter to her brother, who was teaching school in Boston, Emily wrote,

[these days, w]hen I know of anything funny, I am just as apt to cry, far *more* so than to *laugh*, for I know *who loves jokes* best [Austin], and who is not here to enjoy them. We dont *have* many jokes tho’ *now*, it is pretty much all sobriety, and we do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that its pretty much all *real life*. Fathers real life and *mine* sometimes come into collision, but as yet, escape unhurt! (L 65)

At times, her father’s behavior seemed to her little short of tyrannical:

Tutor Howland was here *as usual*, during the afternoon—after tea I went to see Sue—had a nice little visit with her—then went to see Emily Fowler, and arrived home at 9—found Father in great agitation at my protracted stay—and mother and Vinnie [her sister] in tears, for fear that he would kill me. (L 42)²⁷

And it wasn’t only his children who found him threatening. The next year, after her friend Martha Gilbert visited, Emily wrote Austin:

Mat came home from meeting with us last Sunday, was here Saturday afternoon when father came, and at her special request, was secreted by me in the *entry*, until he was fairly in the house, when she escaped, *unharméd*. (L 82)

The Dickinson children did not simply submit to their father’s exactions; although they rarely rebelled openly, they found creative forms of resistance and subversion. This was especially true of Austin and Emily, whereas Lavinia was more compliant. And yet, there was a tender and witty side to this stern man too. In an October 1851 letter to her brother, Dickinson wrote:

There was quite an excitement in the village Monday evening. We were all startled by a violent church bell ringing, and thinking of nothing but fire, rushed out in the street to see. The sky was a beautiful red, bordering on a crimson, and rays of a gold pink color were constantly shooting off from a kind of sun in the centre. People were alarmed at this beautiful Phenomenon, supposing that fires somewhere were *coloring the sky*. The exhibition lasted for nearly 15. minutes, and the streets were full of people wondering and admiring. Father happened to see it among the very first and rang the bell *himself* to call attention to it. (L 53)

It was he who gave Emily a huge dog, Carlo, who was her constant companion, or "Shaggy Ally," for sixteen years (L 280). When his daughter's shyness advanced, he created a nook for Emily among the trees behind their home, where she could sit out-of-doors unobserved. And once, she writes,

he said he ran out of meeting for fear somebody would ask him what he tho't of the preaching. He says if anyone asks him, he shall put his hand to his mouth, and his mouth in the dust, and cry, Unclean—Unclean!! (L 125)

When she grew older, Dickinson developed compassion for her father's "lonely Life and his lonelier Death" (L 457). Probably in the mid-1860s, she explained to Joseph Lyman, who had been her friend and Vinnie's suitor, "Father says in fugitive moments when he forgets the barrister & lapses into the man, says that his life has been passed in a wilderness or on an island—of late he says on an island." But she also described him as the oldest and oddest sort of a "foreigner."²⁸ She had dreams about him every night for a year after he died, and in a letter to a friend, she described *his* pleasure in their last moments together, while indicating that she had never been able to figure him out:

The last Afternoon that my Father lived, though with no premonition—I preferred to be with him, and invented an absence for Mother, Vinnie being asleep. He seemed peculiarly pleased as I oftenest stayed with myself, and remarked as the Afternoon withdrew, he "would like it to not end."

His pleasure almost embarrassed me and my Brother coming—I suggested they walk. Next morning I woke him for the train [to Boston]—and saw him no more.

His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists. (L 418)

Inventing an absence for mother was easy; it was harder to know how to respond to father's unique combination of vigilance and reserve.

And what of Emily's mother in her maturity, once she had re-

covered from the depression that plagued her in the 1850s? In one of her first letters to Higginson, the poet summed up the situation succinctly, if somewhat cruelly, as follows: "My Mother does not care for thought" (L 261). Elaborating on the idea that she and her mother inhabited different worlds, in 1870 she told him, "'I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled'" (L 342b). Higginson had to take her word for it, since he never met Mrs. Dickinson either during his 1870 or 1873 visits to The Homestead. Edward, however, put in an appearance, exhibiting what one might think of as normal parental curiosity about his daughter's illustrious caller. With Higginson, Emily Dickinson persisted in this narrative of maternal neglect and abandonment and incomprehension and overall lack of mutual sympathy. In 1874, she wrote him punningly, "I always ran Home to Awe when a child, if anything befell me. He was an awful Mother, but I liked him better than none" (L 405).

Despite Dickinson's statement that "My mother does not care for thought," for a woman in her time and place Emily Norcross Dickinson had a superior education. True, she was never much of a reader, but she did attend a coeducational school in Monson and then studied at a boarding school "for Young Ladies" in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1823, receiving a commendation for "punctual attendance, close application, good acquirements, and discreet behavior."²⁹ She first met Edward Dickinson, a Yale College graduate who was studying law, in the winter of 1826; they met in Monson, her hometown, where he was serving as a marshal of a military court. Edward was interested in settling down and getting to work on his plan for a life of "rational happiness." He almost immediately identified Emily Norcross as someone he wanted to marry, writing her that he found her "a person, in whom so many of the female virtues are conspicuous."³⁰

The young couple corresponded for six months, with Edward writing long and serious letters, to which Emily responded sporadically with short apologetic letters that evince little interest in ideas or in the affection of her beau, but great interest in the daily goings-on of her own domestic circle. Notwithstanding the tepid

tone of her letters, Edward was in love, and he extended a sober proposal in a letter written the following June. Based on his "full conviction of [her] merits & [her] virtues," he proposed to make her a "friend" for life.³¹ These sententious and less-than-amorous expressions of affection did not set Emily's heart on fire, and she stalled in responding to his proposal—claiming that she needed to consult her father—until later that summer, at which time she did accept. She postponed the marriage for more than a year, though, until May 1828. There was a small ceremony in Amherst, because she wanted "as little noise as possible," did not "wish for company," and wanted to "stand up alone" (without bridesmaids and bridegrooms).³²

The new bride gave birth to three children within four years: William Austin in April 1829, Emily Elizabeth in December 1830, and Lavinia Norcross in February 1833. A story, perhaps apocryphal, has it that on the eve of the birth of her famous daughter she defied her husband's wishes for the first and only time by inducing a paperhanger to redo their bedroom. She was not active in community affairs and appears to have had no close friends in the town, although she exchanged visits with her own relatives. Emily Norcross Dickinson ran an orderly and immaculate house, loved gardening, and prepared outstanding food. But when Edward was away on business—a not uncommon occurrence—she was anxious about the children, and in 1843 she struck at least one observer as full of her usual "plaintive talk."³³ Whatever the mother's substantial virtues—she was not overly controlling—by the time she was nineteen, the emerging poet Emily Dickinson was writing, "God keep me from what they call *households*" (L 36). Housekeeping as she understood it was a "prickly art," and for an aspiring writer, her "timid" mother was far from inspiring.

Emily Dickinson was an affectionate and verbally gifted child, who was deeply attached to her more self-confident older brother and gregarious younger sister. After attending the local primary school, she enrolled at Amherst Academy, where she created a distinct impression on one of her teachers (Daniel Taggart Fiske), who many years later recalled her as she was in 1842–1843:

a very bright, but rather delicate and frail looking girl; an excellent scholar, of exemplary deportment, faithful in all school duties; but somewhat shy and nervous. Her compositions were strikingly original; and in both thought and style seemed beyond her years, and always attracted much attention in the school, and, I am afraid, excited not a little envy.³⁴

Dickinson completed her last term at the Academy in August 1847, and at the end of September she entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, in nearby South Hadley. It was only seven miles away and she got over her homesickness quickly, although home continued to be her model of perfection. Shortly after she arrived, she wrote to her friend Abiah Root, "I think I could be no happier at any other school away from home. Things seem much more like home than I anticipated & the teachers are all very kind & affectionate to us. They call on us frequently & urge us to return their calls & when we do, we always receive a cordial welcome from them" (L 18). Mount Holyoke was a serious place of higher learning for young women, with a reputation for fostering practical as well as spiritual traits. There was some economic diversity, which induced a fear of "rough & uncultivated manners" (L 18). But Emily Dickinson does not seem to have minded the light housekeeping chores, whereas her childhood acquaintance and future friend Helen Hunt Jackson refused to go to Mount Holyoke "to learn to make hasty pudding and clean *gridirons!*"³⁵

We can get a vivid picture of what life was like at Mount Holyoke from a daily schedule she shared in a letter to her friend Abiah Root:

I will tell you my order of time for the day, as you were so kind as to give me your's. At 6. o'clock, we all rise. We breakfast at 7. Our study hours begin at 8. At 9. we all meet in Seminary Hall, for devotions. At 10¹/₄. I recite a review of Ancient History, in connection with which we read Goldsmith & Grimshaw. At .11. I recite a lesson in "Pope's Essay on Man" which is merely transposition. At .12. I practice Calisthenics & at 12¹/₄ read until dinner, which is at 12¹/₂ & after dinner, from

1 1/2 until 2 I sing in Seminary Hall. From 2 3/4 until 3 3/4. I practise upon the Piano. At 3 3/4 I go to Sections, where we give in all our accounts for the day, including, Absence—Tardiness—Communications—Breaking Silent Study hours—Receiving Company in our rooms & ten thousand other things, which I will not take time or place to mention. At 4 1/2. we go into Seminary Hall, & receive advice from Miss. Lyon in the form of a lecture. We have Supper at 6. & silent-study hours from then until the retiring bell, which rings at 8 3/4, but the tardy bell does not ring until 9 3/4, so that we dont often obey the first warning to retire. (L 18)

The schedule was indeed regimented, but despite her anxious dreams about home (L 16) and her waking fears about the entrance exams (L 18), she was in high spirits for much of the time.

Nevertheless, to the Emily Dickinson who preferred to dwell in possibility, the religious regimentation in which the school specialized was unsettling. Mary Lyon (1797–1849) had founded Mount Holyoke with a dual emphasis on intellectual achievement and Christian self-denial, and these values were not always compatible with each other. Throughout the school year, the subject of giving oneself up to and for Christ was emphasized; Miss Lyon held separate meetings for those who had “professed faith,” those who had a “hope,” and those who had “no hope.” Emily Dickinson was one of eighty “No-hopers” when she entered; by the end of the term, only twenty-nine remained, including herself. At one point, Miss Lyon asked all those who wanted to be Christians (and hence to fast on Christmas) to rise. Emily was one of those who remained seated, a fact remarked on by her roommate, her cousin Emily Norcross, who commented in one of her letters home to Monson, “Emily Dickinson appears no different. I hoped I might have good news to write with regard to her.”³⁶ Emily Dickinson was by no means indifferent to religion, “the all important subject” (L 13), nor was she indifferent to the theme of self-denial. In January 1848, she, along with sixteen other students who felt an “uncommon anxiety,” met with Mary Lyon to discuss the state of their souls. Under the right circumstances, anxiety might be a prelude to hope.

Emily, however, left the three-year course at Mount Holyoke without converting. She completed what was called her “junior” year, and in early May, her father decided that there was no need for her to return to the school as a “senior.” Perhaps he was concerned about her health, since health was always an issue in the Dickinson family, and she had been home for a month with a cough that raised the specter of tuberculosis, from which so many suffered. Perhaps, too, he viewed a further Mount Holyoke education as superfluous for a woman who was not expected to become a missionary, support herself, become a professional writer, or enter the learned professions. Emily herself does not seem to have minded. Most Holyoke scholars did not stay the course and the town of Amherst, with its college and reading clubs and literary societies had at least as much, if not more to offer. Nevertheless, Dickinson left Holyoke with a sense of unfinished spiritual business. Although Mary Lyon did not succeed in converting her, she appears to have deepened Dickinson’s interest in the relationship between self-discipline and power. Lyon urged women to believe in their own abilities, stating that “We have great powers over ourselves. We may become almost what we will.”³⁷ As a daughter of New England, steeped in the traditions of neo-Puritanism, Dickinson was taught that the projects of perfecting and realizing the self (or soul) were intimately intertwined.

There was a problem, though. While Dickinson felt impelled to confront some of the large questions of life, there were more particular matters that concerned her as well. For example, in February 1848 she complained to her brother that she had not received any valentines, that she had looked in vain for one of “Cupid’s messengers.” “Your highly accomplished & gifted elder sister is entirely overlooked,” she explained, and she asked Austin to remind her friend “THOMAS” (otherwise unidentified) to send her one (L 22). Status in a girls’ boarding school depended on more than academic accomplishments, and popularity with boys mattered. But how could she ponder the large questions of life and also fulfill conventional gender expectations? Her own father had written a series of essays in the 1820s that had addressed this issue, making it clear that he viewed intellectual women as unsuitable marriage partners. When his essays were published in

the local newspaper in 1826–1827, they inspired controversy. He was accused of being a male chauvinist, and in some respects, so he remained.³⁸ “He buys me many Books,” Dickinson later explained, “but begs me not to read them—because he fears they joggle the Mind” (L 261).

Her formal schooling ended, Dickinson returned to Amherst which, in the winter of 1849–1850, was “alive with fun” (L 29) and which, as anticipated, provided her with a “feast in the reading line.” What, though, was to be *her* life’s work and how was she to express her growing sense of estrangement from the genteel conventions that threatened to entrap her? Would it do to think of herself as a character in a book, someone, say, like Byron’s prisoner of Chillon? How powerful *was* her imagination? What would constitute her “almost,” the impediments that energized and defined her? Dickinson’s letters are full of humor, but there is intermittent loneliness as well and during the revival of 1850, even her stern, unbending father was converted, as was her sister Vinnie. Dickinson, however, took pride in “standing alone in rebellion” (L 35), as it seemed to her she was doing. With deliberate irony, she pictured herself as Satan: a Romantic hero of a Byronic cast, engaged in a heroic course of action. Cultivating this persona helped her through the trying domestic days, in which she stayed home to help a sick mother and denied herself outings with friends. She was a good worker, the queen of the court, if regalia be “dust, and dirt” (L 37).

Yet during the early 1850s, her “golden dream[s],” the vague life-ambitions which she discussed with friends, were coming clearer. There were “fancies” she refused to nip in the bud, and there were literary consequences. In 1850, for example, one of her prose valentines appeared in the Amherst College literary magazine (L 34) with a favorable notice. It was a witty send up of classical learning, biblical rhetoric, current political oratory, and discourses of romantic friendship. This rollicking comic valentine was also grandiose. Dickinson compared herself to Judith, the heroine of the Apocrypha, and, together with her friend George Gould, to the United States of America! Intent on distinguishing herself, Dickinson was opting for “metaphor” rather than marriage and motherhood, though at times she was at-

tracted to the social status of the “wife” figure or else saw it as inevitable. Her first extant poem, also dated 1850, is a comic valentine in properly rhymed couplets which she sent to her father’s law clerk, Elbridge Gerry Bowdoin. Bowdoin was a confirmed bachelor, so no one was likely to take her offer of herself and her friends seriously: “Seize the one thou lovest, nor care for *space*, or *time!*” (Fr 1). Dickinson was especially adept at imitating sermons and in the early 1850s, she wrote other comic valentines that ironized gender stereotypes and fuzzy clerical thinking.

Her seriousness of purpose was fostered and promoted by friends such as Benjamin Franklin Newton, who was another of her father’s law clerks. Newton, who suffered from tuberculosis, moved to Worcester in 1849 and in 1850 sent her Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poems, “a beautiful copy,” which formed part of the gift-exchange of their friendship (L 30). His premature death in March 1853 unsettled her and ten months later, she wrote a letter to his clergyman Edward Everett Hale, also of Worcester, in which she described Newton as “a gentle, yet grave Preceptor, teaching me what to read, what authors to admire, what was most grand or beautiful in nature, and that sublimer lesson, a faith in things unseen, and in a life again, nobler, and much more blessed” (L 153). When she described her development as a poet in her famous 1862 letter to Higginson, she explained, “My dying Tutor told me that he would like to live till I had been a poet, but Death was much of Mob as I could master—then” (L 265). It is likely that she was referring to Newton. After the fact, there was a romantic component to her feelings for him which was not apparent at the time. It is also likely that her father was discouraging the intensity and frequency of their correspondence. As she explained to her friend Jane Humphrey, “I can write him in about three weeks—and I *shall!*” (L 30). But the importance Dickinson attached to this relationship after his death was characteristic of her thought structure and deeper emotional bias. Death was her crucial “almost,” the limit on human power she could not control. As fact and metaphor, it worried her for all of her writing life. Like her mother, she tended to conflate death and separation and Newton’s departure in 1849, marriage in 1851, and death in 1853 intensified this tendency.

Meanwhile, her letters became more and more elliptical and in certain respects, troubled. Her close friend Susan Huntington Gilbert, who was exactly her age, was the recipient of some of them. Sue was born in Old Deerfield, Massachusetts, but the family moved to Amherst in 1832, where her father owned a tavern and stagecoach stop. Unfortunately, her mother Harriet Arms Gilbert died in the winter of 1837 when Sue was six, and her mother's death effectively broke up the family. Sue and her next-older sister Martha were sent to live with Sophia Arms Van Vranken, a "jovial" maternal aunt whose husband was a merchant in Geneva, New York.³⁹ When Sue's father Thomas died in 1841, reportedly because of alcoholism, he was listed as an "insolvent debtor" in the county records. Understandably, Sue was sensitive about her background and eager to make the most of her wide-ranging talents, including her love for books. In 1847 she returned to Amherst and attended the Academy for a term; beginning in 1848, she was a student at the Utica Female Academy, "which boasted a stately Ionic portico and offered instruction in everything from Latin and 'Technology' to flower painting and guitar."⁴⁰ After completing her education, she came back to Amherst, where there were rumors that she and Edward Hitchcock, Jr., son of the Amherst College president, were about to become engaged. Worldly and popular, self-confident but also insecure, when offended Sue took on what Austin, her suitor, called in an 1851 letter "that unapproachable dignity, that rigid formality."⁴¹

That same summer, Sue decided to leave Amherst, the Dickinsons, and what seemed to her the stifling quiet of small-town life.⁴² She was eager to demonstrate her independence and took up a teaching position in a girls' boarding school in Baltimore. Austin was out of town too, teaching "poor Irish boys" in an overcrowded public school in Boston (L 43), and Emily commiserated with both of them about their jobs, though Sue seems to have been more satisfied with hers. In any event, a career in teaching for one hundred and twenty-five dollars a year plus room and board and expenses was not for her, and she returned to Amherst in July 1852, having played out this experiment in feminine self-reliance to her own satisfaction.

Sue's particular combination of insecurity and aplomb struck a deeply responsive chord in Emily, and during Sue's teaching year at Mr. and Mrs. Archer's Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies, Dickinson wrote her a series of remarkable letters that indicate how desolate she felt without her. As with other letters by Emily Dickinson, it is sometimes difficult to know how much she was posing, for example when she expressed fears for her own sanity and imagined herself chained up in an insane asylum because of the intensity of her love. Some of these intensely possessive letters must have been difficult to receive. Others were more tranquil and were focused on the exquisite pleasures of an erotic sisterhood, which excluded the routine obligations represented by "the worthy pastor." Dickinson set about creating a new sacred text, known only to the members of a secret society intent on circumventing the authority of a powerful, monolithic, and boring community of elders:

So sweet and still, and Thee, Oh Susie, what need I more,
to make my heaven whole?

Sweet Hour, blessed Hour, to carry me to you, and to
bring you back to me, long enough to snatch one kiss, and
whisper Good bye, again.

I have thought of it all day, Susie, and I fear of but little
else, and when I was gone to meeting it filled my mind so full,
I could not find a *chink* to put the worthy pastor; when he said
"Our Heavenly Father," I said "Oh Darling Sue"; when he
read the 100th Psalm, I kept saying your precious letter all over
to myself, and Susie, when they sang—it would have made
you laugh to hear one little voice, piping to the departed. I
made up words and kept singing how I loved you, and you
had gone, while all the rest of the choir were singing Hallelu-
jahs. I presume nobody heard me, because I sang so *small*, but
it was a kind of a comfort to think I might put them out,
singing of you. (L 88)

Historians of sexuality such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Lilian Faderman have supplied further context for understanding the homoerotic and possibly protolesbian elements of Dickinsonian desire, as expressed in the letters to Sue. Romantic same-

sex friendships were the norm during the antebellum era, but for Emily Dickinson, many questions remain.⁴³ Whereas today the word “lesbian” can describe not only sexual practice but also an essentialized category of identity, such an identity would not have been possible for Dickinson. The sexologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pathologized erotic intimacies and practices that some women in the 1850s could still view as normal. Practically speaking, however, in Dickinson’s case, the fact that she was strongly identified with her brother Austin and devoted to his welfare was a further complication in her attempt to bind Sue to herself. Seducing Sue emotionally and perhaps in some measure physically troubled her image of herself as a devoted sister, which in some measure she was.

While some biographical critics such as Paula Bennett believe that Dickinson was primarily autoerotic, others have suggested that whereas Dickinson had what we would today call bisexual desires, she probably acted on none of them, or at least not very much. In brief, cultural paradigms of acceptable intimacy for middle- and upper-middle class white women suggest that Dickinson and Sue were engaged in risk-taking behavior if they were sexually intimate.⁴⁴ As we learn more about women’s sexual ideologies and practices in America in the nineteenth century, some elements of Dickinson’s situation and response are likely to be clarified. But barring some sensational new discovery, the bedroom door remains locked.

After Sue’s return to Amherst in July 1852, she and Austin began seeing a great deal of each other and by March 1853, they entered into a long and difficult engagement. (In later years, their marriage was famously troubled.) After Sue’s return from Baltimore, Dickinson facilitated a clandestine courtship and imagined an erotic triangle that included *her*. Yet she was pursuing mutually antagonistic goals, simultaneously attempting to create an eroticized female counterculture with Sue and to integrate her beloved friend into the Amherst family circle. Although the precise chronology of many letters is uncertain, and virtually all of Sue’s letters to both Austin and Emily were subsequently destroyed, it appears that Emily’s interest in Sue intensified once she realized that Austin was seriously pursuing her. This combi-

nation of personalities and familial roles was more fateful than accidental. Dickinson’s identification with Austin, only one and one-half years her senior and temperamentally more like her than the less complex Vinnie, had always been very strong. During the 1850s, while he was teaching in Sunderland and Boston and then studying in Cambridge, she participated vicariously in his triumphs and defeats and repeatedly expressed her willingness to shoulder his burdens, which she tended to represent as greater than her own. They laughed together at the foibles of “the folks” (their parents) and other relatives and elders. In her eyes he could do no wrong, but she worried about him excessively, often appearing *overconcerned* about his ability to negotiate a dangerous world, but also excessively deferential.⁴⁵

As the poet Adrienne Rich has demonstrated, excessive deference was one of Dickinson’s strategies for controlling and deflecting aggression throughout her career, even in the poetry of her maturity.⁴⁶ Although Dickinson loved (and resented) her brother, she performed excessive deference in her relationship with him as a way of controlling and deflecting aggression, both hers and his. This covertly hostile, self-minimizing approach is vividly on display in some of her letters, particularly in early letters such as the following:

I like [your last letter] grandly. . . . I feel quite like retiring, in presence of one so grand, and casting my small lot among small birds, and fishes—you say you dont comprehend me, you want a simpler style. *Gratitude* indeed for all my fine philosophy! I strove to be exalted thinking I might reach you and while I pant and struggle and climb the nearest cloud, you walk out very leisurely in your slippers from Empyrean, and without the *slightest* notice request me to get down! As *simple* as you please, the *simplest* sort of simple—I’ll be a little ninny—a little pussy catty, a little Red Riding Hood, I’ll wear a Bee in my Bonnet, and a Rose bud in my hair, and what remains to do you shall be told hereafter. (L 45)

Here, Dickinson seems thoroughly in control of a naive pose, which she uses strategically to express resistance to a request

Austin had apparently made in a previous letter that she write in a simpler style. Striving to do more than express herself clearly in her writing, Dickinson wanted to be philosophical and exalted, to challenge herself and her reader but also to disguise erotic subtexts that were threatening to her self-esteem and to her audience. Although Dickinson represents Austin as her incomparable role model and Austin did write verse on occasion, in a subsequent letter, she insisted that *she* held the “patent” on invention and would not let him steal it from her. “Father says your letters are altogether before Shakespeare,” she wrote mordantly, “and he will have them published to put in our library” (L 46).⁴⁷

After a tryst at the Revere Hotel in Boston in March 1853, Sue and Austin became engaged. Dickinson wrote, “Sue’s outwitted them all—ha-ha! just imagine me giving three cheers for American Independence” (L 109). Austin was still attending Harvard Law School, though, and Emily and Susan continued to see a great deal of each other in Amherst. For example, in 1854, when Austin, Lavinia, and their mother visited Edward in Washington, Emily preferred to stay at home, her father acceded to her wishes, and Sue moved into The Homestead. (Emily’s cousin John Graves provided the necessary male protection; Edward was always concerned about his women when he was away.) Yet the loving triangle formed by Sue and Emily and Austin was unstable, and Sue and Emily quarreled in the summer of 1854, when Austin returned from Harvard. Emily was obviously upset, and the pressures on Sue were intense. She fell ill with what was diagnosed as “Nervous Fever,” and when she had recuperated sufficiently, Sue left Amherst for seven months. Dickinson’s letter of late August, the first since her beloved friend’s departure on August 4, alludes to their falling out and conveys the bleakness of her mood. Realizing that Sue’s feeling for her was unlikely to burn as brilliantly as she had once thought it might, “It’s of no use to write to you—,” she complained, “Far better bring dew in my thimble to quench the endless fire” (L 172).

This extravagant vocabulary was replicated in tributes to Sue in years to come. Sue was the “only Woman in the World,” the “Woman whom I prefer,” and “Where my Hands are cut, Her

fingers will be found inside” (L 447, L 288). Although Dickinson shared more poems with Sue than with anyone and continued to count on her both emotionally and intellectually, there were tributes such as the following that she probably did not share, one of an impressive and often heartrending group of poems inspired by her in some measure unreciprocated love for Sue:

Ourselves were wed one summer - dear -
Your Vision - was in June -
And when Your little Lifetime failed,
I wearied - too - of mine -

And overtaken in the Dark -
Where You had put me down -
By Some one carrying a Light -
I - too - received the Sign -

‘Tis true - Our Futures different lay -
Your Cottage - faced the sun -
While Oceans - and the North must be -
On every side of mine

‘Tis true, Your Garden led the Bloom,
For mine - in Frosts - was sown -
And yet, one Summer, we were Queens -
But You - were crowned in June - (Fr 596)

After marrying Austin, Susan entered a new phase of life. As a hostess devoted to her house and its entertainments, and as a mother, beginning in 1861, when the first of her three children was born, Sue actualized herself as a social being. “A strong-minded American woman,” as she characterized herself in a letter to her friends the Bartletts, Sue’s identity was also contingent and interdependent. She flirted with the charming editor Samuel Bowles (1826–1878), who was Austin’s friend as well, and distinguished herself in Amherst both for the elaborateness of her entertainments and for her mercurial moods. She attracted friends easily but discarded them readily. Emily, another strong-minded American woman, was forced to be more austere self-reliant,

though we catch our last glimpses of her as a social being in the house next door, the house with the blazing wood fire, rampant fun, inextinguishable laughter. Thus she wrote to Sam Bowles in 1858, "I think Jerusalem must be like Sue's Drawing Room, when we are talking and laughing there, and you and Mrs. Bowles are by" (L 189). And in 1859 she reported, "Austin and Sue went to Boston Saturday, which makes the Village very large. I find they are my crowd" (L 212).

As her friends married—Sue and Austin on July 1, 1856—Dickinson felt increasingly solitary. By 1856, she had drafted a considerable number of poems—no one knows exactly how many—and she had won second prize for her rye and Indian bread at the local Cattle Show. In 1857, however, Dickinson virtually disappears from view. There are no letters that can be conclusively attributed to that year, which in itself is curious, since her correspondence is continuous up to that point. She was appointed to a committee of the annual autumn Cattle Show to judge a bread-baking contest, but there is no proof that she ever served. Beyond that, she disappears from view. Even the rumor mill of Amherst grinds to an unaccustomed halt. An accident of historiography? Perhaps, but it seems more likely that Dickinson was turning inward. "Tis a dangerous moment for any one," she later wrote in an undated prose fragment, "when the meaning goes out of things and Life stands straight—and punctual—and yet no content . . . come[s]. Yet such moments are. If we survive them they expand us, if we do not, but that is Death, whose if is everlasting" (PF 49; *Letters* 3:919). Subsequent letters refer to a major traumatic event, as do many of her finest poems, which describe a horrifying psychological catastrophe and its aftermath:

"Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,
That nearer, every Day,
Kept narrowing it's boiling Wheel
Until the Agony. . . . (Fr 425)

* * *

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down -

It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon. (Fr 355)

* * *

'Tis so appalling - it exhilarates -
So over Horror, it half Captivates. . . .
Terror's free -
Gay, Ghastly, Holiday! (Fr 341)

* * *

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through - (Fr 340)

* * *

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
The nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs (Fr 372)

* * *

Such knowledge came from somewhere—surely not from her reading alone.⁴⁸

The supposition that Dickinson's poetic vision was associated with psychological trauma is distressing to readers who want to believe that she chose the conditions that nurtured her art, that because of her verbal intelligence and aptitude for form, she was in control of her feelings too. Dickinson's freedom was historically situated, however, and the choices she felt compelled to make were arduous indeed. While it may be difficult to celebrate the loss of coherent social identity as a strategy of female empowerment, it is nevertheless true that in turning inward, Dickinson gained unique insights into the human psyche. For her, personal pain was integral to expression, and by 1858 she had begun transcribing poems onto sheets of stationery, which she then bound with needle and thread into small booklets. Conventionally, these homemade books are called fascicles (gatherings), or manuscript books, and Dickinson continued this practice until

1865. Subsequently, she organized sheets more haphazardly and did not bind them. (These unbound collections are conventionally referred to as “sets.”) Various theories have been advanced as to their purpose, but she did not share these little manuscript books, forty in all, with anyone else. When she sent her poems out to family and friends, she distributed them one by one. The poems she sent were a form of self-publication, perhaps preparing for better days, and in 1861, we see her writing to Sue, “Could I make you and Austin—proud—sometime—a great way off—’twould give me taller feet” (L 238). At that time she was engaged in using Sue as reader, critic, and mentor; *her* writings may have influenced Sue as well.

Only five poems have been conclusively identified as having been written before 1858. By the spring of 1858, however, she had also written her first letter to the man she called “Master,” whose identity has been the subject of much speculation. After Dickinson’s death in May 1886, three draft letters were found among her papers. Two of them address the recipient as “Master,” and the third refers to “master” in the text. It is generally assumed that they were intended for the same person, and they appear to have been written in 1858, 1861, and 1862. We do not know for certain that the final versions were sent. It is possible that Dickinson saved these drafts with her poems or otherwise segregated them from the letters that she had received and which were burned by her sister after her death. (On such occasions, it was customary in the late nineteenth century either to return letters to their senders or to destroy them.) The impetuous Lavinia came to regret the burning, but since her policy was to preserve almost everything written by her sister, perhaps that principle guided her when she saved these drafts. “Dear Master,” the first of them begins, “I am ill, but grieving more that you are ill, I make my stronger hand work long eno’ to tell you.”

I wish that I were great, like Mr. Michael Angelo, and could paint for you. You ask me what my flowers [a metaphor for her poems] said—then they were disobedient—I gave them messages. They said what the lips in the West, say, when the sun goes down, and so says the Dawn.

Listen again, Master. I did not tell you that today had been the Sabbath Day.

Each Sabbath on the Sea, makes me count the Sabbaths, till we meet on shore—and (will the) whether the hills will look as blue as the sailors say. I cannot talk any more (stay any longer) tonight (now), for this pain denies me.

How strong when weak to recollect, and easy, quite, to love. Will you tell me, please to tell me, soon as you are well. (L 187)

Establishing a continuum of hope and despair, this letter suggests that too much pain will silence the poet, but that when the world is sufficiently distanced, when the sun goes down, some form of artistic and spiritual rebirth is possible. Even as she anticipates a reunion with “Master” in heaven or in a place on earth that, for two together, is *like* heaven, Dickinson seems to acknowledge that she did not find it “easy, quite, to love.” Whoever he was, Master did not understand the “flowers,” or poems, that she had sent him. He asked her what they meant. Listen again, she says. Try harder.

As the language poet Susan Howe has observed, Dickinson’s Master letters are deeply influenced by literary models.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it seems likely that “Master” was an actual man who was corresponding with Dickinson, that she was sending him poems, which he did not understand—she blames the poems, “then they were disobedient”—and that her “terror—since September” may well have been related to a traumatic change in their relationship.⁵⁰ Whereas Richard B. Sewall, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, and Judith Farr conclude that Master was Samuel Bowles, the dynamic editor of the *Springfield Republican* and one of Dickinson’s most distinguished male friends, following an earlier tradition Albert Habegger has reasserted, plausibly, that Master was the Reverend Charles Wadsworth (1814–1881).⁵¹ Of the men with whom Dickinson is known to have corresponded, Wadsworth is the only candidate who matches what we may plausibly infer about her unknown correspondent, and after his death, she referred to him as her “dearest earthly friend” (L 807).

Dickinson probably met Wadsworth during her visit to Phila-

delphia in 1855, where he was the minister of the fashionable Arch Street Presbyterian Church, and where her cousins the Coleman sisters, Olivia and Maria, were members of his congregation. (The second "Master" letter expresses her desire to "come nearer than presbyteries" [L 233]. A presbytery is a governing committee of the Presbyterian church.) It is certain that Wadsworth visited Dickinson in Amherst in 1860, when he was in mourning for his mother, and again in 1880. In April 1862, the same month in which Dickinson first wrote to Higginson, Wadsworth formally accepted a post at the Calvary Church in San Francisco and on May 1 he sailed for California with his wife and children.⁵² Wadsworth and his family returned to Philadelphia in 1869, where he suffered from the vocal impediment to which Dickinson refers, obliquely, in her eulogy for him, "The Spirit lasts - but in what mode" (Fr 1627). No breath of scandal ever attached itself to Wadsworth's reputation; he was not a known womanizer like Bowles, whose marriage was strained. After Wadsworth's death, Dickinson entered into correspondence with his close friend, James D. Clark of Northampton, and then with his brother. Eventually she invited both Clark brothers to visit her in Amherst, at a time when such gregariousness toward strangers was almost unprecedented for her. In all, Dickinson sent the Clark brothers twenty-one letters, many of them tributes to Wadsworth, whom she identified as "my Shepherd from 'Little Girl'hood." Although she referred to an "intimacy of many years with the beloved Clergyman" (L 766), her letters ask for basic information about his personal life, about which she knew little, and they never mention his wife.

The single extant letter from Wadsworth to Dickinson is addressed to "My Dear Miss Dickenson" [*sic*] (L 248a). This undated letter, possibly from the early 1860s, expresses concern about her "affliction," whatever it is. It asks to learn more definitely of her "trial" and expresses appropriate sympathy. There is nothing in Wadsworth's letter that suggests a sexual relationship, although sexual relationships between married ministers and female congregants were not unprecedented. While it is conceivable that Wadsworth's letter was written in a code that Dickinson would have understood, there is little reason to think that Wadsworth

went to California to escape either from his temptation to seduce Emily Dickinson or from the consequences of such a seduction. It is, however, perfectly possible that he was already thinking about relocating to California in September 1861 and that he told Dickinson about his plans. Whatever happened or did not happen between them, Dickinson continued to elaborate the mythic structure she was developing in her poetry. The "Master" letters exploit stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, as a powerful older man, invested with spiritual authority, takes on sublime and demonic attributes. "Master" does not live in New England and does not depend on Dickinson as she does on him. He is probably married, certainly he is otherwise engaged and has pressing commitments that exclude her. Master is not available for ordinary companionship. The single extant letter written by Wadsworth is signed "In great haste Sincerely and most Affectionately *Yours*." We do not know why it survived Lavinia's bonfire. Many poems reinforce the personal myth that Dickinson elaborates in the "Master" letters, yet because of the intensity of her conception of love, the awe-inspiring Master figure represented in her poems and letters does not readily correspond to his historical equivalent.⁵³

For four years (1878–1882), however, long after she wrote the poems of erotic triumph and despair inspired by Sue's marriage and Master's supposed incursion into her own life, Dickinson did have one documented love affair that was significantly mutual and physical. Otis Phillips Lord (1812–1884) was an Amherst College graduate, class of 1832, with a large and lucrative law practice before he was appointed to the Massachusetts Superior Court in 1859. In the 1850s, he was active in Whig politics and was known as an effective orator. He and Edward Dickinson were political allies and became close friends in the 1860s. Lord and his wife Elizabeth lived in Salem and were childless. They first visited the Dickinsons in 1860 and were regular if not frequent guests thereafter.⁵⁴ "Phil" Lord and Dickinson fell in love with each other very shortly after his wife of thirty-four years died on December 10, 1877. As Dickinson imagined him to be in the late seventies and early eighties, Lord exemplifies the distancing thematic of the "Master" letters, even though Lord was not the in-

spiration for these letters or for the poems in which Dickinson had characterized herself as a secret wife. Dickinson could invest Lord with majesty, but unlike "Master," he was not cruel to her and the poet was more in charge. She was in her late forties during the flourish years of their romance, he was in his late sixties, and while there are still power inequalities in their relationship that she underscores, Lord emerges as a sweetened "Papa" (L 750).

With her father dead in 1874 and her mother incapacitated by a stroke in 1875, and following the death of Lord's wife in 1877, Dickinson and Lord entered into an unmistakably passionate correspondence, as can be seen in the following excerpt from Amherst (as Dickinson called herself) to her Salem (as she called Lord):

My lovely Salem smiles at me. I seek his Face so often—but
I have done with guises.

I confess that I love him—I rejoice that I love him— I thank
the maker of Heaven and Earth—that gave him me to love—
the exultation floods me. I cannot find my channel—the
Creek turns Sea—at thought of thee—

Will you punish me? "Involuntary Bankruptcy," how could
that be Crime?

Incarcerate me in yourself—rosy penalty—threading with
you this lovely maze, which is not Life or Death—though it
has the intangibility of one, and the flush of the other—
waking for your sake on Day made magical with you before I
went (L 559)

Lord was pressing her to give him something, either her hand in marriage, or her sexual favor, but she wrote him:

Dont you know you are happiest while I withhold and not
confer—dont you know that "No" is the wildest word we con-
sign to Language?

You do, for you know all things—[top of sheet cut off]
. . . to lie so near your longing—to touch it as I passed, for I
am but a restive sleeper and often should journey from your

Arms through the happy night, but you will lift me back, wont
you, for only there I ask to be—I say, if I felt the longing
nearer—than in our dear past, perhaps I could not resist to
bless it, but must, because it would be right

The "Stile" is God's—My Sweet One—for your great
sake—not mine—I will not let you cross—but it is all your's,
and when it is right I will lift the Bars, and lay you in the
Moss—You showed me the word.

I hope it has no different guise when my fingers make it. It
is Anguish I long conceal from you to let you leave me, hun-
gry, but you ask the divine Crust and that would doom the
Bread. (L 562)

She evidently refused to give herself to him. Nonetheless, she continued to write love letters, fantasizing about his touch:

I do—do want you tenderly. The air is soft as Italy, but when
it touches me, I spurn it with a Sigh because it is not you.
(L 750)

By this time, Dickinson's letters were deeply indebted to her own past writings, so that when she spurns the air, she echoes the opening stanza of a poem written in about 1862, in which spurning figures prominently: "If you were coming in the Fall, / I'd brush the Summer by / With half a smile, and half a spurn, / As Housewives do, a Fly" (Fr 356). And when she confesses, "The trespass of my rustic Love upon your Realms of Ermine, only a Sovereign could forgive—I never knelt to other" (L 750), we hear the echo of her "Master" letter, which contains a variant on the kneeling trope: "Low at the knee that bore her once unto [royal] wordless rest [now] Daisy [stoops a] kneels a culprit" (L 248). Dickinson in love is always a writer and her letters are brilliantly intertextual; they allude to patterns of pleasure and pain, of dominance and submission, deeply imbedded in prior and future texts. With "Phil" Lord, however, Dickinson also translated words into deeds. She engaged in a gratifying sensual and emotional relationship with Lord that had the capacity to shock—

which says as much about the repressive sexual mores of the time as about her behavior. According to Mabel Loomis Todd, when she first was getting to know Sue, Sue warned her that the two sisters next door were immoral: "You will not allow your husband to go there, I hope! . . . They have not, either of them, any idea of morality. . . . I went in there one day, and in the drawing room I found Emily reclining in the arms of a man."⁵⁵

Immoral or not, Emily dreamt of marriage with Lord:

The celestial Vacation of writing you after an interminable Term of *four Days*, I can scarcely express. . . . Emily "Jumbo"! [he had been teasing her about having gained weight.] Sweetest name, but I know a sweeter—Emily Jumbo Lord. Have I your approval? (L 780)

Nonetheless, the two never did marry, probably from the combined pressures of Dickinson's agoraphobic attachment to her own home, the opposition of Lord's niece and heir Abbie Farley, and the illnesses of both Lord and Dickinson in the 1880s. He died of a stroke in 1884, and when Dickinson herself died two years later, the incurably romantic Lavinia put two heliotropes in the coffin, "to take to Judge Lord."⁵⁶

The loss of Lord was the second-to-last in a series of devastating deaths during the last twelve years of Dickinson's life. The death of her father in 1874 was the first and most important, though in certain respects his death also liberated her. In June 1874, Edward Dickinson became ill while speaking in the Massachusetts legislature in favor of the Hoosac Tunnel bill—again the railroad and the economic future of Amherst were favorite causes. Faintness forced Edward to stop and retire to his hotel, where the doctor whom he had summoned administered a dose of morphine or opium. (The family believed that Edward was allergic to the medication and that medical bungling had killed him.) According to legend, after his body was brought home from the train station and after the undertaker and his assistant had left, Austin leaned down and kissed his forehead, saying "There, father, I never dared do that while you were living."⁵⁷

Emily did not attend the funeral, or greet guests, or participate in any public way in honoring the man of whom she wrote to Higginson, "His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists" (L 418).

Because of the social and physical circumscription of Emily Dickinson's later life, subtractions from her "estate" of family and friends weighed more heavily than they might have under other circumstances. Although Lavinia Dickinson described Emily as always ready to welcome the rewarding new person, there are numerous accounts of people, including some old friends, who tried to see the poet in her later years, only to be shut out politely but firmly by Dickinson and her protective entourage. The woman of letters Helen Hunt Jackson was cordially welcomed in the 1870s, but Jackson, who asked to be Dickinson's literary executor and pressured her to publish, was one of the rare exceptions.⁵⁸ Samuel Bowles died unexpectedly in 1878, Dickinson's mother died in 1882, as did Wadsworth, her beloved nephew Gilbert in 1883, Lord in 1884, and then "H.H." (Helen Hunt Jackson) in 1885. There is no way to be sure that these losses hastened Dickinson's end, but whether she died of Bright's Disease, a kidney disorder, or whether as now seems likely the primary cause of death was heart disease and hypertension, Dickinson's final years were riven by their elegiac tenor.⁵⁹ "All but Death, Can be adjusted," she once wrote (Fr 789), and she had too many occasions on which to affirm the wisdom of her own words. "Death" itself was exempt from change; not so, despite her best efforts to the contrary, Emily Dickinson.

"My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any," the poet had written to Higginson in 1869 (L 330), but after reading one of her most impassioned love lyrics, this urbane man of letters was not sure that he could believe her. Was it possible that the person who signed herself his "Scholar" and his "Gnome" and whom he described as "partially cracked" had had a sexual secret?⁶⁰ When she wrote him in 1885 that "Biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied" (L 972), did he think that she was calling attention to death as an inconceivable and philosophically unsettling event? Certainly, much of her poetry is concerned with death in its literal and metaphorical guises—for

death can represent powerlessness and power too—but her statement also implies that biographers feed on absences. This is especially true of Dickinson's biographers, since she did so much not only to encourage but also to thwart them. Whereas Dickinson resisted being reduced to any kind of totalizing formula, including that of the romantic recluse daring to dream beautiful dreams, "dwell[ing] in Possibility - / A fairer House than Prose," she also wrote that "Each Life converges to some Centre - / Expressed - or still - / Exists in every Human Nature / A Goal" (Fr 724). How did she balance the longing for freedom implied by the idea of dwelling in possibility and the longing for fixity implied by the idea of a center? Put somewhat differently, what ambivalences narrowed Dickinson's original ambition to publish her letter(s) to the world? She wanted to make her family proud and she wanted to select "her own Society." How could the need to be true to herself and to seek social validation be reconciled? As a young woman she remarked, "When I die, they'll have to remember me."⁶¹ History has justified the claim.

By now, at the start of the twenty-first century, Dickinson's intellectual development, social experience, and psychological logic have been the subject of a formidable quantity of biographical research, as well as a vast quantity of idle speculation. In writings about her as a person, there has been drama and there has been melodrama, but it is well known that many of the actual facts of her life, including the exact dating of her manuscripts, have continued to elude us. There are some advantages in our belated recognition that the "real" Emily Dickinson can never be finally located, that "'It is finished' can never be said of us" (L 555), so long as we recognize that some Emily Dickinsons are more real than others. The historical frustrations she encountered help to make her real, as does the undeniable power of her language. In voicing her own contradictions, Dickinson imagined reaching out to others, including all those future poets who have wondered what she means and in some instances seen her as a problematic prototype of female genius. But this imagination of herself as available to literary histories of the future was inconsistent, as are accounts of what she wanted to happen to her poems after her death. "If fame belonged to me, I could not

escape her," she wrote to Higginson in June 1862, "if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase—and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me—then—My Barefoot-Rank is better" (L 265). She would not pander to the public, and as an artist, there were compromises she refused to make.

Granted that women in her time were conditioned to subordinate their own needs to those of others, we must recognize that there was a tremendously lively community of published women poets whom Dickinson chose not to join. Some of her poems suggest that she was attracted to the idea of martyrdom and that she conceived of herself as a martyr poet, sacrificing and sublimating her immediate desires so that others might live more fully. Overall, though, Dickinson's verbal inventions depend on a more complicated negotiation with desire and a stronger sense of entitlement. Turning briefly to S. P. Rosenbaum's excellent concordance, which presents us with her words, neatly arranged dictionary-fashion in alphabetical order,⁶² we discover not one but many possible roads to "glory," including "Night's possibility" and "Time's possibility," to say nothing of all those impossibilities that she compares to wine. Why is impossibility stimulating and alternatively why is "A load" "first impossible, when you have put it down?" What kind of opportunities and burdens inspired these insights, this cost-benefit analysis, this capitalist despair? To describe Emily Dickinson's language as in certain respects representative of her socioeconomic and sexual class is not to confine her to the house of prose or to deny the larger value of her vision. Rather, Dickinson's famously indeterminate lines inspire curiosity about those personal and social histories that shaped her imagination of "heaven," including the various heavens she renounced, some of them more finally than others. Marked by its intellectual and emotional range, Emily Dickinson's writing is full of self-confidence and of secrets; the richness of her language emerges out of a narrational impulse that is fragmented and incomplete. Reminding us of "internal difference - / Where the Meanings, are" (Fr 320), her poetry also reminds us of our need to reconcile differences, in ordinary terms, to love. Whatever the limitations of her social experience, her legacy is capacious, as was her heart. "Step lightly on this narrow Spot,"

she wrote, gesturing toward the grave but refusing to be confined by it,

The Broadest Land that grows
Is not so ample as the Breast
These Emerald Seams enclose -

Step lofty for this name be told
As far as cannon dwell,
Or Flag subsist, or Fame export
Her deathless Syllable (Fr 1227D)

NOTES

1. Dickinson's letters are quoted from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958). Subsequent references are cited as (L) in the text.
2. For Higginson's military career, see *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, ed. Christopher Looby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). See also Tilden G. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
3. Dickinson's poems are quoted from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). Subsequent references are cited as (Fr) in the text. Designations such as "A," "B," "C," etc., are Franklin's and identify different versions of poems as printed in the variorum.
4. For a more detailed discussion, see Barbara Antonina Clarke Mossberg, *Emily Dickinson: When a Writer Is a Daughter* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
5. On the quest motif, see Vivian R. Pollak, *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), chapters 4, 5, and passim.
6. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 16–17.
7. Frederick Clayton Waite, *Western Reserve University, the Hudson Era: A History of Western Reserve College and Academy at Hudson, Ohio,*

from 1826 to 1882 (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1943), quoted in Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974), 1:37.

8. Quoted in Alfred Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House, 2001), 27.

9. Rev. Alfred Ely, quoted in Habegger, *My Wars*, 31.

10. "What shall I call her?" Lavinia inquired about her soon-to-be stepmother Sarah Vaill, "Can I say Mother. O that I could be far away from here." Lavinia Norcross to Emily Norcross Dickinson, December 6, 1830, quoted in Wolff, *Emily Dickinson*, 51.

11. On Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd, see Polly Longworth, *Austin and Mabel: The Amherst Affair and Love Letters of Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), and Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience Victoria to Freud: Education of the Senses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 1:71–108. (William) Austin Dickinson was called Austin after one of his mother's dead brothers.

12. On Edward Dickinson's political career, see Betsy Erkkila, pp. 133–34 and passim in this volume.

13. Habegger, *My Wars*, 344.

14. In 1860, Emily and Lavinia went to Middletown, Connecticut, where they visited their second cousin Eliza Coleman. The Coleman family had introduced Dickinson to the Rev. Charles Wadsworth in Philadelphia in 1855.

15. See Norbert Hirschhorn and Polly Longworth, "'Medicine Posthumous': A New Look at Emily Dickinson's Medical Conditions," *New England Quarterly* 69 (June 1996): 299–316. Posthumous medicine evidently has its limitations and many theories have been advanced over the years, both about the nature and effect of Dickinson's problem. For example, some readers link her "terror—since September" to fears of blindness, but her letters do not suggest that in September 1861 her eyes were distressing her. Whatever the cause, the effect was to take her out of Amherst and away from her home. It took something extreme, and potentially self-destructive, to do it.

16. Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 2:133.

17. See Mariette Jameson, quoted in *ibid.*, 2:406. For Jameson family context, see Morey Rothberg and Vivian R. Pollak, "An Emily

Dickinson Manuscript (Re)Identified at the Library of Congress," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 43–51.

18. On Dickinson's logic of deprivation, see Vivian R. Pollak, "Thirst and Starvation in Emily Dickinson's Poetry" (1979), reprinted in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Judith Farr (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 62–75.

19. Amy Lowell, "Emily Dickinson" (1918), reprinted in *Poets and Poetry: Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), 88, 93, 89–90.

20. On Amy Lowell's biographical ambitions, see S. Foster Damon, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle with Extracts from Her Correspondence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), 611.

21. For a succinct discussion of Dickinson's tendency toward panic attacks, beginning apparently in 1854, see Polly Longworth, "The 'Latitude of Home': Life in the Homestead and the Evergreens," in *The Dickinsons of Amherst* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2001), 31–36. Longworth emphasizes the 1854 onset of the condition and believes that "Sue [Gilbert] was one of a few persons outside her immediate family aware that Emily was coping with increasing anxieties that made her social behavior mystifying and erratic." On agoraphobia as symptomatic of various anxiety disorders, see John F. McDermott, M.D., "Emily Dickinson's 'Nervous Prostration' and its Possible Relationship to Her Work," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 9 (Spring 2000): 71–80.

22. Ellen E. Emerson, quoted in Leyda, *Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, 2:482.

23. Leyda, *Years and Hours*, 2:179.

24. Despite Edward's reputation for financial probity and order, some recent scholarship indicates that there were problems. Longworth, "Latitude," describes him as juggling a trust account in the 1850s and then resigning suddenly as Amherst College treasurer in 1872, "frightened by an inability to balance the books" (37, 56). On the trust account for his orphaned nieces, Clara and Anna Newman, Longworth's "juggling" seems to capture the spirit of the matter and Habegger argues cogently that "at no time did the Newman heirs or their husbands register dissatisfaction with his oversight of their affairs" (346–47). For an earlier, more dire account, see Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 307–09.

25. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*

(New York: Ballantine, 1989), 121. The Kansas-Nebraska Act opened the way for slavery in territories hitherto protected by the Missouri Compromise and was unanimously opposed by northern Whigs. For more on Edward's politics and rhetoric, see Habegger, *My Wars*, 296–99.

26. On the railroad, see Domhnall Mitchell, *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), chap. 1. See also Dickinson's poem, "I like to see it lap the Miles" (Fr 383).

27. Tutor Howland was Vinnie's beau.

28. Dickinson, quoted in *The Lyman Letters: New Light on Emily Dickinson and Her Family*, ed. Richard B. Sewall (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1965), 70.

29. *A Poet's Parents: The Courtship Letters of Emily Norcross and Edward Dickinson*, ed. Vivian R. Pollak (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), xviii.

30. *Ibid.*, 3.

31. *Ibid.*, 19, 18.

32. *Ibid.*, 206, 208.

33. Leyda, *Years and Hours*, 1:81.

34. Daniel Taggard Fiske, quoted in Sewall, *Life of Emily Dickinson*, 2:342.

35. Helen Hunt Jackson, quoted in Ruth Odell, *Helen Hunt Jackson* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1939), 36.

36. Cousin Emily Norcross, quoted in Sewall, *Life of Emily Dickinson*, 2:360.

37. Mary Lyon, quoted in *ibid.*, 2:366.

38. On Edward's five essays, written under the pseudonym "Coelebs" (a bachelor), and published in the *New-England Inquirer*, an Amherst paper, see *Poet's Parents*, 93 n 1 and 104–05 n 1, and *passim*. On February 16, 1827, "A Lady" compared his sentiments to those of an "eastern Sultan or bashaw" before concluding, "If as he professes, he is resolved to die a martyr to our cause, not unlikely he will fall as thousands before him have done, who for the want of holier motives have passed into oblivion unknown, unpitied, unlamented." Edward probably abandoned the "Coelebs" project because of the controversy it generated and a sixth essay remains unpublished.

39. Sue's biography remains to be written. The most detailed ac-

count of her early years is in Longworth, *Austin and Mabel*. See also Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith, eds., *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* (Ashfield, Mass.: Paris Press, 1998), and Habegger, *My Wars*. See also Dickinson Electronic Archives, ed. Martha Nell Smith and others, [www://http: dickinson/virginia.edu](http://dickinson/virginia.edu). This site provides published and unpublished writings by Susan in prose and verse, including her memoir "Annals of the Evergreens" and her 1886 *Springfield Republican* obituary for Dickinson.

40. See Habegger, *My Wars*, 266. Habegger emphasizes that Sue had "several well-educated and prosperous aunts, uncles, and older brothers to admire and emulate" (265). In particular, her brothers Dwight and Frank, who prospered in Michigan, provided Sue with a dowry of five thousand dollars on her marriage. She was especially fond of Dwight, who was some fifteen years her senior and whom she turned to as a father substitute, a role he seems to have enjoyed. Thomas Dwight Gilbert (1815–1894) made a fortune in lumber and shipping and eventually settled in Grand Rapids, where he became president of the local bank. The city erected a monument to him on his death. See *Ceremonies at the Dedication and Unveiling of the Thomas D. Gilbert Memorial* (Grand Rapids: Loomis & Onderdonk, 1896).

41. Austin Dickinson, letter to Sue, quoted in Habegger, *My Wars*, 269.

42. Sue lived with her sister Harriet and brother-in-law William Cutler, a prosperous merchant whom she actively disliked. On the restrictions of the Cutler household, with its sententiousness and overheated rooms, see Habegger, *My Wars*, 267.

43. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" (1975), reprinted in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 53–76. Smith-Rosenberg famously concludes that the supposedly repressive Victorian era may actually have encouraged a wider range of sexual practices than we do today. Lillian Faderman, in "Emily Dickinson's Letters to Sue Gilbert," *Massachusetts Review* 28 (Summer 1977): 197–225, argues that Dickinson's letters to Sue are clearly distinguishable from those intended for women "with whom she was merely good friends" (205). Some of this material is excerpted in Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love*

Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York: Morrow, 1981).

44. For a fuller discussion of the erotics of Dickinson's love for Sue, see, in chronological order, Vivian R. Pollak, *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender*, especially chap. 5 (1984); Paula Bennett, *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992); Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Hart and Smith, eds., *Open Me Carefully* (1998).

45. For further psychological speculation about Austin and Emily, see Pollak, *Anxiety*, 72–74.

46. Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," *Parnassus* 5 (Fall-Winter 1976): 49–74.

47. Dickinson's "patent" was also her purchase on Sue. On Dickinson's possessiveness, see Judith Farr, "The Narrative of Sue," *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 3.

48. For speculation that Dickinson suffered a nervous breakdown in 1857, see John Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

49. In *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1985), the language poet Susan Howe locates Dickinson's Master letters in relation to nineteenth-century British fiction, especially Dickens and Charlotte and Emily Brontë. See 24–27 and *passim*.

50. Martha Nell Smith has suggested that "Master" is Sue. She argues that a subsequent "Master" letter (L 233) was altered by a hand other than Dickinson's to disguise its homoerotic content and that all three Master letters are encoded examples of lesbian desire. See *Rowing in Eden*, chapters 1, 3, and *passim*.

51. In *The Anxiety of Gender* (1984), Vivian Pollak also opted for Wadsworth as the distant beloved. She described the symbolic logic of the Master project and argued that he could not live in New England, a position with which Habegger concurs. Pollak suggested that the Master figure was, in part, a reaction to the loss Dickinson experienced when Sue turned toward Austin, a context that Habegger eclipses. Meanwhile, Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart seek to demonstrate that Dickinson's love for Susan was fulfilling more or less throughout the poet's life. Smith and Hart believe that while the relationship had its ups and downs, as what relationship doesn't, Susan remained Dickinson's truest and most constant

friend. Thus, they reject narratives that describe Dickinson as punished for lesbian desire and instead present Susan as Emily's ideal companion, critic, and reader. Apart from Dickinson's audience in the mind, Sue was her main audience, in that Dickinson sent approximately a third of her poems to friends and in that Sue received more than anyone else, Higginson being the next nearest contender.

52. According to the *Springfield Republican* in October 1865, "Among the 'orthodox' preachers, Rev Dr Wadsworth . . . perhaps ranks first; and his society, a Presbyterian one, is probably the largest and richest of that order. He is more of a scholar than an orator, however; and is greatly respected and beloved." See Leyda, *Years and Hours*, 2:102. In the next year, Mark Twain also noted his presence. See *ibid.*, 2:112.

53. For a fuller discussion of stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in the Master letters, see Marianne Noble, "The Revenge of Cato's Daughter: Emily Dickinson's Uses of Sentimental Masochism," *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chapter 5 and *passim*. Noble observes that "The letters and poetry of Emily Dickinson prominently feature sentimental scenarios that bear a striking resemblance to certain passages in evangelical sentimental works . . . in which helpless innocent females submit to the abusive domination of an extremely powerful male. Many of these scenarios are masochistic, for the victims willingly submit to and even seek to be dominated or hurt" (147).

54. In 1875, Elizabeth Lord was one of the witnesses to Dickinson's will.

55. Leyda, *Years and Hours*, 2:375–76.

56. Higginson, quoted in Sewall, *Life of Emily Dickinson*, 2:667.

57. Austin Dickinson, quoted in Leyda, *Years and Hours*, 2:224.

58. On Dickinson and Jackson, see Vivian R. Pollak, "American Women Poets Reading Dickinson: The Example of Helen Hunt Jackson," in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, ed. Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 323–41. See also Betsy Erkkila, "Dickinson, Women Writers and the Marketplace," in *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), especially 86–98. And for a valuable new biography

of Jackson, see Kate Phillips, *Helen Hunt Jackson: A Literary Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

59. Habegger has shown that Dickinson's physician overdiagnosed Bright's Disease as the cause of death in other patients. See *My Wars*, 622–23, and appendix 3. See also Hirschhorn and Longworth, "'Medicine Posthumous': A New Look at Emily Dickinson's Medical Conditions."

60. When Higginson was preparing the second posthumous edition of poems in 1891, he wrote to his coeditor Mabel Loomis Todd, "One poem only I dread a little to print—that wonderful 'Wild Nights,'—lest the malignant read into it more than that virgin recluse ever dreamed of putting there." See Millicent Todd Bingham, *Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson: The Editing and Publication of her Letters and Poems* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), 127.

On "partially cracked," see Higginson in 1877 to his sister Anna, also a poetess, quoted in Leyda, *Years and Hours*, 2:263. See also "half cracked" in Adrienne Rich, "'I Am in Danger—Sir,'" *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews, and Criticism*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton, 1993), 26–27.

61. Leyda, *Years and Hours*, 2:481.

62. S. P. Rosenbaum, ed., *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964).