

EMILY DICKINSON (re-visited)

December 10, 1830

May 15, 1885

"Words are my life," she has said, and Emily spent her life choosing the perfect words to express an essence. Some say that the genius behind poetry is finding that light within... that phosphorescence. Emily claimed to know that her work was poetry if "I feel physically like the top of my head were taken off...a poet lights the lamp and then goes out himself..."

*A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.*

Her poetic commentary and her choice of words have created epiphanies for many of us. She told us how the sun rose and encouraged us to dwell in possibility. She reminded us that great hopes (may) fall, that pain can swallow substance up and that fame has a wing and a sting. She mused that hope is the thing with feathers, that creating a prairie takes reverie, that experience has a precarious gait.

She claimed that the brain is wider than the sky and this was printed on the front of material distributed at a recent International Neuroscience Convention. She did not know, she said, that years had feet. Collectively we sigh, for, likewise, we did not know.

Controversial analyses appear but we prefer to think of her as the woman presented in Luce's "Belle of Amherst," a woman who CHOSE her life as an eccentric recluse in order to amuse the world and have the privacy to create: she was an individualist of the highest order asking for nothing but to share "the ecstasy and sacrament of her life." She was, indeed, interested in publishing her poetry. There appeared to be unconsummated love affairs with older married men in her life and she experienced many emotions with very few excursions from her Amherst homes.

She claims that as a child she giggled and played and that she was deeply involved with her teachers and friends. She was close to her family. Letters reveal that the Dickinsons often experienced financial difficulties. They were all religious but Emily rejected formal religion, and continued to do so during the year she attended MHC (1847-48). She claims that MHC was "run by a dragon," Mary Lyon, who was so determined to have all her students accept Christ that she classified them into 3 groups: SAVED, WITH HOPE and HOPELESS. Only Emily remained in this last group. It is probable, however, that she left MHC after one year because her father wanted her at home and not because of this potential conflict. Indeed, many of her comments about ML were more benign, citing her as one who cared for the students, stating in one letter that, "Miss Lyon and all the

teachers seem to consult our comfort and happiness in everything they do..." She wished (as more modern students have) that life in South Hadley were not so "isolated" and asked about the Mexican War, indicating that she was certain ML would furnish them with weapons if necessary.

She spent the remainder of her life in Amherst helping to care for her invalid mother, writing and hoping to be published. It has been suggested that she retained a childish innocence far beyond the normal period of time and it was not until sometime after 1858 that she began her exploration of the tragic world of desire. She became more introspective, dropped "emilie" as the spelling of her name and became ill when her dog and constant companion, Carlos, died in 1865. Her illnesses were often associated with her emotional state.

When a mentor of hers, Higginson, finally met with her, he recorded many of the things that transpired including comments on her father's "remoteness." On that meeting day, Higginson was relieved to leave her and stated, "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." He did not offer her encouragement regarding her poetry during her lifetime although he was ultimately responsible for her publication 4 years after her death.

In his 2002 biography, My Wars are Laid away in Books, Arthur Habegger professes the belief that ED continues to be the most loved of American Poets despite the fact that she is seen as the most elusive, an "icon of mystery." He attempts to clarify her developmental stages through letters. He shows how she could be both a woman of her era and a timeless creator. He concludes that with her death and subsequent publication of her works 4 years later, "Something with an unheard-of brilliance had come to an end, and something public, derivative, and dependent on a world of stumbling readers had begun. We may suspect the poet would have seen her lasting fame as a contemptible substitute for the limitlessness and perfection she had spent her life thinking about."

She had written:

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me-
The simple News that Nature told-
With tender Majesty

Her message is committed
To Hands I cannot see-
For love of Her-Sweet-countryman-
Judge tenderly-of Me

We do-

Stay in touch-

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My Wars are laid away in Books Alfred Habegger (2002)

"The Belle of Amherst" William Luce (1976)

The Complete Works of Emily Dickinson Thomas H. Johnston, editor

Mount Holyoke College Archives (papers, articles and letters)