Chautauqua Script—Emily Dickinson

HIGGINSON

I am Thomas Wentworth Higginson, one of the editors of Emily Dickinson, and I first discovered her in 1862, when she asked me in a letter,

DICKINSON

Could you tell me how to grow?

HIGGINSON

In response to her question, I told her that she should revise the rhythm of the poems. Instead she chose not to publish at all. One would think this would be the end of our communication, but it certainly was not. It didn't take long for me to become her correspondent, friend, and critic. Twelve years after we began our correspondence, her father died—whose death would mark the beginning of a long ten years of loss. I quickly realized that most of her poems grapple at first hand—the more audaciously the better—with the very mysteries of life and death. The unutterable dignity of death seems to have forced itself again and again upon this lonely woman.

TODD

I, Mabel Loomis Todd, Dickinson's other, more prominent, editor, moved to Amherst after living in Washington with my husband. It was so different from my former life, and yet it was pleasant, too. I was a well-accomplished lady, and it did not take long for the Dickinson sisters to take note of me. I would come to their house to sing and play for them. I never met Emily face-to-face. We would carry on conversations between the brilliantly lighted drawing room where I sat and the dusky hall just outside where she always remained, I grew very familiar with her voice. I had never seen her closely, and still I was full of grief at her parting. But it was my honor to have a hand in the publication of her poems.

HIGGINSON

Throughout the editing process, Mrs. Todd would send me copies of the manuscripts to look over, but that was quite enough. My relationship with Emily was complex, on my side there was an interest that was strong and even affectionate, but not based on any thorough comprehension; and on her side a hope, always rather baffled, that I should afford some aid in solving her abstruse problem of life.

TODD

For Emily every subject was proper ground for legitimate study, even the somber facts of death and burial, and the unknown life beyond. She touches these themes sometimes lightly, sometimes almost humorously, more often with weird and peculiar power; but she is never by any chance frivolous or trivial. The poems were having a wonderful effect on me, mentally and spiritually. They seemed to open the door into a wider universe than the little sphere surrounding me which so often hurt and compressed me—and they helped me nobly through a very trying time…I felt their genius and I knew the poems would succeed.

DICKINSON

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 countrymen,
Judge tenderly of me!

I don't speak things like the rest. I was born on December 10, of 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, to a family unlike most everyone, and we were dependent on one another for delight. My father, Edward Dickinson, seemed to me to be the oldest and oddest sort of a foreigner. Sometimes I would say something and he would stare in a curious kind of bewilderment. His heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists. I never had a mother, but I was born to Emily Norcross Dickinson, who did not care for thought. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled. My dear sister Lavinia, or as I like to call her, Vinnie, is far more hurried than Presidential Candidates—I trust in more distinguished ways, for *they* have only the care of the Union, but Vinnie the Universe. She was most motherly towards me. She would sleep by my side, and her tie to me is quite vital; yet if we had come up for the first time from two wells where we had hitherto been bred her astonishment would not be greater at some things I say. My brother Austin was dearest to me, and I would write to him of things that I did not desire the rest of the family to see.

In 1840 I was entered into Amherst Academy. I had a teacher there that emphasized both religion and science in his lectures and writing, and it was because of this that Edward Hitchcock was influential in my life. My family was religious, except me. I didn't start to question my father's Puritanical convictions until I attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1847.

I prayed, at first, a little Girl,
Because they told me to—
But stopped, when qualified to guess
How prayer would feel—to me—

If I believed God looked around,
Each time my Childish eye
Fixed fully, and steady, on his own
In Childish honesty—

Though I was only at Mount Holyoke for a year, I learned an important lesson from Mary Lyon, "We can become almost what we will." There were others that heavily influenced me—those outside my family. We had portraits upon our walls of Thomas Carlyle, Elizabeth Barett Browning, George Elliot and Ralph Waldo Emerson. It was from these that I would learn the most. But I did return home, for home was always dear to me.

I had a crisis of faith when my family was all being converted to Christianity. My sister wrote to my brother in earnest about how he should accept Christ. She wanted the three of us to all

believe. This matter of conversion haunted me. In my letter to Abiah Root, a friend from Mount Holyoke, I wrote:

Abby has told you about things, here, how the 'still small voice' is calling, and how the people are listening, and believing, and truly obeying—how the place is very solemn, and sacred, and the bad ones slink away, and are sorrowful—not at their wicked lives—but at this strange time, great change. I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so do I slink away, and pause, and ponder, and ponder, and pause...

Tis a dangerous moment for any one when the meaning goes out of things and Life stands straight and punctual and yet no content come. Yet such moments are. If we survive them they expand us, if we do not, but that is Death, whose if is everlasting.

I did suffer a great many deaths in my life. If I could but list a few… my friend Ben Newton, who was a lawyer in my father's office died five years after I met him. This death was paramount in my life.

Father was the next to die. I could hardly bear it. His death left Lavinia and I to care for Mother. Samuel Bowels, to whom I wrote letters, died four years later. And two years after that, in 1882, Charles Wadsworth, my close friend, died—the very same year that Mother died. The Dyings had been too deep for me, and before I could raise my Heart from one, another had come. The year after Mother died, my nephew, Gilbert, died. There are too many to count, now, and I measure by Fathoms, Numbers pass away— I became a recluse after my father's death, and those that followed after only made me seclude myself more.

I wrote to Higginson during this time of emotional need. During our first meeting I felt as though I talked a great deal, though I tried to encourage him to speak. He must have known that a cross examination would have made me withdraw into myself. Indeed, we both parted feeling that letters were better than actual meetings. A letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. Indebted in our talk to attitude and accent, there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone. My sister-in-law Susan once said,

Her talk and writing's were like to no one else…a Damascus blade gleaming and glancing in the sun was her wit. Her swift poetic rapture was like the long glistening note of a bird one hears in the June woods at high noon, but can never see…quick as the electric spark in her intuitions and analyses, she seized the kernel instantly, almost impatient of the fewest words, by which she must make her revelation.

There are few things in this world that fascinate me more than language. You may think my opinion is easily disregarded and perhaps you are right, for in my lifetime I saw little outside of my hometown of Amherst and I chose to isolate myself even from the people I knew and loved. What do I have to say of the world? And yet, I have been farther than this world—I have explored the "Undiscovered Continent" within myself. I have grappled with the very fabric of the unknown.

This is exactly why I find language so intriguing. It has been, if you will excuse the comparison, a sort of lover to me. I often feel as though the English language has sought me out with its murmurs, its sounds, its syllables. Each one of us has tasted it—the capability of language to provide a definition for what once seemed undefinable. Some of you will argue that the capabilities of language are not infinite. And you are right—I am quite familiar with their limitations. There have been many times when I found myself facing these limits—many time when even I could not stretch the words to say what I desired. It is this frustration that I spoke of when I wrote this poem:

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—
And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum—
Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My Mind was going numb—
And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space—began to toll,
As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked solitary, here—
And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then—"

What I mean to refer to is the death of an idea. This brings me to a question of identity, and of purpose. How can I know? Have you ever lingered in the vastness of the unknown? I have lingered there—so often that I am familiar with it. I am so intrigued by our humanity. We are bound to our need to understand. Perhaps you have seen it in yourselves. Each of us stands in the midst of all that we do not know, and yet we construct, within our minds, "Planks of Reason," if you will, which allow us to make sense of the world. But we must be careful. I have watched these constructions become prisons—preventing people from considering other perspectives and ideas, blinding them until they forget there is any unknown at all. And even worse, I have watched these people become comfortable in their prisons. This is the concept I referred to when I wrote:

"A Prison gets to be a friend—

I became determined, you see, that any ideas about reality that I constructed should never become prisons to me. That is why

“I dwell in Possibility—
A fairer House than Prose—
More numerous of Windows—
Superior—for Doors—
Of Chambers as the Cedars—
Impregnable of Eye—
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky—
Of Visitors—the fairest—
For Occupation—This—
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise—”

This is the premise of our lives, is it not? “The spreading wide of our narrow Hands to gather Paradise.” But we would be fools were we to believe that our small human hands could fully grasp something so big and infinite. We must be willing, when our “Planks of Reason” break, to readjust our ideas of reality and to shed new light on the darkness of the unknown.

I am sure it might seem strange to hear me speak like this. Many of you see me as a recluse, and what right does a woman who is isolated from society have to question the workings of a world in which she has little involvement? But question I do—I am not afraid to question these things and others. And I am not afraid to question myself. I was constantly forced to face myself as I wrote poem after poem. To address my fears and my uncertainties. And among them was Death; the great unknown, the great equalizer. And death calls when he pleases. He does not ask our permission, he does not wait until we are prepared. My most famous poem deals with this idea. It reads:

“Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.
We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—
We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—
Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—
We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—

The Cornice—in the Ground—
Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

But I will tell you, that as I have explored with my pen the unchartered territories of the those things that we cannot know—those things that many would rather ignore or explain away—I have come to see death in a different light than most of mankind. Death provides an escape—a doorway into worlds we have not yet known or encountered. Perhaps there we shall find meaning.

Now, as you can imagine, these words—and many of my other words besides—did not sit well with my contemporaries. A part of me knew this, I think, and so—except for a handful of poems which found their way into print only by means of my sister-in-law, Susan, and against my wishes—I resisted any kind of publication. But, as you have heard, after my death my dear sister Lavinia persuaded Mr. Higginson and Mrs. Todd to release my work to the public.

I am glad I was not here to witness the event. I am told that my poems were well received by readers—the critics, however, found little to praise. Allow me, if you will, to read you some of their opinions of my work. Once one looks past their blindness, the remarks are really quite entertaining.

For instance, here is a review of my poetry from a Thomas Bailey Aldrich who writes in the *Atlantic Monthly* during January of 1892:

"It is plain that Miss Dickinson possessed an extremely unconventional and grotesque fancy...She had much fancy of a queer sort, but only, as it appears to me, intermittent flashes of imagination. I fail to detect in her work any of that profound thought which her editor professes to discover in it. The phenomenal insight, I am inclined to believe exists only in his partiality; for whenever a woman poet is in question Mr. Higginson always puts on his rose-colored spectacles...an eccentric, dreamy, half-educated recluse in an out-of-the-way New England village (or anywhere else) cannot with impunity set at defiance the laws of gravitation and grammar...Oblivion lingers in the immediate neighborhood."

HIGGINSON

Preposterous!

DICKINSON

And the critic Andrew Lang was hardly any kinder in his review of my poems, which appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in March of 1891. He called my work "balderdash" and stated that

"If poetry is to exist at all, it really must have form and grammar, and must rhyme when it professes to rhyme...One turns over Miss Dickinson's book with a puzzled feeling that there was poetry in her subconscious, but that it never became explicit. One might as well seek

for an air in the notes of a bird as for articulate and sustained poetry here...There is not much else that can be quoted without bringing in the fantastic, irresponsible note of a poet who has her own audience, and had constructed her own individual 'Ars Poetica.'"

Well! I should like to argue that "form and grammar" are not the only things worth considering when constructing a poem. Here, my friends, is the very sort of thing that I was referring to when I spoke of constructing realities that then become prisons. Mr. Lang is so imprisoned by this narrow idea of what a poem *should be*, that he quite forgets to consider all a poem *could* be, and what good is that?

But he is not the only one confined to these rules of grammar and rhyme. The critic Arlo Bates wrote in the *Boston Courier* in November of 1890,

"There is hardly one of these poems which does not bear marks of unusual and remarkable talent,"

But he insisted on adding that "**there is hardly one of them which is not marked by an extraordinary crudity of workmanship."**

HIGGINSON

She used chiefly dashes, and it has been thought better to give them the benefit in this respect of the ordinary usages; and so with her habit as to capitalization…in which she followed the Old English and present German method of thus distinguishing every noun substantive.

TODD

The way I understand it, she capitalized those words of importance—those words that deserved to be stressed. As for her punctuation, it was all significant. She used periods and commas, but commonly she depended upon a mark of various lengths resembling a dash that tilts up or down as frequently as it is level. Because of her handwriting, it is often difficult to tell a comma from a dash and a dash from a lengthened period. Such punctuation could not be reproduced in typeface.

DICKINSON

But I will always think very kindly of Mr. William Dean Howells, who wrote so highly of my poetry in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in January of 1891 that I am almost tempted to think he began to understand it.

"**She never intended or allowed anything more from her pen to be printed in her lifetime; but it was evident that she wished her poetry finally to meet the eyes of that world which she had herself always shrunk from. She could not have made such poetry without knowing its rarity, its singular worth; and no doubt it was a radiant happiness in the twilight of her hidden, silent life."**

But five years later a lovely lady by the name of Bliss Carman honored me with her review of my poems. In November of 1896 she wrote in the *Boston Evening Transcript*:

"The conviction remains that Emily Dickinson's contribution to English poetry (or American poetry, if you prefer to say so) is by far the most important made by any woman west of the Atlantic. She borrowed from no one; she was never commonplace; always imaginative and stimulating; and finally, the region of her brooding was that sequestered domain where our profoundest convictions have origin and whence we trace the Puritan strain within us. A life-long recluse, musing on the mysteries of life and death, she yet had that stability of character, that strong sanity of mind, which could hold out against the perils of seclusion, unshaken by solitude, undethroned by doubt."

It was the efforts of Thomas H. Johnson that allowed my entire collection of poetry as well as all of my letters to be published in the 1950s. Since then, well, you may evaluate the accuracy of Mr. Aldrich's prediction that "Oblivion lingers in the immediate neighborhood."

Let me leave you with this thought—for all of our realities are but costumes draped over the shoulders of consciousness and it is language that allows us to approach these realities, the limitation of language that challenges us to face our unknowns. This is why I write. Perhaps Mr. Lang is right in saying that I have constructed my own "Ars Poetica." Permit me to share it with you now. It is simply this:

"**If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry**."