

[Comments made before the premiere of *This is my letter to the world for voice, flute and piano* at Connecticut College.]

Emily Dickinson (1830-86)

Picture this: a volcanic talent housed in the body of a childlike, seemingly timid, agoraphobic who dresses all in white and lives in a small college town in western Massachusetts.

She deeply admires the work of George Eliot and the Brontes.

She says she has not read Whitman but jokes that she has heard he is disgraceful.

Her family is prominent; her father a stern, respected lawyer who becomes a Congressman.

She is two poets: the public one who writes poems about nature like "Bee!" and the private one who writes about her secret art like "A Spider sewed at Night."

In 1862 she writes T.W. Higginson, an author at the Atlantic who has written an article for young writers, asking for advice and enclosing 4 poems. He replies and in her next letter she says, "Thank you for the surgery" but slyly teases and ignores his critiques. She is looking for validation, perhaps publication, but avoids any alteration to her work. Higginson suggests delay in publication and writes of her elsewhere, "To a person of experience, no stupidity is so discouraging as a brilliancy that has no roots." To his credit he also says he feels the "strange power" of her poems, travels to meet her and engages in a lifelong correspondence.

She spends only a year at Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary and lives a quiet life in seclusion. She is deeply ambivalent about a woman's role; she makes fun of housework but dutifully bakes bread for the family. She avoids the tedium of conventional women's company saying, "The Sewing Society has commenced again... my hard-heartedness gets me many prayers." And she speaks of marriage as "Born, Bridalled, Shrouded in a Day."

She is no Puritan, writing "Blessed are they that play, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" and "Unless we become as rogues, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven." She is bold and ambitious in her work: "My country is truth" and "My business is to find." She is adventurous: "Dying is a wild night and a new road."

And she dares much: "The shore is safer but I love to buffet the sea."

On her instruction, Emily Bronte's poem "No coward soul is mine" is read at her funeral.

Her poem "Success" is published anonymously in *A Masque of Poets* and widely believed to be by Emerson.

But she finds in other experiences with publication that her eccentric and individualistic punctuations and word choices are smoothed out and regularized. Gilbert and Gubar call those characteristic dashes "rending pauses, silences like wounds, fractures within" and they do not appear in her published work for many decades after her death.

Her personas are various and her tone ever changing.

Her subjects range from the great bewildered lyrics of the 1860's ("It was not Death for I stood up") to childish delight ("I'm Nobody! Who are you?"), to unchildish obstinacy,

agorophobic entrapment (“Safe in their alabaster chambers”), and to strategies of escape (“Captivity is consciousness/So’s Liberty”). She makes aggressive masculine imagery her own as in “My Life has stood— a loaded Gun—”.

She is obsessed by white: as in “Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat” or white as polar cold, or purity, enigma, virginal power, bride, ghost. And she writes throughout her life of death and madness. All these personas haunt her (“One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted”); they enrich her work, and provide strategies for escaping the narrow world of Amherst and of a woman’s traditional poetic voice.

She recreates the mythic tradition linking spinsters with spinning spiders. The spinster/spider is an emblem of art, the triumphant secret self as are the pearl images about another artful product created in secret. This spinster/spider literally sews her finished poems into fascicles, said by some to be a viable form of self-publication given her experiences at the hands of publishers. She says “Nor any know I know the Art.” Still, she is confident of her art (“I took my Power in my Hand”) and she is confident of her purpose which is no less than the “physiognomy of immortality.”

In Higginson she does not find but rather creates the mentor she needs. In Helen Hunt Jackson she finds but keeps at arm’s length a fellow writer who declares her a great poet and admits her envy.

In Amy Lowell’s waspish comment, she is “One of the greatest women poets who never lived.”

Frost writes at length from his own male consciousness: “Poetry has never been women’s business. We don’t know enough Sappho to know how good she was. We’ve had Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett... but Emily is bigger than all those. You would have to call her the greatest woman writer in the history of the world.”

At least Emily knew who she was. She calls herself “a Kangaroo among the Beauty” and says “I sing...to keep the Dark away.” She also writes “The Poets light but Lamps—/Themselves—go out—”.

In a late poem from about 1884, #1600, about a bird, she concludes with lines that may echo our response to her work. She writes:

“And then he lifted up his Throat
And squandered such a Note
A Universe that overheard
Is stricken by it yet—”