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Confronting Genius:  
Psychobiography and  
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Varieties of  
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Psychological Aspects of  
Nuclear War (Thompson);  
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## A Bandaged Secret: Emily Dickinson and Incest

NORBERT  
HIRSCHHORN

. . . . Big my Secret but it's *bandaged*—  
It will never get away  
Till the Day its Weary Keeper  
Leads it through the Grave to thee.

Emily Dickinson  
Poem 1737<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

I started to think about this paper in 1987 after reading Robert Craft's flippant review (*Amorous in Amherst*<sup>2</sup>) of Polly Longworth's book<sup>3</sup> about the adulterous love between Emily Dickinson's brother Austin and Mabel Loomis Todd. It was Mrs. Todd, of course, who later rescued ED's poems and letters. Austin, 54, and Mabel, 27, consummated their love in the Dickinson dining room, and trysted up to a dozen times a month, mostly in the Dickinson Homestead; it could not have escaped ED's attention. ED died in 1886, less than three years later; she had been a total recluse since the mid-1860s, but her withdrawal started at least a decade before. Craft speculated on ED's reclusion and its timing—a matter of fascination for Amherst townspeople then, and for ED scholars

and readers since—and concluded:

... whatever it was, including an experience that exceeds the known facts, *something* had happened to this (in 1852) twenty-two-year-old girl who had been socially active only shortly before ...<sup>4</sup>

I wondered why Craft snickered at Austin and Mabel's sexual romps at the close of ED's life, yet at the same time soberly discussed the artist's decades-long withdrawal. What connected the two; what was the "*something*" that happened decades before? Craft never says so outright, but he meant to intimate something carnal. The word "incest" jumped into my mind, and I felt compelled to explore my intuition. Why this hunch? Certainly because some things quite near to incest touched my own life. The reader must decide if I present the evidence with respect and objectivity that incest may also have touched Emily Dickinson.

I will explore in this article whether incest was the "something" that happened to ED, in three ways: first, by comparing ED's family to the "incest-family profile;" then, by comparing ED's known behavior to that shown by modern sufferers of incest; and finally, I will analyze what critical readers of ED have found in her letters and poetry, to see if her words provide any clue.

### THE INCEST-FAMILY PROFILE

Incest is a crime committed mainly against young girls; it occurs in many societies, and in families with a distinct profile; it damages its victims for decades. Incest is not rare. Judith Herman has defined incest in her book, *Father-Daughter Incest*<sup>5</sup>, by two attributes:

"... any sexual relationship between a child and an adult, in a position of paternal authority," and, "... a sexual relationship (with) any physical contact that had to be kept a secret."<sup>6</sup>

Incest is not, therefore, limited to penile penetration, and the contact that is kept secret might have occurred but once, although multiple episodes are more usual. The victim of incest may even forget the event, the story emerging only during psychotherapy in adulthood; more often it is kept a shameful secret.

Herman provides a profile of the incestuous family, based on her interviews with forty white middle and working class women, in psychotherapy, who suffered incest with their fathers.

The informants described their father as perfect patriarchs ... arbiters of the family's social life and (who) frequently

succeeded in virtually secluding the women in the family. But while they were often feared within their families, they impressed outsiders as sympathetic, even admirable men ... hard-working, competent, and often very successful.<sup>7</sup>

The fathers strongly preferred their sons; they were often violent; they demanded, and got, all the nurture and attention that a child should expect. The informants said their mothers were depressed, withdrawn, often exhausted by multiple or difficult pregnancies, and who could neither care for or protect their daughters.

Eighty percent of Herman's subjects were the eldest or only daughter. Most became "little mothers," and "Daddy's little girl," to serve their fathers' needs. Because of this bond, however unwholesome, each woman adored her father and despised her mother. Thus the father's demand for sex was one none could resist; the demands nearly always began before puberty. Paradoxically, perhaps, members of the incest families were religious and observed traditional gender roles and morals.

Herman provides statistical evidence for the incest-family profile. She compared her 40 subjects to 20 women of equivalent social background also in therapy, but with no history of incest. Five attributes of the incest-family profile were significantly present more often in the incest sufferers: a violent father, a sick mother, mother-daughter separation, the sufferer became a "little mother," and large families. The sample is too small to detect how the components rank in order of importance, and which are simple reflections of one or more of the others<sup>8</sup>. According to Herman, it is the relationship with the mother that must be repaired to heal an incest sufferer.

Jean Renvoize, a British author, in her 1986 book, *Incest: A Family Pattern*<sup>9</sup>, shows that incest occurs among families of all classes and races, among low-brows and intelligentsia. The families are typically "close" ones:

Incestuous families bind themselves together with ropes of mutual dependence, fear of separation, and secrecy, and if any one member tries to break away the bonds are ruthlessly tightened ... As children grow older and develop natural desires for outside relationships, so the more powerful is the pressure put on them to remain within the family for all their social and emotional needs. This is not out of simple fear of family secrets being revealed, though this of itself is sufficient to keep the family isolated, but more out of a dread of the family system collapsing.<sup>10</sup>

The dread is authentic: in many families a parent or grandparent has run

away. Renvoize summarized several studies of incest and found the patterns demonstrated by Herman: the authoritarian father, the dormant mother, the daughter who must nurture both. The child responds to the molesting adult because her need for affection is as great as her need for food and drink. Indeed, researchers report that child victims are preoccupied with food and other metaphors of nurture.

Renvoize suggests that incest between an older brother and his sister can also occur in such families, particularly when any show of healthy affection between them is forbidden. Unlike father-daughter incest, which tends to go on for a period of years, sibling incest usually takes place over a few months.

John Crewsdon, in *By Silence Betrayed*<sup>11</sup>, finds incest in small-town America. The incestuous family, reports one experienced Wyoming judge, "... is typically introverted ... have very strong religious convictions, very puritanical ... (The wife is) a very passive, dependent woman."<sup>12</sup> The molesters, says Crewsdon (who uses the broader term, "sexual abuse"), often undergo born-again religious experiences, and thus believe that they are redeemed; they remain, nonetheless, narcissistic, grandiose, and impulsive.

The same family profile was found in 19th-century America. Linda Gordon<sup>13</sup> examined social case-workers' records from three welfare agencies in Boston from 1880 to 1960. Incest was found in homes ruled by a pious, traditional father, with a weak and absent mother; the eldest daughter had to fill in, then became the victim. The case studies show that the father expected every whim pleased, every meal cooked just so and when, every sexual desire indulged, and who—beyond the occasional stern lecture—assumed no responsibility for normal child care.

Incest is generational. The sons in an incest family often repress their own nurturant feelings, so degraded these are in the family; they then seek sex with subordinate women: prostitutes, younger sisters, their own children. Incest is not rare. When Herman canvassed Boston area psychiatrists, 2-20% of their women patients gave a history of incest; the higher estimates came from psychiatrists who had simply asked about the possibility, suspected or not<sup>14</sup>. Crewsdon cites the important cross-country random phone survey conducted in 1983 with impressive sensitivity by social scientists<sup>15</sup>. 22% of adults (27% of women, 16% of men) gave a history of sexual abuse—most of it serious; one-third of the positive respondents said they had never told their secret before. Diana Russell's in-person interviews of 900 women in San Francisco<sup>16</sup> gave a 28% incidence of childhood sexual abuse involving physical contact, 29% of which was by a family member. Large-scale interviews in Canada in 1983 by the Gallup Organization, and recent surveys in Great Britain, gave figures of 33% and 10% respectively<sup>15</sup>. Whether the figure is 10%, 25%, or higher, occurs within or outside the family, the event is not rare. The

evidence in these surveys is that under-reporting—from fear, from repression of memory—is much more likely than fantastical invention.

We can only infer the incidence of incest in ED's time. It was common among the poor and working-class British<sup>17</sup> and in Boston<sup>18</sup>. Freud discovered a history of father-daughter, sibling or other adult-child incest among a group of eighteen upper class Viennese (12 women, 6 men) suffering from a wide range of anxiety neuroses, and reported it as such in 1896. (A few years later, he decided he had merely heard fantasies and thus created the core of psychoanalytic theory<sup>18</sup>. Modern revisionists insist that Freud had it right the first time.) The standards of child-care in late-Puritan New England are congruent with the incest-family profile. A remarkable primer, "The Mother at Home; or The Principles of Maternal Duty . . .," instructs father to be master over utterly compliant mothers and children. ED's father, Edward Dickinson, bought this book in 1833<sup>19</sup>. The profile of the incest-family was the norm when ED was a child, and played out even in her own neighborhood. In 1876 Reverend Charles Dexter Lothrop was publicly excommunicated from the First Congregational Church of Amherst, as reported in the Springfield Daily Republican:

The testimony covered the training of the three daughters from their infancy up, and was of the most revolting character, involving brutal horsewhippings for trivial offenses, systematic starving, feeding of rotten meat, and positive dishonesty and faithlessness in his family relations.<sup>20</sup>

## THE DICKINSON FAMILY

How closely did the Dickinson family fit the "incest-family profile?" I will draw principally on Jay Leyda's detailed compilation of ED's life and environment<sup>20</sup>, John Cody's psychoanalytic study of ED<sup>19</sup>, Richard Sewall's monumental biography<sup>21</sup>, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff's more recent biography and poetic exegesis<sup>22</sup>. The reader be warned that even seemingly secure facts come in more than one version or interpretation.

Emily Dickinson's grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson was a visionary. To realize his "City upon the Hill," Amherst College, against high odds, he neglected his law practice, chased one speculation after another, until he went bankrupt.

When he failed, his entire family was swept along with him, and no one was affected more profoundly than his oldest son.<sup>23</sup>

Samuel simply gave up, escaped to the West—Ohio—and left Edward to pick up the pieces. Edward became obsessed to restore the Dickinson reputation and finances, repossess his father's grand house ("The



Homestead"), and to rescue Amherst College. He accomplished all that, and also became a state representative, a US congressman, treasurer of Amherst College, a power in town. Remarkable, but he was not a lovely man. Wolff describes him as lonely and pinched<sup>23</sup>. His letters of courtship to Emily Norcross show him at times sanctimonious, bullying, repressed; at times afraid<sup>24</sup>. He could stand as our caricature of the 19th century pater-familias, ruling every event in the household when he was at home, by mail if not; brooking no challenge to his authority. He intercepted his children's letters<sup>25</sup>. He was intensely moralistic on matters of virtue and sobriety<sup>26</sup>, a leader of the temperance movement<sup>27</sup>, although his political enemies alleged some hypocrisy on his part<sup>28</sup>. He accepted Christ during an 1850 revival<sup>29</sup>. He believed in education for women, but mainly "to prepare them . . . to discharge the duties of domestic life . . ."<sup>30</sup>. He refused to let his widowed mother live with him<sup>31</sup>. He urged ED, then fourteen and already sensitive, to visit the Lunatic Asylum of Worcester, a sort of freak show<sup>32</sup>. In 1864 and 1865, ED spent seven months away from home for treatment of a serious eye condition; yet in 1866 she writes: "I had promised to visit my Physician for a few days in May, but Father objects because he is in the habit of me." (L316)<sup>33</sup>

We have one story of impressive violence when Edward beat a horse brutally<sup>34</sup>. In letters Edward wrote to his children Cody finds other evidence of "aggressive fantasies."<sup>35</sup> One such note in 1838 begins platitudinously enough:

My Dear little Children, your mother writes me that you have been quite good since I came away—You don't know what a pleasure it is for me to have such good news from you—I want to have you do perfectly right—always be kind and pleasant, & always tell the truth, & never deceive . . . All you learn now, when you are young, will do you a great deal of good, when you are grown up. Austin, be careful & not let the woodpile fall on you-& don't let the cattle hurt you in the yard, when you go . . . after water. Take good care of Emily, when you go to school & not let her get hurt.<sup>36</sup>

A letter to his wife has the same bullying sound we hear in his courtship letters (emphases all in the original):

One thing I forgot to charge you about—that is, going out, evenings, to attend meetings—As much as you may be *inclined* to go, my *positive injunction* is, that *you do not* go into the *vestry*, on *any account*, for *any purpose*, in my absence—Now don't disregard this. I shall find it out, if you do. It is a most

dangerous place—I wonder that any body will venture into it.<sup>37</sup>

Emily Dickinson's mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, is bleakly represented by most ED biographers. She is called inhibited, uncommunicative, depressed. In the courtship letters she withdraws like a turtle when prodded<sup>38</sup>. A visitor in 1838 wrote to a sister: "I called on Saturday . . . on Mrs. E. Dickinson—she was as usual full of plaintive talk . . ."<sup>39</sup> She seemed just background, with less presence than the cat, as ED wrote in 1853: "I am all alone, Austin. Father has gone to New York, Vinnie to Northampton, and mother is cutting out apples in the kitchen. I had forgotten *pussy*, tho'; she's sitting on the mat, looking up in my face . . ." (L116) Mrs. Dickinson delivered three children in under five years (Austin, Emily and Lavinia), the last most difficult; and then no others. As both of ED's parents were one of nine siblings, Wolff wonders if the marriage then became celibate<sup>40</sup>.

Emily Dickinson's biographers do not, of course, speak specifically about the incest-family profile. Yet Wolff, who is unimpressed by psychoanalyses of ED, says in a lengthy footnote:

One fact about Emily Dickinson's 'falling in love with her father' between the ages of perhaps four and seven must be observed, however. If any girl experiences her mother's love as insufficient . . . she will come to this period of intense, passionate feeling for her father . . . All of the evidence in Emily Dickinson's letters and poetry suggests that she turned to Edward Dickinson with tremendous needs, passions and expectations, and that *in reality* (as opposed to her idealization of him) he was utterly unable to rise to these needs."<sup>41</sup>

(A curious choice of those last words, as it is the eroticization of that father-daughter relationship that gives the desired nurturing, but at the terrible price of secrecy, shame, and impotence.)

Cody, the psychiatrist, is more direct: " . . . the father-daughter bond induced in her (ED) an inability to love any but father images, with consequent incest anxiety."<sup>42</sup>

If ED "fell in love with her father," she was also afraid of him—or so she related to Thomas Wentworth Higginson: she did not learn to read time until age 15 because she feared to tell her father his instructions were not working<sup>43</sup>. By contrast, ED said a number of dismissively cruel things about her mother (L261).

The Dickinson family shared other elements of the incest-family profile. Austin was much favored by his father, who compared his writing to "Shakespeare," (L46) but ignored Emily's. ED could play the role of



"Daddy's girl," both with her father<sup>44</sup> and with father-surrogates, as suggested by the third letter-fragment to the anonymous "Master" ("I will be your best little girl . . ." (L248)) Cody shows that ED acted "Little Mother" to Austin, in letters written between 1848 and 1854<sup>45</sup>. On much-later testimony by ED's sister Lavinia, Wolff concludes.

This was a house of isolation, a house where the independence could be maintained only if easy intimacy and spontaneous affections were sacrificed. Vinnie describes, in the end, a fortress of terrible loneliness.<sup>46</sup>

The Dickinson family was what we moderns might term,, "enmeshed." It was not just Emily who was bound to the house, but her more out-going sister was unable to separate from the precincts of the immediate family; and Austin could scarcely leave Amherst even, as it turned out, to save his life. Cody, citing Anna Freud<sup>47</sup>, tells us that excessive clinging and dependency among siblings reflects the absence or remoteness of parents. ED said it plainer: "(Lavinia) has no Father and Mother but me and I have no Parents but her." (L391)

(It may mean nothing, a common event in those days in any case, but with only two bedrooms available, the Dickinson children "were apparently bundled together," in one<sup>48</sup>; at age eleven ED complains to Austin of missing "my bedfellow very much," meaning either Austin or Lavinia—the punctuation is absent (L1).)

There is, of course, a fundamental weakness in trying to match the Dickinsons to the incest-family profile. We must remember that many of the stories about the Dickinsons and ED's life have been filtered through the memories and gossip of people not always objective; and further interpreted by biographers who wish to prove a point, myself included. Sewall ameliorates the profiles of a tyrant father, a wimpy mother, with some evidence; at the least he would not have them so caricatured. I find that Sewall tends to mute many of his characters, however. He says, for instance, that it was David Peck Todd's generosity and love for both his wife and Austin that allowed him to agree to their adultery<sup>49</sup>; in fact, and documented in Sewall's book, Todd had a seamier reason: he was himself an adulterer<sup>50</sup>, and a voyeur. Nonetheless, even Sewall observes that three generations of Dickinsons (Samuel, Edward, Austin, Emily and Lavinia) started out in adolescence and young adulthood full of enthusiasms, only to become erratic, isolated, melancholy. "There was something of the loser in this generation of Dickinsons . . ." <sup>51</sup>

#### EMILY DICKINSON'S BEHAVIOR

Let me now examine the question from the other end. Was ED's

behavior like that of an incest sufferer?

Incest, when it occurs, leaves scars and abscesses. Incest is a time-bomb, going off years to decades later; a land-mine, hidden even from the sufferer until stirred by adult crises related, psychologically, to the event itself<sup>52</sup>. Incest victims, as adults, are far more prone than others to depression, shame, and rage (expressed overtly or not). They are dependent, relying often on older men, many of whom are unavailable, aloof, or even abusive<sup>53</sup>. A paper in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, showed that 20% of women exposed to sexual abuse in childhood had psychiatric disorders, compared to 6% of a non-abused group (both groups culled from a random sample of 2000 women in New Zealand). The abused women in particular reported depression, anxiety and phobias occurring long after the event; the authors were reminded of the post-traumatic stress syndrome which notoriously recurs<sup>54</sup>.

Incest sufferers are often inappropriate in their adult sex life, and then feel inordinately sinful and isolated. Writes Herman:

Many women had developed a repertoire of sexually stylized behavior which appealed to their fathers, and it usually worked on other men too . . . Many had affairs with much older or married men in which they relived the secrecy and excitement of the incestuous relationship . . . (They) described themselves as 'different' . . . they could never be normal . . . the sense of being an outsider, cut off from normal human intercourse . . . Many women made an explicit connection between their feelings of isolation and the incest secret. Although they had been helpless as children to prevent the incest, they nevertheless felt that they had committed an unpardonable sin . . . "If the mother was obviously ill or handicapped, the patient may feel, consciously or not, that she was to blame for her mother's disability, as if the rage and hatred she felt toward her mother had magically resulted in harm. This fantasy often persists into adult life and contributes to the patient's feeling that she is too evil or dangerous to be intimately involved with other people, for she maintains an exaggerated fear of her own destructive potential."<sup>56</sup>

ED felt this way. In a letter to a friend, Jane Humphrey, in 1850:

They say you are teaching in Warren—are happy—then I know you are good—for none *but* the good are happy—you are out of the way of temptation—and out of the way of the tempter—I didn't mean to make you wicked—but I was—and shall

be—and I was with you so much, that I couldnt help contaminate. (L30)

And in an 1852 letter to her dear friend Susan Gilbert (who will become Austin's wife):

... in thinking of those I love, my reason is all gone from me, and I do fear sometimes that I must make a hospital for the hopelessly insane, and chain me up there such times, so I wont injure you. (L77)

Louise DeSalvo has written about the effect of incest on the writer Virginia Woolf ('') and notes that,

Children who have been reared in incestuous households tend, in their adulthood, to try to sexualize every relationship, because in early life the relationships within the family have been sexualized.<sup>58</sup>

ED's letters to Susan, and later to the vivid Kate Anthon, sound "homosexual" to our modern sensibility. Are they? Wolff believes the style was simply how 19th-century women friends of breeding wrote one another<sup>59</sup>. The proper comparisons, however, are with courtship letters of ED's parents—sober as a crutch; or with Susan Gilbert's apparently guarded responses to Austin's flamingly intense letters of courtship; and with the amorous exchanges between Austin and Mabel. ED's letters are definitely on the amorous end. Her adolescent friend, Abiah Root, apparently complained of it, for ED writes back, "You remarked that I had written you more affectionately than wont—" (L91). When ED's most sympathetic biographer, Sewall, was unable to decide if her letters to journalist Samuel Bowles, a married man, were pleas for professional recognition or sub-licit proposals of love, or both<sup>60</sup>, we guess ED conflated her motives as well.

I should like to give a flavor of how secret sex affects a child; not from a sufferer of incest, but one of the second generation of people affected by the Dickinson saga, Millicent Todd Bingham, who unwillingly witnessed the adulterous affair between her mother, Mabel Loomis Todd, and Austin Dickinson. Listen to the language:

I say there was no visible result in childhood. There was: the disapproval and concern expressed themselves in trying to protect mamma. Of course I didn't know what from. Nor did I ever try to find out. But she needed someone to take care of her. I

assumed the burden. It was an almost unbearable one . . . I could not tell her not to go sit in Miss Vinnie's parlor with Mr. Dickinson by the hour, not tell her not to go riding alone by the hour, nor to stay by the upstairs fire alone behind locked doors by the hour . . . But, that locked door upstairs . . . I couldn't understand that myself. That formed a very substantial part of the weight I was carrying...<sup>61</sup>

When I now examine the known facts of ED's behavior it is not to propose them as any proof of incest, but in a continuous exploration of this event as the "*something*" that happened. I liken this to finding a thread within a snarl, tracking the strand by its nodes and color, hoping that what I discover is all of a piece.

In her early adolescence ED was energetic and optimistic ("I am growing handsome very fast indeed! I expect I shall be the belle of Amherst when I reach my 17th year." (L6, in 1845)). Even then, however, a characteristic melancholy intruded, as in this letter to her friend, Abiah Root, in 1846:

The New Year's Day was unusually gloomy to me, I know not why, and perhaps for that reason a host of unpleasant reflections forced themselves upon me which I found not easy to throw off. But I will no longer sentimentalize upon the past, for I cannot recall it. (L9)

On the surface, some of her gloom was related to the relentless pressures to be "reborn," and the guilt she felt for refusing. In the mid-century Amherst was fevered with revivals; charismatic preachers exhorted the faithful and faithless: church-goers or no, all must up and declare for Christ. Eventually every Dickinson but she became Christian. In L10 to Abiah ED described her struggle:

I was almost persuaded to be a christian. I thought I never again could be thoughtless and worldly—and I can say that I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior. But I soon forgot my morning prayer or else it was irksome to me. One by one my old habits returned and I cared less for religion than ever . . . I feel that I shall never be happy without I love Christ. When I am most happy there is a sting in every enjoyment. I find no rose without a thorn. There is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world never can fill.

In L11 she told Abiah that the pressures on her to profess Christianity made her "... feel that I am sailing upon the brink of an awful precipice,

from which I cannot escape & over which I fear my tiny boat will soon glide if I do not receive help from above." Death and Immortality absorbed her. In the same letter, ED confessed that the death of her friend Sophia Holland two years earlier had left her with a "fixed melancholy." She would mourn many more young friends in the years to come.

From 1847 to 1848 Emily Dickinson spend 10 months living at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, ten miles away. She felt homesick (L18, L20 to Abiah), and cheered by the prospect of not returning when the school year was done (L22, to Austin). Her father was ready to accede: "Father wishes to have me at home a year, and then he will probably send me away again, where I know not . . ." (L23) She never returned to school, and near the end of that year had the first of many falling-outs with friends (L26).

The next two years were cheerier, but then her mother became ill. With her sister away at school, ED had to care for everyone else. ED, in tears, resisted the pleas of an anonymous suitor to go riding (L36). By 1851 her earlier optimism had eroded. Austin wrote Susan after his sisters visited him in Boston: "—Vinnie enjoyed herself, as she always does among strangers—Emily became confirmed in her opinion of the hollowness & awfulness of the *world*."<sup>62</sup> In 1853, on the day Edward Dickinson's pet project, the Amherst & Belchertown Rail Road, was completed, ED " . . . 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 how I did." (L127) In 1854 she described to Susan an attack of panic while in church (L154). It is from this time that first intimations are recorded of her later eccentricities<sup>63</sup>, and she became afraid of leaving home; here in a letter to Jane Humphrey:

I'm afraid I'm growing *selfish* in my dear home, but I do love it so, and when some pleasant friend invites me to pass a week with her, I look at my father and mother and Vinnie, and all my friends, and I say no—no, cant leave them, what if they die when I'm gone . . . (L86)

By the mid-1850s a lot had gone wrong for ED. Her mother took to bed with what may have been depression; ED's cloying relationship with Susan Gilbert went aground when Austin and Susan agreed to marry (for a while, unknown to each other, both Austin and ED were writing passionate letters to Susan); several school friends no longer answered her letters. The letters began to have a distracted diction, Ophelia-like. When the doorbell rang, she ran, "as is my custom." (L202)

Emily Dickinson started to wear white habitually in the early to mid 1860s. Joseph Lyman, a friend, wrote: "Enter a spirit clad in white, figure so draped as to be misty . . ." In another letter, he called ED "rather morbid and unnatural."<sup>64</sup> Somewhere between 1858 and 1862 she experienced some profound loss: her poetry was not understood by men she considered

mentors; there may have been a failed romance with the mysterious "Master"<sup>65</sup>. In her second letter to T.W. Higginson, April 25, 1862, she related "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—" (L261). "Singing" is ED's code for writing poetry; in those years she wrote her finest.

The terrors increased. In 1863, ED wrote to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross, that despite the heat wave, she must close her windows and shut her door at night "for fear of prowling 'booger'." Her fears " . . . gave me a snarl in the brain which don't unravel yet . . ." (L281) After two prolonged stays in Cambridge with these cousins in 1864 and 1865, for treatment of an eye condition that severely restricted her reading and writing<sup>66</sup>, she returned home, and soon after became reclusive for the rest of her life. Her letters, interestingly enough, became more tranquil, centered. It is in the 1870s that her reputation as "the Myth"<sup>67</sup> and "insane"<sup>68</sup> emerged. Her last physician, O.F. Bigelow, observed the extreme phobic nature that ruled: the only examination ED would permit was to walk past the open door of the room in which he sat<sup>69</sup>. Between 1874 and 1884 nearly every person most dear to her died. A summary judgement was offered by a young neighbor in 1891: "She was regarded by those who knew her as a strange, if not weird, creature."<sup>70</sup>

The thread I have tracked shows a young woman increasingly sad, phobic, and withdrawn, beginning as early as at age sixteen. I cannot say for certain that this intimates incest; but if such a woman came for counselling today, the responsible psychotherapist would soon explore the possibility.

It would be unfair to leave the reader with only this image. In her last two decades she consoled others despite her own tragedies; her beautiful phrases and poems eased their pain. ED's love letters to Otis Lord, after his wife's death in 1878, were sweet and clear. She became reconciled to her invalid mother (" . . . when she became our Child, the Affection came . . ." (L792)). We would say today, that healing of a sort happened.

## THE RECLUSION

Why did ED become a hermit in her own house?

The debate is polarized. Cody strongly believes that she suffered some severe and prolonged psychic injury in childhood that drove her to psychosis and reclusion in adulthood. "Her poems . . . afforded her emotional relief from her psychic pain . . . (but) possessed also an analytic and documentary function."<sup>71</sup>

Donna Dickenson maintains to the contrary, that ED *chose* withdrawal to advance her craft even if, ultimately, her behavior became stereotyped, and harmed the poetry<sup>72</sup>, because by the time of her com-



plete reclusion she had already produced two-thirds of the canon; perhaps, suggests Dickenson, ED realized she would never be published, and she was not mad but stubborn—"if the world did not recognize her, she would not recognize the world."<sup>75</sup> To accept Dickenson's view, we would have to conjure a tale of rational withdrawal, followed by irrational reclusion. This cannot be correct, on the face of it.

Sewall suggests that ED's decision to devote herself to poetry was made as early as 1850, when she was 20 years old (Austin testified that ED's reclusion began ". . . after (age) 18 or 20, gradually withdrawing herself from society."<sup>76</sup>). Letters to her friends Abiah Root and Jane Humphrey speak metaphorically of choosing a life on the open sea, rather than the safe shore, of having ". . . a golden dream with eyes all the while wide open. . .", of having ". . . one gold thread. . . the long big shining fiber which hides the others . . ."<sup>77</sup> Sewall believes the life, the dream, the gold thread stand for the vocation of poetry, one ED knew even then that she was destined to master. Poetry and reclusion were also the way to marry her own tendency to withdraw to her absolute need to rebel against the conventional evangelical pieties ("dimity convictions," p401) of her society, friends, and even family. It is a picture of a wise, however sad, choice by one who had the maturity to make it.

I can accept that ED knew she had the capacity to be a great poet; and that she held a highly original, if precocious philosophy of life. But given the emotional turmoil many of her letters betray, and those examples of erratic behavior we have, the notion of a "wise, rational choice" of reclusion is not credible. It is more economical to posit that what impelled her to withdraw was the same emotional power that, harnessed to her glorious gift with words, created her singular poetry. If one accepts this hypothesis, we are lead to the eminent psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's formulation that all work is a form of *reparation*. Faced with an inner world divided between good and bad, people try—through their work—to restore a personal sense of wholeness by restoring the outer world; the artist does this through unique creation of "instruments of Truth and Beauty"<sup>78</sup>. When the artist is gifted (and the work accessible) recipients of the art feel restored as well. (Many great artists notably fail to repair themselves, even while producing great art that consoles others.) ED was aware of the reparative nature of work (" . . . I told my Soul to sing—/She said her Strings were snap— . . . /And so to mend her—gave me work . . ." (p410)), as well as its antecedents: ". . . I work to drive the awe away, yet awe impels the work." (L891) The view of a principled, if poignant, retreat neglects one other facet of ED's character: her unbridled intensity. Most biographers comment on her intense, erotic language in letters to Susan, Austin, Kate Anthon, Samuel Bowles—the sort of intensity that might frighten a recipient; the sort of intensity that left Civil War veteran Thomas Wentworth Higginson gasping, that he had never been with

anyone ". . . who drained my nerve power so much." Biographer Sewall comments wryly, "His letters home from Southern battlefields seem relaxed in comparison."<sup>79</sup> Sewall blames this intensity on the "Dickinson Rhetoric" and the Dickinson propensity to pose—"When can we trust these Dickinsons?" asks Sewall<sup>80</sup>—but this is mere labelling, not explanation.

We hardly need testimony. What could a person be like who in an eight-year period (1858-1865) composes over one thousand poems, and hundreds of crafted letters? Imagine all those feelings and images spinning in her brain; and the continuous hum of the 4-3 beat. ED worked in spasms. About a third of her poems are fair copies neatly bound into 40 fascicles; but over 600 remain as she first composed them, raw. Millicent Todd Bingham's description of these when she opened her mother's camphor-wood chest in 1929 is too delicious to miss. Her poems were written on

. . . backs of brown-paper bags or discarded bills, programs and invitations; on tiny scraps of stationery pinned together; on leaves from old notebooks (one such sheet dated '1824'); on soiled and mildewed subscription blanks, or on department-or drug-store bargain flyers from Amherst and surrounding towns. There are pink scraps, blue and yellow scraps, one of them a wrapper of *Chocolate Meunier*; poems on the reverse of recipes in her own writing, on household shopping lists, on the cut-off margins of newspapers, and on the inside of their brown-paper wrappings . . . Emily liked best the inside of used envelopes . . . Many a detached flap, too, provided just room enough for one perfect quatrain.<sup>81</sup>

Emily Dickinson could not bring the control she had over her art to her relationships. In modern parlance, ED had trouble with boundaries. She fell passionately in love (feelings of joy, rage, physical desire, jealousy, infatuation) with several people in her lifetime, kept at safe distance by letter. She had unrealistic expectations of most of her loves, consummated none, and fell out with nearly all. She therefore had to create boundaries: for her feelings, in the compressed, incendiary language of her poems; for her behavior, by staying away from people. She understood herself; to T.W. Higginson in 1862:

Are these (poems) more orderly? I thank you for the Truth—I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize—my little Force explodes—and leaves me bare and charred—(L271)

I believe that ED's intensity and her impulse to withdraw have a com-

mon cause. Given what we know about human behavior, the cause originated early in her life; it may have been the "something" that happened. Dickinson, who of all of ED's biographers has least patience with psychodynamic explanations, identifies the formative elements of the reclusion as: poetic rejection of the external world, the death of friends, and "most of all, the frightening side of the adventure into her own hinterlands."<sup>80</sup>

## THE POETRY

It is finally the poetry that compels us to examine ED's life so minutely. Leyda says her "... poems are among the most intensely personal and yet *impersonal* on record."<sup>81</sup> They elude us so often, we burn to know if "something" happened to cause the poetry; and if the poetry reflects what happened. We want to know this much more about ED than, say, about Marianne Moore. One assumes, in such a quest, that ED wrote autobiographically, her poems a private diary, or a code whose symbols can be cross-referenced and deciphered. Opinion, of course, is irreparably divided. Dickinson says firmly that a gifted artist invents and reinvents—makes things up—and that we must absolutely distrust any attempt to link ED's poems to reality. ED's *metier* was unsolvable riddles and multi-faceted metaphors, her own reclusion included<sup>82</sup>. ED herself claimed, in a letter to Higginson, that "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person." (L268)

Some critics despair whether a coherent, single interpretation of the poems is ever possible. Heather McHugh:

... no one reading is the truest. Her poems don't *argue* the coincidence of opposites; they embody that coincidence, in acts of poised equivocation ... It makes no sense to seek the *point* of such a poem: one's work as a reader is to hold the many offered readings in mind—to be of many minds.<sup>83</sup>

This is precisely what makes ED's poetry so phenomenal, and our debates about them so contentious: each of us is her co-author. Dickinson's riddled language induces the reader to project his or her own emotions and associations onto the poem, recreating it each time; the poems now belong to us, it is our right. Yet this way of reading is needlessly nihilistic if we wish to understand what ED meant. She wrote furiously, spontaneously, close to the psychic bone. Leyda says wisely,

... no analyst of the poems can ignore (her) life, whether or not he writes of it. The tiniest scrap of biographical fact might

be the very detail needed to help grasp a cluster of associations, the missing piece in the puzzle that makes plain a series of relationships in the life that in turn reveals a major theme of continuity in the poems.<sup>84</sup>

ED's impulse toward secrecy is reined by her impulse toward revelation. The poem, therefore, must be read within the context of Emily Dickinson. Yet in the analysis of poems for clues to her life, and of her life for keys to her poetry, we face a tautologic danger: in the absence of new, external information, how to prove from the poems something we already suspect. If I believe strongly that ED was a sufferer of incest, dozens of poems will read out consistent with that belief. The closest students of ED's life and writings have, in fact, tried to show how clusters of her poems and letters are congruent and autobiographical. Says Sewall, "... Emily tended to associate certain images, or clusters of images, with specific people, experience, ideas."<sup>85</sup> If I examine these scholars' reaction, I may discover the predominant emotional themes in ED's poems and letters, and compare them to her life. What we will have, then, is a shadows-on-the-cave wall reflection of Emily Dickinson. The other analogy is the way psychotherapists use their own reaction to understand what their patients are saying. We will see that ED's life and poetry are the same.

John Cody, the psychiatrist, has constructed a story of a psychotic break (coming, he says, between 1856 and 1858, with a recurrence in 1862) around such poems as p937 ("I felt a Cleaving in my Mind—..."), p280 ("I felt a Funeral, in my Brain ... And then a Plank in Reason, broke. ..."), p410 ("The first Day's Night had come—... Could it be Madness—this?"), p341 ("After great pain, a formal feeling comes—..."), p378 ("I saw no Way—the Heavens were stitched—..."). He illustrates how other poems (ps. 341, 510, 512, 761) uncannily mirror the images of catatonia and the stages of a psychotic episode as expressed by modern-day patients with psychosis. Cody also alludes to several letters written sometime between 1858 and 1865 that seem absolutely manic (L190 to Joseph Sweetser, and L195 to the Hollands, for example), and have the feel of paranoid secrecy. In Sewall's words:

... from here on Emily's figurative language and allusions often defy precise explication. It is as if, as well may be the case, she consciously phrased letters that, should they fall into alien hands, would be all but undecipherable.<sup>86</sup> The metaphoric expression ... in the letters ... intensifies to such a degree that it becomes an almost private code.<sup>87</sup>

To Cody, the poems and letters of this period—and ED's behavior as

far as one can verify—are assuredly reminiscent of what is called, inadequately, in lay language a “nervous breakdown.”<sup>88</sup>

Cody does not believe any single trauma explain the poet and the poems, but he was the first to raise the question of incest. Writing in 1971, however, he regarded the phenomenon as a fantasy, not real. He interprets p2, embedded in the 1851 L57 to Austin (“. . . Prithee, my brother, / Into my garden come!”) as: “Emily unconsciously regards Austin as a potential lover.”<sup>89</sup> (The cadence in this early poem reminds me of verse 4:12 of the Song of Solomon: “The garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.”)

In explication of p1670, that remarkable poem about a worm turning into a snake and chasing the narrator, Cody posits that,

. . . unless her own libidinal responses were massively stimulated by her brother, thereby coming up *squarely against the incest taboo*, she would not have repressed the episode.<sup>90</sup> (Emphases mine.)

That is, Ed repressed the actual episode of an erection by nesting its image within a dream taking place in a poem. The letter ED wrote to Abiah Root in 1850 (L31) gives the psychiatrist more such material, with images of a lascivious common cold, snakes crawling about one’s shoes, a large male serpent who bites the deepest but whose bites a woman gets used to, a schoolhouse and an attorney-at-law. Cody defines them as homosexual thought defending against “heterosexual incestuous temptations” for her teacher-brother and lawyer-father<sup>91</sup>. In L281 to the cousins Norcross, where ED is terrified of intruders, Cody finds that,

Distorted memories of childhood fantasies of sex play with Austin may also have revived and escaped from the repression of her disintegrating ego. When she struggled to keep her sexual conflicts out of awareness, they came back in the disguised fantasies and fears of a sexual assault.<sup>92</sup>

Cody cross-analyzes p579 (“I had been hungry, all the Years—”) p609 (“I Years had been from Home . . .”), and p190 (“He was weak, and I was strong—then— . . .”). The poems, say Cody, equate the longing for food, for home (whose surfeit or gratification create anxiety and the impulse to flee) with sex; and they are decidedly autobiographical, whether real or fantasized:

If . . . the poems do commemorate a real event, it’s hard to escape the conclusion that the experience she found so odious and insupportable was an actual sexual encounter.<sup>93</sup>

While ED had a “strong aversion to sexuality,” her erotic, romantic attraction to both sexes, nonetheless, had “terrifying and destructive consequences.”<sup>94</sup> “Her sometime sense of fusion with Sue revived and intensified the repressed incestuous interests she once had in her brother.”<sup>95</sup> Cody dates ED’s collapse two years after Austin and Sue marry (1856), and the recurrence one year after their first child is born (1861).

Cody remarks on the several poems of that period whose dominant images are drowning, or being submerged by the sea (ps. 30, 52, 107, 162, 249, 368, 520). ED speaks of drowning even in her early letters, where the trope illustrates loss, despair, and rage. To Abiah Root, whom she accuses of faithlessness (L69), “. . . but if I drown Abiah, and go down to dwell in the seaweed forever and forever, I will not forget your name, nor all the wrong you did me!”; or in desperation to “Master” (L248), “Oh how the sailor strains, when his boat is filling . . .”

DeSalvo has pointed out how the imagery of smothering and drowning recurs in narratives of incest sufferers, and how Virginia Woolf used such imagery as well.<sup>96</sup>

Recently Maryanne Garbowsky has tried to simplify matters by proposing that ED suffered from agoraphobia, an extreme and irrational fear of being in public places or alone<sup>97</sup>. Agoraphobia is largely the self-imposed restriction that follows one or more attacks of *panic*, the fight-flight response gone haywire. A person in a panic attack has palpitations, sweating, dizziness, trembling, shortness of breath, a sense of impending death; followed by a sense of numbness and unreality. Panic attacks occur in people—more often women—somehow predisposed to them physiologically. Garbowsky’s evidence is L154 (ED’s recounting of a panic attack) and a handful of poems which, when compared to the testimony of latter-day patients with panic disorder, seem to describe literally the symptom (p281, “‘Tis so appalling—it exhilarates— . . .”; p410, “The first Day’s Night had come—”; p414, “‘Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch, . . .”; p510, “It was not Death, for I stood up, . . .”; p512, “The Soul has Bandaged moments—”; among others). Panic attacks are, however, largely associated with traumas early in life<sup>98</sup>, including incest<sup>99</sup>, <sup>100</sup>. Indeed, some of Freud’s 18 patients with “hysteria” had histories of incest and panic attacks<sup>101</sup>.

Another close reader of ED and her life is Vivian Pollak<sup>102</sup>. She calls ED, “. . . the laureate of sexual despair . . . Dickinson wishes to discover whether she is at fault or whether the fault inheres in her world . . . Dickinson’s subject is herself.”<sup>103</sup> Thus, many of ED’s poems are either memorializations of specific events; or a way to repair the pain caused by the desire for sexual experience when one fears being destroyed by it. ED perceived, says Pollak, that to feel pleasure is also to capitulate to a menacing, violent Father—God.<sup>104</sup> Emblematic of these forces is p125:



For each ecstatic instant  
We must an anguish pay  
In keen and quivering ratio  
To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour  
Sharp pittances of years—  
Bitter contested farthings—  
And coffers heaped with Tears!

Pollak identifies five thematic clusters of poems, all dated between 1859 and 1865. The clusters are neither chronologic or consistent with ED's own organization in the fascicles. It is as if a publisher-editor who knew the poet intimately chose the final ordering of work.

The first cluster provides ED's self-diagnosis. The theme is most completely expressed in p520 ("I started Early—took my Dog—/And visited the Sea—. . ."):

An inexperienced heroine ventures confidently into the world, only to discover that the world is a man and that 'His Requirement(s)' (p732) include the negation of her power over him. Unwilling to submit to his disguised yet callous demands, she withdraws from his presence. This resolution of her . . . anxieties depends on the suppression of her sexual appetites, so that her victory remains a partial one.<sup>105</sup>

Emily Dickinson celebrates in p508 both her withdrawal ("I'm ceded—I've stopped being Their's. . ."), and her new rank as poet (" . . . But this time—Adequate—Erect,/With Will to choose, or to reject,/And I choose, just a Crown—"). Yet it is a bittersweet celebration: those left only to imagine gratification may be morally superior, but are losers nonetheless (p67, "Success is counted sweetest/By those who ne'er succeed . . ."). Hunger makes fantasies of food pleasurable, but then actual satisfaction becomes painful (p579, "I had been hungry, all the Years—. . ."), or even deadly (p327, "Before I got my eye put out . . .").

A second cluster of about 90 poems, contains many sent to Susan (who actually received nearly 300 over the years). The poems are about ambivalent and painful relationships between women, especially those with an erotic charge. (See, for example, p458, " . . . Neither—would be absolved—/Neither would be a Queen/Without the Other—Therefore—/We perish—tho' We reign—"; p156, "You love me—you are sure—"; p299, "Your Riches—taught me—Poverty."; p631, "Ourselves were wed one summer—dear—"; among others.)

The third cluster, about 40 poems deals with marriage. Pollak summarizes the argument as follows:

The nature of women, as perceived by Dickinson, makes them vulnerable to men . . . In a favorite metaphor, she compares women to flowers who depend on the sun's phallic potency. Though woman's nature cannot thrive without some exposure to the sun's heat and light, constant exposure to it entails the fact or the threat of death.<sup>106</sup>

For example, in rising to "His Requirement" (p732), woman loses her capacity to play, to think independently, her sense of self—which only propagates the male role of dominance. Because ED was so obviously attracted to worldly and charismatic men, but so conflicted and unsuccessful in such relationships she attempts, through poetry, says Pollak, to invent her own marriage: "Styling herself 'The Wife—without the Sign,' (p1072) she describes . . . a marriage validated by faith alone,"<sup>107</sup> as in p322, "There came a Day at Summer's full . . . To that new Marriage/Justified—through Calvaries of Love—" But even the poetic, sacred marriage fails:

In telling the story of her unnatural devotion to a lover who persistently kills her (p925, " . . . Most—I love the Cause that slew me . . ."), Dickinson attempts to reconcile her fear of male dominance with her passion for its power. Because these attitudes toward male sexual aggression are fundamentally incompatible, eventually she views time itself as her enemy: it prolongs her sexual vulnerability and impedes her spiritual rebirth.<sup>108</sup>

What is left, then, is Death. The fourth cluster thus includes ED's classics: p712 ("Because I could not stop for Death—. . ."), p465 ("I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—. . ."), p1017 (To die—without the Dying/And live—without the Life/This is the hardest Miracle/Propounded to Belief."), p341 ("After great pain . . ."). among others. These are poems of despair, a mirror to ED's in-limbo state she does not understand, nor can justify. p443 ("I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—. . .") has the wrenching lines: "And yet—Existence—some way back—/Stopped-struck—my ticking—through—. . ." p510 ("It was not Death, for I stood up, . . .") relates a life that feels like death, but isn't, nor is it alive (" . . . But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—/Without a Chance, or Spar—/Or even a Report of Land—/To justify—Despair.") After Death, comes silence. What is left, is poetry.

The final cluster contains the poems about poetry. Poets are the ultimate Creators, comprehending the Whole ("Sun—then Summer—then the Heaven

of God—p569), so able to discern sense even from any trivial thing that they are assured an immortality (“... Exterior—to Time—” p448). Therefore, an immediate fame may even be incompatible with immortality: p709 (“Publication—is the Auction/Of the Mind of Man—”), p406 (“Some—Work for Immortality—”). ED made sure her poems survived, even as she ordered her correspondence burned.

Emily Dickinson’s most recent biographer and exegete, Cynthia Wolff, allows that we can discover events in ED’s life in order to understand the poetry, but warns against backing in from the poetry to detect events in the life<sup>109</sup>. In fact, she says that, “Only two known crises punctuated her adult life—eye trouble that became acute between 1861 and 1865 . . . and the death of her father in June 1874.”<sup>110</sup> Wolff also sees nothing intense in the letters ED wrote to Susan (“... a reflection of the current conventions for correspondence between intimate friends.”<sup>111</sup>); she calls the adultery between Austin and Mabel “entirely irrelevant” except for Todd’s role in getting ED published; and regards ED’s reclusion as unexceptional;

. . . there is no ‘tragedy’ sufficient to account for the force of the verse, and her daily existence was so simple that even the usual rages and passions of ordinary life seem to have been largely excluded from it.<sup>112</sup>

With this remarkably reductionist view one would think that Wolff would not be drawn to *any* psycho-sexual themes in the poems, much less intimations of incest. Despite herself, Wolff is susceptible to the raw images in ED’s poetry. Wolff comments on p1705 (“Volcanoes be in Sicily . . . /Vesuvius at Home.”) that, “domestic brutality is the most ancient of crimes . . .”<sup>113</sup>; on p280 (“I felt a Funeral, in my Brain, . . .”), Wolff says, “the surroundings flood into consciousness with a force like that of sexual violation;”<sup>114</sup> Wolff calls p303 (“... the Chariots—pausing—at her low Gate— . . .”) “explicitly sexual,”<sup>115</sup>; and p315 (“He fumbles at your Soul . . .”) suggests “sexual molestation.”<sup>116</sup> There are other examples.

Wolff does not just limn the sensational, but shows that in ED’s universe it is none other but God who seduces, rapes, and violates. God, in ED’s poems, is a doltish sadist, some icy freak who fondles the female Soul (p512) with, “such a perverse mixture of orgasmic delight and fatal loss.”<sup>117</sup> This God experiments on humans, p414, and dissects larks to find out where the music comes from, p861. He (or his Son) wrings the believer with anguish, p497, and stabs even while the supplicant sues for “... His sweet forgiveness— . . .” Who is this God? He is “Burglar! Banker-Father!”, p49<sup>118</sup>. He seduces, and then rewards with Death. Wolff points out more than once that in ED’s code, taken from the Shakespeare, Death is equivalent to sexual climax<sup>119</sup>. To worship this God is to succumb

to rape; therefore, this God must be impeached for his perfidy, his cruel and phallic fury. In her poetry, ED finds Him guilty.

Wolff fails to understand that the “usual rages and passions,” were absent from ED’s daily life (not quite correct) because she poured them into her poetry; she could be sweet and murderous at the same time. Wolff spins an elaborate theory about her mother’s failure to make eye contact with infant ED (based on clusters of letters<sup>120</sup> and poems<sup>121</sup> whose tropes are the eye, seeing, face, and the phonemes eye/I), but Wolff is peculiarly blind to the psychic origins of ED’s poetic rage against the phallic God.

Richard Sewall altogether rejects the profile of a poet-in-rage. His is the adult artist, completed and in control. Sewall emphasizes ED’s profound and utterly modern ability to use her own soul and its terrors as the marble from which to carve out an existential primer: to teach those of us stuck in mundane ways that the whole human cycle is at once terrifying, inexplicable, beautiful, lonely, evanescent, triumphant. He likens her to “The Poet of Job . . .”<sup>122</sup> ED, says Sewall, has discovered that sublime and terrifying message too dazzling not to be told slant, that Love, Poetry, God, and Immortality are congeneric (“coeval,” says ED in p1247); and that ED herself, angel-like, confers on us the blessing of this message—even in the face of doubt about the Other Side, despite the anguish at the loss of this side. “Let us love better, children, it’s most that’s left to do.” (L255)

This gentled portrait is given by the biographer least happy with the dark stereotypes of the Dickinson family, and one who never dwells on sexual imagery in the poems<sup>123</sup>. Nor does he countenance any but a buoyant view of ED’s childhood. In his reading of p637 (“The Child’s faith is new— . . .”) he says in exasperation, “How this poem could have come out of a blighted childhood is hard to see.”<sup>124</sup> Yet ED’s letter to Austin in 1853, missing him terribly, reveals something else:

I wish we were children now. I wish we were *always* children,  
how to grow up I dont know (L115).

This is decidedly not testimony to a happy childhood which prepares one for a happy adulthood, but the lament of one wishing to return to some prelapsarian state. ED’s unrequited intensities, her rage, her gradual withdrawal were echoes of something in childhood. The themes recur throughout her poetry, most intensely in the poems and letters written between 1858 and 1865. Thereafter the spate subsided; some kind of healing occurred, but the scars show:

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. (p1601, c. 1884)

I am persuaded that ED's poetry and letters do tell us something of her inner life and—by inference—its possible antecedents. The themes and images of sexual violation, brutality, shame, guilt, rage, rebellion against a seducing and rapist God, mental and physical disintegration—are all *consistent* with what a person who suffered incest might express; a person who learned early that, "Shame is so intrinsic in a strong affection . . ." (L318), yet one who came to understand herself, within and through her poetry, and turned to console us.

#### NEW EVIDENCE

Nothing I have said, it must be emphasized, constitutes proof; but a sound hypothesis is one that stimulates thought and new research. I should like, therefore, to offer a new finding.

Lady Georgiana Fullerton wrote gothic romances in the mid-19th century. Austin read her "Grantley Manor" (draft letter to Susan in 1851: "You ask what I read . . . Bachelor's Reveries—Dana's Prose & Poems—The Bible—'Grantley Manor,' . . .<sup>125</sup>), and probably "Ellen Middleton" (ED to Austin: "I have read 'Ellen Middleton' and now Mat has it. I needn't tell you I like it, nor need I tell you more, for you know already." (L90)). Austin also read Fullerton's novel, "Lady-Bird", and he writes to Susan about it in 1853:

The first thing that comes to me after this beautiful evening & that bright moon is the question with which you began your last letter—"Why dear Austin have you always said dont read 'Lady Bird'?" Well Sue just for the same reason that if a dish of fair very fair fruit were set before us—& I had eaten of it & found a foul worm lying concealed beneath its tempting skin—I should say it isnt good—dont eat it Sue . . . I am glad youve satisfied your curiosity & read it Sue—if it hasnt hurt you & if you are just as well for it—for now you know just what it is, & just what—in a very mild, kind way I was rather trying to keep from you—& you know now it was from no sinister motive—It seemed to me an unhealthy book—An oppressive, disease laden atmosphere seemed to me to exhale from it's every page—I saw only sad sights and heard only sad sounds as I

went through it—"twas like walking underneath a church-yard to me and meeting souls there not yet freed from their earthly bodies—awake to their awful state—but with no means of relieving themselves & listening to their wailings and groanings—&gazing upon their looks of despair. 'Twas to me a story full of only wretchedness & misery—of infinite wrong & of inexpressible injury—of days of terror—nights of wo—of brightest hopes blasted—of mortal lives wasted—of true hearts separated—of human souls destroyed. 'Twas a story of deeper suffering than many ever know—that it's best [not] *any should* know till they are obliged to . . .<sup>126</sup>

I have obtained an original edition of this book<sup>127</sup>, to see what exercised Austin so. "Lady-Bird" is about three children who play together and grow up in life. Gertrude Lifford ("Lady-Bird") is manor-born, Lifford Grange. Her father is authoritarian and cruel, her mother paralyzed. Mary Grey and Maurice Redmond are stepsister and stepbrother, raised in a cottage by Mary's widowed mother. Mary and Maurice love each other and promise to marry; Maurice, however, decides to study music in Italy, and Mary breaks off the engagement. To save Gertrude from an arranged marriage, Maurice elopes with her (even though she loves yet another, saintlier man, but that one is not to be). Maurice dies in a shipwreck, leaving Gertrude with their son. She serves the poor, Mary becomes a nun, and Gertrude eventually returns to the manor where she is reconciled to her to father, now contrite and kind. The last lines of the book: ". . . and since that time there have been flowers in the gardens, and happiness within the walls of the old house of Lifford Grange."

Where is Austin's worm? Perhaps in the letter Mary writes to Maurice:

DEAREST MAURICE: I have been often wishing to say what I now write . . . but now my mind is made up, and writing will be easier than speaking. I think you must guess what I am about to say—you must give up the idea of marrying me. It has all been a mistake from the beginning. We have loved each other dearly—how dearly God only knows, and I love you, if possible, more than ever. But I feel now that it does not answer for two persons who have been brought up together from infancy and lived like brother and sister to fancy, when grown up, that they love each other in a different way. I believe it is the mistake we made upon this point that has caused your misery.<sup>128</sup>

#### ECHOES

Suppose, now, that a memoir is found: behind some brick, beneath some hearth, somewhere in Amherst. The handwriting is difficult to read,



but it is familiar. The memoir has been given a title, by some other hand: "A Bandaged Secret." And in it is the following passage, a reminiscence about childhood, and about the author's father, or perhaps brother (only the last four letters are clear):

... as I sat there he began to explore my body. I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled his hand approached my private parts. But it did not stop. His hand explored my private parts too.

In fact, this passage comes from Virginia Woolf's memoir, "A Sketch of the Past."<sup>129</sup> Louise DeSalvo has detailed the impact of incest on Woolf, her "insanities," her suicide. She documents the extent to which Woolf's family matched the incest-family profile; how Woolf bravely tried to make known her story of incest—at the hands of her half-brothers—in her letters, her fiction, her diary, her conversations, her memoir; and the horrible extent to which her story is *still* disbelieved. A 1984 biographer, Lyndall Gordon, insisted that Virginia Woolf was brought up, "bathed in a protective love."<sup>130</sup> Recently, Quentin Bell—Woolf's nephew—tried again, in a review of DeSalvo's book, to mitigate the episodes:

I had written a biography of Virginia Woolf in which I had revealed that she and her sister Vanessa had been the victims of their half brother George Duckworth, who, perhaps half unconsciously, had been guilty of sexual harassment . . . Now if Professor DeSalvo had gone further, if she had been able to provide the kind of evidence of rape by George or Gerald Duckworth that would justify specific charges in a court of law, than perhaps she might have invited threats from some quarter, but I cannot see that she has done this, or proved this beyond all reasonable doubt . . . The case against the Duckworth brothers stands where it did. George carried his demonstrations of 'fraternal affection' to a point at which they became offensive to his half sisters; but how much further he went one cannot tell.<sup>131</sup>

The point is that *Virginia Woolf* told how far they went. No one listened. When even she began to doubt her own memories and evidence, she committed suicide.

As I read DeSalvo's book, late in my research, I came to understand why I had been so drawn to the hidden, forever unknowable story of Emily Dickinson. It was not just to discover the solution to the riddle called Emily Dickinson—no one shall, I have only made another guess at

it and will continue guessing<sup>132</sup>. Nor to provide a fresh way to read her poetry—others have done this already even if they did not actually diagnose incest. It had as much to do with understanding myself. I have learned that, as with any holocaust, the story of incest must be told, told completely, told honestly, and not at all slant. If the truth comes easier, the sufferers of incest—today's, tomorrow's—may gain the courage to face their pain, perhaps even find healing and peace. When we acknowledge incest we will understand what allows it to occur, and how it may be prevented.

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 (p441)

*Norbert Hirschhorn is a public health physician, specializing in child health in third world countries. He is also a poet.*

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. All poems by Emily Dickinson cited here follow the numbering scheme of T.H. Johnson's, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Little Brown and Co., Boston, 1960. I use the fourth quatrain of poem 1737 as an emblem, and do not imply any confession by Emily Dickinson.
2. Robert Craft, *Amorous in Amherst*, *The New York Review of Books*, pp.18-21, April 23, 1987.
3. Polly Longworth, *Austin and Mabel: The Amherst Affair & Love Letters of Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1984.
4. Craft, p. 20.
5. Judith Lewis Herman (with Lisa Hirschman), *Father-Daughter Incest*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1981.
6. Herman, p. 70.
7. Herman, p. 71
8. Herman, p. 75
9. Jean Renvoize, *Incest. A Family Pattern*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1986
10. Renvoize, p. 103.
11. John Crewsdon, *By Silence Betrayed. Sexual Abuse of Children in America*. Little Brown and Co., Boston, 1988.

12. Crewsdon, pp. 197-198.
13. Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston 1880-1960*. Viking, New York, 1988.
14. Herman, p. 177.
15. Crewsdon, chapter 2.
16. John M. Leventhal, *Have There Been Changes in the Epidemiology of Sexual Abuse of Children During the 20th Century?* Pediatrics, vol. 82, 766-773, 1988.
17. Lloyd deMause, *Schreber and the History of Childhood*. The Journal of Psychohistory, vol. 15, pp. 423-430, 1987.
18. Herman, p. 7.
19. John Cody, *After Great Pain. The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson*. Belknap Press, Cambridge, 1971.
20. Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*. (Two Volumes) Archon Press, Hamden, 1970, reprint. Vol. 2, p. 257.
21. Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1987.
22. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1987.
23. Wolff, p. 21.
24. Vivian R. Pollak, *A Poet's Parents. The Courtship Letters of Emily Norcross and Edward Dickinson*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1988.
25. Cody, p. 59.
26. Pollak, L33, L41, L48.
27. Leyda, vol. 1, p. 25, p. 199.
28. Leyda, vol. 1, pp. 225-256
29. Sewall, p. 66.
30. Pollak, L22.
31. Leyda, vol. 1, pp. 56, 58.
32. Leyda, vol. 1, p. 30, p. 86.
33. All of Emily Dickinson's letters cited here are numbered according to Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, editors of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Belknap Press Cambridge. 1958.
34. Sewall, p. 63.
35. Cody, pp. 86-87.
36. Leyda, vol. 1, p. 42.
37. Leyda, vol. 1, p. 48.
38. Pollak, pp. xi, xviii-xix; L71, among others.
39. Leyda, vol. 1, p. 81.
40. Wolff, p. 59.
41. Wolff, p. 554.
42. Cody, p. 102.
43. Leyda, vol. 1, p. 96.
44. Pollak, p. xxxv.
45. Cody, pp. 155-165.
46. Wolff, p. 44.
47. Cody, p. 445.
48. Sewall, p. 322.
49. Sewall, pp. 179-180.
50. Sewall, p. 295.
51. Sewall, p. 152.
52. Sylvia Fraser, *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing*. Ticknor and Fields, New York, 1988.
53. Herman, p. 34.
54. Paul E. Mullen, *et al, Impact of Sexual and Physical Abuse on Women's Mental*

- Health. The Lancet, vol. 1 pp. 841-845, 1988.
55. Herman, pp. 96-103.
56. Herman, p. 141.
57. Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf, The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1989.
58. DeSalvo, p. 84.
59. Wolff, p. 570.
60. Sewall, p. 473.
61. Sewall, pp. 298-299.
62. Leyda, vol. 1, p. 213.
63. Leyda, vol. 1, pp. 301-302.
64. Sewall, pp. 425-426.
65. Sewall, chapters 21, 22.
66. Martin Wand and Richard B. Sewall, "Eyes Be Blind, Heart Be Still.": A New Perspective on Emily Dickinson's Eye Problem. New England Quarterly, vol. 52, pp. 400-406, 1979. Gaps in Dickinson chronicles may be just gaps, or may be momentous; no evidence exists that anyone from Amherst ever came to visit ED but two young cousins staying with Austin and Sue. Cody believes ED was being treated for depression (Cody, p. 416).
67. Longworth, p. 3.
68. Sewall, p. 566.
69. Leyda, vol. 1, p. xxix.
70. Leyda, vol. 2, p. 114.
71. Cody, pp. 6-11.
72. Donna Dickenson, *Emily Dickinson*. Berg, Leamington Spa, 1985.
73. Dickenson, p. 81.
74. Sewall, p. 222.
75. Sewall, p. 388, p. 395
76. Larry Hirschhorn, *The Workplace Within. Psychodynamics of Organizational Life*. MIT Press, Cambridge, 1988.
77. Sewall, p. 563.
78. Sewall, p. 236.
79. Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham, editors, *Bolts of Melody. New Poems by Emily Dickinson*. Harper & Row, New York, 1945.
80. Dickenson, p. 82.
81. Leyda, vol. 1, p. xx.
82. Dickenson, chapter 3.
83. Heather McHugh, *Interpretive Insecurity and Poetic Truth: Dickinson's Equivocation*. The American Poetry Review, vol. 17, pp. 49-54, 1988.
84. Leyda, vol. 1 p. xix.
85. Sewall, p. 209
86. Sewall, p. 481
87. Sewall, p. 463
88. T.H. Johnson, on page 808 of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, calls ED's fainting episode of June 1884 a "nervous breakdown." The "terrible pain in the back of her head," after nephew Gilbert's death in 1883 (report of a neighbor, Sewall, pp. 146-147), subsequent fainting episodes, and the final diagnosis of Bright's Disease (chronic renal disease and hypertension) make hypertensive crisis the more likely explanation for the 1884 event. Cody is, however, talking about a psychotic episode.
89. Cody, p. 179.
90. Cody, p. 181.
91. Cody, p. 178.
92. Cody, p. 388.

93. Cody, p. 143.
94. Cody, p. 150.
95. Cody, p. 206.
96. DeSalvo, p. 259.
97. Maryanne M. Garbowsky, *The House without the Door. A Study of Emily Dickinson and the Illness of Agoraphobia*. Fairleigh Dickinson University, Rutherford, 1989.
98. Carlo Faravelli, Tim Webb, Alessandra Ambonetti, Fabrizia Fonnesu, Antonella Sessarego, *Prevalence of Traumatic Early Life Events in 31 Agoraphobic Patients with Panic Attacks*. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 142, pp. 1493-1494, 1985.
99. Denise J. Gelinas, *The Persisting Negative Effects of Incest*. *Psychiatry*, vol. 46, pp. 312-322, 1983.
100. Joseph M. Hyland, Alfredo Namnum, William S. Simpson, *Contrasting Approaches to the Treatment of Anxiety Disorders*. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, vol. 50, pp. 573-582, 1986.
101. James Strachey, editor, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Hogarth Press, London, 1955: Volume 2, "Studies on Hysteria," (with Josef Breuer); Volume 3, "Further Remarks on the Neuropsychoses of Defence;" and "The Aetiology of Hysteria;" Volume 7, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria."
102. Vivian R. Pollak, *Dickinson. The Anxiety of Gender*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1984.
103. Pollak, p. 9, p. 20.
104. Pollak, chapter 4.
105. Pollak, p. 115.
106. Pollak, pp. 159-160.
107. Pollak, p. 165.
108. Pollak, p. 187.
109. Wolff, p. 140.
110. Wolff, p. 140. My readings of Leyda and Sewall, however, do not indicate any problem with ED's eyes until 1864.
111. Wolff, p. 111, p. 570.
112. Wolff, p. 164.
113. Wolff, p. 185.
114. Wolff, p. 228.
115. Wolff, p. 199.
116. Wolff, pp. 280-281.
117. Wolff, p. 353.
118. Wolff, p. 361.
119. Wolff, p. 206, pp. 274-276.
120. Wolff, pp. 52-57.
121. Wolff, p. 226.
122. Sewall, pp. 719-720.
123. Of p249, "Wild Nights - Wild Nights!" Sewall writes: "This (poem) has been variously interpreted as religious or erotic. It may be both. But its central tensions . . . may go back emotionally to such relatively simple origins as . . . loneliness and longing for her friends during a bad spell of early spring weather." (Sewall, p. 431.) Of p2 (" . . . into my garden come!") written to Austin, Sewall says, " . . . she became the pastoral poet, with a touch of the lover." (Sewall, p. 434.)
124. Sewall, p. 333-334.
125. Leyda, vol. 1, p. 218.
126. Leyda, vol. 1, p. 275.
127. Lady Georgiana Fullerton, *Lady-Bird. A Tale*. D. Appleton and Company, New

York, 1853. "Grantley Manor" and "Ellen Middleton" have been reprinted by Garland Publishing Co., New York, 1975, two in a large series of Victorian novels. "Grantley Manor" is innocuous. "Ellen Middleton" is the deathbed confession of a young woman who, as a child, accidentally killed her cousin, and keeps it a shameful secret; two witnesses, however, bind her and themselves in emotional blackmail, destroying all their lives. ED wrote to Susan about the novel, "You and I will have an hour with 'Edward' and 'Ellen Middleton,'" sometime when you get home—we must find out if some things contained therein are true, and if they are, what you and me are coming to!" (L94)

128. Fullerton, p. 194.
129. DeSalvo, p. 104.
130. DeSalvo, p. 2.
131. Quentin Bell, *Who's Afraid for Virginia Woolf?* *New York Review of Books*, March 15, 1990, pp. 3-6.
132. Millicent Todd Bingham could never understand what prompted Lavinia Dickinson to turn against Mabel Loomis Todd in the Dickinson-Todd law suit, after Austin's death; even to perjure herself, siding instead with the hated Susan Dickinson. Mrs. Todd had, after all, helped immortalize Lavinia's adored sister. Did Susan hold "a sword over Vinnie's head, ready to let it drop if she did *not* get that land back?" (Sewall, p. 260—letter of Mary Lee Hall to Millicent Todd Bingham, 1934.) Could it have been some final Dickinson secret?