

Chapter & Verse

James Knox Whittet

March 2015

Towards Eternity: Emily Dickinson (1830 - 1886)

Emily Dickinson was born into an affluent family in Amherst, Massachusetts. She was a student at Amherst Academy for seven years and then spent a short time at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary before returning to her family home which she rarely left for the rest of her life. She never married and her deepest relationships were almost entirely conducted through thousands of letters. One of her last requests was that most of those letters be burnt. As she grew older, she became more and more reclusive. Various explanations, more or less inadequate, have been put forward as to why she came to shun the outer world, some have speculated that she suffered from epilepsy others that she was agoraphobic. Whatever the reason, her seclusion allowed her to experience the world with a deeper intensity.

Although Emily was an extremely prolific poet (almost 1,800 poems were discovered after her death) less than a dozen of her poems were published in her lifetime and these were published anonymously. It wasn't until some four years after her death that a first collection of her poems was published and the poems were extensively edited to suit the poetic conventions of the time.

It was almost seventy years after

her death that her collected poems were published largely unaltered.

Emily was greatly inspired by her reading of Shakespeare, Wordsworth and the Brontë sisters; her beloved dog, Carlo was named after a dog in *Jane Eyre*. However, the most profound literary and spiritual influence in her life was the Bible. In her teens, she wrote that her *greatest pleasure was to commune alone with the great God and feel that He would listen to my prayers*. For Emily, as for Kafka, writing was itself a form of prayer. Many of her poems are in the form of hymns and psalms or childlike ballads with the second and fourth lines rhyming in each quatrain. There is a breathless quality about her verse, conventional punctuation gives way to the dash. She did not give a title to any of her poems. Like the writers of the psalms, her relationship with God is often questioning, complaining and rebellious. If she was, as she often portrayed herself, the Bride of Christ, who later came to dress in white, it was a rather turbulent marriage.

Emily lived close to a graveyard, many of her closest friends died young and she lived through the slaughter of the American Civil War. She became increasingly obsessed with death and she would have echoed the words of Virginia Woolf that *death is woven in amongst the violets*.

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 -

It's this acute awareness of life's brevity that gives her the extraordinary ability to experience each moment as if it was her last. She distils the nectar of whatever beauty she perceives in nature: the flight of birds, she wrote of herself *I am small, like the wren*, a sunset, the delicacy of flowers. She had an overwhelming passion for flowers, particularly wild flowers. In one of her most revealing poems, she wonders if life was briefer still, perhaps lasting only a day, our full consciousness of the wonder and beauty of creation be too much for human reason to withstand.

Did life's penurious length
 Italicize its sweetness,
 The men that daily live
 Would stand so deep in joy
 That it would clog the cogs
 Of that revolving reason
 Whose esoteric belt
 Protects our sanity.

After his only meeting with Emily, the literary critic, Thomas Wentworth Higginson provided a rare description of Emily:

. . . a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair ... in a very plain & exquisitely clean white pique & a blue net worsted shawl . . . I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her.



Emily as a teenager

Emily who *drew* so much from the confined world in which she lived, died in the spring of 1886, aged 55.

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

Her body was placed in a white coffin surrounded by her beloved flowers. In what is thought to be her last letter, she wrote of being *called back*. Her coffin was carried shoulder high through field after field of buttercups to the family burial plot. There was a reading of her favourite poem, Emily Brontë's *No Coward Soul Is Mine*.

She had so often imagined herself dead but in her poems her dead are rarely still, they undertake a voyage deeper and deeper into the heart of the mystery.

Although she had many doubts and inner struggles in her life, she held on to the unshakable conviction that death is far from being the end as the opening lines of this poem make clear:

This World is not Conclusion.
 A Species stands beyond -
 Invisible, as Music -
 But positive, as Sound -
 It beckons, and it baffles -
 Philosophy; don't know -
 And through a Riddle, at the last -
 Sagacity, must go -

Desert Island Poems
 features

Terry Waite CBE
 interviewed by

Lord Phillips of Sudbury

**Friends Meeting House, St
 Johns Street, Bury St
 Edmunds, IP33 1SJ**

10 April at 19:30 - 21:30

This fascinating evening will see Terry's choice of poems being read by members of SPS. There will also be piano music by Matt Carter to break the conversation and set the atmosphere.



This is a ticketed event - £6.00
 for SPS members and £7.50 for
 non-members.