Emily's lists

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Helen Vendler
DICKINSON
Selected poems and commentaries
560pp. Harvard University Press. £25.95 (US $35).
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Judy Jo Small
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Emily Dickinson's rhyme
280pp. University of Georgia Press. $24.95;
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Jane Donahue Eberwein and Cindy MacKenzie, editors
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Robin Peel
EMILY DICKINSON AND THE HILL OF SCIENCE
435pp. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. $65;
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£82.50.
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Victoria N. Morgan
EMILY DICKINSON AND HYMN CULTURE
Tradition and experience
246pp. Ashgate. £55 (US $99.95).
978 0 7546 6942 5

At least four Broadway-produced plays, five novels, 186 published poems, two children's books, and a Simon and Garfunkel song ("For Emily, Wherever I May Find Her") are about Emily Dickinson, usually portraying her as a spinster, a madwoman, a helpless agoraphobic, always in white, hiding away in the upper rooms of her New England home, shunning publication as she did society. "The Soul selects her own Society –", she wrote, "Then – shuts the Door –". Only one confirmed photograph of Dickinson exists, a daguerreotype showing her at about seventeen, posed and dark, with serious, wide-set eyes. Her life, or what we know of it, has been reconstructed by scholars and writers through her surviving, posthumously published letters (1,049 of them) and poems (almost 1,800), some of the greatest written in English; yet Dickinson herself warned "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person". Still, many scholars insist on examining her literary remains in a relentless pursuit of the writer herself. For example: was she descending into madness when she wrote "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" – or was she, as some suggest, suffering from a migraine?

Helen Vendler's *Dickinson: Selected poems and commentaries* actually focuses on the poems. "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" is indeed an account of a mental breakdown, Vendler writes, "indistinguishable from death because it so obliterates consciousness", but the experience belongs to Dickinson the "Representative" speaker, not Dickinson the poet. Here, "Dickinson" is a spectator at her own funeral in some obscure mental place, complete with "Mourners" treading "to and fro":

> 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 . . . .

Vendler uses the word "Dickinson" throughout her commentaries for "the poet" and "the speaker" but trusts us to understand which "Dickinson" she means. Hers is a technique that emphasizes the poet's own: Dickinson consistently used "I" over "she", a deliberate strategy resulting in such immediacy that many readers – even established scholars – form a diagnosis for the poet from her speaker's described experiences (madness, migraines, epileptic fits?) and forget about the intricate artifice of the poems. Dickinson revealed in a letter that her ideal reader is one who "permits a comfortable intimacy and yet lets the innermost Me remain behind its veil". Vendler is that reader.

In a typical example of Vendler's critical approach, she tallies twelve "and"s in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain", in addition to connecting words and phrases such as "then", "began to toll", etc, culminating in her description of it as "a single-sentence paratactic narrative", in which the repetitions create an impression of "attack after attack on 'Reason'". Dickinson, she notes, initially wrote "Brain" at the end of the tenth line, then bracketed it, and replaced it with "Soul". "Corporeal madness seems indubitably a disease of the brain – yet how do we represent not a physical disease but a spiritual illness?".

This new book is as meticulous as Vendler's commentary on Shakespeare's sonnets (1997). As well as their mysterious inner lives, these are poets who share an ability to compress the maximum force into the fewest words. In Dickinson's case, her manuscripts show that she left behind multiple variations on words and phrases, sometimes as many as a dozen, without any indication of favouring one over the others. She claimed that her closest companion was her lexicon.

Some time in 1858, Dickinson began gathering her poems into handwritten copies, several poems on a page, loosely bound with looped thread to make them into small packets, forty in all, which she then stored in an ebony box. Only five poems can be dated from before 1858. By 1860, she had written more than 150. In her most productive period (a span of five years), Dickinson composed at least 800, resorting to the scrap of an envelope or the back of a chocolate wrapper to record a few lines. By then she was taking what she called her "Northwest passage", one of five exits at the back of her home, leading to her bedroom, to avoid social calls. At the same time, she was an energetic correspondent. For her, letter-writing was "visiting".

The man she most famously "visited", from 1862 onwards, was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a literary critic, celebrated abolitionist, clergyman and proponent of women's rights. She knew him only through his essays in the *Atlantic Monthly*, but he became her mentor and, in her words, her "preceptor" and "safest friend". "Mr. Higginson", she began one letter, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?". They met only twice, the first time in 1870, at her urging. Higginson told his wife, "I was never with anyone who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her". To Higginson and almost 100 others, Dickinson enclosed poems with letters, embedded them in the text of the letters themselves, or sent them as complete letters in themselves, framed by salutation and signature. "A Letter always feels to me like immortality", she wrote, "because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend." After Dickinson's death, her sister Lavinia kept her promise to her, and burned most of her sister's correspondence. Lavinia then happened on the locked-away poems and immediately regretted what she had done. Dickinson had left no instructions about her poem; Higginson, who had had his doubts about the protégée whom he had once described as "my partially cracked poetess", published them with the help of Dickinson's brother's mistress – but not without first amending many of her rhymes.

"Uncertainty about the value of those rhymes has lingered ever since", Judy Jo Small writes in *Positive as Sound*: "no consensus has been reached on the question of whether her rhymes constitute a serious defect, an eccentric quirk, or a major accomplishment". No matter how dryly technical it may sound, a study of Dickinson's use of rhyme is therefore altogether necessary to an understanding of her poetry. In *Positive as Sound*, a study reprinted last year, twenty years after its first publication, Small investigates how Dickinson's rhymes relate to her sense. The movement from partial to full rhyme, for example, can support a progression from complexity to affirmation. Dickinson experimented with various kinds of rhyme and sometimes skipped rhyme altogether. When Higginson suggested that she moderate these tendencies to make her poems more palatable to public taste, she politely refused: "I could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled my Tramp". Small approaches two of Dickinson's poems seemingly identical in theme to illustrate the difficulty one faces when searching for correlations between meaning and sound in the poetry: "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" and "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind". Small explains how the pattern of rhyme in the first poem coordinates with the meaning: "The conventional 'correctness' of the rhymes in the middle of the poem contrasts with the oddness of the rhymes in the framing stanzas, which parallel the speaker's initial disorientation and the ultimate failure of his or her desperate attempt at formal control". She then examines "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind", another likely description of mental breakdown. Unlike the previous poem, this one contains only full rhymes; there is no disruption of form to give the effect of madness. "If form and content should be compatible, then either the poem is seriously flawed or the apparently conflicting sound and sense do in fact work together in some complex way", Small writes:

> Perhaps the poem is a wry commentary on the way one can hold externals under maniacal control while one's inner self is crumbling? . . . Or perhaps we are meant to feel the artistic mastery (if that is what it is) as a liberating anodyne to the psychic distress so that the two are poised in delicate balance? . . . Or, maybe the poem is a Dickinsonian joke, a parody ridiculing conventional verse technique for its absurd unfittedness to this kind of theme . . . .

Small supports her analysis with examples from Dickinson's letters that address the poet's love of paradox and her lexicon, or relate her approach to craft.

The essays in *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters*, edited by Cindy MacKenzie and Jane Donahue Eberwein, argue that Dickinson's letters can be read as poems, both for their poetic language and the way Dickinson offers in them "oblique directives on how to 'read' a poem". The poet deliberately recedes into the background, more often revealing, instead of herself, her self-awareness as a writer. MacKenzie cites Dickinson's letters to Higginson as the most convincing evidence. His poetess adopted a "veil of coy and sometimes defensive posturing" when she wrote to him; "without friends and family, she could expect content and context of letters to overwhelm poetics, but with Higginson, more than any other correspondent, she presumably thought deeply about how he was reading her and about what the impact of his reading might have on her poetry". Her adherence to her unique formal methods, shown in her refusals to follow his critical advice (such as his suggestion that she adjust her unconventional rhyme), "underlines the degree to which she believed in herself as a poet and, by the time of her queries, in her singular poetic method". Dickinson remained reticent, even with him, on the subject of her own life. In 1885, one year before her death, she told him, "Biography first convinces us of the fleeting of the Biographied". She remained to him, MacKenzie writes, "the embodiment of evanescence".

MacKenzie and Eberwein's book also helps to correct the impression that Dickinson was an absolute recluse. To read the letters is to discover some flexibility in her literary and social persona. Dickinson's correspondence may even have encouraged her poetic production, providing her with an audience and thus preventing physical isolation from becoming a burden. Stephanie A. Tingley explains that because Dickinson's mother and sister were often too busy to write, it was left to Emily to write letters of congratulation on births and marriages, thank-you notes, and expressions of condolence on behalf of the family. She sent flowers from the garden with witty notes, gifts from the kitchen and short poems, at least 500, over the course of her lifetime. These were private visits. She instructed her brother Austin not to share his letters from her with anyone.

In *Emily Dickinson and the Hill of Science*, Robin Peel explores how her poems reveal the influence of nineteenth-century scientific culture, such as palaeontology and the botanical classification of flowers, but moves beyond Dickinson's scientific language and imagery to consider the scientific progression of her poems. He reads Dickinson alongside

the popular science journals and newspapers of the day, material that he believes Dickinson might have read, but her familiarity with science becomes more convincing when he examines the textbooks used in the schools she attended, such as Amherst Academy, where the study of science was a particular strength. The Academy offered its students regular opportunities to visit Amherst College, where the principal subjects were astronomy, botany, chemistry, geology, mathematics, natural history, natural philosophy, and zoology. When Dickinson was seventeen, she wrote to Austin:

> I finished my examination in Euclid last eve & without a failure at any time . . . . I had almost forgotten to tell you what my studies are now . . . . They are Chemistry, Physiology, & quarter course in Algebra. I have completed four studies already & am getting along well.

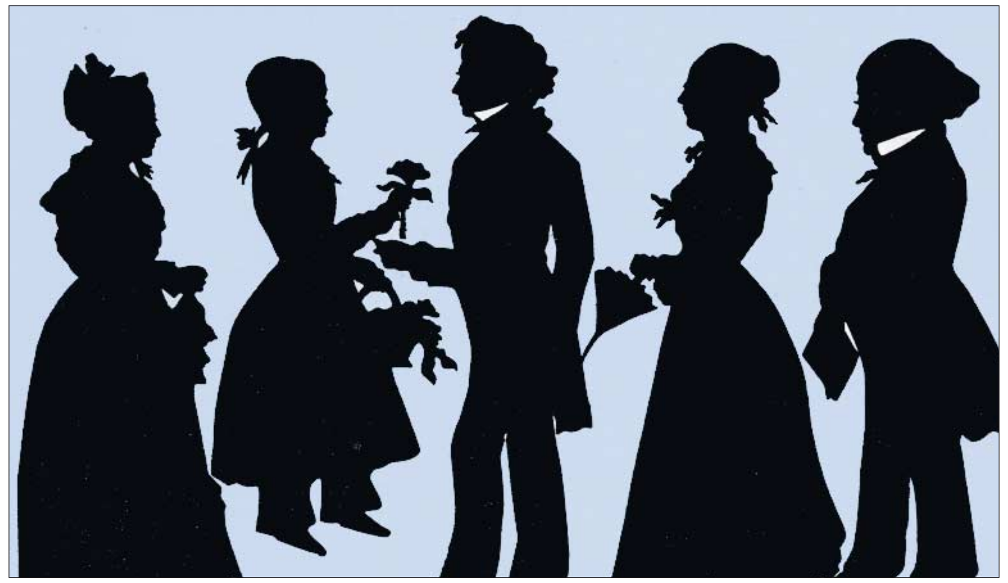
Peel shows science's influence with convincing evidence, but also defends his belief with a simple, logical argument: "You do not have to be interested in a subject to be influenced by it". In 1848, though, near the end of her formal schooling, Dickinson seems to have been interested enough. Even at an early age, she found herself drawn to the natural sciences, encouraging a friend to join her in a school assignment: "Have you made an herbarium yet? I hope you will, if you have not, it would be such a treasure to you". Dickinson kept her own herbarium for the rest of her life.

Peel then makes his more daring claim that the sciences Dickinson studied when she was young inform not only the language and the metaphors in her poems but also their structure. He reads Dickinson not as a poet but as a concealed natural philosopher by examining the way observation unfolds in her work. "The visible world was her starting point," he observes, "and she tried many strategies and adopted many roles in her quest to understand it." Some may object to Peel's argument by quoting from one of her many poems that dismiss science entirely: "I pull a flower from the woods – / A monster with a glass / Computes the stamens in a breath – / And has her in a 'class!'". But Peel explains that the poems do not object to science itself so much as its perceived "Arrogance": "Distaining men, and Oxygen, / For Arrogance of them –". Dickinson's willingness to analyse and reluctance to synthesize supports her poetic vision, and this argument forms an important thread throughout Peel's book. Her poems exhibit a constant struggle to define and understand "the Truth", consistent with the scientific push towards knowledge. Her scepticism, crucial to scientific inquiry, drives her methodology: "Sweet Skepticism of the Heart – / That knows – and does not know – And tosses like a Fleet of Balm / Affronted by the snow – / Invites and then retards the Truth". The irony is that Dickinson heightens rather than reduces uncertainty (she uses the scientific method yet avoids scientific conclusions). One poem begins with detailed observations of nature, "Squirrel – Eclipse – the Bumble bee –", but ends by amplifying rather than reducing nature's mystery, "Nature is what we know – / Yet have no art to say – / So impotent our wisdom is / To her Simplicity". Peel reads this to mean that the world is not the product of fundamental laws, as science suggests, but the conclusion becomes more interesting when one observes the tone. The poem ends not in frustration and anger at the failure to understand, but with an acceptance of the limits of knowledge. Even if one does not accept Peel's appraisal of Dickinson as a natural philosopher/scientist, her scientific language and imagery make the influence difficult to ignore. More often readers associate her work with religious themes, but, Peel proposes, "It might just possibly be a hybrid of scientific observation and religious speculation in poetic form". A "hybrid" poem by Dickinson that supports this idea closes with the line, "Faith – the Experiment / Of our Lord!". If "Faith" is an "Experiment" then use of the scientific word "Experiment" implies the possibility that "Faith" could fail.

Victoria N. Morgan brilliantly extends the discussion of the poet's "religious speculation in poetic form" in *Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture*, showing that Dickinson wrestled not only with the language of science, but Christianity as well. Morgan acknowledges the clear tension between Dickinson's consistent use of hymn forms and her innovative religious views (a parallel to Peel's observation of the tension between the scientific method of observation and the view that science cannot lead to truth), but moves beyond the critical consensus on the poet's ironic distance from orthodox religion. Hymns are Christian songs used by a congregation in worship, and Dickinson (at odds with Evangelical Protestant Christianity, and traditional conceptions of God and theology in general) had stopped attending church by the age of thirty. Her poem "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church – / I keep it, staying at Home" is frequently cited as evidence of her attitude toward religion (some critics read her as an atheist because of this poem), but the form makes the position more nuanced than her words imply. Morgan argues that Dickinson adapted the form of traditional hymns to give herself the ideal space to express spirituality. An important aspect of her engagement with hymns is the questions they generate about communal participation. Hymns invoke the participation of a shared community, with shared ideas about God, and anticipate listeners and singers; from this Morgan argues that Dickinson's relation to hymns can almost be interpreted as an alternative form of devotion: "Why do they shut me out of Heaven?", Dickinson writes; "Did I sing – too loud?". Her poems' tones vary tremendously, from affirmation ("Faith – is the Pierless Bridge / Supporting what We see / Unto the Scene that We do not –") to anger ("Of Course – I prayed – / And did God care?"), often chafing against the "antique Volume – / Written by faded men". Morgan also shows that Dickinson was influenced, not entirely by "faded men", but by contemporary women hymnists who redefined God in ways more compatible with their own experience, posing a challenge to the hierarchical.

Like Peel, Morgan examines the works that Dickinson probably read. The Dickinsons owned several hymn books, some of them including the hymns of Isaac Watts. Watts, credited as the author of at least 750 hymns, was an Independent Congregational Minister who held non-denominational religious views. The formal influences are obvious. Watts, like Dickinson, was accused of using "disordered" or "defective" rhythms and "bad rhymes" in his work. But Morgan sees Watts's deeper influence on Dickinson through a paradox. Watts, despite his dissenting views, represented the tradition of established orthodox religion that Dickinson derided. The popularity of his hymns made him a cultural touchstone. His work was championed during the Evangelical religious revivals in New England and appears in a volume of popular hymns that Dickinson mockingly offered to send to her potentially wayward brother. At the same time, Watts's position as a dissenter and innovator in poetic and religious expression gave Dickinson an example of someone who connected religious and lyrical expression, and produced a form of protest against stifling hierarchical structures. Her rebellion is not against the God she redefines in her poems, but against the need to organize religion in a hierarchical way.

We might think of Dickinson as a recluse, but together these books remind us of her sociable intelligence – the willingness to engage with contemporary developments, from the religious to the scientific, that accompanied and affected her intense devotion to her craft.



A silhouette of the Dickinson family visiting Emily (second from right) at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, Massachusetts, 1848

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