Emily Dickinson

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About her eyes, and her face, we know the most. It is what we look upon first, look upon most, when we meet someone, it is true, yet such a meeting is for us forever, already, denied. Too late we have come, too early she has left.

About her face I know more than almost anyone else’s. At the age of sixteen the length of her mouth crease was 8.5mm; the distance from the edge of her iris to her lower lid was 0.2mm. Is this what we mean by ‘know’? Fragments of things, gathered. The distance from her lateral lid crease to upper lid margin was 0.7mm at 3.8mm, in her right eye, and 0.8mm at 3.7mm in her left. Atoms, falling, yet never diminishing that from which they came. The length from her caruncle to lateral canthus? In her right eye, 5.1mm, 4.5mm in her left. Scraps. ‘Excuse / Emily and / her Atoms / The North / Star is / of small / fabric but it / implies / much / presides / yet.’ How much is implied by, how much authority sits upon, those slant lines of skin? We now know much, and it is always too little.

In perhaps two hundred poems Dickinson made reference to mathematical terms or procedures, often with an exactitude which is lacking in this reference towards them. Counting and measuring figure in many of these, and the reason for such actions is to allow a ratio to be made. For Dickinson this reckoning is most often spiritual, or metaphysical — between Heaven and earth, for
example, the unknowable and the known — and emerges from an attentiveness to the tiniest detail. ‘I am small,’ she wrote, yet for Dickinson ‘small’ might also mean the North Star.

It is fitting, then, that the measurements we possess of Dickinson’s eyes, of her face, were obtained in order that a comparison might be made, between the girl in the daguerreotype of late 1846 — perhaps one made to mark her sixteenth birthday — and the woman in another, made perhaps twelve or thirteen years later.¹ The woman — unlike the girl — is not alone, but is instead seated next to another who is a little older, it seems, although perhaps this is due to a certain gauntness of her face, a thinning of the cheeks, a deepening of the eyes. Yet, even to describe the image invites some confusion, as what we see in the daguerreotype is laterally inverted: we look upon these faces as we would our own, in a mirror. The other woman sits to Dickinson’s right, to the right in the image, dark and domed; her clothes perhaps are black, mourning, and brocaded along their edges. White lace crests above her collar. Her hair makes an arch of her forehead, and falls to cover her ears; the pale line of her centre parting leads to an ornate comb which gathers and holds her hair. Her hands rest in her lap, her right bent towards her, her left across it, a ring — or its shadow — just visible upon her middle finger. Her mouth a seabird — a wrinkle in the sky.

To look at Dickinson in this and in the earlier photograph, side by side, is to enact a peculiar, familiar magic. The later dress is almost identical to the earlier one — it might have been cut from the same pattern — and is ‘out of date’ by period, similar to that which separates them. The hair is parted in the centre, too, although is now slightly looser, and less tight around the ears (the lobe of the left one is higher in both pictures). The lips are full; the cheeks a little fuller. Now her left hand lies across her lap, rather than tipping down from a table edge — now — now — al-

¹ This second photograph was discovered in 1995 by a collector known to us as ‘Sam Carlo,’ a pseudonym surely grafted from Samuel Bowles, Dickinson’s close friend and probable owner of the daguerrotype, and Carlo, her beloved Newfoundland dog, his name taken from a dog to be found in Jane Eyre; it seems that it is not only Dickinson who is hiding behind this image.
ways the present continuous with a photograph — while the other — the other disappears behind the women next to her, perhaps resting upon her chair or, one hopes, against her back. A thumb stroke — a different tense.²

For all that she is presented to us now as an apparition, Dickinson knew all about the changes the body undergoes, its thickening, its thinning, and its decay. In the years following the making of that first portrait, Dickinson suffered numerous episodes of ill health, the symptoms of which — it is likely — would have suggested to her physicians that she was suffering from tuberculosis (TB).³ Her grandmother, Betsy May Norcross, had succumbed to TB in 1829, the year before Emily’s birth; two of Betsy’s daughters died of TB, while another, Emily Norcross Dickinson — Emily’s mother — displayed symptoms of TB which were described, instead, as ‘vague’, ‘obscure’, and ‘nameless’. ‘It left the little Tint / That never had a Name —’. If the condition was certainly not unknown, then the diagnosis was often left unsaid.

Dickinson’s bedroom looked out onto Amherst’s West Cemetery, and a quarter of those carried past her window had been consumed by tuberculosis. Many of her early poems place her as both an onlooker and a participant — ‘It was a short procession — / The Bobolink was there — / An aged Bee addressed us — / And then we knelt in prayer —’; others demonstrate an attentiveness to the body’s self-betrayal — such as the frothing of blood at the mouth — and the final, inevitable journey it must then make:

So has a Daisy vanished
From the fields today —

² It is thought that the second woman is Catherine (Kate) Scott Turner Anthon, with whom Dickinson may have been in love, and who may have been her lover.
³ On Dickinson’s probable tuberculosis, and its effect upon those close to her, and upon her poetry, too, I am indebted to George Mamunes’ ‘So has a Daisy Vanished: Emily Dickinson and Tuberculosis’ (Jefferson and London: MacFarland, 2008).
So tiptoed many a slipper
To Paradise away —
Oozed so, in crimson bubbles
Day’s departing tide —
Blooming — tripping — flowing —
Are ye then with God?

Death was Dickinson’s companion during her youth, yet it was also a possessive one, taking other companions from her, too: ‘Death was much of a mob as I could master’ she would later write of the period in the early 1850s, when thirty-three young adults in Amherst died, almost all of them from TB. But before this, disease itself can isolate those who act as its host, abusing their hospitality, and in so doing it is not only they who are affected. When Dickinson was only two years old, her mother gave birth to another girl, but took rather a long time to recover. It was decided that Lavinia Norcross, Emily’s mother’s younger sister, after whom her own younger sister was named, would collect Dickinson and have her live with the Norcrosses for a while. While we cannot be certain from what Dickinson’s mother was suffering at that time, the disease which spread through the Norcross homestead was far more readily identified. Lavinia Norcross’s brother, Hiriam, had died of TB four years previously, and she was now nursing her widowed sister-in-law, Amanda, who was herself in the advanced stages of the disease. The couple had two children, William, and Emily (who later became Dickinson’s roommate at Mount Holyoke Seminary); later still they were too amongst the ‘daises’ mourned by Dickinson, both succumbing, in the early 1850s, to the disease which had killed their parents.

Dickinson’s own health was later to become a cause of her isolation, too, albeit more often from her school friends than her family. In 1838, and later in 1844, she missed significant periods of school due to poor health, although this became far worse in the following academic year, when she was able to attend fully for only eleven weeks. As she wrote to a friend, Abiah Root, ‘this season is bad for persons who are consumptive.’ Even at so
tender an age — just fifteen — Dickinson had seen death still the faces of the young, of those denied the opportunity to become old. ‘We take no note of Time,’ she continued in her letter to Root, ‘but from its loss. T’were wise in men to give it then a tongue. Pay no moment but in just purchase of its worth & what it’s worth, ask death beds. They can tell.’

Two years later, after Dickinson had entered Mount Holyoke, her cough returned, and in March 1848 her father, Edward Dickinson, was so concerned by this, and her increasingly frailty, that he had her return home. She convalesced there for a month, and probably took a form of opium, before returning to school, fearful of being pitied as an invalid. As she wrote once more to Root: ‘I could not bear to leave teaching and companions before the close of term and go home and be dosed and receive the physician daily, and take warm drinks and be condoled with on the state of health in general by all the old ladies in town.’ Soon she would have no choice, however, and three months after writing the letter she left the seminary for good, and for her own good, too.

But disease can create a sense of companionship amidst the isolation, too, an experience which can be shared even as it remains resolutely one’s own. In early 1865, Dickinson write to ‘Cousin Loo’, Louise Norcross, that, ‘The eyes are as with you, sometimes easy, sometimes worse’, thereby suggesting a complaint so familiar to both that it need not be named, and could rest in obscurity. (It is now thought that both suffered from extropia, or deviation of the cornea: a close study of it within the disc of Dickinson’s eye in the 1846 daguerrotype shows it to have deviated fifteen degrees from true.) Indeed, obscurity is what was forced upon Dickinson during this period, too, during extended treatments for an eye problem. In both 1864 and 1865 she left the familiarity of not only her home but of Amherst, too, in order that she might travel to Boston to receive treatment.

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4 On the ongoing problems which Dickinson had with her vision, I am indebted to James R. Guthrie’s *Emily Dickinson’s Vision: Illness and Identity in her Poetry* (Gainsville: University of Florida Press, 1998).
from Dr. Henry Williams, an eminent ophthalmologist. During this first visit, which lasted seven months, Dickinson was forced to remain in a boarding house amongst strangers, and was further isolated due to Dr. Williams’ insistence that she remain in her room; furthermore, she was to lie with her eyes bandaged against the daylight, and could remove them only at sunset, a ‘Covered Vision’ which would emerge in a later poem. (One presumes that the room’s lighting was also suitably dimmed.) Whereas for most of us our eyes first open at the rising of the sun, Dickinson’s would at its setting, her day starting as ours might start to end. The rhythms of her day are out of step with that of the sun, and in a number of poems, night and day are exchanged for one another:

Sunset at Night — is natural —
But Sunset on the Dawn
Reverse Nature — Master —
So Midnight’s — due — at Noon.

If in this poem it is as though the mechanics of the universe have broken, a situation which might affect Dickinson, but makes no judgment upon her, another seems to suggest that Dickinson is somehow implicated in the reversal, or may indeed be responsible for it.

Good Morning — Midnight —
I’m coming Home —
Day — got tired of Me —
How could I — of Him?

Sunshine was a sweet place —
I liked to stay —
But Morn — didn’t want me — now —
So — Goodnight — Day!

Dickinson seems to be being punished, here, exiled from the sunshine that she craves. The day tired of her, and the ‘Morn’
did not want her, yet Dickinson must have been concerned that it was ‘Day’s Great Progenitor’, as she describes God in another poem, who was banishing her from the light. For Dickinson both God and the sun might be considered the same thing — she made use of the felicitous homophone of God the Son/Sun — and she felt God’s presence most clearly in the bright light of noon. Here, at its zenith, the sun was closest to heaven, and yet most clearly visible to us, and most clearly illuminating that which surrounds us. At such moments the sun was at its most revelatory, in an optical and a spiritual sense; in revealing our presence upon earth, the sun also lights our way to heaven. Dickinson’s communion was, from an early age, defiantly domestic — ‘Some keep the Sabbath going to Church — / I keep it, staying at Home —’; she wrote in 1852 — and it was within the fourteen acre plot behind the family home that she found her own personal Eden. When her family doctor then prohibited her from visiting it, most especially upon a bright June day, with the sun at its very highest, she must considered this an expulsion from paradise as damning as the original Fall. For what was she being punished? Her refusal to attend church, or to confirm her Christianity during one of the periodic Revivals which spread through New England with a virulence which matched that of another form of consumption? (The two forms are perhaps not unconnected.) Dickinson’s consumption was likely tubercular, yes, but it was certainly ocular, and she gathered up her surroundings with her eyes — ‘The Meadows — mine — / The Mountains — mine — ’ — until they could take no more, or were not allowed to, of this heaven on earth. ‘Before I got my eye put out / I liked as well to see —’, yet perhaps this was not for her to see, or to see yet, and so her sight had to be obscured. If humility is often represented as a lowering of the eyes, then that which God thought to teach Dickinson was achieved through an act rather more violently described.

For Dickinson, her sight was a source of great apprehension: of anxiety, a fearfulness that she might never see again, or read, as she was once prohibited from doing; of capturing and laying claim, as she did upon meadow, and mountain, and ‘As much
of Noon as I could take'; and of understanding that which surrounded her, even that which — like heaven — might usually be considered to lie beyond our sight. “How shall you know”? / Consult your Eye!’ In time, this last sense took precedence over the first, and Dickinson began to consider her ailment less a punishment than a different form of revelation, one that encouraged the poet to extend her perceptual range. Rather different, scientific examples of such an extension can be found in a number of Dickinson’s poems, not least in her ongoing fascination with astronomy, a science that allows one not only to see across vast distances, but also to peer directly into the heavens, and to consider what might be found there.

Dickinson wrote a poem about an astronomer, and used certain technical terms within her work, albeit in ways in which their more usual sense was transformed into something rather more metaphysical — if one might attempt to determine the distance from the earth to the sun, then one might also use means to determine — similarly — one’s closeness to God, or alienation, perhaps. During this period such attempts were made using ‘parallax’, a process by which a distant object is observed from two points, a known distance apart. When the observers attend to the same phenomenon — such as the Transit of Venus across the face of the sun — then difference in angle between their observations can be used to triangulate the distance of the observed object. Is this what we have been doing with Dickinson all along? It is upon Dickinson’s face, and not the sun’s, that we gaze, and we must do so a little differently. Unable to observe it now — or even at any one time — from two known spatial distances, we must do so instead from distances which are temporal, the ‘compound vision’ of the photographers’ plate cameras, in 1846 and then in 1859, replacing that of the astronomers’ telescopes. It is from two different points in time, and not space, that we turn to look upon her, to measure and mark, in the hope that this might also mean to understand. Yet what can we know of her? Like the North Star we might use her to find our way, but she is less constant, or we are. (We most certainly
are.) Like the sun, Dickinson marks our days, and yet remains unimaginably distant. It can hurt to look.

‘None see God and Live —’
the bodies that remain

Valentin Zerl
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