

“You cannot solder an Abyss with air”

Traces of early relationship to mother in the life and poetry of Emily Dickinson¹

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With a starting point of seeing a poem as a free association unto which the reader might form his/her own associations, the work of Emily Dickinson is discussed from the point of view of early development and relationship to mother. The paper is based on selected poems, letters and chosen parts from the biography of Emily Dickinson. It is argued that the poet seems to have experienced a trauma during the first months of life in the shape of erratic infant care, that caused environmental impingement. Having to react at this early age made the gradual unfolding of a secure feeling of identity precarious and had deep consequences for body-mind development, and for the relationship between inner and outer realities. The theory of Winnicott and his concepts of “going-on-being”, “male and female elements” and impingements are considered. The relationship of Emily Dickinson to her sister-in-law, Sue Gilbert, is seen as important, as the latter had a capacity for being a container of otherwise hidden parts of the poet’s inner life. Emily Dickinson’s life in isolation, questions of creativity born from experiences of absence and loss and from early bridges broken down, are discussed.

Key words: *Emily Dickinson – poem – going on being – Winnicott – creativity*

Psychoanalysis and poetry both use language, but both also try to leave its limitations (Ekman, in Mårtenson, 2001). In psychoanalysis, we try to listen to and to ponder over what is outside the outspoken word and in poetry the poet tries to go beyond the limits of language, of logic and of frame of expression. One of the difficulties which confronts us when we try to interpret a poem psychoanalytically can be considered to lie in the fact that interpretations are being given without

the possibility of confirmation. We can never be sure that the poet, the one who gives us the images, would recognize himself in what we believe we have grasped. But – we can see the poem as a free association, unto which the reader might confer his own associations. A poem tries to “move the sleeping images of things towards the light” (Dryden, in Knights, 1980). Psychoanalysis too. In the encounter between poem and interpretation, between a literary composition and reader, landscapes might open up.

Knights (*ibid.*) wants to underline his view that all poetry is a matter of capturing intuitions in various complex ways and that what is “known”, when reading a particular poem can only be grasped by responding to and by living through each poem. Once it is “there” in our minds, it might enter into a discourse with the reader. The

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act of knowing is, however, not to be seen as having an end or a final point but as an ever afresh awakening of a focused awareness. From this follows that diversity of interpretation of any poem worth taking seriously is inevitable and that interpretation is personal, or it is nothing.

Perhaps the language of poetry is the one most similar to that of music. It is not just the words and the images that give us resonance, but also the pauses, the rhythm and the melody. We can experience silences, abstentions, fadings – “Dying annuls the power to kill” (P 358) says Emily Dickinson – and the colour of words.

When by chance – more than twenty years ago – I got hold of a small book with and about Emily Dickinson (Pickard, 1967), the encounter was overwhelming. There was in her poetry and use of metaphors from widely different areas, a non-compromising tone – and at the same time, a sensitivity, a braveness of expression and choice of matter, a mobility in transitions between sincerity and playfulness, between the ceremonious, the scientific and the everyday matter, but perhaps most of all – descriptions of intrapsychic phenomena and conflicts. A strange feeling of mightiness and heft together with a certain austerity and lack of sentimentality. Her often short, impressionistic and what can be seen as very modern poems were felt to expand my own self-knowledge – not the least by their becoming catalysers for an inner process – but also for her verbalizations of hard-to-catch atmospheres, those that most of us at times have experienced.

I have found that – to me – her poems describe a prism. After a re-reading of one and the same poem, I can experience it quite differently and see angles and mirrorings which earlier eluded me. Sometimes the reason seems to be what sources of conflict happen to be central within myself at that particular moment. Sometimes, it seems to depend on which other one of her poems I have in mind. For example the poem “Perception of an object costs/Precise the Object’s Loss ...” (P 1071) has been of some concern for a couple of years. If you read it after one of her “pearl poems” i.e., those of her poems where she pictures a “pearl” as a forlorn precious thing, or as something which would be lethally dangerous to get hold of by diving (e.g., P 452, P 270, P 424), interpretation may go in the direction of experience of corporeal shortcomings in comparison with the man. If you have got another poem in your mind – a poem which seems to picture an infant with her mother –

thoughts may go in the direction of “perception-as-eating“, as getting to disappear, incorporation. The interpretation I suggest in the following I have reached after having taken one step back – in order to see more.

This situation – of an enriching lack of stability in the experience of her poems – gives me the feeling of trying to catch a bird in flight and of making an effort of fastening it on paper, though it moves and flies up again and shows new angles.

In the following, I will try to describe one *specific* aspect of her poetry that has not been described before in any writings about Emily Dickinson known to me. The aspects I will draw attention to seem to lie as a mist in front of her poetry as a whole. I will discuss some poems, excerpts of letters and some chosen parts of the biography of Emily Dickinson – those that concern her relationship to her mother and to her sister-in-law Sue Gilbert – in order to describe my thoughts.

The line I try to draw begins with Emily Dickinson’s metaphor for her mother, goes on with her thoughts about the absent as more real than the present and ends up with a short description of biographical data. Thereafter follow poems, which could describe a “going-on-being”, a breach in “going-on-being” and poems which discuss the relation between body and soul. Trauma, thoughts about early development of an opposition between mind and psyche-soma, about true self and the poet’s life in isolation follow.

In the interpretation of Emily’s life and work, I am inspired by the thoughts and writings of Winnicott, and in his work, lies the main theoretical base for this paper. The method used is subjective – as is free association and living through and responding to something. I see the poems of Emily Dickinson as stemming from the innermost of the poet/author, expressing and reflecting different angles and aspects of a complicated inner landscape of conscious and not conscious scenes – as seems to be the case with all works of art that have the power to affect us profoundly.

BIRDS

In her poetry and in her letters, Emily Dickinson used to talk about her mother, her sister-in-law Sue and other especially important women as

“birds”. Accordingly, she wrote at the death of her mother – who had been paralyzed after a stroke six years earlier – “The dear Mother that could not walk, has *flown*” (L 779).

One peculiarity of birds can be considered to lie in their capacity to be in front of us and then suddenly not. To surprise us with their presence as well as with their absence. In a letter from 1848 to her friend Abiah Root, from whom she had not heard for many months but seen a short glimpse of in a crowd – Emily writes (L 26):

“Slowly, very slowly, I came to the conclusion that you had forgotten me, & I tried hard to forget you, but your image still haunts me, and tantalizes me with fond recollections. At our Holyoke Anniversary, I caught one glimpse of your face, & fondly anticipated an interview with you, & a reason for your silence, but when I thought to find you, search was vain, for “the bird had flown”. Sometimes, I think it was a fancy, think I did not *really* see my old friend, but her spirit, then your well-known voice tells me it was no spirit, but yourself, living, that stood within that crowded hall & spoke to me – ”.

In the letter, we experience the changes between presence and absence – of place as well as of time. Past tense becomes present time, goes back to past tense and then to present time again – only to finish in past tense. The place changes from memory, to the crowd, to the dreamworld and back to a present place in front of her. Movements and flight as that of a bird.

”Bird” also brings an association to “spirit” or “soul” as opposed to “body” or “dust” – a connection the letter also mentions. “Spirit and dust” – and the relation between them, was to become a question of extreme importance for Emily, a question she tries to throw light on all her life in poems and letters.

For Emily, the bird’s changing positions between presence and absence also seem to be related to an experience of closing and opening the eyes. Between extinguishing and creating. That which is in front of us exists – and suddenly not. That which is not, might be created. We find questions of what is situated in the shared reality, independent of us and – on the other hand – what is created when the world of senses testify of an absence.

PERCEPTION AND REALITY

In the following poem Emily tells us something about her relationship to the “outer” or “shared” reality:

P 1071
Perception of an object costs
Precise the Object’s loss –
Perception in itself a Gain
Replying to its Price –

The Object Absolute – is nought –
Perception sets it fair
And then upbraids a Perfectness
That situates so far –

To perceive an object presupposes its prior loss. Perception is in itself a gain, that corresponds to the loss, to the cost of the loss. It is a currency of the invert, of the negative. The absolute object “is nothing”. Perception arranges the object rightly or fairly and after that upbraids, complains that perfectness is so far away. The perceiving person takes over and creates that which is not – from an absence and an experience of loss. The word “loss” tells us that the person of the poem, the perceiver, once has had the object, or has seen it in a presence and afterwards lost it. In other words time is considered as a dimension.

Though Emily Dickinson here expresses herself in a confident tone, the question of *where* reality situates is one she deals with over and over again in her poetry.

After the loss or after the breach or – after disillusionment following illusion (Winnicott, 1951 p. 241) – we *see* the object. We give attention to the empty place. In absence, the meaning of the absent object comes to the fore.

P 1666
I see thee clearer for the Grave
That took thy face between
No Mirror could illumine thee
Like that impassive stone –

I know thee better for the Act
That made thee first unknown
The stature of the empty nest
Attests the Bird that’s gone.

The person or the “I” of the poem, sees you clearer when the grave hides your face. No mirror could have lightened up you more – than that cold grave-stone. The absence makes her “see clearer” and

“know better” the other one. She “knows” you more from the act that made you first “unknown”. In absence, the meaning the absentee has and has had comes to the fore. And also, that part of *her* that was in touch with the absentee is seen and felt in a new way. The absent object is cathected and the present one decathected. In the poem, the size and the height of the empty nest bear witness of the bird that has disappeared. It is a question of a succession in time where experienced presence has become experienced absence. The position where she confronts an absence overshadows the one where she stands before a presence. If the eye does not meet the positive, mind fills up the scene. From emptiness, from the yawning abyss, creativity starts. To fill out what has disappeared and to fill it with that which caused the gap. To create out of the negative.

P 546
 To fill a Gap
 Insert the Thing that caused it –
 Block it up
 With Other – and 'twill yawn the more –
 You cannot solder an Abyss
 With Air.

You cannot fill a Gap with *another* gap. You cannot solder an Abyss with air. The opening, the gap of the mind cannot be repaired with anything else than with that which caused it. That which is gone has been an inseparable part of me and has become an inseparable part of me. If you try to fill the empty space with something else, you will get a still wider gap. Emily here talks about a place which has been lost and cannot be refound or repaired. And which cannot be neglected. Nor grieved. What is – or the one who is – absent can be sensed corporeally – as a lost part of the body – “Absence disembodies – so does Death” (P 860).

Perhaps Emily in the following poem states that a return to the womb would restore the feeling of wholeness and completeness. The womb here as the “Coffin”. It encompasses with compact walls and might contain a “Citizen of Paradise”. However, we can see that Paradise changes in the end. The small Repose becomes a “Circumference without Relief – or Estimate – or End –”.

P 943
 A Coffin – is a small Domain,
 Yet able to contain
 A Citizen of Paradise
 In its diminished Plane.
 A Grave – is a restricted Breadth –

Yet ampler than the Sun –
 And all the Seas He populates
 And Lands He looks upon

To Him who on its small Repose
 Bestows a single Friend –
 Circumference without Relief –
 Or Estimate – or End –

CIRCUMFERENCE

As an answer to the question of how she spends her days, Emily states that “My business is Circumference” (L 268).

In a short poem, she is concerned with questions of being part of something – and of being part of something in different ways.

P 633
 When Bells stop ringing – Church – begins –
 The Positive – of Bells –
 When Cogs – stop – that's Circumference –
 The Ultimate – of Wheels.

When churchbells become silent, they announce that church – or service – begins. The negative of bells announce the positive of church. The absence call for presence like a negative calls for its positive. The poet contrasts this situation with that of wheels. The teeth, cogs of a wheel can make another wheel spin, by fitting in with the teeth of the neighboring wheel. However, when not in motion, the cogs become the ultimate border or circumference of a separate unit, the individual wheel. With the bells, there is a feeling of absence or “hunger” demanding the coming of the other half of the party, the church. With the wheels, there is an atmosphere of all or nothing, of controlled motion or motionlessness, of lack of air, total dependence and also – of death.

When Emily, in poems, ponders on the concept of “Circumference”, she seems to contrast states of motionlessness and Vitality, of timelessness (or Eternity) and Finitude and of Brain and Dust and we also find questions of Decay and of how “The Dust – connect – and live” (e.g., P 515, P 802, P 889). In the poem “Crisis is a Hair” (P 889), she says “To suspend the Breath/Is the most we can/ Ignorant is it Life or Death/Nicely balancing.” When wilfully suspending breath, we “aim” at separating the Brain (or Spirit) from the Dust, the psyche from the soma.

In a poem where Emily discusses perception of time relative to experienced pain (P 967), she

writes about “The minute Circumference/ Of a single Brain –“. In the following poem, we are told that although the Brain might be small in circumference, it contains almost everything:

P 632

The Brain – is wider than the Sky –
For – put them side by side –
The one the other will contain
With ease – and You – beside –

The Brain is deeper than the sea –
For – hold them – Blue to Blue –
The one the other will absorb –
As Sponges – Buckets – do

The Brain is just the weight of God –
For – Heft them – Pound for Pound –
And they will differ – if they do –
As Syllable from Sound –

The Brain contains the Sky and You and absorbs the sea and is the weight of God. Is there anything left of the Sky and the sea and of You and of God outside? The brain becomes all the greater and all the more filled up; the body all the smaller and less visible, as is also the case with the world outside.

LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Emily Elisabeth Dickinson was born on December 10th, 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her elder brother Austin was then 1½ years old. In 1829, her mother loses by death a brother and her own mother. When Emily is 1½ years old, mother starts to expect her younger sister Vinnie, who is born in February 1833. Emily is then 2 years old. Their mother is ill for some months after the delivery. According to a family friend, Emily’s mother, Emily Norcross, suffered from a “trembling fear of death” and hypochondriasis; later also from neuralgi and in 1856, she was described as being invalid and lying on the couch after a trip (Sewall, 1994). During her childrens’ first years, the mother travelled a lot on her own, e.g., to her childhood home in Monson and to a brother in Boston.

When Emily is 2½ years of age, she is sent – as the only one in the family – for a six-week trip to her aunt (mother’s sister) Lavinia. The two of them travel with horse-and-carriage for twenty miles. Lavinia writes to Emily’s parents:

“... she slept most of the way to B – . We heard it thunder several times but tho’t we

should not have a shower where we were – We stopped at the tavern in B – Just after we passed Mr Clapps – it thundered more & the thunder & lightning increased – (Emily) called it *the fire* – the time the rain wind & darkness came we were along in those pine woods – the thunder echoed – I will confess that I felt rather bad We tho’t if we stopped we should not get home that night – (Emily) felt inclined to be frightened some – she said “Do take me to my mother”. But I covered her face all under my cloak to protect her & took care that she did not get wet much –” (*ibid.* p. 323).

After some weeks, Lavinia writes again: “(Emily) is a very good child & but little trouble – She has learned to play on the piano – she calls it the *moosic*. She does not talk much about home – sometimes speaks of *little Austin* but does not moan for any of you. – She has fine appetite & sleeps well & I take satisfaction in taking care of her –” (p. 324)².

Emily never joins the First Church (Calvinistic) – in contrast to the rest of her family, relatives and friends. At about 14 years of age, she goes to school outside of Amherst. During a religious awakening – one of the eight in Amherst during Emily’s lifetime – Miss Mary Lyon, Emily’s teacher, asks them to stand up in class, who harbors the wish to become Christians. Everyone stands up except Emily. Later she comments: “They thought it queer that I didn’t rise. I thought a lie would be queerer” (Sewall, 1994 p. 269).

She never had a “serious love-affair”. The words are from a cousin of hers and from Emily’s brother Austin and sister Vinnie.

At about 1861, at 31 years of age, Emily starts to isolate herself in her house Homestead. Emily calls it her “living entombment”. During the following 24 years up to her death, she does not cross her “Father’s ground to any House or town” (L 330) – her father’s ground consisting of the two nearby states Homestead and Evergreen – and during her last ten years, she does not leave her house. Emily used to sit on a chair outside her room on the second floor when guests came to the house. From there she followed – hidden – all that happened in the drawing-room. Therefore, many friends of the family never met Emily face-to-face.

² Name in brackets are inserted later. In the original letter her name was “Elisabeth”, as Emily was called during her first years of life.

In June 1861, the first child of her brother Austin and his wife Sue is born – a son. Emily writes poems to her sister-in-law that express jealousy (P 218) and fear of becoming deserted (P 220).

In April 1862, Emily sends a letter to the newspaperman and colonel Thomas W. Higginson at the Atlantic Monthly together with four of her poems:

“Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? The mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly – and I have none to ask – Should you think it breathed – ...” (L 260).

Apparently she gets the answer that her poems are too “spasmodic” and “uncontrolled” and that she should postpone publication (L 265). Her second letter to Higginson contains the words “Thank you for the surgery –” (L 261). After this, Emily gives only four poems for publication, some of them anonymously. In sum, she publishes six poems during her lifetime. In 1955, her collected poems reach the public posthumously.

Higginson and Emily correspond for 24 years – until her death. In 1870, he writes a letter to his wife, a few hours after his first encounter with Emily (L 342a):

“A large county lawyer’s house, brown brick, with great trees & a garden – I sent up my card. A parlor dark & cool & stiffish, a few books & engravings & an open piano (...). A step like a pattering child’s in entry & in glided a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair & a face a little like Belle Dove’s; not plainer – with no good feature – in a very plain & exquisitely clean white pique & a blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand & said “These are my introduction” in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice – & added under her breath Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers & hardly know what I say – but she talked soon & thenceforward continuously-& deferentially – sometimes stopping to ask me to talk instead of her – but readily recommencing”.

The next day, he writes again to his wife about the meeting with Emily (L 342b): “... 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. She often thought me *tired* & seemed very thoughtful of others”.

According to Bonniers’ Great Dictionary (1991), (Emily Dickinson) is now counted as one of the greatest American lyric poets.

THE MOTHER

In 1870, while her mother is still alive, Emily Dickinson writes: “I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled.” (L 342b).

“She [i.e., her sister Vinnie] has no Father and Mother but me and I have no Parents but her.” (L 391) And: “I always ran Home to Awe when a child, if anything befell me. He was an awful Mother, but I liked him better than none” (Sewall, 1994 p. 74). With the word “Awe” Emily apparently refers to the *feeling* of “awe” and not to a person.

In May 1828, Emily’s mother Emily Norcross marries Edward Dickinson. Emily’s father was a highly respected lawyer, Congress Representative and Treasurer of Amherst College. He was in favor of education for women, against slavery and – as to his breakfast habits, it is said that he only wanted bread baked by Emily. He is said to have been loyal to his wife and to have accepted without reproaches Emily’s eccentricities and way of life. However, according to Emily and to family friends, Edward Dickinson was a man who seldom smiled and who was felt to be emotionally remote. Emily seemed to have liked to tease him or to have sought contact with him by pulling his leg – in a gentle sort of way.

In 1875, Emily’s mother gets stricken with paralysis and becomes totally dependent on her two daughters Emily and Vinnie – who both live in Homestead all their lives. On her mother’s death, Emily remembers some of her metaphors from one of her earlier poems – “After great Pain” (P 341): “Her dying feels to me like many kinds of Cold – at times numbing – then a trackless waste” (Sewall, 1994).

In a letter from 1882, Emily writes: “We were never intimate Mother and Children while she was our Mother – but Mines in the same Ground meet by tunneling and when she became our Child, the Affection came . – When we were children and she journeyed, she always brought us something. Now, would she bring us but herself, what an only Gift ...” (Sewall, 1994 p. 89).

Though many guests and friends have witnessed that the Dickinson-family members cared for each other, physical contact seemed to have been rather

absent. Accordingly, Emily's brother Austin is said to have mentioned to his wife Sue: "I never experienced any tenderness in my family".

Mabel Todd, a family friend, writes: "Their mother, quiet, gentle little lady, died during the middle of November 1882, without causing a perceptible ripple on the surface of any one's life, or giving concern to any of her family. Austin told us that her chief claim to attention had been her constant attempts to bring something to any caller which he or she could possibly require, and continual questionings had almost exhausted their patience. "Won't you have this or that to make you more comfortable?" or "Can't I bring you another chair?" had been the basis of her poor little attempts to make anyone within her circle happier, which failed sadly ..." (*ibid.* p. 287).

SUE

Emily met Sue Gilbert, her junior by nine days and her future sister-in-law, while in their teens. In the early 1850's, Emily was influencing Sue and her brother Austin to court each other and to marry. The wedding was held in 1856. From then on Sue, Austin and later their three children lived in the neighbouring house called the Evergreens, which Emily's father had had built for them.

During the decade of 1850, and in the beginning of the 1860's, Sue was regarded as a very charming, intelligent, culturally interested and literate woman by the whole Dickinson family, by neighbours and acquaintances. However, from about 1865 onwards, Sue became more and more of an alcoholic, physically aggressive and not-well-seen in Amherst. Their marriage became very unhappy and Austin at times feared for his life, after Sue at home had thrown around knives and pieces of furniture. However, the importance of Sue to Emily continued for almost 40 years, until Emily's death. Sue lived until 1913.

As late as eight years before her death, Emily likened Sue with "Eden" (Farr, 1997). To Emily, Sue is "Eternity", the "Only Woman in the World", "Cleopatra" (and Emily is Anthony) and "endless Fire" (*ibid.*). She claims that "With the exception of Shakespeare, [Sue has] told me of more knowledge than any one living" – (L 757) and in 1864 she writes: "Should I turn in my long night I should murmur "Sue"" (L 294). Sue is also identified with a bird "who builds a nest in everyone's heart" (Farr, 1997). In 1877, Emily writes that she would like to "own a Susan of my own" (P 1401).

Sue traveled a lot on her own, e.g., to New York and Emily sent her letters of longing and reproach at Sue's leaving her behind.

Though many letters from Emily to Sue are love-letters and openly erotic, their relationship is not believed to have been corporeal (Farr, 1997). It is also uncertain whether Emily's erotic feelings were reciprocated by Sue. Emily wrote more letters and dedicated more poems to Sue than to anyone else. She usually wrote her poems on a piece of paper, which she carefully folded into a small package and subsequently asked someone to deliver it to the neighbouring house.

Sue did the same. Sometimes they met face-to-face, but more seldom after 1865, i.e., during the last twenty years of Emily's life. Emily filled her drawer with almost 900 poems, which were found after her death on May 15th 1886. The wealth of poems was a fact of great surprise to everyone. Emily had made 40 small fascicles of about six pages per fascicle by putting a thread through two holes in each paper. Usually she herself called her poems "my Lives". Her poems now amount to 1775 and – if the ones later found in her letters are counted too – to almost 2000. Just a handful were published during her lifetime.

At intervals, Helen Hunt Jackson, a contemporary author of Amherst, sent requests to Emily offering her help in publishing the poems: "You are a great poet – and it is wrong ... that you won't sing aloud" (Sewall, 1994 p. 580).

Emily Dickinson was getting weaker two years before her death. A doctor had to state the diagnosis – Bright's disease, a chronic inflammation of the kidneys – after having seen her fully dressed and with the face turned away pass the opened door of her room.

The importance of Sue for Emily was respected and accepted and Sue was the one asked to prepare Emily for the funeral and the one to write the obituary for the newspaper.

THE BEING

Winnicott (1966) says in his article on "male" and "female" elements (elements which are to be found in both sexes) that when the "female element in the boy – or girlbaby finds the breast, it is

the self that has been found" p. 180). The breast then, is a symbol – not for doing but – for being. The good-enough-mother gives the baby the possibility to feel that the breast *is* the baby. This *being* constitutes the – "only basis for self-discovery and

a sense of existing (and then on to the capacity to develop an inside, to be a container, to have a capacity to use the mechanisms of projection and introjection and to relate to the world in terms of introjection and projection)” (*ibid.*). Winnicott continues, saying that this girl element *is* the breast and shares the qualities of breast and mother and is desirable or, in other words, exciting. Exciting implies: liable to make someone’s male element *do* something.

The *being* that we have seen described here, resembles in atmosphere and figuration what is approached in the following poem – to be the object of doing. Here the person in the poem does not wish *to paint* and does not wish *to play* – but instead *to be* the picture being painted and – *to be* the cornet being played upon.

P 505

I would not paint – a picture –
I’d rather be the One
It’s bright impossibility
To dwell – delicious – on –
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare – celestial – stir –
Evokes so sweet a Torment –
Such sumptuous – Despair –

I would not talk, like Cornets –
I’d rather be the One
Raised softly to the Ceilings –
And out, and easy on –
Through Villages of Ether –
Myself endued Balloon
By but a lip of Metal –
The pier to my Pontoon –

Nor would I be a Poet –
It’s finer – own the Ear –
Enamored – impotent – content –
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts of Melody!

In the second stanza, the person in the poem does not want to *talk* like the cornet, but rather to *be* a cornet. Raised softly to the ceilings and out and easy on – passing through etherical villages, i.e., passing through the skies – imbued with a balloon through a lip of metal. The mental image is not far away – of a newborn baby being nursed at the breast. The balloon is the breast with a lip of metal, the pier to my pontoon, which – simultaneously – is also the lip of the person in the

poem. If you have a close look at the mouthpiece of a cornet, you might see that it resembles those of a baby’s lips when being nursed. But – why a “lip of Metal”? The metal is – from the point of view of the observer – between the breast and the baby and is that which joins them. “Metal” supposes a material that stands attacks – but – how much does it join?

Emily here uses a language of great density. What she perhaps wants to illustrate – if we allow ourselves to go along in her pictures – is the point of contact between the breast and the mouth, a greatly magnified picture of a small detail where the one moves over into the other. They conjoin in the expression “the Pier to my Pontoon”. She tries to express something which is not possible to express – as “*being*” of this kind precludes its simultaneous illustration.

In the last stanza, she seems to simultaneously picture herself as a Poet, stunning herself with her Bolts of Melody, the *doer* and as the recipient of the handling, the one owning an Ear, the *being* that awakes activity, the object of doing. (This poem seems to be her only one where *being* and *doing* are described like this.)

”Pier” and “pontoon” belong to water and sea. The pontoon is a construction that keeps itself and perhaps someone/something floating. The pier is what protects against the violent forces and waves of the sea and is a wall against the Unconscious and against the dangerous depths and movements of the early Mother. The following poem might picture how dangerous it becomes when the pier is not any more capable of giving protection, but is mouldering away:

P 286

That after Horror – that’twas *us*
That passed the mouldering Pier –
Just as the Granite Crumb let go –
Our Savior, by a Hair –

A second more, had dropped too deep
For Fisherman to plumb –
The very profile of the Thought
Puts Recollection numb –

The possibility – to pass
Without a Moment’s Bell –
Into Conjecture’s presence –
Is like a Face of Steel –
That suddenly looks into ours
With a metallic grin –
The Cordiality of Death –
Who drills his Welcome in –

That we just a few seconds later – after having passed the mouldering pier – could have dropped so deep down into the sea that the Fisherman would not have been able to plumb and locate us. That we would not have been found. Just the thought, paralyzes memory. We would have met the Cordiality of Death – in the shape of a Face of Steel with a metallic grin – who suddenly looks into ours when he drills his “Welcome in”.

THE PIER TO MY PONTOON – THE BRIDGE THAT DOES NOT HOLD

In the poem with the cornet, Emily pictured the connection lip – pier – pontoon and the atmosphere was rather much filled with trustfulness. In the poem with the mouldering pier, something has happened. The pier, which should have protected the pontoon and made possible a fleeting existence has mouldered away. The fleeting as a “being” is now being threatened.

Perhaps Emily here describes the inner changes taking place when the connecting bridge has mouldered – the bridge between the mouth and the breast, between the baby and the illusion of the breast as a part of the self. Is Emily here describing a traumatic desillusionment – traumatic because it has come too early or too suddenly? A first bridge broken down.

Perhaps Emily Dickinson in these poems describes her fright of losing ability to communicate and to reach contact with others. But – behind this fright – she also seems to describe experiences following deficiencies in the earliest care, described in the picture of the mother as a bird who is suddenly absent.

According to Winnicott (1949a), it is especially difficult for an infant to meet a care that is “erratic”, i.e. irregular or without plan. The baby answers to the deficits in care with an overactivity or overgrowth of mental function. As a consequence, an opposition between the mind on the one hand and psyche-soma on the other, might develop. He believes this to happen when the thinking of the infant begins to take over and organize the caring for the psyche-soma, as a reaction to an abnormal environmental state. In health, it is the function of the environment to take this care and thereby to secure the on-going initial absolute dependence of the infant on his/her mother.

For Emily, the absent mother becomes more real than the sporadically present, the sick and –

as we have heard – the mother who is herself filled with fear of death and of illnesses. Probably also a mother who has been affected in her mothering by the two great losses (of her own mother and her brother) shortly before Emily’s birth. Emily seems to tell us in her poems, that she creates, fills out, takes over – where reality fails – where the early mothercare does not hold. “The Object Absolute – is nought – /Perception sets it fair ...” (P 1071).

When the “going-on-being”, the continuity of being is disturbed, the baby fills the deficits in care with his/her own mental activity. The baby will meet – not only instinct-impulses, but also the most primitive types of ego-needs – even the need for negative care (Winnicott, 1949a).

One risk is that the baby’s own mental functioning becomes a thing in itself, “practically replacing the good mother and making her unnecessary” (*ibid.* p. 246). “Absolute dependence” (Winnicott, 1966) on *mother* is then in jeopardy and so are also the early tasks in development as those of forming “the sense of self as a unit and the development of a sense of existing in the body, of occupying it all, no more, no less” (Winnicott, 1953 p. 411). For Emily, the real becomes that which is absent and that which is not-corporeal:

P 524 (the second stanza)
The Flesh – Surrendered – Cancelled –
The Bodiless – begun –
Two Worlds – like Audiences – disperse –
And leave the Soul – alone –

And “Death is a dialogue between /The spirit and the dust.” (P 976). The poem finishes with “The spirit turns away Just laying off for evidence / An overcoat of clay”. The flesh is cancelled and the bodiless begun. Two worlds – like audiences – disperse, leave in different directions – and leave the Soul – alone –.

Death is a dialogue between the soul and the body. The soul is released from the body, from an “Overcoat of clay”. Psyche is divorced from soma and the soul is left alone. Two worlds and two audiences and the bridge is broken, did not sustain.

The bridge is broken between the mouth and the breast and between the psyche and the soma and therefore – to some degree also – between inner and outer reality.

One audience, one bridge would have opened up the way to and would at the same time have pre-

supposed a being, where psyche-soma is also soma-psyche, i.e., where the psyche and soma aspects become involved in a process of mutual interrelation (Winnicott, 1949a p. 244). – Or it would have opened up to a situation, where “not only (...) the enjoyment of body functioning reinforce(s) ego development, but also ego development reinforces body functioning” (Winnicott, 1964 p. 113). Winnicott uses the word “indwelling” – to describe the “dwelling of the psyche in the personal soma, or *vice versa*” (*ibid.*).

SPIRIT AND DUST

In the following poem, Emily Dickinson wants to join the body (“the Dust”) with the round disk that is in front of her.

P 992
 The Dust behind I strove to join
 Unto the Disk before –
 But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
 Like Balls upon a Floor –

She does not succeed in joining them together – because the Sequence, the tones of harmony *ravell*, *disentangle* out of “Sound/Like Balls upon a Floor –”. The balls bounce on the floor – and the sounds of the bounces are definitely and unconditionally separate. They cannot be joined or interlaced into an accord or into a web that holds.

The person in the poem wishes to join the body, “the Dust” – “Unto the Disk before”. We can recall Emily’s definition of her as a poet: “My business is Circumference”. Circumference and Disk. Already a small baby – of about six months of age – can “describe” (Winnicott, 1949a) himself as a circle, a circle as a diagram of the self, where psyche and soma both join in the same field. The first drawings of children are usually circles.

Emily Dickinson seems to say that her work as a poet, described as “Circumference“, deals with her Spirit-Dust-dwelling. A dwelling, where Brain, Spirit or psyche is too loosely encased in the circle of her Body, Dust or soma and vice versa, and where the mind is not developed out of a Spirit-Dust web. In the poetic work of her life, this line of questions can be traced over and over again. “Mind” has ravelled out of the psyche-soma entity because of the necessity to *react* – react to deficiencies in the earliest care. This constitutes the trauma. In *health*, when the individual psyche-soma has come satisfactorily through the earliest

developmental stages, mind is no more than a special case of the functioning of the psyche-soma (Winnicott, 1949a). But, when the baby has to react in too great a degree and too early, she is not in a state of “going-on-being” and not in a state of psyche-soma entity, but meets an interruption in existence (Winnicott, 1949b). The round “Disk” and the “Circumference” are Emily’s metaphors for an inner state of going-on-being that she cannot reach.

According to this way of interpretation, the assumption is then, that Emily has had to react to deficiencies in the earliest care of her as a baby – in a first period of life when *she* should have needed an active and nearest perfect adaptation from the *environment* and when she should have needed a mother who would have “warded off the *unpredictable*” (Winnicott in Kahn, 1992 p. xlvi). This was followed by the necessity to take over with all too early thinking in order to make the care “perfect” when it had caused impingements, intrusions. At this very early stage of development, there is not sufficient ego strength for there to be a reaction without loss of identity (Winnicott, 1949b). It is the need to react that constitutes the trauma as the continuity of being will then be upset. Without the earliest illusion that the breast also *is* the baby “no contact can be reached between psyche and environment” (Winnicott, 1952 p. 223). A gap, an abyss will develop in “going-on-being”.

Winnicott (1949b) says: “Reacting at this stage of human development means a temporary loss of identity. This gives an extreme sense of insecurity, and lays the basis for an expectation of further examples of loss of continuity of self, and even a congenital (but not inherited) hopelessness in respect of the attainment of a personal life” (p. 183–84). And: “Relationships produce loss of the sense of self, and the latter is only regained by return to isolation” (Winnicott, 1952 p. 222).

The true self is dependent on a psyche-soma growth (Winnicott, 1949a), which means that the psyche can become the imaginative elaboration of somatic parts, feelings, and functions – and that later on, the live body, with its limits, and with an inside and outside, is *felt by the individual* to form the core for the imaginative self.

Emily Dickinson, with a – postulated – interruption in psyche-soma, in her “Circumference” and in her “going-on-being”, tried to find a solid ground to stand on in the *essential*, in the *protected* and in – what she called – the “*truth*”. In

her poems of definitions, i.e., poems, where she tries to describe certain phenomena or concepts (e.g., P 988, P 772, P 782), she seeks the nucleus or the essential properties in concepts like “music”, “beauty”, “best gains”, “pain”. In riddles, which she liked to write, she seeks the protected and hidden kernel. In her way of life, she tried to find solutions, which would feel true to herself. An example is the Calvinist faith and church which, in spite of some social pressure, never were to become her personal choice.

P 780
The Truth – is stirless –
Other force – may be presumed to move –
This – then – is best for confidence –
When oldest Cedars swerve –

And she finishes “Truth stays Herself and every man/That trusts Her – boldly up –”.

Her “Verse”, which she wondered if it “breathes” was her living true self, hidden in the drawer of her writingdesk – from the eyes of the world – but not from the eyes of Sue.

The immense importance of Sue for Emily cannot be questioned or exaggerated. Sue could “hold” (Winnicott, 1969), contain and receive the most hidden parts of Emily – declarations of love, playfulness, jealousy, demanding greed, hopelessness and anxiety. Sue became, in some parts an Other, who was not impinging or deserting. Sue became someone in the outer world to whom Emily could relate and – as a consequence – move in the direction of seeing herself from the outside. Between them, a transitional space was created (Winnicott, 1951) – the two neighbouring gardens – with a bridge of letters and poems, her “Alives”.

Emily Dickinson also creates bridges with the reader. In her poems, you find compression in the form of omissions, or deletions. Some of the omissions are retrievable, i.e., easy for the reader to guess (Miller, 1987). With non-retrievable or non-recoverable deletions, we cannot fill in with certainty, we can only reach meaning by reading the poem actively and by filling in our own associations. According to Miller (*ibid.*), in the poems of Emily Dickinson, we find a high frequency of omissions that is non-retrievable. She often creates a “gap of nonrecoverable deletion through asymmetry” (p. 29), i.e., the scene has no external point of reference or context. Another frequent non-recoverable deletion found in her poems is the omis-

sion of phrases providing the logical links between consecutive statements or between stanzas (*ibid.*).

The reader then, must create and fill in – where reality fails – and build the bridge from his/her side to meet her in her poems.

EPILOGUE

In this paper, I have drawn a line between the earliest childhood of Emily Dickinson and her poems. Beside this line there comes to the fore another one – which seems to be weaved into the one just pictured – and a line I plan to discuss in a coming paper. It is one which can be said to picture her experiences at the time of her mother's pregnancy, when Emily was 1½–2 years of age. We can see the metaphor of the “Coffin” which contains a “Citizen of Paradise” in this light, as well as a large number of poems that deal with “the grave” and “the crescent”. These hide and are parts of something unseparable and have an upwarded or rounded form.

We also remember how Emily was covered in a cape as protection from lightning and rain in the pinewood as a 2-year old. In these situations/images, Emily is inside and simultaneously outside, can perceive an absence and simultaneously a presence. She hides her own poems – her “Alives” – in the uterus/drawer – and “perception” which is to become a concept of such importance in her poetry – might here find *one* central source. Emily was given the name of her mother – “Emily”, but was called Elisabeth in her first years. Presence and simultaneous absence might here have a personal meaning.

According to this interpretation, Emily experienced her mother's pregnancy and the separation from her at 2 years old as traumatic – a trauma that might have intensified the earlier one – the one described in this paper.

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