THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

EMILY DICKINSON'S BIOGRAPHY

Reviewed by Stephen Vincent Benét

"IF fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase and the approbation of my dog would forsake me then", wrote Emily Dickinson some sixty years ago when her constant epistolary friend, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, twitted her mildly with a suppressed desire "to publish"; and the mingled pride and restraint of that reply betray the unflinching quality of her mind. She would not pursue one inch, and, during her lifetime, she published only as a tree publishes — leaves scattered among her friends to endure or crumble into nothing as the humor of weather might have it. But for all that, she has not been able to escape the trumpet. The wreath that would have been a little too notorious for her preference when she lived, she has now — the seldom given — and after much misunderstanding and a deal of fable, the lamp of her immortality burns with a sure light. Time cannot diminish, but only makes more apparent, what she had and did not claim. She may never be a universally popular poet — her thought has burrs for the lazy — but she will always be a great one; and the fact that she might have been among the finest prose writers of her time is definitely revealed in this biography.

The noteworthy external facts of her life are few, and their chronicling has been made even more difficult by the burning of her more intimate letters, at her request. Yet her biographer succeeds in giving a portrait of her fa firmer and more vivid than portrait which the historians of many more noisy existences have achieved. Born December 11, 1830, in the first brick house to be built in Amherst, of a family American for nine generations, her heredity was New England to the Puritan marrow of its bones. Her grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, a solemn, charming, religious and educational fanatic, who is delightfully pictured in white beaver hat and new greatcoat, departing from home in a yellow gig "to see about getting a charter for something they propose to call Amherst College", predicted the coming of the millennium in "the near future of about seven years" and constantly besought his family "never to forget the hereafter" — an injunction his granddaughter obeyed with unique precision. Her father, so deeply loved that she said of him, "If Father is asleep on the lounge the house is full", was haughty, austere, shy, gentle, terse New England. The only self indulgence recorded of him is the statement, "I always intend to have the best horse in town" — which he did — and his letters to the wife who feared and loved him in true Old Testament fashion were always stiffly signed "yr. most ob't servant". The New England of those elder Dickinsons, that indurate, wintry soil yet capable of such surprising Aprils, has passed or is already passing museumward — the temper is

out of the steel — and we shall not have an Emily Dickinson again, for her peculiar genius could have been rooted in no other world. Lace shawls and India shawls — gold banded china, and mahogany claw footed and pine-apple cut — the hard, unrelenting pews of the white meeting house at Hadley — a dowry brought by a yoke of brindle oxen — the fear of a God too mercilessly just for ease, and the reticent hardy flowers of a New England spring — these made her what she was, and the life they represented has altered beyond recovery.

"Home is the definition of God", she writes; and from that home her excursions were few — though until the one great shock of her life came about she was never the baffled recluse that some have pictured. She grew up "a natural, silly, happy girl" with quick wit, an instinctive devotion to nature, and a delight in music — but by no means a prodigy. If some time was devoted to herbariums and practising "The Grave of Bonaparte" and "The Lancer's Quickstep", she was also employed in the "prickly task" of housekeeping and bread making; and her attendance at the South Hadley Female Seminary (an institution where "those foolish notes called Valentines" were strictly forbidden and the development of suitable mates for missionaries to the heathen was strongly stressed) was marked with at least one spectacular instance of normal insurrection. When she returned to Amherst after her schooldays, she took an intense interest in all the mild social diversions permitted the youth of the time.

In that age of merino and sprigged muslins, the College Commencement and the Annual Cattle Show were the two great fêtes of the year, and both were enjoyed impartially by Emily, with innocent zest. Staid parties that ended at ten o'clock, where timorous flirtations were conducted upon horsehair sofas, while some lady or gentleman "obliged" with that popular melody "Are We Almost There Said the Dying Girl" — candy scrapes and blindman's buff in the President's house — lectures and protracted meetings — no cards or dancing ever — and on Sundays church, church, church. But she was content and happy.

Then her father was elected to Congress and took his family to Washington for the winter, when she was twenty three. There came her first mingling with a larger world that she astonished with her wit — her first experience of an undreamed of south. She must have made a charming picture among the primly pompous elegances of the Washington of the Fifties, with her white skin, sherry colored eyes, hair "bold as a chestnut burr", and keen, rapid laughter. And then what she had always half feared, half wondered about, happened to her — and she fell in love, irretrievably as lastingly.

The script is hardly legible here, but we know of the renunciation. With her upbringing, under the particular circumstances, anything but renunciation would have been impossible. And when she renounced once, she renounced forever.

"Sue come! That man is here — Father and Mother are away and I am afraid Emily will go away with him!" But he went away instead — died later, half across the world from her — and she stayed in that home which had been to her the definition of God. She kept a picture on the wall of her room and once she asked a good friend to name her new son by his name. "That was all, for the visible score", but from then on her imperceptible withdrawal from the world grew only more definite with the passage of days.

She had alleviations, it is true — though not of the irreparable. Her immediate family — her sister-in-law, "Sister Sue", to whom alone she really showed the self that was her poetry — that sister's children, dearly loved — books, "Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne and the Revelations" — flowers — friends by presence or correspondence, many notable in their day — most of all, perhaps, the endless chain of notes that passed between her house and Sister Sue's — notes in which so many of her poems are embedded. But the poems she showed only to a few others, and the one friendly attempt at publication brought such apparent distress to her that it was not repeated.

Her gradual self seclusion deprived her neither of her sense of humor nor her capacity for love. "You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog as large as myself that my father bought me. They are better than beings because they know but do not tell; and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano." There you have her attitude. As for news — in spite of an interest in the affairs of the world much greater than has been supposed, it grew increasingly more true that

> The only news I know
> Is bulletins all day
> From immortality.

Her soul increasingly looked deeper into the crystal. The tall pale snowstorms stalked outside the house in the deep winter, and in the deep summer the twilight she loved came as always, touching Amherst with his yellow glove; but even those things came slowly to be of less importance beside the immense, invisible events of the spirit. She never became a visionary, but she lived and died a mystic — and the circle of physical life narrowed about her as it grew less meaning, till at last only a few things remained. After her father's death she never left the house except to water her flowers on the porch at twilight. On May 16, 1886, she died and was carried on a bier of pine boughs covered with a pall of blue sand violets to the cemetery where the bodies of her mother and father lay. So little travel was there for such a far voyager.

Her biographer says, "She had the soul of a monk of the Middle Ages bound up in the flesh of Puritan descent", and her poems sometimes remind us in their tremendous omissions and their huge brevity of those monkish illuminations where all terrifying Hell is painted within two inches and the whole Host of Heaven itself can be covered with a coin. And as she could shrink a world to the compass of a gem, so any event was large enough for her to make a world of it — as may be witnessed in the extraordinary account of the burning of Stebbin's barn (pages 320–321 of the "Life and Letters"), a description of a totally unimportant fire which reminds one of Stephen Crane at his best describing the Last Judgment. And as native and out of key with the American prose of her age as Crane's work was native and out of key with his, is her note upon "sugar-pears with hips like hams and the flesh of bonbons". But the only attempt to induce her to write prose deliberately failed — though no one who reads her letters here can fail to be sorry that it so happened.

Her dealings with religion were characteristic, and are most interestingly discussed. The minatory, fire eyed God of the white meeting house was never hers. She loved God, but she had her own opinion of him, too. No one who had not could have remarked, as she did, "'Give me thine

heart' is too peremptory a courtship for earth, however irresistible in heaven"; or "Do you think we shall see God? Think of Abraham strolling with him in genial promenade." Her letters and conversation were salted with the Bible — but she was very nearly the only person since certain of the saints to treat the Bible and its characters with a certain spontaneous directness that would have delighted St. Francis of Assisi as wholly as it would have desolated Cotton Mather. Like most fine poets, she had a tenderness for the devil. She remarks of him in one letter, "We read in a tremendous Book about 'an enemy' and armed a confidential fort to scatter him away. The time has passed, and years have come, and yet not any 'Satan'. I think he must be making war upon some other nation."

So we come to the letters, and the desire to quote overmuch. The unique and characteristic transitions from such a passage as, "Friday I tasted life. It was a vast morsel. A circus passed the house — still I feel the red in my mind though the drums are out", to, a little later, "Vinnie is deeply affected by the death of her dappled cat, though I convince her it is immortal, which assists her some", are a constant temptation. But it is better to point at the book — and the books of the poems — and have done. Too much reviewing consists of warming over in little what should be tasted in the whole — and I am quite conscious that I have fallen into that error already.

It only remains to be said that Martha Dickinson Bianchi has accomplished a very necessary and difficult task with reticent excellence. For those who are interested in American poetry, or indeed in the best of poetry at all, the "Life and Letters" should be an indispensable book — and not only for them alone. The internal history of an extraordinary soul is there — and souls come somewhat infrequently, even in our times. And there is an epitaph for that soul there, which, to my mind, is hard to surpass in its vein: "The small heart cannot break. The ecstasy of its penalty solaces the large."

The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson. By Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Houghton Mifflin Co.