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EMILY BRONTË AND EMILY DICKINSON: PARALLEL LIVES ON OPPOSING SHORES

By Wendy Anne Powers

The lives of Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson are seen as paradigms of the problems and responsibility of the biographer of the quiet life or inward world. The similar familial environment of the authors: strong father; lack of maternal influence; devoted siblings enjoying intellectual rivalry; a background of the written word, is examined. Both Emilies found sustenance and defence in their homes and suffered homesickness when absent. The influence of the Brontës, particularly of Emily and Charlotte, on Emily Dickinson and her poetry is investigated.

Keywords: Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Biography

Two women with so little of what the world thinks of as action in their existences as barely to make one life between them combined: Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson are each the ‘gigantic’ woman of nineteenth-century literature in their respective countries. Both led very quiet external lives and yet had spectacular lives of the mind. There is a demand for knowledge of them, and very little that can satisfy that demand in the way of factual information — but yet there has not been a lack of biographies written about each woman. The lives of Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson pose a special problem to the biographer: so much genius to be accounted for, and so little experience to explain it. The readers of their writings and the biographers have trouble believing that there is not some secret in the midst of these women’s lives.

In reaction to the quiet existence led by each woman, biographers have, at times, simply created information about the two Emilies, never so frequently as in the decades immediately following each woman’s death when love affairs and secret lives were manufactured at will, more in the interest of creating myth than biography. Today, we are much more responsible biographers, or so the dignified cloak of academia makes it seem. The scholarly biographer now wants to knock down the old misleading myths, but, as Nadel recognizes in his study of the genre of biography, ‘the desire to correct or revise the myth [involves the biographer in his] own unconscious creation of new myths’. The lives of the two Emilies, so uncannily similar — and in nothing more so than our lack of knowledge about them — are paradigms of the unique problem and responsibility facing the biographer of the quiet life.

Born little over a decade apart, the two women’s lives ran parallel courses from childhood. Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson were both born into families of importance, the former’s father a pastor and the latter’s a lawyer. Both fathers were leading citizens.
of their respective towns, Haworth, Yorkshire, and Amherst, Massachusetts, and so each daughter was known to the townspeople. The family environment in which each writer grew up was made up of similar characters: a father of unusually strong intelligence and power, often portrayed in both women’s biographies as a tyrant, and a mother in contrast lacking, literally for Brontë and figuratively for Dickinson. Brontë’s mother died when Emily was only three years old; for all the impact Dickinson’s mother apparently had in her household or on her daughter’s character, she was equally nonexistent. Both girls’ characters were singularly shaped by their father and singularly uninfluenced by a mother’s presence — or rather shaped by its lack.

The number of siblings each writer had may vary, but the intensity of the relationship among them was the same. Both sets of siblings were unusually close, their relationships being earnest, lively, and of a peculiarly intellectual nature. Both fathers imbued their children with an urgent demand for learning and scholarship, nurturing this desire in their daughters as well as sons. This is unusual. While a nineteenth-century daughter’s achievements were something to be counted, intellectualism was not usually in the list. But these children grew up in an environment which emphasized creativity, intelligence and wit. While the incredible Brontë juvenilia, both in amount and quality, is well-known, in the Dickinson household the children also eagerly shared knowledge and books and, while not writing fiction as the Brontë children did, the Dickinson children did value writing. The father Dickinson stressed the art of letter composition, and the children learned this well, as both the quality of their letters and the references in them to the practice of this art show. The similarity in the sibling relationship of each household seems significant: both contained an element of intellectual rivalry, but both were above all devoted to each other. They felt a peculiar need to protect each other from the outside world. The older brother was adored and venerated by both Emilies, and while both brothers fell short of their sisters’ hopes and expectations in later years (Austin Dickinson more subtly than Branwell Brontë), both Emilies continued to love and defend them, even to the other sisters. Brontë and Dickinson were even more attached to their sisters, though both women were also more reticent of this relationship. While Emily Brontë’s deep devotion to Charlotte and Anne and Emily Dickinson’s to Lavinia cannot be doubted, it is interesting that in both cases the two Emilies were the more vocally undemonstrative sister, Charlotte and Lavinia being both more vociferous in the expression of their love, at least in the letters that survive. Perhaps that is only because both Emilies were the first sister to die, leaving Charlotte and Lavinia to defend the memory of their brilliant if socially defiant sisters.

The family home was the centre of existence, providing both sustenance and defence for the two Emilies. Both were sent away to school for short periods of time, but both girls eagerly returned home, suffering from varying degrees of homesickness. These absences in youth only reaffirmed the felt necessity of home to their health and imaginations. If Brontë was more intensely homesick as a girl, Dickinson would outdo her by practically falling ill from moving down the street with her family when in her twenties. Emily Brontë is famous for her love of the moors directly behind the parsonage, while Emily Dickinson would choose the walls of home itself as the limits of her external world. In the anecdotes that survive about both women and their love of home, stories of baking bread occur, the quintessential symbol of home and hearth: Brontë is said to have propped open her German book on the kitchen table to study while baking bread,
Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson

and Dickinson, as Brontë, baked bread for her father, winning a second prize ribbon for her bread in a fair.

When Emily Brontë died, Emily Dickinson was then just eighteen years old. Her favourite books, after the Bible and Shakespeare, were the novels of Dickens, George Eliot, and Charlotte and Emily Brontë. However, because of the stark originality of Dickinson’s poetry, the literary forces that influenced her are often glossed over, as she seems to owe so little to anyone. Yet rarely does a new force or direction in literature burst forth on its own without having been shaped by what came before it.

Emily Dickinson was influenced by the Brontë family, and most specifically Emily, from beginning to end. By beginning, I mean the beginning of Dickinson’s life as writer: of the three verses she is known to have written before 1858, one was a commemorative verse on the death of Charlotte Brontë (‘Oh what an afternoon for Heaven,/ When ‘Brontë’ entered there!’). By end, I mean Dickinson’s death: Thomas Wentworth Higginson read Emily Brontë’s poem ‘No coward soul is mine’, at Dickinson’s funeral, it being one of her favourite poems; some traditions have it that she had asked for it to be read.

The Brontë influence on the Dickinson household was not small. In a list of books which Dickinson’s brother Austin recommends to his future wife Susan Gilbert, printed in Sewall’s biography of Emily Dickinson, lies the title ‘Shirley’. Sewall identifies most of the titles, but not this one; the letter is dated October 1851, and I would pose its identification as Charlotte Brontë’s novel Shirley, published in 1849. Years later, Emily Dickinson sent a copy of the Brontë sisters’ poems to the publisher Thomas Niles. Both brother and sister would enthusiastically recommend the writing of the Brontës. The names Jane, Rochester, Cathy and Heathcliff are found casually interspersed throughout Emily Dickinson’s letters. She wrote in one letter that her sister ‘Vinnie has a new pussy the color [sic] of Branwell Brontë’s hair’, indicating a casual familiarity not just with the writings of but with the lives of the Brontës. Dickinson’s father gave her a dog which she named Carlo and dearly loved, much like Emily Brontë’s Keeper; Sewall dates the present of Carlo at, he says as best he can tell, 1850. Walsh points out that Dickinson read Jane Eyre in the fall of 1849 — and St John Rivers’s dog in the novel is named Carlo.

In his book The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson, Walsh notes the influence the Brontë family, primarily Jane Eyre, had on Dickinson. Sewall mentions, in passing, that ‘Jane Eyre’ inspired Dickinson by the example of a sensitive, intellectual girl holding to her convictions and triumphing. Walsh considers the effect of the novel to be substantial in the shaping of her character:

Dimly aware that she possessed unusual abilities, though uncertain of their exact nature, impatient to discern in her stars something of loftiness, grandeur, exaltation, in the pages of the Brontë novel she came upon herself and all her vague desires mirrored to the life.

In a lyrical letter of early 1850 to her friend Jane Humphrey, Dickinson writes, ‘The winter was all one dream, and the spring has not yet waked me...’: Walsh interprets the source of this dream to be Jane Eyre: ‘Sometime, then, in the early winter of 1849–50 something happened which had a transforming effect on Emily and her attitude toward the future. That something, beyond any doubt, was her first encounter with the novel, Jane Eyre.’ To Dickinson as incipient author, it must have been especially inspiring to discover a woman writing with the kind of fervent honesty towards which she was
inclined. Walsh also cites *Jane Eyre* as the inspiration for some of Dickinson’s poems, and he provides a chart of twelve instances of Dickinson borrowing phrasing directly from the novel. But what Walsh does not do is look at the influence on Dickinson of Charlotte Brontë’s younger sister.

If, at the beginning of her life as poet, Dickinson was influenced by Charlotte Brontë, as her power grew, she moved towards the Brontë sister who shared her name. Walsh mentions Emily Brontë once, saying, ‘The stark personality of Emily Brontë was to intrigue [Dickinson] more and more as time went on, leading to some quirks in her own behavior [*sic*] that added to her reputation for queerness.’ But Walsh drops the subject at this, saying no more of Emily Brontë, nor commenting on the parallels between the lives of the two Emilies. In late 1857, Dickinson read Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and Walsh writes of how she enjoyed this biography. I suspect that she was even more interested in the character of Emily Brontë, glimpsed only fleetingly and in shadow, behind the figure of Charlotte. The only other statement Walsh makes concerning Dickinson and Emily Brontë is that, ‘though she could probably not have achieved sufficient objectivity to be entirely aware of it, [Dickinson] was actually a mixture, a strange combination of the qualities, physical and otherwise, of the two sisters, Charlotte and Emily.’ Actually, Dickinson’s character is almost entirely similar to that of the Brontë sister whose name she shared; the only trait Dickinson shared with Charlotte and which Emily Brontë was completely lacking was the need for some external support and approbation, witnessed by Dickinson’s many correspondences with literary men. It is hard to believe that Dickinson was unaware of her kinship with Emily Brontë. In her letters and the recorded anecdotes about her, Dickinson seems conscious of creating herself, and her behaviour often feels premeditated for effect as she shaped her persona — with Emily Brontë as a guide.

Dickinson called her ‘gigantic Emily Brontë’. That she projected herself in the image of the Brontë family, Emily in particular, was not unnoticed by those who knew her: Sewall records the notes taken by Millicent Todd Bingham in an interview with Mary Jordan, who knew the Dickinson family: ‘Ned told Miss Jordan that she [Emily?] was a left-over of the Brontës . . .’. Ned was Dickinson’s nephew; the supposition of Emily’s name which Sewall makes is necessary because the comment stands alone in the midst of notes about other family members — but about whom else in the family could Ned’s astute comment possibly be?

Although both Emilies seem so unshaped by external influences, perhaps environment does account for something in their development, if such similar familial environments could produce such similar characters. Mrs Bingham’s notes also include Miss Jordan’s comment on Dickinson: ‘Thinks Emily . . . living in imagination entirely’. This, like many comments on Dickinson, seems descriptive of both Emilies. When Dickinson writes to her friend Abiah Root, ‘The shore is safer, . . . but I love to buffet the sea — I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger!’, Emily is not speaking of physical actions, but of her thoughts, and such a wild independent philosophy imbues the poetry and prose also of Emily Brontë. This philosophy produces the almost amoral world of both women’s writing. Institutionalized morality was rejected by both Emilies; an indication of this is that both would stop attending church with their families.
The sisters were devoted, each feeling a protectiveness about the other. [The other] aggressively stood between Emily and the world in later years when Emily no longer could face contacts as far abroad as the living-room or the front door. Emily reciprocated with daily allegiances... 20

Brontë and Dickinson must be the two most famous female recluses in the history of literature. The above passage, by the way, happens to be about Dickinson; but it could have been about either woman.

The deaths of Brontë and Dickinson were the birth of rumour and myth. Emily Brontë’s status as author was even questioned, some maintaining that her brother Branwell wrote parts of *Wuthering Heights*. Both women exhibit very practical knowledge in their writing of things from guns and law (Brontë) to farming (Dickinson), leading people to question, as they have of Shakespeare, how this writer could possibly have known these things? Both women’s biographies have debated without resolve the same questions. Was the father a tyrant, or merely a strong man of his times? Was there a love affair? And what about ‘agoraphobia’? The modern name of another illness is attempting to attach itself to the myth of Emily Brontë in Katherine Frank’s biography, 21 and one wonders how long it will be before a biographer starts talking about the extreme thinness of Emily Dickinson in the one photograph which exists of her. In her biography of Christina Rossetti, Jan Marsh, 22 with no evidence other than an interpreted ‘personality profile’, posits incest. It may sell more biographies to suggest a melodramatic name such as agoraphobia, anorexia or incest on the dust-jacket, but it is not ethical. While complete impartiality in the writing of biography cannot be achieved, that does not mean that one abandons the fight for it.

The biographer of these women is confronted by the difficulties of writing of the internal life without resorting to tabloid theories. Both Emilies lived in ‘an independent world, created out of pure intelligence’, 23 which is how Wordsworth describes the poet’s life, and never did two poets more fulfil his ideal. It is a challenge, not insurmountable, to chronicle these lives.

Notes

4 Sewall, p. 93.
5 Sewall, pp. 621, 637.
6 Sewall, p. 638.
7 Sewall, p. 498.
9 Sewall, p. 682.
10 Walsh, p. 67.
11 Walsh, p. 66.
13 Walsh, p. 117.
14 Walsh, p. 114.
15 Walsh, p. 117.
16 Sewall, p. 621.
17 Sewall, p. 264.
18 Sewall, p. 263.
19 Johnson, p. 16.
20 Johnson, p. 34.
Biographical note

Wendy Powers grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. She studied English literature at The College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, and the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. She taught English literature in college-prep schools for five years on the East Coast, before becoming a tour director in England and Ireland for Tauck World Discovery. She now lives in San Francisco with her husband, Robin McLeod, a videographer, where she manages the city’s largest condominium complex; and like most (former) English teachers, she is working on a novel.