TWO MINDS THAT SHOULD HAVE MET

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To Emily Dickinson

An arterial interlude,
An artist's brush found a hand,
And time did circumscribe the mood
That only destiny had planned.
A poet, to measure life —
A flower, a snake, a bee's juleps;
She imitated strife —
Her age but felt her lips.
You'll know her as you know the tomb —
As sunsets know of majesty;
She died — before death crossed her room
She merely paused — for Eternity.

THE liberal ideas of the mid-Nineteenth Century in America invaded the Connecticut River Valley very cautiously. The area remained staunchly orthodox, with Congregationalism maintaining the lead. The steadfastness of the valley's religious and social philosophy was secure for more than a full generation after Boston had welcomed Unitarianism. In fact, very few of the reforms of Eastern Massachusetts excited the slightest tremor in the placid and simple life of the western half of the state. Abolition moved them not, but Temperance did. A brook farm invention would have shocked them, but foreign missions abroad were of the utmost importance. Yet, in this seemingly secure picture - the garden of Emily Dickinson - came the news of the Transcendental Ralph Waldo Emerson. Economic superfluity and mechanical *savior faire* brought leisure time, hence more reading and diversion. New aspirations were being expressed by speakers, lecturers and teachers. Young men and young women jumped at the fermentation of the intellectual fever. Amherst could not resist it for too long a while.

As misfortune would have it, we have little notion of what liberal writings came into the Amherst bard's experience. We do know, from a glancing allusion in her letters, that she did touch the edge of Thoreau's social criticisms and Emerson's transcendental mood.

There is no direct evidence that Emerson, the visionary and poet, ever came face-to-face with Emily Dickinson, New England nun and poetess, although the former ventured to Amherst many times. Once he even spent the night under her brother's shelter, and it is hardly likely that Emily escaped feeling the sage's living presence. Doubtessly the older generation of the firm Amherst society eyed Emerson with suspicion and care. His apparent heresies were not completely particularized, but they were viewed as youthfully dangerous. His first speaking engagement was not the result of an invitation by the school authorities, but it humbly resulted from the persuasion of two undergraduate societies.

In the autumn of 1865 Ralph Waldo Emerson came to Amherst College again and delivered a series of six lectures. Subsequently, it is reported he went to Austin Dickinson's house for tea; Emily had gone to Boston. He spoke again before the Social Union in 1872 and again in 1879 at the invitation of President Seelye. Emily had entered upon her life of seclusion, but it is difficult to accept that she never heard the profound voice of the philosopher-poet whom she, of all persons in Amherst, was most profoundly equipped to understand. The Emerson that touched her being most tenderly was the philosopher and the singer of a transcendental horizon — the Emerson of poems, of essays, and of nature.

The impression that Emerson created a point of view which Emily Dickinson adopted is most untrue. The real resemblances which are observable in Emerson and Dickinson are due to the truth that both were responsive people to the life around them at the time. Their work was a fulfillment of the finer grandiose energies of Puritanism. Theirs was the freeing of ideas and intellectual independence from the ironclad chains of dogma. The soil was softening; the dawn was being born,

and the icy coating of Puritanism was giving acclaim to a master thought and conviction — "self-sufficiency." Individualism was to become absolute — the final accomplishment in the painful struggle and the revolt from authority. Emerson portrayed a fine sense of the divine sufficiency of man, for it was inextricably entwined with his ecstatic acceptance of life.

"We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies."

The soul's infinite depth, its self-reliance and its existence in itself as omnipotent enough are intrinsic to the transcendental ethics of Emerson and Dickinson. There was no proof for the poets of the soul's sovereignty, nor was there need of disproof.

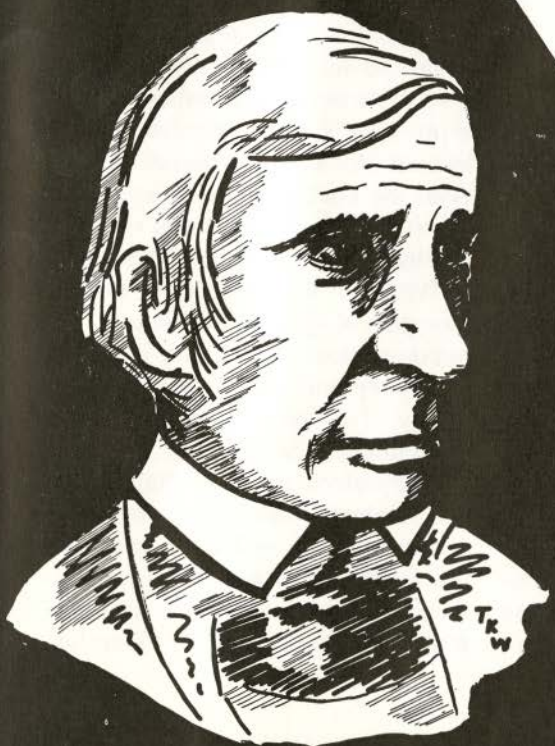
The two, whose souls reflected upon themselves, whose spirits stood in eternal awe of themselves, differed in their poetic application of transcendentalism. Emerson was a social critic engulfing human institutions, the world and individuals. The fullest development of man must be primary, and all institutions and world matters must be directed toward that end. The god-like power in his self-reliance was to be the final fulfillment of the "good Life." Emily, in her grand economy had the small but infinite world of her house, her garden, her piano and a few books. She was beyond economics; she was too profound for politics; and she chose her "own society." The transcendental life was to be tested upon the inner life. The individual must maintain himself in the face of grief, poignacy, and disappointment. For Emily the problem was to discover what the lonely soul could do in the strain of inevitable pain and loss. Within the limited scope of her experience she was able to live and die again and again and to know the soul's capacity to endure forever.

Good coming from evil, spiritual gain springing of mortal pain, were common notions of Nineteenth-Century idealism; the theological paradox of sin had its own means of grace. The doctrine was stated again and again, and then restated. It provided the basis of many essays by Emerson; for instance, "Compensation" and "Uriel." Emily Dickinson redeemed the doctrine from its hard-bitten, blunt and hackneyed form.

"Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.
Not one of all the Purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the Definition,
So clear, of Victory
As he, Defeated, Dying
On Whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Break, agonized, and clear!"

No mechanical devices are necessary. The pulse of the universe is taken and suffering transcends itself. The work is economical and severly structural. Nothing is out of place; nothing could have been spared. She accomplished with one glancing stroke what Thoreau had in mind and what Emerson poetically dreamed, a demand that poetry be justified by its sincerity and cosmic power.

Emerson and Emily Dickinson were avid advocates of integrity. Their common purpose was to explore deeply the spiritual power of man. Plainness and homeliness were sufficient for them. Emerson, in spite of his genius of the



epigram, and Dickinson with her hand upon the urgency of the soul's superior experiences, did not care prudishly for the sweet niceties of verse. They displayed the form implicit in the bare living thought or experience. Sense, power, and meaning had grace, not rhyme or set forms. Therefore, it is not alarming to find that the two are indistinguishable at times — especially in the sententious quatrin that both employed.

Indeed it is quite easy to discover passages that might have belonged to either poet. Professor Percy H. Boynton had deftly demonstrated this apparency.

"To clothe the fiery thought
In simple words succeeds
For still the craft of genius is
To mask a king in weeds."

And:

"The hedge is gemmed with
diamonds;
The air with Cupids full.
The cobweb clues of Rosamond
Guide lovers to the pool."

Both are from Emerson's hand but it would be difficult to say that Emily hadn't penned them. The resemblance in substance and thought are only equalled by the similarity in style. Plagiarism or imitation could not be belittling accusations hurled upon either of the artists, for the explanations are simply accountable to the fact that the two mounted the hill of poetic immortality from the same New England field — they never lost their rooted kinship with their earth and past.

The moral and social stability of New England combined with the intellectual fermentations of the time were reflected in Emily Dickinson's poetry and Emerson's prose and poetry alike. The striking arrangement of their thoughts and words were acquired from the native language and rocky earth of the day. Their instincts for forms of communications, preferred in realistic speech, was so much stronger than their regard for the rules of the purists. The attitude was Emersonian, for a poet's first concern was less with the past and its literature than with the impressions of life living about him.

Their treatment of nature was not a conscious setting out to propound a doctrine of nature. Emily has no desire to be a nature poet, for she found the external world and outer life so intricately related to the world of the soul from which she extracted her poetry. Emerson viewed nature as a means to greater eternal truths and therefore used it as experiences from which profound philosophical meaning could be drawn. Emily located nature as an artist; Emerson saw it as a *philosopher;* the twain did meet. Nature, or truth, was a model from whose realms subtleties, expressions and experiences could be learned. As a visible manifestation of God, the Puritan conception of nature was so ingrained in their art that much was left without comment. The dreams of William Cullen Bryant and the thoughts of Jonathan Edwards were not overlooked, though they might have been overtly disguised. For Emily the beauty of the earth offered a kind of revelation of the hereafter; for Emerson, a perfection to be attained. Two transcendental minds never met on earth, but their real meeting came in the realm of thought and experience; their final meeting will come, as Emily should have desired it, in Eternity.