

## Dickinson's Final Sorrows

In a letter of 1883, Emily Dickinson declared that “The Crisis of the sorrow of so many years is all that tires me.” Later she cited a line from one of her favorite poems: “As Emily Brontë to her Maker, I write to my Lost ‘Every Existence would exist in thee – ’”<sup>1</sup>

The darkest season of Dickinson’s life began after her mother’s death in 1882, followed by the death of her eight-year-old nephew Gilbert from typhoid fever in 1883. After this, she wrote to his mother: “I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity in everything that flies – His Life was like the Bugle, which winds itself away, his Elegy an echo – his Requiem ecstasy –.” Dickinson’s posthumous editor, Thomas H. Johnson, claimed that “no death during Emily Dickinson’s lifetime more deeply shocked and grieved her” for “with his departure went a certain inner light.” Her final “poems” more closely resemble fragments, although she continued faithfully writing letters to many family members and close friends.

One such friend who sustained her toward the end of her life was Judge Otis Phillips Lord, who had been one of her father’s closest associates. He pursued a romance with Dickinson after the death of his wife. Although Dickinson loved him, she refused his marriage proposal. Lord’s death from a stroke, only six months after Gilbert’s, led Dickinson to write the following short fragment:

Each that we lose takes part of us;  
A crescent still abides,  
Which like the moon, some turbid night,  
Is summoned by the tides.

<sup>1</sup> “Every Existence would exist in thee” is a line from Emily Brontë’s poem “No coward soul is mine.”

<sup>2</sup> This Dickinson line clearly refers to a line in the New Testament epistle of First Timothy: “For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (1:12).

In June 1884, Dickinson suffered a second “nervous prostration” and never fully recovered. Intimations of immortality haunted Dickinson until the end, and from her earliest poetry to her final letters, a central theme emerges—what she identified as her “flood subject”: immortality. In a letter dated November 19, 1884, she confessed that “to ‘know in whom’ we ‘have believed,’ is Immortality.”<sup>2</sup>

That final day came for her on May 15, 1886. Despite her inability to “declare for Christ” during her year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, despite her failure to “keep the Sabbath going to Church,” Dickinson wrestled with God to the end. One of her last letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson ended with a citation from the Genesis 32 story of Jacob’s fight with the Angel: “ ‘I will not let thee go except I bless thee’ – Pugilist and Poet, Jacob was correct –.” This was a story she had dramatized earlier in the poem “A little East of Jordan.” Dickinson’s faith conformed neither to Calvinist orthodoxies nor to the fashions of Amherst, which makes Brontë’s poem—which Higginson read at Dickinson’s funeral—even more poignant:

No coward soul is mine  
No trembler in the world’s storm-troubled sphere  
I see Heaven’s glories shine  
And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear . . .