

Preface

“unable”



Joseph Donahue

One page of the facsimile edition of the letters of Emily Dickinson shows a letter of Emily Dickinson, written to Sue Dickinson, completely blacked out. Even for one familiar with the back-story to such radical textual interventions in the Dickinson archive, the effect is dramatic; so, too, the sheer paradox of its presence: so much effort was expended on this particular page to assure it could not be read, and yet the blacked out letter was there, as if the negation of the letter needed to be preserved, as if that was what also must live forever amid the poet's words. If the written page was the true medium of the poetry, I felt compelled to ask in the spirit of letters and their relation to the spirit, was this act of blacking out also a work of art?*

If so, then for all its darkness, how brilliantly rendered the censure was; the unsigned artist has chosen to obliterate not simply a letter of Dickinson's, but a letter that is also a poem, not simply any poem, but THE poem, it seemed to me then and now, in which, Dickinson's defining idiom arises, in the breach, still preserved here, that separates stanza 4 from stanza 5. Further, this poem is doubly notable, and so the censure doubly effective, since the discovery of

*See Martha Nell Smith's essay on "unable" (p. 282 below) for images of these "interventions."

the style is associated with the naming of the poets beloved, Sue, forever more. In this letter/poem, the beloved is explicitly linked to the order of the cosmos. She is a star chosen from amid many “from out the wide night’s numbers,” by the beginning poet. So, not just the poet but the intervening artist is cosmologically minded. If the poem calls the universe to be around the name of the beloved, the artist adds the act of negation as a part of the world making ambition of poetic utterance. And yet we do know the page, the poem, which the artist doesn’t want us to know. As initiates into the Dickinson work we know both the poem and its deletion.

Who was this anonymous artist? The editor of the letters thinks its Austin, but there are others who take it to be Mabel. What we do know is that this artist has struck out not merely the name of the poet’s beloved, but the whole poem, not just the whole poem but the entire tradition of what was once famously called love in the western world, which Dickinson inherits and passes on, from Petrarch and Dante to Sydney, to Shakespeare, to Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Brownings, to Dickinson’s contemporary, Mallarme. We may take this darkening as a simple obliteration, or we might, given the shrewd mastery of her materials that our artist demonstrates, be forgiven for entertaining the suggestion as hers that the entire love lyric tradition might carry within it such a blinding *coup de foudre*. As this tradition of poetry is innately theological in that it involves both gods coming to earth, and the divination of the beloved through the devotions and consecrations of the lover, in Dickinson’s term, the idolater, we might well understand our artist to be saying that a part of Love’s agony is precisely to experience within the act of desiring such a negation as the blackening out of the letter enacts.

In approaching this cancelled love letter, this abstraction in the place of a name, I have been especially influenced by the work of Barton St Levi, especially in regard to his reading of Dickinson’s relation to the 19th century American Sentimental Love Religion, a religion which on the evidence of their letters can claim Mabel and Austin among its most enthusiastic practitioners. In this religion, which I seriously take to be such, writing is an act of deification. The beloved is raised up and set amid the stars. I tend to see this love religion as a part of the vast imaginative effort to make what Catherine Albanese has recently traced in her extraordinary work,

A Republic of Mind and Spirit, the American Metaphysical Religion. Albanese work allows us to see more distinctly the cosmological implications of Dickinson's lyrics, and to see in what Dickinson wrote and how she wrote it the practice of her own combinatory spirituality. This spirituality draws upon a magical world-view, both from the culture coming to be around her, and from the English folk past. Indeed Robert Duncan in the recently posted recordings of his 1981 seminar on Dickinson is emphatic on this. For him, Dickinson is not just a fully self-conscious "pagan," she is an initiate of the hidden religion; her poems and letters are spells and hexes. And one of her predominate poetic form is the Valentine.

What I will read tonight is a suite of poems that are a part of a multi-volume ongoing poem called *Terra Lucida*. *Terra Lucida* touches in a number of places upon 19th century art, thought, and culture, most especially the Hudson River School and Luminist painters. With "unable" I presume to intuit Dickinson's world, to find there, in a phrase than has long been key to my understanding of poetics, "an adjoining zone." I begin with a response to Mabel Todd's Manichean gesture, and move out from the letter to the world both Dickinson's world and our own, and my own. My title comes from lines of Dickinson, lines she sent to Sue on the occasion of the death of Sue's sister:

Unable are the loved to die
For love is immortality

Nay
Deity.

unable

Black diagonal waves
across the sky of

the page,
in the

rush of, the
surge and rip of,

a censorious
wind, raising up

stipples of
negation

black slashes
tilting right

where were
words . . .

*

Must be
underneath,

an unfolding of
thought and feeling,

must be
a love letter

from deep within the
century before last,

underneath all the
xes, loops, squiggles and

horizontal
strikes

must be
an incantation

a lyric, calling into
being a paradisa

homestead
an Eden made

anew, of
summer fields,

birds, flowers,
an orchard,

the rising sun,
the wonder of love,

the gleam
of bees,

the miracle
of honey

*

Must be
the scratch of

a skilled a hand
a hand that puts gold leaf

to ceramic cups, that
can paint flowers

on silk, so that
no syllable of the letter

sent does not
dissolve in the stir of

a rich black ink,
as if

bearing its own
obliterative

witness in
the church of

“hermetic memory”
where all is transformed

by the touch of
this inky spell,

even the avowed
rarities of the earth,

never to be
struck

from the
living record

of you, my preceptor,
the gems, pearls out of

the depths, the deep mines
in distant continents,

the jungles
and deserts the age

was itself
dazzled by,

opal twilight, the sun
at midpoint,

possibly
over Ecuador.

*

Must be
an anti-script of

pure lightlessness
pouring forth from the hand of

care, envy, rage, grief
in a letter, across

a letter perhaps
to no ultimate point beyond

assuring scholars
this letter was

in some sense
answered

*

Must be
this page is the

creation, and the black of the
cancelling hand,

the flourish
of a Manichean.

*

Must be
this annihilating

post-script is malevolent
tendency rising from the singing of

the name of the
beloved.

*

Must be
an anti-logos

there before any
word, before even the paper itself

the blackness
before the page was,

soaking through from behind
pulled into visibility

with a
pen stroke.

*

So, before ink or pen or paper
came to be there was

an immense and
inaugural passion

Love's name,
cried out,

a star was chosen
from amid the many

in the night within which
birdsong gathers.

*

So, not anti-logos,
anti-valentine.

*

So, there will come further elisions.
As well as, now and then,

the scissoring
to shreds of the

name of the
beloved.

*

So, which of
any of

our passions will
not be blotted out, which

love not swallowed in a storm of black,
a welling of final sky

a rescission
of all starlight

a redaction of
our every delight,

our celebrations will be our Calvary
as through our deepest

joy falls
a black dash,

a few loops,
a curlicue or two.

*

Nonetheless
who among you has not

written out the name of your secret love
at least once, so that it might, if only for a moment,

shine before your eyes
like an offering?

*

Who,
in love

- and literate -
has not written out

if only on a scrap of
tallied

numbers, or in
the snow, or deep inside

a textbook
so to

almost touch,
almost enter

the rendering
of the sound of

the one
name

unuttered yet
sounded

in the hollows
of an overwhelming

devotion
it secretly

rises into being
and then sinks away,

in illegibility,
in scribble.

*

Cloud of ink
ink of unknowing.

*

So, feel a flow through the
fingertips of that which light

ultimately illumines,
the presence of the dark,

the shape of the beautiful loops of ,
the dark beneath the dark

now flowing
over the white page

the valleys and peaks
Love's world coming to be

within the black fire and wind
blowing sideways the tips of

each lick of flame, tilting
toward where the wind

says say the name the
single vibration that

has been the object of
your long idolatry,

feel the name of your love
pass onto the page, into the page

drowning within the page
the wave of the name

pulled under
by the successive

cross-currents
of its own dissipation.

*

So, where the pen lifts from the page
and flies above it, then settling

hear Mabel Todd saying:
I am ready for more. I am

*ready to do the work of death again
to be the scythe Longfellow sang of*

*and lay this field of love on its side
and plant the new black crop*

*that so abundantly
fills this field.*

00

northwest passage

So, sister, could you risk the
glaciers, blocked channels, step past

the remnants of encampments
the frozen flags and

diaries in the ice,
that we might meet in

the yet to be claimed transit
blending one ocean and another

mixing twilight and dawn
eternity and immortality

grandeur and grief?
Sister, it may be the case

that my last note to you
may have scuttled in the

Arctic sea between
our two houses,

black depth rising
up through love's vessel.

Sister, if you love me,
could you set to sea yourself,

could you complete,
in secret, a crossing

so enticing to propose
and treacherous to pursue,

as Lord Franklin, much to
his dismay, found out?

Sister, I am here amid
the polar uproar

in less an outpost
than a long shadow

without my soul, my second,
my Sue, abandoned amid

the distances that make
all passage possible.

Sister, find me in
such a northwest

that opens itself to
no other expeditions.

00

Drink till the time be at hand
to say however softly

and in strictest solitude
love's name aloud,

employ such a fervor
that the name will be nothing

less than a place the mirror
of the place where you

both will meet,
an arctic waste

or a garden where the
a love, unweddable

in this life, waits in
immense joy

for the world
to end.

*

Drink till an apocalypse
comes each hour of the day

let the face of the Beloved
be the veil of an altar

love of a lover
love of God

impossible proximity
delirious distance

a Persian passion
has entered Amherst

Saddi approaches
Hafiz is here

voice of the beloved
voice of the peerless one

peerless the one the
taverner's daughter.

*

Drink till you return from afar.
But were you to see me

here in the church
during services,

among the others
even you could not doubt

the orthodoxy
of my belief.

Within me, however,
all is different.

I pray only to you,
my absent beloved.

My idolatrous heart
is a shrine to you.

Heretical passion
enflames me.

*

Drink till the turbans are all unbound
Drink till the house like the world turns round

*

Drink till a sip will be sufficient.
Drink till the whisper of a sip

will be too much, should one
be born into being with eyes

the color of sherry
in the glass

after the
guests depart.

00

So, a concession was made to the pagan world
hidden within the legend of the saint so that in

let us say even a Catholic schoolroom in New England
in the 1960s among the paper flurry might be sent secret,

unsigned valentines, the veneration of undisclosed
devotees, and the recipients awaiting a relation

which may never arrive, a love far more fabulous
than any forthright request for surrender of self.

To be loved by one of whom one is ignorant, a guess is
possible but fraught, claiming to know could be

humiliating, or at least humbling and exalting, better
to simply be one at whose feet figurative flowers are set,

and feel kissed, if only from an immense distance,
to know only that the unknown itself has chosen you,

owns you, made you a slave, the sign of which is
an envelope that has found its way to you, slipped

into your pack, your pocket, your desk, your lunch.
In the depths of Christianity another god was at work.

I love you greater than Jesus loved men might be
a way to put it, fold it, send it in a cream-colored

or deep red envelope, heart of flower, the cry be mine,
be adored, so might first be felt the ache of being ached for,

before hand was ever held, before the first heat of
a slow dance at a mixer, nuns pulling the too

passionate apart, should such a secret valentine arrive,
a message from spring at the onset of Lent in which

an apparently less dire agony announces itself.
In some small way you might feel invisible arms

around you, feel grasped by a naked and minor deity,
feel an invisible arm slip itself around you and hold you,

as if you were cut from green marble, as if you were
placed on a mantle, a gift from a wedding of which

the bride remarks: “Some ice-cream, and it was over.”
of which the groom says later, and to his mistress,

he had felt he was going to his execution. And so,
in the palace of Amherst, Christianity fell out of fashion.

The pagan world returned, night after night,
throughout all seasons, Eros found Psyche.

00

my Sue

So that no delight
 in writing, in reading,

 could ever exceed that which
 came from the writing and reading of

 our love-notes, those left
 so furtively, and so retrieved,

 from under a loose brick
 in the long stair up

 to the front door while
 hoping the only one

 to catch me in my
 devotion would be Sue,

 up there, in the white
 wave of the curtains;

 her notes only
 read around the

 corner, behind
 a tree, facing away

 from the street, in
 an ecstasy; all those

 words, folded,
 unfolded, all

 our writing,
 our wooing . . .

00

a song

Lips, at a cup
bee amid my petals

(I can't sip till
you've tasted first)

Sweetness
is near, is near

Hover without
touching

Lips to the
Infinite

Lips, at a cup,
Bee amid my petals

Hover without
touching

(I can't sip till
you've tasted first)

is near but
not yet

lips to the
infinite

sweetness,
lips, at a cup

00

Such would be the long death throes
of the transcendental

the arrow of the
transcendental

is lodged in my heart.
Duncan says later

we'll get to the agony
but the seminar recordings

never return to it,
that agony,

yet it seems to be
greater than that of

Christ or Eros,
or at least

to precede theirs,
to be the source of theirs,

and of all true song
as Dickinson

makes so clear.
The arrow of the

transcendental
hurts me all the time.

The arrow cuts deep.
I don't understand

this agony
which deepens

with each new hope
of elucidation.

*

song

Such would be to have
the heart of the sun

the heart of a daisy
the heart of a woman

the heart of a gun
Such would be to have

the heart of a woman
the heart of a daisy

the heart of a woman
such would be to have

the heart of the sun
the heart of the sun

*

Such would be
but my tutor is dead

as well, years gone, now
only a noble ghost.

He went to the garage
and turned on his car

and sat inside it
and breathed.

Often he came
to me in dreams,

but not for a while now,
not for many years.

My tutor, who
gave me your

lexicon, the garden,
the orchard, the hills,

the infinite, where
amber turns to

violet, gold
to opal.

*

There was a while when
a camera could bring back the dead

There was a while when a new pigment
added to oil paints could make the beauties of

the world more ravishing
made paradise appear on earth

as clouds, mountains, and streams
as the light that fell on all

there was a while when science
confirmed the flights of the soul across

oceans and continents
to gardens on other planets

and received instruction
in a new morality

there was a while
when phantasms of the spirit

appeared in a far away twilight
at the exact moment of death

dying in India, appearing on a porch
amid blue shadows in England

there was a while
when theologies arose

from romance novels, when
illicit desire was the sign of election

there was a while when
perfection was possible and

higher orders of being emerged
there was a while when

the dead were happy
and puzzled by our grief

there was a while
when a moment of terror

might bring forth an heretofore
entirely hidden personality

there was a while
when anomalies were

evidence and gathered up
from all over the earth; accounts of

visitations, and sightings
and powerful dreams

were studied, and held to be
revelatory of what is.

*

There was a while
when men and women

could be divine be
alive, be loved, through

love be divine, be worshipped;
by a window, a hedge, a gate

a back road, a carriage,
a staircase, a study,

at twilight, these
could be the stations

of an absolute devotion.
And so, for example,

Mabel Todd might be,
a holy emanation, might be

Beatrice and Layla
might be Christ; and Sue

might be lifted up
and placed in the night sky

might be Stella, Astella,
chosen, studied, addressed

be a light in the night or not
a star hidden in a pure black sky

a boat of light in the inundating dark
worshipped, cursed,

proclaimed a star yet
blotted from the sky

and the proclamation
itself also blotted

words are hiding in the dark
are the presence of light in the dark

Sue the overwhelming dark
that alerts us to the barest light

the words that bring the star to be
by a poet who seems at times almost Roman

in a world where citizens
might become gods

a Mediterranean world
a north African world of

stations and shrines
idolaters and idols

where a beloved might be told
slay me and my soul

shall rise to paradise
still thine.

00

Come back, Jesus,
and set a man

against his father,
a daughter against her

mother, and even a daughter-in-law
against her mother-in-law . . .

Come back to river valleys,
to farmland and towns

in New England
and New York

decade after decade.
Come back Jesus and make

enemies within
households

sister against a sister
brother against a sister

Come back Jesus, just to set
a bachelor against his fiancé,

come to colleges
amid religious

revivals so that
at an assembly

at a call to the saved
some will stand

and some
will not.

*

*The Jesus
Christ you*

*love remarks he
does not know me . . .*

*

Come back Jesus, start an argument
about where and when

heaven is, decade after
decade, and over centuries,

let each soul at some point
in the disputation chose

if heaven is to die
or is to be born.

Decade after decade
within each generation

let the argument end
and start again

(if only so one friend
might write another:

*We differ often lately,
And this must be the last.)*

*

Jesus, let each believe
differently, so that

each will die differently;
let deathbed décor be

by turns lavish or spare,
the final horror ringed

by an unpredictable
mix of accouterments.

*

Jesus, in the emerging ideology of style
as the world of commerce

emerges from that
of the churches

let last words be
either revelatory

or irrelevant, either
a spellbinding,

heaven disclosing
dénouement, or

psychologism, sedation,
a pill, a sip, a shot, a dose.

*

Jesus, let the last
gasp take on a new timbre

whether in the mouth of the dying
or in the ears of those there

in keeping with whatever
each believes

breathy, dry, wet,
raw or withered

one generation to the next,
or even among members of the

same generation
ringing the bedside

or when children hear
their parents die

or when parents have
the misfortune to

live to see
a child die.

00

to Emily Dickinson

Last words, secret words,
the last words said to me,

bitter words, maternal, heard
by me alone, heard, never

written out, never told,
preceptor, you might be

the one at last to taste
their desolation.

00

Of all the agonies left
unaddressed by Duncan of

surpassing interest
would be the fate of

Emily Dickinson
in the afterlife,

called, I presume,
to see Love's

name
lacerated.

*

See, from deep within
an adjoining zone

a living hand
rewriting her lines

until they would seem
in their very disappearance

to be all beauty, hauled off,
now, and buried

under black
shrubs.

*

What moved this
intervening

nub cannot be spite,
hate, envy as these are earthly

motives
and this occulting

was a heavenly gift,
this seeming rescission

of all passion in the name of
eternity, a name struck

from the roles of the
once real world.

*

Duncan may have speculated
about an intimacy in the beyond

face to face, amid angels.
But first, for her, there is

a consummate hopelessness,
dark spilling ink across the light.

She must see the star
she chose go dark.

*

*unable are
the loved to die . . .*

*

ditto copies

Sweet air of
paper and ink and

alcohol, as if
a blossom

came to
rest on each desk

so would begin
a lifetime of the love of

paper and ink
and alcohol,

and light, and shade,
and of course words

a hint of all that
is to come

but amid such multi-
part intoxication

how can we deduce
what our fate will be

from nothing more than
a sheet fresh from

a ditto machine, also
known as, though

we did not know this then
a “spirit replicator”

summoning forth
your words

in lavender and alcohol
words wet as a fresh pearl

that first, truest
drunkenness

we were all
bees hovering

above purple blossoms
dew-glazed field

wobbling in
wonderment as

from your earlier moment in
the history of print technology,

before wax coated pages
and spinning drums

honeyed fumes
twilight colored letters

your words came to you, came to be,
and in mimetic magic

as I read I became an “I”
that had read your words

at that instant
in autumn,

in New England,
deep violet words

rising in waves from the page
felt then the truth about light and

shade and the future and the
falling sun, the first of it,

first scent of
that flower of

poetry, handed out to each
in a small classroom

waft of a word never
known before, what

did it mean,
Presentiment?

*

*unable are
the loved to die . . .*

*

The black of this ink
is the black of daylight

during which a zealous
astronomer might dream of

photographing the moon
turned utterly black

might gather his best lenses
and travel to California

or Texas, or Japan
pack his plates

and spend weeks
heading towards the

sighting that would make his name,
lift it, as it were, to the stars,

obliterated though they be
at the moment of

totality, that might establish
for him, on earth, and among

the scientists of his day.
a place of eminence

The stream of black his
wife spreads across the page

is what the death of the sun should be,
the corona given off by

the rays of original script
as if these whorls were a ritual

assuring the cloudlessness
of the day which fills

for several minutes
in 1878, 1887, 1886, 1900,

1905, 1914, 1918, 1919, in
Tripoli, Russia, Florida, and Brazil

with all the famously
terrifying metaphysical

silences of the night sky
as if the light of the earth

must be extinguished
as well, so to join

the sun and moon
in lightlessness save for

and this astrological darkness
must begin with a shadow of a hand

falling across a love letter,
all their coquetry and loss

and wit and twists of thought
all verbal instances of the

reign of Venus on earth;
whose transit back into the sun

is complete, is photographed,
was photographed, by

David Todd
in 1882

and now the sun
is filled with ink.

Let the sky of
the page be full of

haloes and waves
shadow bands, rose-

colored prominences
red eruptions and

for a moment
or two, a corona.

00

song for little Gib

*unable they that
love to die*

the garden is Eden
the garden is grief

*unable they that
love to die*

*unable they that
love to die*

the garden is Eden
the garden is grief

