in 1879, perhaps the fair copies of the three Master Letters, which now exist only in draft form, among them.38

All told, Penniman knew George Gould over a period of at least fifty-three years, and her recollections of Emily Dickinson extended back about sixty-five. I believe that continuing to ignore voices out of the past—like those of Ann Eliza Penniman and the eight other informants who commented on the Gould–Dickinson romance—serves to perpetuate the mystique that has been unnecessarily and increasingly accepted as the heart of Dickinson’s poetic gift. I would submit, to the contrary, that grounding her expressions of longing, pain, attraction, sadness, and renunciation in a flesh-and-blood individual in fact enhances Dickinson’s achievement, for it demonstrates how she was able to spin works of unique and extraordinary beauty out of the ordinary stuff of human experience.


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THE MAKING OF AN IMAGE:
EMILY DICKINSON’S BLUE FLY
SAM S. BASKETT

Of Emily Dickinson’s many poems concerning death, her “flood subject,” none begins more startlingly than “I heard a Fly buzz — when I died —”: the line virtually explodes upon the reader’s consciousness. At once matter-of-fact and incredible, the abrupt, urgent asseveration pulls the reader into the scene even as it pricks him into casting an apprehensive thought toward his own inevitable demise. The ensuing lines revert to the time just before the death. The process of dying has apparently been drawn out: “The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –.” But death now seems imminent: “Breaths were gathering firm / For that last Onset – when the King / Be witnessed – in the Room –.” The synecdoches suggest the fading
awareness of the speaker, who no longer sees those “around” as persons. At last, the “stillness” is broken,

. . . and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain – stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

That is all: no “King” is witnessed, and the reader is left uncertain about how to relate the termination, as indicated in the poem’s final lines, to the continuation asserted in the first; but the signal of death, the “Blue – uncertain – stumbling Buzz,” reverberates disconcertingly in the memory long afterward. Surely this dramatic image—and, in effect, the poem is a miniature drama with the indifferent yet unsettling fly playing a significant role—is an instance of Dickinson’s unique creativity. The image is, in truth, distinctive as she crafted it, but Dickinson’s blue fly is actually adapted from two sources. As Wendy Martin has observed, a considerable number of Dickinson’s poems are “either a response to or a direct reworking of her reading, and her work often contains dramatic renderings of scenes from specific novels.”

This is just such a poem, a reworking of elements of Tennyson’s “Mariana” and of chapter 18 of Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables.

In “Hawthorne’s Tennyson,” a recent article in the Times Literary Supplement, Matthew Peters traces the connection between “The blue fly sung in the pane,” Tennyson’s image that objectifies Mariana’s isolation and desire for death, and Hawthorne’s description of Judge Pyncheon as he lies dead, alone in his house. Throughout the chapter, allusions to the poem accumulate, including the sentence, “And there we see a fly—one of your common house-flies, such as are always buzzing on the window pane.” There is abundant evidence in Dickinson’s letters that she was familiar with both writers, and in

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their work she would have found the fly image that she reworked with consummate skill to fit her own purposes.

Dickinson’s first allusion to Tennyson occurs in 1848, when she was seventeen. During her recent illness, she writes from Mt. Holyoke, she has had a “feast” of reading, including The Princess, published the previous year. Other references also indicate her profound appreciation of the poet. In August 1866 she wrote her beloved friend and sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, that she had “dreamed of your meeting Tennyson in Ticknor and Fields” (Tennyson’s as well as Hawthorne’s Boston publisher). And in June 1877, “So much has been Sorrow that to fall asleep in Tennyson’s Verse seems almost a Pillow.” She then quotes the last line of “Guinevere,” “To where beyond the voices there is peace.”

As for Hawthorne, in 1879, fifteen years after his death, Dickinson is still attuned to the darkness of his vision, writing, “Hawthorne appals—entices.” A few months after Seven Gables was published (1851), she refers specifically to the novel in terms that betray her emotional involvement with it. Although only twenty-one at the time, in a letter to her brother Austin, who was ill, she fancifully, and mournfully, compares the two of them to Judge Pyncheon’s elderly cousins, also sister and brother. “How lonely it was last night when the chilly wind went down, and the clear, cold moon was shining—it seemed to me I could pack this little earthly bundle, and bidding the world Goodbye, fly away and away . . . and then I thought of Hepzibah how sorrowful she was . . . yet for affection’s sake and sake of ‘Clifford’ she wearied on . . . I don’t mean you are him or that Hepzibah’s me except in a relative sense, only I was reminded.”

T. S. Eliot famously pronounced that the mature poet doesn’t “borrow” but “steals,” welding the theft “into a whole of feeling from that which it is torn.” He could have been describing Emily Dickinson’s composition of “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –.”

Even though I am focusing on a single vivid image that Dickinson took from Tennyson and “Hawthorne’s Tennyson” and then

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5Dickinson, Letters, 2:455.
6Dickinson, Letters, 2:585.
7Dickinson, Letters, 1:649.
8Dickinson, Letters, 2:155.
intensified, there is a further, less direct connection that has a bearing on the tradition the American poet inherited and extended. Peters notes that “Hawthorne willingly inherited Tennyson’s vision of Mariana’s isolation, as Tennyson himself undertook the Shakespearean source for the poem (Measure for Measure),”9 “Mariana in the moated grange” being the poem’s epigraph. This is surely aslant to “the blue fly,” but it does relate to the whole of “feeling,” to the “truth” that has become the poem—“Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—,” another Dickinson first line. Dickinson is thought to have had much of Shakespeare, her “truest master,” by heart. Thus the epigraph and, indeed, by extension, Measure for Measure, is part of the “willing inheritance” from which she is “making” “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –.”

But what, specifically, has Dickinson done with her “inheritance” to make it new? The fly is surely significant in “Mariana,” T. S. Eliot observed, for the verb sung instead of sang in the pane “tells us something important has happened” in reference to Mariana’s desolate isolation, just as Hawthorne’s fly circumstances Judge Pyncheon’s death.10 But the fly’s appearance is only momentary, one line in the poem, one sentence in the novel. In Dickinson’s imaginative reconstruction, it ominously foreshadows from the first line; then the “Buzz” in line 13, capitalized from a verb into a noun, assumes something of the purport of a last rite, actually and perhaps ironically the only such ceremony the “I” is given. The fly thus is an active, immediate agent as it looms auditorially/visually in the speaker’s final consciousness, at the very heart of the feeling/meaning of the poem as well as the obliterating presence at the death.

The poet has, in a faux-theological sense, “translated” the fly by her characteristic synaesthetic interfusion of sensory experiences, and her equally characteristic manipulation of grammar, from a visible “common” phenomenon to something almost sinisterly strange, something a little difficult to “see.” The color blue, a function of sight, is melded, threateningly perhaps, into sound and even motion—the Blue Buzz is “stumbling”—and the uncertainty of the sound emphasizes the nonappearance of the expected “King,” the poet’s art thus facilitating the problematic perception of the intersection of the visible and invisible worlds called dying.

9Peters, “Hawthorne’s Tennyson,” p. 15.
10Quoted in Peters, “Hawthorne’s Tennyson,” p. 15.
ON a “glorious” spring day in April or early May of 1897, Mark Twain paid a surprise visit to the London Hospital. He would have preferred not to go but felt compelled by a promise he had made.

Nine months earlier, after a year-long, round-the-world lecture tour, Twain had arrived in London, exhausted from his travels. Almost immediately after he disembarked, news reached him that his favorite daughter, Susy, with whom he had a deep (if somewhat strained) relationship, was seriously ill in Connecticut. Twain’s wife Livy and their second eldest daughter, Clara, quickly booked passage back to the States, while Twain remained in England, hoping for the best. But on 18 August 1896, at the age of twenty-four, Susy Clemens died.

Alone in London, exhausted, and depressed, Twain tried to keep a low profile. He declined opportunities to lecture and saw only a few friends. One of these was Adele Chapin, an American who had been born in Louisiana and had married a businessman from Massachusetts. Twain first met the Chapins at a dinner party in New York in the 1880s, and they had recently entertained him in Johannesburg, during the last leg of his overseas lecture tour. Robert Chapin had been serving as American consul in South Africa but in January 1897 had moved to London, where he and his wife soon reconnected with Twain.

In her memoir, Their Trackless Way, Mrs. Chapin remembered how unhappy and restless Twain was at the time. He would pace up and down her living room “and say, ‘If I was God, I would be ashamed to treat my children so. Don’t talk to me about a Heavenly Father; no human father would behave as God does.’”