

INTO DEEP ETERNITY:

An Introduction to Emily Dickinson

An introduction to Emily Dickinson is an introduction to poetry, which is certainly a great need in the world today. Unfortunately, a very up-to-date English text can offer rather poor and trivial examples of poetry because they are so exclusively focused on the personal and feeling elements of poetry

Poetry is not just verbal-emotive slush. A great poet is a great thinker, an exact user of words. When slush is offered, students wisely conclude that poetry is unimportant. In true poetry, however, the intensity of feeling arises from the exactness with which a very particular circumstance is both described and, simultaneously, evoked. And oddly enough, the very particularity of the circumstance often has a universal appeal. We have not all smelt mushrooms growing in the damp, but many of us have smelt something in childhood and come to associate that odor with all that is innocent yet earthy, rich, and full of peace. We feel the particularity of the poet's work reverberate with the particularity of our own lives, and we take joy in the memory and in the wisdom of a serious thinker.

Most people do not realize that Emily Dickinson wrote over 1600 poems. Most would be astonished to learn that except for a few familiar lines which were published in 1892 and are found in every anthology, Emily Dickinson's work is still under copyright restrictions. This makes it expensive — and difficult — for anyone but academics to publish reflections on most of her poetry. Now it is becoming easier, but the cultural shift of the late 20th century has made most of her biographers and commentators shy of her religious and spiritual life. Most are ignorant of it, but even if they knew some facts, they don't have the tools to interpret religious experience.

The first part of this book was written by my mother for a great-niece named Emily, just as she turned thirteen. Here, my mother paraphrases each of sixteen poems, so that meaning is clear. Sometimes, the poet's grammar is shifted from common usage for the sake of the "music," and the confusion this causes makes some turn away from poetry altogether. Having made the primary meaning of the poem clear, my mother then offers some reflections from her own life and experience. When a poem becomes part of your life, you see why the words are just so, and not otherwise, and you will certainly come to love this very great American poet.

The second part of this book was originally written independently for my Aunt Mary, (so it is called "Mary's Book") and it explains some things about Emily's life and friendships, and about her love for God. My mother believed she was a mystic, and that this is the key to her work.

Given in marriage unto thee,
 Oh thou celestial host —
 Bride of the Father and the Son,
 Bride of the Holy Ghost!

Other Betrothal shall dissolve —
 Wedlock of Will decay —
 Only the keeper of this Ring
 Conquer Mortality —