MOURNER AMONG THE CHILDREN

The Psychological Crisis of Emily Dickinson

BY JOHN CODY, M.D.

PART II *

The psychological background for the crisis of Emily Dickinson's life has been roughed in. One must now turn to the circumstances and individuals that precipitated her breakdown. In Emily's late teens and early 20's a new personality moved into her life and quickly assumed major importance. She was Susan Gilbert, Austin's future wife. Austin courted her for several years and married her six years after the beginning of Emily's correspondence with her.

In certain respects Susan Gilbert resembled Emily. She was considered "brilliant" and was highly verbal. She too was bereft of a mother although her loss was through death when she was very young. Like Emily, she parted from childhood reluctantly and looked to an older brother for love and protection. She once wrote to this brother, Dwight, "I feel so keenly the loss of a Mother's love, and influence... Is it strange... dear brother, when I feel thus, that I should look to you, and find myself thinking of and loving you as a Father..." 82 She appeared less than eager for marriage and wrote to Dwight, "...earthly plans are so mutable. I have always felt so like a child the idea of really being married seems absurd enough and if the event ever occurs I think I shall experience a feeling of odd surprise." 83 Just before the wedding to Austin she wrote to friends in these unenthusiastic terms, "I shall have a quiet wedding—a very few friends and my brothers and sisters—a little cake—a little ice cream and it's all over—the millionth wedding since the world began..." 84

The relationship of Emily, Austin and Susan quickly assumed the form of a triangle. It appears that for a time Emily thought she had found in Sue the "mother" that she had been longing for, and to a lesser extent Sue perhaps felt similarly toward her. Austin's letters to his fiancée are pallid speeches compared with the passionate outpourings she received from Emily. A few excerpts will convey the intensity of her attraction. Four years before Sue's marriage, Emily wrote to her complaining of the

*Part I appeared in the January 1967 issue of this QUARTERLY.
days dragging until the summer when she would see Sue again, 
"... yet they do move a little, and bounding o'er them all—I meet 
the glad July—and have you in my arms—Oh Susie—you shall 
come..." And in a later letter, "Oh my darling one, how long 
you wander from me, how weary I grow of waiting and looking 
and calling for you; sometimes I shut my eyes and shut my 
heart toward you and try hard to forget you because you grieve 
me so, but you'll never go away, Oh you never will... I don't 
know how I shall bear it [if spring comes and Sue is still away] 
... O it would surely kill me!" She pleads to be forgiven for 
continually begging letters of Sue and says, "Only want to write 
me, only sometimes sigh that you are far from me, and that 
will do..."

The mother-seeking quality of her longing is clearly conveyed 
in the following: "Oh Susie, I would nestle close to your warm 
heart, and never hear the wind blow or the storm beat again. 
Thank you for loving me darling... But what can I do towards 
you?... dearer you cannot be, for I love you so dearly, that it 
almost breaks my heart—perhaps I can love you anew, every 
day of my life, every morning and evening—oh if you will let 
me, how happy I shall be!... Just write me every week one line 
and let it be, ‘Emily, I love you’ and I will be satisfied.”

Her frustration at Sue’s relative reserve combined with a dim 
awareness of something abnormal and perhaps dangerous in her 
own intensity is occasionally perceptible, as in the following: 
“... In thinking of those I love, my reason is all gone from me, 
and I do fear sometimes that I must make a hospital for the 
hopelessly insane, and chain me up there such times, so I won’t 
injure you.”

The phrase “I must... chain me up there” is perhaps not un-
related to the poet’s gradual transformation into an entrenched 
recluse hidden within her father’s house for the later decades 
of her life.

The relationship was a very uneasy one. Consider the follow-
ing mingling of unbridled longing and apprehensive caution and 
the clear implication of confusion of sexual roles: “... will you 
indeed come home next Saturday, and be my own again, and kiss 
me as you used to?... I hope for you so much, and feel so eager 
for you, feel that I cannot wait, feel that now I must have you 
—that the expectation once more to see your face again makes