



Emily Dickinson in Love
The Case for Otis Lord

JOHN EVANGELIST WALSH

❧ *Emily Dickinson in Love* ❧

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FICTION

The Man Who Buried Jesus: A Mystery Novel

EMILY DICKINSON
IN LOVE

❧ *The Case for Otis Lord* ❧

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Rutgers University Press
New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Walsh, John Evangelist, 1927-

Emily Dickinson in love : the case for Otis Lord / John Evangelist Walsh.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8135-5275-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8135-5337-5 (e-book)

1. Dickinson, Emily, 1830-1886—Relations with men. 2. Lord, Otis P. (Otis Phillips), 1812-1884—Relations with women. 3. Dickinson, Emily, 1830-1886—Family. 4. Poets, American—19th century—Biography.

I. Title. II. Title: Case for Otis Lord.

PS1541.Z5W25 2012

811'.4—dc23

2011028850

A British Cataloging-in-Publication record for this book is available
from the British Library.

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The poems of Emily Dickinson herein are given as they first appeared in the volume *Bolts of Melody*, ed. M. T. Bingham (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945).

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Fondly dedicated to my Marriott grandkids:

The Captivating

Katrina

and

The Admirable

Eric

You love the Lord you cannot see,
You write him every day,
A little note when you awake . . .

*From poem 487, dated 1862,
fifteen years before Otis Lord's wife, Elizabeth, died*

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Emily in her late twenties, at the start of her secret affair with Otis Lord. The photo is a retouching, arranged by her family, of the hair and dress in the teenage daguerreotype (see 62, 157). The face is untouched except for elimination of the distorting shadows on the nose and a defining of the eyes. Often rejected as artificial, this picture is actually much more like the mature Emily than the old daguerreotype, badly lit and badly posed as it was.

Public domain.

PROLOGUE: A PUZZLEMENT

*What song the sirens sang, or what name Achilles assumed
when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions,
are not beyond all conjecture.*

Sir Thomas Browne

Though she was a plain-looking woman, Emily Dickinson managed to interest and even fascinate a goodly number of men both young and old. Small and thin, standing barely an inch or two over five feet, weighing when young less than a hundred pounds—“like the Wren,” she described herself—by all accounts she had in her favor something more lasting than physical allure. At least on those men susceptible to a rare combination of wit, an impish charm of manner and mind, and sharp intelligence, it appears she exerted an instant, strong appeal.

Still, as her niece recalled, she did have some pleasing, not to say striking, features. “Her dark, expressive eyes,” wrote Martha Bianchi, “with their tint of bronze, and Titian hair set off by her white skin, were always considered remarkable by others. Indeed the richness of her hair and eyes were her salient points, oftenest commented on. She had regular features, and her upper lip, a trifle long, gave her face a slightly ascetic appearance.”

Living in a college town, two minutes’ walk from the main college buildings, with a father who was a high official of the school, all

through her teen years and early twenties she and her sister entertained a steady parade of student visitors to their house. Three or four of these visitors, it is known, showed an interest in Emily, and for one of them, Henry Emmons, she eagerly returned that interest, his departure after graduation being her first love disappointment. There was also her father's law student Ben Newton, who encouraged her poetic ambitions when Emily was not quite twenty, but who left Amherst to pursue his law studies.

Her only definite, documented affair of the heart, that with the elderly widower Otis Lord, didn't come until much later in life. It dates to her final eight or so years, when she was in her fifties.

There was, however, an earlier attachment, the knowledge of which surfaced late: that with the mysterious, unidentified man she called "Master." This still-veiled affair, occurring as she entered her thirties, has tantalized Dickinson readers and scholars for half a century, ever since three letters from her to him were found and published. It is that particular puzzle, long the dark, impenetrable center of Dickinson biography, that I some time ago set out to solve. It is true that certain impatient critics have insisted that the identity of Emily's secret love, or whether he existed at all, is neither relevant nor important to her story, and especially not to her existence as an artist. That's much too detached a view. A weighty emotional burden carried in resigned silence for some twenty years, giving a distorting wrench to normal hopes and dreams, is an urgent topic for study in anyone's life. How much more in the life of a poet!

My first offer of a solution appeared in my 1971 biography, *The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson*, there kept fairly short to fit the pattern of her whole life and artistic progress. In the following pages that early effort is much expanded, refined, and I believe strengthened. Herein Emily's long-hidden, long-sought mystery lover is brought before the curtain at last, bathed in a bright spotlight and invited to take a bow, doffing his mask.

But my purpose in these pages is not merely to uncover and confirm the identity of the poet's "Master." It is much more to fit that

information into the known events of her life, finally making good sense of facts long known but ill understood. Her extreme withdrawal from a normal existence, for example—where during her first thirty-five years she had been an active, outgoing friend to many men and women—takes on some real meaning.

Equally her strange decision to dress always in white comes into better focus, as does the curious episode of the eye trouble that occurred at the very start of her withdrawal. No accident was her spending so much time in Boston to have her ailing eyes treated when it might have been done as easily or better at home.

More than with most such attempts to peel back the encrustations of time, and because the obscuration was not accidental but was deliberately done, recovering the truth of this long-passed story demands a certain patient attention to detail. Further, to be its most effective the approach must assume a particular form, not unlike a veritable suspense tale. In fact, the curious chronicle of Emily's shadowy love affair with her hidden Master takes on the proportions of a classic literary puzzle, in the same mold as the famous Phalaris forgeries (solved so brilliantly by the English scholar Richard Bentley); or the amazing Skakespeare imposture of young William Ireland. In real life, of course, it was not so, not while it was happening, not in Emily's immediate personal experience. But like all mysteries, real or fictional, it becomes so by virtue of the effort to unravel it, and the present effort follows that pattern.

I do not, I should add, pause in my narrative to refute the claims made in behalf of the several other candidates proposed for the honor of being Emily's "Master," now numbering some half-dozen. Any attempt to notice all the arguments in support of these men would lead the discussion into a thicket of interpretation, impossibly tangled. A book three times the size of the present one would be needed and would make for very heavy reading. It is enough, I judge, to demonstrate that the evidence favors one man alone, favors him so irresistibly that no room is left for argument.

Each reader will decide whether that goal has in the following pages been realized (of course for this author it's a definite thumbs-up!).

Equally to the point, in my explication of certain of her poems—those carrying, as I see it, biographical significance—I do not bother with larger meanings or with aesthetic considerations. Such an exercise would be irrelevant to my purpose in these pages. Between what I take to be biographical fact, and what critics might see as of purely aesthetic worth, there is no necessary clash, since both may be true and of weight. In the few cases where such a clash occurs, or seems to, I take due notice of it. What really counts in such a discovery process is not so much each separate item but the biographical pattern developed. In my chapter 4, especially, but also throughout the book, I am confident that such a revealing pattern in her poems is amply demonstrated.

In these pages everything stated or suggested rests squarely on documentary evidence and on sober inference from its submerged or “latent” content. Analysis in depth of the documentary witness, however, is for the most part detached from the main narrative and consigned to the notes at the back of the book. In short, in the main narrative generally I offer my *developed* theory of Emily's secret love as a chronicle finished and complete in itself. This is particularly true in Part II where, having previously established the lover's identity, I portray the broad dimensions of the affair, from its unexpected start to its mournful conclusion.

A final necessary comment, to set in place a true understanding of the crucial opening episode, in which after her death Emily's brother deals with a blackmailer over some of her old letters. If, instead of selling the letters in question to the Dickinson family, the blackmailer had proceeded, as he threatened, to publish them, a sensational public scandal would have ensued involving the reputation of a high public official. Sympathy would have suddenly shifted away from Emily personally, and her reception as a poet, then fast gathering steam, would have been drastically altered for the worse. Only the passage of time has made the difference. Somehow, it no longer

Prologue

seems to matter that, in some degree, Emily stole the affections of another woman's husband, a man of some reputation in the law and politics, greatly admired by all.



THE UNMASKING

Master, open your life wide and take me in forever. I will never be tired, I will never be noisy when you want to be still. I will be your best little girl . . .

*Emily, about age thirty-five,
to the mystery man she called "Master"*