

## **Adoration of Italy in Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Emotional Symbolism and Womanly Rebellion**

**by  
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Most Emily Dickinson scholars would agree that the iconic American poet's emotional life can be better reconstructed from the content of her poems than from imaginative research by scholars or critics into details, many unknown, of her biography. In the fervour of inquiry that changes according to the sensibilities of each scholar or literary critic, the core of Dickinson's poetic inspiration can be lost in the subtleties of complex prurient and turbid psychoanalysis.

Regardless of all interpretive biographies, some quite compelling, the essence of the iconic American poet's art remains timeless in its observations, wisdom, and emotional verity. It's interesting to note that her poetry contains a variety of verses in which Italy and its geography play an important symbolic role. As Judith Farr explains in *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*, (Harvard UP, 2004, p. 99) the poet, "who liked to think she saw 'New Englandly,' was, though Puritan in her disciplined upbringing, profoundly attracted to the foreign and especially to the semitropical or tropical climes that she read about in *Harper's* and *The Atlantic Monthly*—Santo Domingo, Brazil, Potosi, Zanzibar, Italy...."

Even if it were possible to demonstrate, with incontrovertible documentation, that the mythic solitude of the poet of Amherst hides an enigma conflicting with the ethics of her Puritanical Calvinist society, the discovery wouldn't alter the relevance of that solitude for the poet herself. Her years in a white dress, confining herself to her father's land, the relative seclusion in her room after the age of approximately thirty-three years, the ebullient activity of her poetic spirit, like a pearl forming in a seashell, still shines with the ineffable genius of her singing—beyond all us frogs croaking in our ponds.

Emily Dickinson learned to look at the vicissitudes of life and its natural creatures and objects with an analytical eye, as she lived her deepening emotional life. Every detail of what goes unnoticed by many, in the din of passing days, stimulated her to discoveries, affording an emotional or intellectual response in verses often dashed off and habitually left unfinished or unedited. In her art, she seems to have re-evaluated her early education,

challenging notions into lyrical transfigurations. Geography, history, astronomy, botany, ornithology, philosophy, and theology contained realizations that deepened her spiritual life based on the realities of science and nature. She is indeed one of the more scientifically orientated poets that America has produced. Many have noted the science and scientific terms peppering her texts, as well as her references to the Italian peninsula. [See Avery, Orsini, Peel, White: *List of Works Cited.*] We can surmise that she was quite aware of the geology and geography of Italy, and the studies of mountains and volcanoes in its landscape, as well as the inroads made there by Galileo, the Father of Science.

During the poet's lifetime, there were developments in science and technology, from advanced microscopes to improved telescopes, which afforded new revelations and ways of looking at nature and the world. Darwinian ideas were burgeoning, so that religion became, more than ever, in conflict with scientific discoveries, as it had been for the Father of Science, Galileo, in the Italy of old. Dinosaur fossils were discovered in the Amherst region and displayed at Amherst Seminary by Professor Hitchcock. Science courses were turning the seminary into a respected college of secular learning. New Englanders witnessed the Northern Lights, a phenomenon that augured Armageddon for some who were driven to take the route of "born again" Christianity in the Great Revival sweeping the poet's Pioneer Valley.

Others turned to Darwin and Emerson and began to feel that the natural world was the proper study of humanity, more than was scripture. Many New England Protestants embraced scientific phenomenon as miracles of nature and evidence of divine power. The conflict between conservative religion is nearly as alive today in our contemporary world as it was in the days of Galileo, Darwin, or Dickinson who wrote of the conflict in her own way. Science, as much as religion is evidenced in Dickinson's writings and its discoveries embedded in her poems, in both metaphoric symbolism and in aspects of structure and epistemology. The idea of Dickinson as scientist is not at all an unfounded one. We know from her eminent biographers that the sciences of botany, chemistry, geology, and chemistry enthralled her. We shall see how the lure of Italy and its culture, as well as geology and geography, entered the imagery of the iconic American poet's mind and become a way of expressing emotional ideas and ideals.

Since she had a limited audience beyond friends and correspondents with whom to share scientific realizations in verse, her questioning mind found answers in emotional truth stimulated by the Transcendentalist philosophers of her region. For contradictory or erroneous ideas or social premises, her genius was able to offer humane and original lyrical intensity and elevated thought as well as questioning. Her compass was divination through words as musical notes beyond music itself, in images that live more fully than their symbols. Words and images associated with Italy, her “Blue Peninsula,” are mentioned in several of her lyrics as symbolic of emotional truths, aspirations, and ideals.

This essay intends to present Dickinson's lyrics concerning Italy, or things related to it, as symbolic of her beliefs and aspirations. Detailed notions about Italy are not present in Dickinson's poems so much as emotional qualities associated with her “Blue Peninsula” and its volcanic and geographical structures, its volcanoes so symbolic of erupting emotions, flowing like lava down mountainous terrains.

As poet and scholar, Joseph Tusiani, wrote in his essay, *L'italia nella poesia di Emily Dickinson, 1957*):

.... at home in Amherst, and at the Amherst Academy or Mount Holyoke Seminary, in books of history, geology, and geography, the young poet learned of Italy as a valued European country of cultural and artistic expression, a peninsula whose northern neighbor was Switzerland with its more austere aspect of propriety—boarded by the Alps in the north and crossed by the Apennine Mountains, a land of two large volcanoes, Etna and Vesuvius, and the homeland of Dante, Columbus, Galileo, and various accomplished painters of renown.

Also, members of the intelligentsia of Dickinson's New England social circle had begun to travel to and be educated in Europe. With the invention of the steamship and ocean liner, the mid-century saw more and more ocean travel, and the rural aristocrats of Dickinson's Pioneer Valley began to journey abroad and be educated in fine European universities, bringing home tales of foreign lands and customs that were inviting to those repressed by the more extreme dogma of Puritanical Calvinism.

Professor William Smith Clark of Amherst College, for one example, according to his biographer, John Maki, and Amherst historian, Ruth Owen Jones, [See *Works Cited.*] was educated in Europe and travelled in Italy more than on one occasion, as did other professors of Amherst Seminary next door to Dickinson's homestead, and founded by her

grandfather. According to Maki and Jones. William Smith Clark, while attaining his European doctoral degree, travelled the Continent, and wrote home to Amherst to Dickinson's neighbors, their cousins in common, the Sweetser. At table with her Sweetser cousins, Dickinson might well have heard of Clark's travels and firsthand observations of Italy's artistic attributes, natural wonders, social mores, and architectural artifacts. We know that he came home from Europe, bringing with him stories of German Christmas trees and festivities, unknown to Puritan Amherst where Christmas was an austere day of fasting. Also, he shocked Amherst residents with his Italian-style greetings consisting of kissing and hugging—unheard of in Anglo society where a distant handshake between gentlemen, and a tip of the hat, to a lady, were the Victorian norm.

It's also interesting that Clark's affectionate style of letter writing was similar in tone to Dickinson's where her father's and brother's tone in correspondence was more reserved and unemotional— adding to the possibility that his Italian travels and freer emotional nature were an influence upon the poet. This a point expounded upon by Ruth Owen Jones, mentioned earlier, in her essay, titled: "Neighbor - and friend - and Bridegroom," after a line in a Dickinson poem.

As Farr, Jones, Sewell, Habegger, Wolff, and other Dickinson biographers in *Works Cited* at the end of this article— have explained, prior to her years of seclusion, Dickinson might have heard descriptions of Italy in the salons, next door in the Evergreens, held by her sister-in-law and friend of many years, Susan Gilbert Dickinson. The Evergreens, erected in Italianate style, as was popular among cultured Americans of the day, was the relatively luxurious house Emily's father had built a stone's throw from hers for her bother, Austin Dickinson, and his bride, Susan, upon their marriage. Both Susan and Austin were educated and refined and commanded some knowledge of European culture and art. Susan Dickinson held salons in the parlor of the Evergreens that welcomed well read and travelled cosmopolitan guests.

Austin owned many art books containing paintings of European masters. Various intellectuals— like Paul Bowles of Springfield, and professors at the seminary, as mentioned earlier, Dr. William Smith Clark most eminently— travelled to Europe and, therefore, Italy, recounting their journeys through Italy at salons held in the Evergreens. Italy was a land considered by many mid-19<sup>th</sup> century minds to be the ideal place to

escape to for a life of unbridled artistic development and emotional freedom. No doubt, stories of other writers' travels met Dickinson's eyes in the magazines she frequently read, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harpers*, and later, *Scribner's*, where she was acquainted with such esteemed and widely cultured editors as Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Joshua Holland, whose wife, Elizabeth, was one of Dickinson's favorite correspondents.

George Sand, Margaret Fuller, as well as the Brownings, among others, were known to have travelled to live in Italy to unleash their creative powers and escape the constraints of Victorian-style culture, felt to be emotionally constricting and full of the sort of propriety still alive in the Puritan Calvinist society of Amherst in Dickinson's day. Victorian demeanour was still the social norm for rural New England aristocracy.

Helen Barolini explains the attraction to Italy as a common mid-19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon in her charming and astute book of essays: *Their Other Side: Six American Women and the Lure of Italy* (NY: Fordham UP, 2006.) Barolini describes the travels of Margaret Fuller, Constance Woolson, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Marguerite Caetani, and Iris Origo, as well as Emily Dickinson's desire to travel in Italy, though she never did. After The Civil War, when New Englanders like Harriet Beecher Stowe and the painter Martin Johnson Heade began to travel and live in Florida, they called that oblong peninsula their *Italy* for the sunshine, blue skies, and flora and fauna there discovered to their delight. This phenomenon is described by edifying art and the literary critic of Mount Holyoke, Christopher Benfey, in his captivating book about the American intelligentsia of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *A Summer of Hummingbirds; Love, Art, and Scandal in the Intersecting Worlds of Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, & Martin Johnson Heade*.

In any case, ideas associated with Italy surely crossed Dickinson's mind because of the example of a life spent there in pursuit of sublime poetry by the woman poet she most admired: the English author, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who had eloped to Italy with her husband, Robert. Florence, a seat of the Renaissance, held its allure for many expatriots of the day, Robert Browning among them.

The parallel study of Dickinson's letters and poems in chronological order with R.W. Franklin's *Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson*, wherein he analyzed her holographic texts with reference to changes in her calligraphy throughout her writing life, offers some sense of the poet's emotional development. Intimate confidences in her

letters are often connected to poetic exaltations or feelings of depressions in her poetry. We can determine, for obvious reasons, that verses composed for the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning were written in or about the year 1861 when Barrett Browning perished in her home in Florence, in June. Consequently, Italy is mentioned in the following poem as the desirable and best resting place for Dickinson's beloved poet:

Her – last poems –  
 Poets ended –  
 Silver – perished – with her Tongue –  
 Not unto Record – bubbled Other –  
 Flute – or Woman –so divine –

Not unto it's Summer Morning—  
 Robin – uttered half the Tune  
 Gushed too full for the adoring –  
 From the Anglo – Florentine –

Late – the Praise – 'Tis dull – Conferring  
 On the Head too High – to Crown -  
 Diadem – or Ducal showing -  
 Be it's Grave – sufficient Sign –

Nought – that We – No Poet's Kinsman –  
 Suffocate – with easy Woo –  
 What – and if Ourselves a Bridegroom –  
 Put Her down – in Italy?

[R.W. Franklin, 600 p.268, c. 1861]

In this sorrowful elegy in which an initial exaltation blends with a final tenderness, it's not yet possible to find the introspective, mystic, and tragic intensity of the poet, because the phase of "the White Election" has not yet begun. "Mine - by the Right of the White Election!...." is a Dickinson poem that seems to have been written at the peak of an inner torment that none of her biographers has been able to fully explain—except perhaps, Ruth Owen Jones, mentioned earlier, in her essay, "Neighbor and Friend and Bridegroom," in which she proposes William Smith Clark as Dickinson's "Master" figure. According to Jones, Colonel Clark was thought killed in the Civil War, at around about the time that the poet wrote, "Mine - by the Right of the White Election!..." Jones explains that the enigmatic poem could well be Dickinson's emotional claim of her right, as his true lover, to Colonel Clark's body for burial memorial, should his body be found

and returned to Amherst—a plausible interpretation of the poem.

Prior to that period of intense emotion, following what biographers agree was some sort of trauma, Dickinson, we know, read Elizabeth Barrett Browning's works. More than any other major Victorian poet of Dickinson's day—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, during her expatriot days in Italy, explicitly confronted political issues concerning *women*—issues that would have interested Dickinson and her sister-in-law, Sue. Like many other writers of her time, Barrett Browning became a disciple of Shelley and other Romantics whose mode was visionary and committed to the politics of social justice in domestic and international affairs. English Romantics, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley read by Dickinson, lived for a time in Italy during the *Risorgimento* to express emotional freedom and humanitarian ideals during the fight for democracy there.

Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children," 1843, was an example of such work prior to her eloping with Robert Browning, in 1846, to Italy, where she took up the cause of Italian democracy and nationalism, a subject which also compelled Margaret Fuller of New England and other Transcendentalist authors, as a struggle for democratic ideals against outmoded aristocracies. Barrett Browning's "Casa Guidi Windows," 1851, and *Poems before Congress*, 1860, are both thematic of the Italian *Risorgimento*, as was *Mother and Poet*, 1862, subtitled *Turin, after News from Gaeta*, 1861—a lyric spoken by the Italian poet and patriot, Laura Savio, upon learning that both her sons had died in the cause of Italian liberty. It constitutes the British poets interest in the problem of women's constraints, and the role of the female poet, as well as the cost and pain of the struggle for independence. Barrett Browning also wrote two poems in praise of George Sand, 1844, and other tributes to women authors. Such concerns were at the center of her masterpiece, a novel in poetry, *Aurora Leigh*, 1857, known to be a favorite of Dickinson's according to her various biographers.

*Aurora Leigh*, the story of a young poet who held back by Victorian constraints and the plight of women's lack of human rights – lives in Victorian England, with a strict, Puritanical aunt (somewhat like Dickinson's father Edward) after the death of her *Italian* mother, and British father. The poem employs contemporary settings to which Dickinson

responded because the social issues were the same as her own in terms of gender and “The Woman Question” of her day. It dramatizes modern woman's need for ancestral role models who nurture literary females. It should be noted that, the orphaned Aurora Leigh chooses her Italian mother's sensibilities over her English father's temperament, adding to the concept we shall see taken up by Dickinson that Italian temperament allows more freedom of emotional expression.

In writing of the development of a woman poet, Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning shows that women inhibit themselves by internalizing patriarchal concepts of themselves. Only when both woman and man can break free from the conceptual structures that oppress them, can they fully become partners in love. This theme is central to *Aurora Leigh*. In offering Dickinson a heroine who achieved poetic and personal liberty, Barrett Browning created a female literary tradition by alluding to her own predecessors, drawing from elements of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, another favorite book of Dickinson, that portrays a self-actualized heroine.

Also, *Aurora Leigh* employs *gynocentric*, as opposed to an *androcentric*, imagery, and substitutes female, rather than male, archetypes from the *Old Testament*. These analogies and images used by Barrett Browning, living amidst and set free by Florentine culture, and the democratic ideals of the *Risorgimento* associated with American Democracy, were an important influence upon Dickinson, causing her to see Italy as elemental to artistic expression and emotional freedom where a woman could escape the constraints of Victorian cultural models.

It was probably around the year 1865 of Abraham Lincoln's assassination and after the end of the Civil War — that Dickinson began to wear her white housedress, most permanently, and it's after that year that she wrote of her decision to make her father's lands the limit of her travels. [Incidentally, it's the year that Dickinson scholar, Ruth Owen Jones, poses that Clark and Dickinson broke off their affair.] It's thought that Dickinson always, thereafter, wore her white dress until her last day, May 15<sup>th</sup> 1886 – but why really? Could the wearing of that white dress also have been influenced, among other factors, by her reading of the Italian classic, *The Divine Comedy*?



Some have decided the wearing of white was to see herself as, or feel like a bride, or a pure virgin waiting for her bridegroom, or maybe even to bury under her “snow,” as she called her poetry (perhaps influenced by Higginson's 1858 essay, “Snow,” in the *Atlantic Monthly*)— the secret of her grieving heart? More recently scholars like myself, and others, have written of various possible reasons for the wearing of her white-pique housedress, not really a gown for social outings.

For one thing, she loved to garden and was often the family baker. Heavy brocades, satins, and taffetas of the day would not suit such activities. Therefore, many women wore white, washable housedresses at home, and such was the custom. Satins and brocades would not do for rambles through the woods in search of wild flowers with her big black New Foundland dog, Carlo, named after the dog in *Jane Eyre*.

Carlo was a constant beloved and trusted companion with whom Dickinson is known to have wandered the fields and woods around her home until Carlo's death in 1866, another logical reason for her confining herself to her father's lands. According to Daniel Lombardo, in *Hedge Away: The Other Side of Emily Dickinson's Amherst, "Poetry in the Air, Rabid Dogs and Typhoid in the Street"*— abandoned, feral, and rabid dogs wandered the streets of Amherst in Dickinson's day, and perhaps, she, devoid of her protective canine companion, Carlo, no longer felt safe on rambles through meadow and town. Since the Elizabethan color of mourning was white, and Dickinson was a great reader of Shakespeare, was she also wearing white to mourn the loss of her most faithful companion, Carlo, in 1866?

Or, was Dickinson, like Bronson Alcott, wearing *Transcendentalist* white to boycott the dye-factories where workers were fainting into boiling vats of color, succumbing to death and illness because of long and inhumane hours of arduous labor without relief? Also, labor strikes were beginning in laundries where collars were washed and starched in hot vats by fainting women for upper class gentlemen, just as fabric-dye factory laborers were suffering inhumane working conditions, as well. Dickinson read the newspapers, and perhaps, quietly joined the strikers of labor movements as did orator, Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Margaret Fuller's, inspiring associate, a

leader of Transcendentalist ideals. We know Dickinson wrote poetry empathizing with the working classes, and that she had a close relationship with Irish workers who labored on her father's estate: Particularly Tom Kelly, handyman, and Maggie Maher, day servant. Yet, there are other possible reasons, and, perhaps, many combinations of reasons why she wore her mythic white dress.

As Judith Farr has pointed out in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, the Pre-Raphaelite paintings so popular in the poet's day, and no doubt in the European art books of Romantic paintings in her brother Austin's library next door in the Italianate Evergreens, which we know she frequented prior to the last fifteen years of her life, may also have inspired her wearing of white. Romantic paintings of the day often contained huge, voluptuous, and mysteriously lit landscapes inhabited by one tiny white-clad figure, a nun, an angel, Jesus Christ, or a wood nymph of some Romantic sort, against vastly impressive vistas of a gorgeous natural world so venerated during the American Enlightenment of New England. Higginson, mentioned prior, in his 1891 *Atlantic Monthly* essay, "Emily Dickinson," quotes as emblematic of her wearing of white, a rather Italian-Catholic poem of Dickinson which he titles: "The Saint's Rest."

Of tribulation, these are they  
 Denoted by the white;  
 The spangled gowns, a lesser rank  
 Of victory designate.

All these did conquer; but the ones  
 Who overcome most times,  
 Wear nothing commoner than snow,  
 No ornament but palms.

Finally, perhaps, there's yet a further reason for the poet's wearing of white, one inspired by an Italian poet. A well known lyric of Dickinson reminds us how she travelled in books to far off lands: "There is no frigate like a book/ to take us lands away...." A book is a "journey" that everyone can take with no oppression of cost or repression of spirit. Another lyric where Italy as a *land away* is evoked by verses about an antique book read with pleasure contains ghosts of many centuries ago. The book is not inanimate or motionless, but mutates into a friend who confides in us precious secrets

of remote times. Herein, are cultural and literary immortals like Sophocles, Sappho, and *Dante's Beatrice*, a pure-hearted girl in a *white* gown.

A precious, mouldering pleasure - 'tis -  
To meet an Antique Book,  
In just the Dress his Century wore;  
A privilege - I think -

His venerable hand to take -  
And warming in our own -  
A passage back - or two - to make -  
To Times when he - was young -

His quaint opinions - to inspect -  
His thought to ascertain  
On Themes concern our mutual mind -  
The Literature of Man -

What interested Scholars - most -  
What Competitions ran -  
When Plato - was a Certainty -  
And Sophocles - a Man -

When Sappho - was a living Girl,  
And Beatrice wore  
The Gown that Dante - deified.  
Facts Centuries before,

He traverses - familiar -  
As One should come to Town  
And tell you all your Dreams - were true -  
He lived - where Dreams were born.

His presence is enchantment -  
You beg him not to go -  
Old Volumes shake their Vellum Heads  
And tantalize - just so -

[R.W. Franklin, 369, p. 256. c. 1863.]

Was the white dress that Dante made celestial perhaps adopted by Emily Dickinson – and wasn't it for Dante, a sweet mirage symbolizing the unattainable love of his blessed and pure Beatrice? Could Emily's white dress symbolize, as for Dante, an unattainable love as written of in her three "Master Letters?"

In one of the three famous and mysterious "Master Letters," Dickinson wrote:

"Vesuvius don't talk – Etna - don't – [Thy] one of them – a syllable – A thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever – She could look the world in the face, afterward – I suppose – "Tell you of

the want" – you know what a leech is, don't you – [remember that]  
 Daisy's arm is small – and you have felt the horizon hav'nt you – and did  
 the sea – never come so close as to make you dance?

[*Letters of ED*, Johnson, 233. pp.373-375 c. 1861.]

Love, when left unattended or in silence, can explode forth and be felt by the soul. Isn't the volcano Dickinson's symbol for the rage of repressed passion that kept under pressure, like lava, explodes from burning depths? Her Master's lack of response causes her to write of suppressed love and desire as Dante did. There is more about volcanic images to which we shall later return.

The land of Dante, of the Apennines and Alps, offers geographic details that the poet transforms into lyric visions of happiness and of unconditional surrender to an inscrutable fate. To sight the land of Italy from the sea, or to imagine seeing it, is not so difficult as reaching that "Blue Peninsula." From a far off vantage point, it is more delirium than shore, more ideal than reality. The poet explains, in a poem that begins, "It might be lonelier / without the Loneliness – I'm so accustomed to my Fate - ....," that not everyone is able to survive the ecstasy of finding happiness and freedom. The last verse of the poem states:

.... It might be easier  
 To fail - with Land in Sight -  
 Than gain - my Blue Peninsula -  
 To perish—of Delight -

[R.W. Franklin, 535. p. 242, c.1863]

This quatrain is typical of Dickinson's laconic lyrics; but is that "Blue Peninsula," dreamt of in vain by the poet from Amherst, really Italy? All doubt fades away, as Joseph Tusiani, explains: if one thinks of those admirable verses in which Italy, compared to the immovable solemnity of Switzerland, is felt to be the ultimate dream of happiness, emotional freedom, and released creative impulse, the consequence of escape from an implacable destiny:

Our lives are Swiss -  
 So still - so Cool -  
 Till some odd afternoon  
 The Alps neglect their Curtains  
 And we look farther on!

*Italy* stands the other side!

While like a guard between -  
 The solemn Alps -  
 The siren Alps  
 Forever intervene!

[R.W. Franklin, 129, p. 66, c.1859]

Dickinson saw Italy as a horizon free of constraints, a place of longed for passion fulfilled. Though confined to her provincial life in Amherst's Puritanical and austere society ruled over by her Calvinist father, and though she's never sailed the sea, she can imagine the waves and their rush. Though she's never visited snowy mountain peaks, she glimpsed the vastness of a freer life beyond their curtains. After all, it was the style in her Victorian day for Americans to love Italy. A Barolini explains, Henry Adams had written dispatches of his travels in Italy for the *Boston Courier*, saying in his autobiography of his sister, Louisa: "like all good Americans and English, [Louisa] was hotly Italian." Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, as Barolini, pointed out in her introduction to *Their Other Side; Six American Women and the Lure of Italy*, p. xiii)— it was the Anglo descended elite of American intellectuals who travelled to Italy, who learned Italian and translated Dante's *Divine Comedy* and formed Dante Societies.

Yet, until Margaret Fuller and other American women travelled there, life in Italy was a male's idealistic aspiration. Lord Byron in his Romantic pilgrimage wrote: "*Italia! O Italia!* Thou who hast / the fatal gift of beauty." British poet Robert Browning's words are engraved in stone in the Venetian palazzo where he succumbed to death: "Open my heart, and you will see / Graved inside of it, Italy."

Certainly, Emily Dickinson would have heard of the French intellectual feminist, Germaine de Stael's novel, *Corinne, ou l'Italie*, a book that fixed Italy in the Cosmopolitan mind as the land where the imaginative woman "of genius" could self-actualize her gifts. George Eliot, also revered by Dickinson as is understood by the poet's biographers, makes various references in *The Mill and the Floss*, to Corinne. As Barolini explains: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, so admired by Dickinson, writes of "My Italy of Women" having read with admiration *Corinne, ou l'Italie* more than once.

Margaret Fuller (born in Cambridge, a leader of the New England Transcendentalists, friend of Emerson and Thoreau) felt she had finally come into her creative stride upon her arrival in Italy during the *Risorgimento*. Once there, she met and married the impoverished, Italian revolutionary, Giovanni Angelo Ossoli, a marquis who

had been disinherited by his family because of his support for Mazzini, a champion of the *movimento*.

Margaret Fuller, as the first important woman journalist of America, sent dispatches to *The New York Tribune* and *The Dial* about the Italian *Risorgimento*. These were likely read by Dickinson in her sister-in-law Susan's library in the Evergreens next door. As is known by Dickinson biographers, Susan Dickinson subscribed to many magazines of the day, to say nothing of the fact that Fuller, before going to Italy, had published the first important and notorious feminist tract read in America, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Sue's library might well have had a copy of the book, or Emily might have heard about it from her Norcross Cousins of Cambridgeport who later in life were members of Emerson's literary salon. Dickinson's "Little Cousins" were sophisticated readers.

*Fuller's* volume described the abominable lack of human rights granted women of Dickinson's day, unable to own any property, even that left to them by their fathers which automatically became their husband's. Women died often in childbirth and were worn out by a lack of legal birth control. They had no lawful ability to vote or earn a living wage, or to be free from abuse, either mental or physical, by the men in their families. They had no right to an education or the ability to determine their own destiny. They were literally *chattel* owned by men of their families. As Barolini writes:

It is interesting how many English or American women turned from the Anglo tradition and toward the idea of Italy as a freeing of their human qualities and as an enriching of life. The Brownings went off to live in Florence; Margaret Fuller, in her thirty-seventh year, arrived in Italy as the leading American woman writer and intellectual of her time and found love and motherhood there, writing, "Italy has been glorius to me." And Emily Dickinson thought of Italy as the loosening of trammels, some absolute freeing of the spirit. [Barolini, p. 57, Works Cited.]

The Alps and Apennines of Italy inspired other lyrics of Dickinson. Their high peaks covered in immaculate snow held inviolate secrets. As mentioned earlier, Dickinson referred to her poetry as her "snow," pure truth falling from her spirit. Immortal and unreachable mountain peaks, like the Alps, are topped with snow and are mysterious because they are ancient and unattainable. Here were the Alps against which the questioning dream of Dickinson struggled for answers or response. Perhaps, the poet

sees herself as a Daisy at the foot of a high and mighty, worldly and unattainable  
 "Master" when she writes:

In lands I never saw - they say  
 Immortal Alps look down -  
 Whose bonnets touch the firmament -  
 Whose sandals touch the town;

Meek at whose everlasting feet  
 A myriad Daisy play -  
 Which, sir, are you, and which am I -  
 Upon an August day?

[F.W. Franklin, 108 p.58 c.1859]

In the following verses of five parallel lines, she wrote another love poem to a divine being, or earthly and unattainable lover, using Alpine Heights as a lofty spiritual devotion that needs something as pure as poetry, "services of Snow," to attain it:

I cannot be ashamed  
 Because I cannot see  
 The love you offer —  
 Magnitude  
 Reverses Modesty

And I cannot be proud  
 Because a Height so high  
 Involves Alpine  
 Requirements  
 And services of Snow.

[R.W. Franklin, 977 p.410 c. 1865]

The Apennines suggested, a tender, fragile levity of joy after tears, as the Italian poet, Carducci, saw them in his *Rime Nuove*:

... ....But from afar  
 Your hillocks with their vanishing mists  
 And the green plain land smiling in the morning showers  
 Speak only of peace to my heart.

[Translated by Joseph Tusiani.]

Dickinson, unlike Carducci, did not stop along the path of mere description, but rather, created an image elevated to a philosophical universality. The Apennine Mountains seemed to symbolize worldly discovery or realization:

The thought beneath so slight a film -  
 Is more distinctly seen -  
 As laces just reveal the surge -  
 Or Mists - the Apennine -

[R.W. Franklin, p. 95, c.1861]

Within a conundrum, an idea becomes clearer when the misty film is seen through to a higher thought—a discovery, a release of the mind into a clearer rational.

All that mattered yesterday becomes trivial in the light of a new morning. The highest mountain peaks contain tracks one can travel through to larger horizons, as feelings and concerns of yesterday are compared with greater realizations or understandings to come:

We see - Comparatively -  
The Thing so towering high  
We could not grasp it's segment  
Unaided - Yesterday -

This Morning's finer Verdict -  
Makes scarcely worth the toil -  
A furrow - Our Cordillera -  
Our Apennine - a knoll -

Perhaps 'tis kindly - done us -  
The Anguish - and the loss -  
The wrenching - for His Firmament  
The Thing belonged to us -

To spare these Striding Spirits  
Some Morning of Chagrin -  
The waking in a Gnat's – embrace -  
Our Giants - further on - [R.W. Franklin, 580, pp261-262, c. 1863]

‘Our’ Cordilleras, ‘our’ Apennines, our high and spiritual strivings, might bring us to a place wherein we are small and finite, and yet: those who contemplate the world in a worldly spirit are citizens of the infinite further on.

Besides the Alps and the Apennines, it was Italy's volcanoes that capture Dickinson's imagination. But, her Vesuvius was inside herself, it seems. It was fashionable for gentlemen and ladies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to visit Vesuvius and climb her promontory. The exploration of volcanoes was in vogue. “Sir William Hamilton's treatises on Vesuvius gave rise to popular excursions,” explains Barolini. People from around the globe were travelling to climb mountains like Vesuvius, and the excavations of the classical sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum were of the period, too. Goethe had come to explore, as had Mme. de Stael who staged a dramatic scene in *Corrine au l'Italie*



on the slopes of Vesuvius. Corinne's lover, Lord Nelvil, explained why his father disapproved of his courtship of her by saying that as a woman she would take any husband away from England because, "Only Italy would suit her" passionate and liberated nature.

Dickinson found her Vesuvius at Home, in Amherst where she both felt imprisoned, and also was inclined to stay, living her life in the emotional depths and passion of a poet:

Volcanoes be in Sicily  
 And South America  
 I judge from my Geography—  
 Volcanoes nearer here  
 A Lava step at any time  
 Am I inclined to climb—  
 A Crater I may contemplate  
 Vesuvius at Home.

[R.W. Franklin, 1691, p. 609, c. undated]

There are other possible interpretations of the emotional meanings in the Italian geographical symbols used by Dickinson. Perhaps, her "Vesuvius at Home" was Squire Edward, her father, who is known to have had a fierce temper at times, in a fit, "beating his horse because he didn't look humble enough" according to Lavinia, Dickinson's sister. Or, the poet's own life at home was a volcano of emotions and passions held in, but released in her poetry? The poem's, "a Lava step at any time" is one of resigned determination, a somber feeling that blossoms into a corolla of light. The verse lingers between meditation and vision.

The only quatrain in which Mount Etna was mentioned offers symbolic imagery of how, "still waters run deep," and passions demonstrated loudly, can be better understood than those that seethe beneath the surface. Dickinson again used an Italian symbol to make her emotional point that "Security is loud...." Etna, also called *Muncibeddu* (*beautiful mountain*) in Sicilian, was known to be the largest active volcano in the world, and Sicilians were thought to be of volatile nature, even as the Bay of Naples, of the Kingdom of Two Sicily's, was thought to be a peaceful refuge in its sublime beauty.

When Etna basks and purrs  
 Naples is more afraid

Than when she shows her Garnet Tooth -  
Security is loud -

[R.W. Franklin, 1161 p. 465, c. 1869]

As Judith Farr, in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, points out: Susan, the poet's sister-in-law, also explained by biographers to be of a volatile nature, though enthralling, was often associated in the poet's mind with volcanoes, and vibrant, torrid emotions. Though we cannot go into that complex relationship here, Farr and other biographers have explored it fully.

Joseph Tusiani (see *Works Cited*) familiar with modern Italian poets, finds much of Emily Dickinson's poetry to have a *hermetic* nature, inviolable, shifty; but intimate and modest, made of attractive reticence, of internal echoes that seem to prove themselves eternal. Her life at home is a volcano of emotions and passions held in, but released in her poetry where emotional truth is revealed and levels all with lips that never lie, lips like an avid poet's lips speaking emotional truth.

A still - Volcano - Life -  
That flickered in the night -  
When it was dark enough to do  
Without erasing sight -

A quiet - Earthquake Style -  
Too subtle to suspect  
By natures this side Naples -  
The North cannot detect

The solemn - Torrid - Symbol -  
The lips that never lie -  
Whose hissing Corals part - and shut -  
And Cities - ooze away -

[R.W. Franklin, 517, p.234, c.1863.]

The image of Vesuvius recurs in another iconic poem of Dickinson's. Her verses describe the protagonist and narrator as "a Loaded Gun:"

My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -  
In Corners - till a Day  
The Owner passed - identified -  
And carried Me away -

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods -  
And now We hunt the Doe -  
And every time I speak for Him -  
The Mountains straight reply -

And do I smile, such cordial light  
 Upon the Valley glow -  
 It is as a Vesuvian face  
 Had let its pleasure through -

And when at Night - Our good Day done -  
 I guard My Master's Head -  
 'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's  
 Deep Pillow - to have shared -

To foe of His - I'm deadly foe -  
 None stir the second time -  
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -  
 Or an emphatic Thumb -

Though I than He - may longer live  
 He longer must - than I -  
 For I have but the power to kill,  
 Without - the power to die -

[R.W. Franklin, 764. p 341-2, c. 1863]

Dickinson's irony is subtle, but powerful. Though, a gun is doing the talking; the image of life is transparent in the initial noun and gives a sad tone to the verses: an oscillation between irony and tears from the first until the last verse, a suspension between drama and tragedy. Again, Vesuvius is used to signify the pleasure of emotional release or ecstasy erupting. The final powerful aphorism dissolves into tragedy, the grief of losing a person profoundly loved before one can die oneself: "For I have but the power to kill, / Without - the power to die -"

When Emily Dickinson withdrew from the world of her "encounters with fate" in the relative solitude of her paternal house, Italy had already gone from the melancholy of Piedmont to the glory of Rome. Austria was still, in the mind of Italians, a symbol of oppression, a trap. The poet was interested in the political destiny of her "Blue Peninsula," as stated in a short lyric, whose last verse is not easy for the American mind to understand, but is very clear to the Italian one of her time.

The wind drew off  
 Like hungry dogs  
 Defeated of a bone  
 Through fissures in  
 Volcanic cloud  
 The yellow lightening shone –

The Trees held up  
 Their mangle limbs  
 Like Animals in pain  
 When Nature falls upon herself  
 Beware an Austrian

[R.W. Franklin, 1703, p. 612, c. undated.]

Here, the history of Italy was analogous to the history of the world, and the individual: Austrian represents not the subtle enemy of the independence of a nation, but is symbolic of the eternal, omnipresent danger of every hoping and struggling soul.

In *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, of Spring, 1999, Patricia Thompson Rizzo wrote a review titled: *Emily Dickinson and the "Blue Peninsula:" Dickinson's Reception in Italy*, regarding the publication by Marisa Bulgheroni of *Emily Dickinson: Tutte le Poesie*:

It must be said from the outset that the volume represents the culmination of the growing interest that Italy, more than any other European country, has shown in the Amherst poet. Because of the impact that it will no doubt have for the next few decades of Dickinson studies in this country, the handsome Mondadori volume edited by Italy's foremost Dickinson scholar deserves to be both praised and closely scrutinized. As a preliminary note informs us, there are 1174 translations by Silvio Raffo, 392 by Margherita Guidacci, 185 by Massimo Bacigalupo and 27 by Nadia Campana.

Perhaps, the above Dickinson poem, "The wind drew off..." endears her to the hearts of Italian poets, along with her desire to travel in their land to release her pent up emotions from their Calvinist prison in other verses. As part of the American Enlightenment of New England led by Alcott, Emerson, and Fuller, Dickinson longed for the land where enlightenment first blossomed out of the Dark Ages into the Venetian and Florentine Renaissance so admired by Romantic poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Sometimes it's an Italian name that excites Emily's fantasy. The Etruria of antique Italy, which inspires us with treatises of erudition, also inspired Dickinson with a magic adjective, powerful and unalterable. 'Etruscan' is equivalent to 'mysterious', 'ineffable', and it's not applied to a terrestrial civilization, but to the celestial and indefinable life of heavenly bodies. There's a boldness in living life *now* to the fullest that Dickinson turns into an image of awe and a song of transfiguration.

The Moon upon her fluent Route  
 Defiant of a Road  
 The Star's Etruscan Argument  
 Substantiate a God -  
 How archly spared the Heaven "to come" -  
 If such prospective be -  
 By superseding Destiny  
 And dwelling there Today - [R.W. Franklin, 1574, p. 580, c. 1882]

The same adjective is used in another poem with a seductive meaning. Here 'Etruscan,' referring to early Italian civilization so idealized by D.H. Lawrence and other authors to come after Dickinson, means 'admirable', 'irresistible', 'definitive':

Unto like Story-Trouble has enticed me -  
 How Kinsmen fell -  
 Brothers and Sister - who preferred the Glory -  
 And their young will  
 Bent to the Scaffold, or in Dungeons – chanted -  
 Till God's full time -  
 When they let go the ignominy – smiling -  
 And Shame went still –

Unto guessed Crests, my moaning fancy, leads me,  
 Worn fair  
 By Heads rejected - in the lower country -  
 Of honors there -  
 Such spirit makes her perpetual mention,  
 That I - grown bold -  
 Step martial - at my Crucifixion -  
 As Trumpets – rolled –

Feet, small as mine - have marched in Revolution  
 Firm to the Drum -  
 Hands - not so stout - hoisted them - in witness -  
 When Speech went numb -  
 Let me not shame their sublime deportments -  
 Drilled bright -  
 Beckoning-Etruscan invitation -  
 Toward Light - [R.W. Franklin, 300, p. 133, 1862]

Did Emily Dickinson know the Italian language? There are no documents to prove it; but knowing Latin and Greek, and people who travelled in Italy, she may have

had a measure of exposure to it, and likely found some in her reading. She could taste its flavor from a study of Latin. In the verses containing 'the gown that Dante made celestial'—the name 'Beatrice' is seemingly used with *four* syllables [Bee-ah-TREE-che] and not three as in English — that is if one pays attention to the rhythm of the original seven-syllables. This might mean that Dickinson pronounced Beatrice in the Italian way rather than in the English manner [BEE-ah-tres.] In two other poems, there's a show of Italian words. The word "*Signor*" is used in one to mean divine being or lover:

The moon is distant from the Sea –  
 And yet, with Amber Hands –  
 She leads Him – docile as a Boy –  
 Along appointed Sands –

He never misses a Degree –  
 Obedient to Her eye –  
 He comes just so far – toward the Town –  
 Just so far – goes away –

O Signor, Thine, the Amber Hand –  
 And mine – the distant Sea –  
 Obedient to the least command  
 Thine eye impose on me -

[R.W. Franklin, 387, p.178, c 1862.]

The Italian word, "*Madonna*" is used in another to signify sacred light, like a candle burning in a darkened cathedral shrine:

Only a Shrine, but Mine -  
 I made the Taper shine -  
 Madonna dim, to whom all Feet may come,  
 Regard a Nun -

Thou knowest every Wo –  
 Needless to tell thee there - so -  
 But can'st thou do  
 The Grace next to it - heal?  
 That looks a harder skill to us -  
 Still – just as easy, if it be thy Will  
 To thee - Grant Me -

Thou knowest, though, so Why tell thee? [R.W. Franklin, 981, p.411, c. 1865]

The description of the stunning beauty in a sunset scene, in the following poem, demonstrates an awareness of Italian art. The choice of words is so precise as to make us see the colors as in a painting.

How the old Mountains drip with Sunset  
 How the Hemlocks burn –  
 How the Dun Brake is draped in Cinder  
 By the Wizard Sun –

How the old Steeple hand the Scarlet  
 Till the Ball is full –  
 Have I the lip of the Flamingo  
 That I dare to tell?

Then, how the Fire ebbs like Billows –  
 Touching all the Grass  
 With a departing – Sapphire – feature –  
 As a Duchess passed –  
 How a small Dusk crawls on the Village  
 Till the Houses blot  
 And the old Flambeau, no men carry  
 Glimmer on the Street –

How it is Night – Nest and Kennel –  
 And where was the Wood –  
 Just a Dome of Abyss is Bowing  
 Into Solitude –

These are the Visions flitted Guido –  
 Titian – never told –  
 Domenichino dropped his pencil –  
 Paralyzed, with Gold -

[ R.W. Franklin, 327, p. 145, c. 1862]

Another poem for its delicate tone suggest Italy with limpid images and Venetian vistas. It's one of the Dickinson's most skillful, and, we know from her biographers, one of her most edited and carefully crafted early works:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –  
 Untouched by Morning –  
 And untouched by noon –  
 Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,  
 Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone –

Grand go the Years,  
 In the Crescent above them –  
 Worlds scoop their Arcs –  
 And Firmaments – row –  
 Diadems – drop –  
 And Doges – surrender –  
 Soundless as Dots,  
 On a Disc of Snow.

[R.W. Franklin, 124, p. 64, c. 1859]

Joseph Tusiani finds an echo of Italian history in the poem: The fall of Venice is accurately carved in the second to last verse and symbolized by the surrender of a ruler of mere human power. The dead, ‘meek members of the resurrection’ live on in Biblical lore forever while earthly powers come and go under the stars and turning firmament. Terrestrial glories, crown jewels, drop into silence as kings surrender. Dickinson paints the movement of history with her precise and tuneful “snow.”

As Barolini explains: the poet, late in her life, at the age of forty-five, with the greatest of intensity, and with her most fecund years behind her, cut from *Scribner's Magazine* a reference to the poetry of Vittoria Colonna, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian poet of the Island of Ischia who maintained a correspondence with Michelangelo. Dickinson, herself, was most published in the scribal sense with her correspondence. She wrote often to Elizabeth Holland, her Little Cousin in Cambridgeport, to Samuel Bowles, to Helen Hunt Jackson, to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and very likely to William Smith Clark who had travelled to Italy and no doubt brought back with him to salons held by her sister-in-law at the Evergreens, his stories of travels in Italy, the land believed to be, as Mm. DeStael's *Corinne* believed it to be, synonymous with living openly, freed for self-expression in the arts, liberated from constricting emotional proprieties. Italy was the land where the arts were appreciated, and the sweet life, *La dolce vita*, not constricted by dogmatic hypocrisies, or held at bay by a Puritan work ethic of more industrially advanced nations.

Italy seemed the land most welcoming to women of artistic talent and temperament. It was a country where the first Doctorate of Theology was attained by a woman, namely Saint Catharine of Sienna, who became, along with Saint Frances of



Assisi, the High Patron Saint of Italy, anointed as such for service to the poor and a love of nature. It was the country where the first woman to publish a collection of poetry in Europe was Vittoria Colonna. It was the land where the first important *woman* painter of the Early Baroque era, was Artemisia Gentileschi, the premier *female* to become a member of the *Accademia di Arte del deSegno* in Renaissance Florence. It was a land where Dickinson's most admired English poet, Elisabeth Barrett Brown, lived in an ex-patriot life in Florence and wrote of Dickinson's favorite, self-actualized heroine, *Aurora Leigh*, who chose her mother's *Italian* sensibilities over her English father's temperament. It was the land to which Elisabeth Barrett Browning fled from Victorian England, and the constraints of her father, to elope with her poet lover, Robert Browning.

Dickinson's "Blue Peninsula" harbored the first prominent American feminist intellectual and defender of women's rights, Margaret Fuller, who discovered the fruition of her work, and her love in the person of a soldier of the *Risorgimento*; the nation to which *Corinne*, the celebrated and liberated heroine of Mm. De Stael, so unafraid of love without marriage, so able to assert her own identity, had also found herself, a woman like George Sand and George Eliot (Marianne Evans) another of Dickinson's admired authors. Marianne Evans lived her life with a married man, boldly expressing emotional freedom and self-expression, as William Smith Clark did around Amherst on his return from Europe, shocking Amherst with his affectionate greetings, hugging and kissing as Italians do upon meeting, and insisting upon celebrating Christmas with feasting and the spirit of generosity and gift-giving symbolized by Saint Nicolas whose reliquary is housed in a cathedral Bari—defying austere Calvinist customs of self-denial, sedateness, and fasting. Italy was where the Renaissance had bloomed, as the American Enlightenment was blooming in New England

Dickinson was re-reading Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the tragic love story that takes place in Italy's Verona, just before she died. Finally, saying in her poetry, using symbols of Italy to actualize the idea that emotional freedom to love art, poetry, and lover, "is all there is" and "its own rescue." As Barolini explains, she drew her incantation of Sicily in the symbol of beauty and truth, the rose, the flower that represents perfection, the transcendent design of Dante's *Paradiso* as *candida rosa*.

Partake as doth the Bee -  
 Abstemiously -  
 The rose is an Estate –  
 In Sicily.

Italy and the island at its toe resided in Emily Dickinson's spirit— representative of a quality of independent artistic truth and beauty, her own rebellious creativity, her inviolate “snow” at the top of her Alps and Appenines, her erupting passions, her Vesuvius at home, her poems full of emotions that have outlived their maker for well over a century.

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Daniela Gioseffi is an American Book Award winning author of fourteen books of poetry and prose. She has published a novel on the life of Emily Dickinson with a non-fiction afterword: *WILD NIGHTS, WILD NIGHTS: The Story of Emily Dickinson's Master*. A featured speaker on many campuses and at international book fairs, as well as on NPR, and The Library of Congress Radio Show sponsored by The National Endowment for the Arts, she has two grant awards in poetry from NYSCA, The John Ciardi Award for Lifetime Achievement in Poetry, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Italian Educators Association, and a New York's Order of the Son's of Italy Literary Award. She founded The Bordighera Annual Poetry Prize for bilingual book publication in English and Italian, with the help of Alfredo dePalchi, Italian Poet, and Anthony J. Tamburri, Dean of the Calandra Italian American Institute. Her father, Donato Gioseffi was born in Apulia, near Bari, in Orta Nova, and Daniela has travelled through Italy visiting Milano, Roma, Venezia, Firenze, Pisa, Perugia, San Marco, and Apulia's Bari, Candela and Orta Nova, and studied in Urbino.