

# Dickinson's Dying Tiger

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By William Eaton

I have proposed previously a first law of American literature, complete with a rider. The law: You are always going to come across one more, intriguing Emily Dickinson poem, ready to reward your attention. The rider: The poem may have something to do with sex.

Vivian Pollak, a professor of literature and women's studies, has found "anxious sexuality" in Dickinson's three-verse poem about a dying tiger. Citing Georges Bataille, we might speak more generally about how the erotic is based in a desire to lose oneself in or with the other—and in the fear of what this must involve. And Bataille may further help us by giving a male—and more twentieth-century French—backdrop against which Dickinson's brief fable can more fully engage our attention. A gloss and abbreviation of the last stanza of a Bataille poem: I drink in your slit and open your naked legs to read what kills me.

But—excuse me—in "The Dying Tiger" there is sensuality and mortality and even, perhaps, vulgarity, but no sex, no consummation, no communion either. The poem's two bodies, and two selves, never even touch, and it is this distance that kills the male and condemns the female to waste away (though she lives on with her poetry and regrets). The first verse:

A Dying Tiger - moaned for Drink -  
I hunted all the Sand -  
I caught the Dripping of a Rock  
And bore it in my Hand -

We should keep in mind that in the poet's imagination the animal became a tiger, rather than, say, an ox, gazelle, or sparrow, though of course such animals thirst and desire, too.

His Mighty Balls - in death were thick -  
But searching - I could see  
A Vision on the Retina  
Of Water - and of me -

The beast wants only Water and her!

**William Eaton** is, among other things, the longtime Editor of *Zeteo* and author of two collections of essays: **Art, Sex, Politics** (in which "Dickinson's Dying Tiger" first appeared) and **Surviving the Twenty-First Century**. He has written extensively about Dickinson for *Zeteo* and elsewhere. Among the less conventional of these works: a pastiche, **This is my letter to the future**, and a bilingual story/personal essay: **Our lives are Swiss (Nos vies sont suisses)**.

**This essay will move restlessly between Dickinson's poetry and biography**, on the one hand, and, on the other, challenges and feelings of our own, twenty-first-century lives. The goal might be said to be to collect all the water, the insights and suggestions, that may be found by taking "A Dying Tiger" to be about the possibility of intimate relations between a woman and a man. As I will note again at the very end, the poem can also be read as being about relations between children and parents. A third alternative: reading the poem in conjunction with Dickinson's biography, we can think about how relations with parents come to shadow a child's possible intimate relations later in life.

Consider the eighth line of the poem with its upper casing of "Water" and lower casing of "me." Dickinson often commented on how small, slight, and undernourished she was. "It would have starved a Gnat / To live as small as I." "God gave a Loaf to every Bird - / But just a Crumb - to Me -" (She was as in need as any tiger.) In one of her letters to the author, minister, and Abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she described herself as "small, like the Wren, . . . and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves." The great phrase, the one that brings tears to my eyes, is the last: "that the Guest leaves." I think of her father—aloof, often away from home, little valuing women or his daughter Emily, except for the delicious breads she baked for him. Among the things Emily learned was how—and particularly for a woman?—responding to another's hunger cannot relieve one's own? In a letter to one of her cousins, she wrote, "Affection is like bread, unnoticed till we starve, and then we dream of it, and sing of it, and paint it."

Dickinson's extraordinary literary output, the almost two thousand poems, can be seen as in part inspired by a ferocious desire to prove herself to the leading man in her life, her father, whose "contribution" was to take little notice of her, while he wrapped in narcissistic admiration her less talented brother. Certainly many Dickinson readers, fans, may themselves have had parents who, the children felt, took little notice of them and their talents. More generally—travelling on the rails our childhoods laid down for us—many readers may feel not so much that God gave us crumbs, but that we, like Emily, have had more to give—be this artistically, intellectually, emotionally, or sexually—than there have been other people ready to enjoy and appreciate our gifts. And thus the dryness of the sherry left in the bottoms of our glasses. Tigers (and some fathers) are frightening, voracious—but O to be so fully desired by such a beast!

I have the sense, too, that, on a deeper level, many of us also feel that at some vital moments in our lives—in moments of passion (not necessarily sexual), and in our marriages, with our children or parents, with a homeless person—we have come up short. We may have left a feast untouched, or failed to bring "wine / To lips long parching / Next to mine". (And I wonder if this doesn't connect, too, to a false idea that the lovers of disinterested others—of self-involved parents, for example—at times develop. Even as we may have learned, again and again, how responding to some other's hunger may not relieve

our own, we may also have this feeling: if only I could have really reached him, really fed him, he would have fed me too.)

**In quite another context Yeats wrote:** “Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart.” Emily’s father distant in one way or another, she was left with her mother— “habitually complaining . . . subject to depression and hypochondria,” is how the psychiatrist John Cody has characterized her. And, “emotionally shallow, self-centered, ineffectual, conventional, timid, submissive, and not very bright.”

“I never had a mother,” Dickinson is reported to have said. But this left her with her brother and sister, to whom she was very close. To borrow a phrase translated from Rilke, they became guardians of her solitude. As for her more distant relatives and friends—who might be better described as the people with whom she corresponded—many seem to have recognized that she was somewhere between odd, extraordinary, and “partially cracked” (a Higginson description). They struggled to respond, let alone embrace, her piercing sensitivity and linguistic gifts. Invariably they came up short.

Pollak, who currently teaches at Washington University at St. Louis, notes: “Her [Dickinson’s] poetry was an attempt to keep herself alive by memorializing a range of feeling and experience threatened with extinction from without and within.” Such a use of creative activity is hardly limited to Dickinson or to her poetry. If Pollak’s line had come to me when I was developing my essay on Plato’s *Lysis* (“Friendship, Deception and Writing”), it could have been adapted to characterize Plato’s tremendous literary and intellectual efforts.<sup>1</sup> Dickinson herself—in addition to bread baking and writing all the poems and more than ten thousand letters—she gardened, and collected and dried flowers. As Freud once put it, art—or creative activities of many sorts, I am proposing—offers substitutive satisfactions for our most deeply felt renunciations, and thus serves as nothing else to reconcile us to the sacrifices we have made on behalf of civilization. (And, I would add, the demands of this “civilization” may be felt in classrooms or workplaces or on electronic dating sites or within our families.)

And, meanwhile, the tiger—without and within—may well get tired of waiting for Water—and for us, or her. For a specific her—Emily Dickinson—and, more generally, for a woman whose own animal desires have not been desiccated and denied by external social pressures working within her. Even if something like water has, finally, been found in the rock, and even if the speaker is, or says she is, preparing for the beast to lick the wetness from “fingers going by” (as she puts it in another poem)—it’s too late.<sup>2</sup> The animal has died.

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<sup>1</sup> William Eaton, [Friendship, Deception, Writing: Within and Beyond Plato’s Lysis](#), *Agni*, Spring 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The lines “A little water supplicate / Of fingers going by” appear in the Dickinson poem that begins “[We thirst at first,—’t is Nature’s act](#)”.

And, I hate to say it, but—in the nineteenth century as in the twenty-first—this deadliness, this missing of one another is the point. Dickinson even exalts it, or tries her best to. “The Banquet of Abstemiousness / Defaces that of Wine - ” she writes in another poem. Or, in a letter to an older man who was eager to marry and have sex with her: “Don’t you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer?”

A famous French expression: “Le meilleur moment de l’amour, c’est quand on monte l’escalier.” The best part of a love affair is climbing the stairs. The Dickinson, nineteenth-century New England version is:

Inquire of the closing Rose  
Which rapture - she preferred  
And she will point you sighing -  
To her rescinded Bud.

From these perspectives, there is little point in actually getting liquid to the beast; the great pleasure is feeling the warm dampness come—and this while you are not quite able, or are indeed refusing, to offer yourself to thirsty lips.

The tiger poem was e-mailed to me by a friend who had heard it read out loud by a Yungian analyst in San Francisco. In dialoguing electronically about the poem with my friend, the following story came to my mind.

Two people meet, and one of them would throw himself or herself passionately into a relationship, seeking to recover a more animal self or to lose his self or herself in love and lust. But the other holds back, afraid of letting go, mistrustful of the other’s passion. Is he really that interested in “me,” prepared to really commit, long-term? And is such committing, such a giving over of oneself, a kind of death? Is there more fun in just enjoying the lover’s attention and thirst, and are we afraid that all this will fade if we give in?

Worst of all—organs ache—while the lover moans and growls and waits, the beloved may enjoy the exquisite pleasure of denial, of denying another, of denying the animal within, denying herself. Until it is the beast who relents, gives up, and the possibilities of passion and of dissolving die. At which point the beloved, alone, may hold tight to her memories, regrets, and guilt, cherishing their poetry.

**With such feelings in mind**, we may be tempted to say that the third and final verse of Dickinson’s tiger poem is more than a disappointment. The weakness—the lifelessness, the dryness—of the speaker’s response to the great, lusty animal’s death could lead one to find the whole poem weak, and from there turn on the posthumously exalted, beloved poet herself.

'Twas not my blame - who sped too slow -  
'Twas not his blame - who died  
While I was reaching him -  
But 'twas - the fact that He was dead -

Seen in manuscript, Dickinson's dashes are quite small, almost periods. I wonder if their meaning for Dickinson wasn't something like, "breathe here." In the tiger poem, the final dash, even when seen small in a reproduction of the manuscript, adds to the flattened affect of this verse. And what is the speaker here proposing through denying—that the tiger's fault does not lie in his voraciousness, but in his—a tiger's!—lack of vitality? He gave up just when water and woman were, finally, coming to his lips. We might as well blame him for ever having placed such hopes in the woman, that she might respond to his desire, his need, and not be distant and dry with him? (And be this in nineteenth-century New England, or in our current, electronically choreographed social lives.)

Or is Dickinson reflecting one, post-Enlightenment, women's view of men: that they (we) cannot help being weak because we are ruled and rendered simple by our appetites as well as by our inability to understand the more complex: women and social forces? Or have I skipped over the more basic point here: we're animals. The tiger's role is to capture others—with moaning, if necessary—and to consume them. And thus the non-tiger—however strongly she or he may feel a desire to give in, be consumed, she must keep her distance, approaching only when the animal is domesticated, neutered, dead, or soon to be. (As I am working in a café, revising this text, the voice of a Patsy-Cline imitator comes through the loudspeakers singing "I'm crazy for trying / And crazy for crying / And I'm crazy for loving you."<sup>3</sup>)

A young female friend has been telling me how she is seeking "the love of my life," and this has reminded me of other women friends who have found such loves but only once and briefly. In several cases, the man died too soon after the relationship began. In every case, the woman continues to hold tight to a dry and fading self-satisfaction—to have once been so enthralled, so entirely taken by another! I find myself reminded, too, of the sales pitch for a contemporary book, presumably targeting single women: "My father in his coffin looked better than most of the men I dated." This is to suggest that the real tiger often dies in childhood, in what a Freudian might term "unresolved Oedipal conflict." Subsequent tigers are poor substitutes, and thus why give them sustenance, why respond to their desires?

**Pollak has focused on Dickinson's social circumstances**, on Dickinson being a woman writer in Victorian times—deprived on account of being deprived—"unable to extinguish

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<sup>3</sup> The song [Crazy](#), which was a hit for the singer Patsy Cline, was written in 1961 by Willie Nelson with help from Oliver English. [Wikipedia](#) informs that the song was written for a male country singer who turned it down because it was "a girl's song"—i.e. girls might keep loving men who did not deserve or return their love, but this is not something boys did or wanted to hear that they did.

such inevitable hungers as the desire for literary recognition and for sexual gratification.” Given her circumstances—“all the Sand”—how women were constrained—Dickinson was unable to satisfy such hungers either. I have no problem with this analysis, except insofar as it is only part of the story. If women—or middle- and upper-class white women—are undernourished and denied the possibility of seeking their own nourishment, how are “their men” living? Emily’s brother Austin had a wife who was left out to dry—in a fancy new, Italianate home—while Austin, in Emily’s work room, carried on with the saucier Mabel Loomis Todd. Anachronistically, we could call Mabel a liberated woman and propose that her biography—which includes her public career as a writer and as the first editor to bring Emily’s work to the public and acclaim—shows how much better life has become for liberated middle- and upper-class white women.

But, again, this is a partial truth. Freud wrote of the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on *all of us*. We can read Dickinson’s tiger as all of us, male, female, or trans, dying amid the desert sands of civilization, in which there is precious little nourishment—more “likes” than hugs or intimate conversations—our deepest desires rarely met. I would not say that these desires are specifically for sex; “communion” might be a better word. We would—and not just on drunken holidays or business trips—lose our individuality and isolation together with another human being, or with other human beings. And this instead of, for example, drying flowers, studying tango dancing, or reaffirming our autonomy-isolation in bed with a porn site, sex toy, detective novel, or favorite TV series.

When I shove social context aside and try to just read the words and phrases of Dickinson’s poem, I can be proud of the tiger. He—alone with his Mighty Balls—has known and sought what matters in life: nourishment and love. I can even go a step further: as a male tiger he has embraced, even in failure, his role: to kill and consume.

But from this perspective, the female speaker of the poem is also doing her sociobiological best. She may long to be able to give herself over to desire and to another—or long to be the tiger, conquering and consuming. But in her present circumstances, faced with a hungry beast, distance and denial are her only hopes for survival. Freud writes, more generally, of the great common task of preserving ourselves against the superior power of nature. We now are less conscious of this superior power than we are of that of capitalism. But in either case, we might say, after *les situationnistes* of 1960s France: taking advantage of free will begins with refusing to offer up the drops of nourishment that we have, despite the odds, been able to gather.<sup>4</sup>

**My sex-linked exploration of Dickinson’s poem is done**, but before concluding this piece, I would touch again on two of the other possible approaches to the dying tiger. The poem may certainly be read as being less about male-female relations than about caring for

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<sup>4</sup> “Le bon usage du choix commence avec le refus de payer.” Decades ago I became attached to the following English variant: “The only free choice is the refusal to pay.”

or working around a depressed or otherwise needy parent. In a letter written a few weeks after her mother died, Dickinson wrote: “We were never intimate Mother and children, while she was our Mother - but Mines in the same Ground meet by tunneling, and when she became our Child, the Affection came.” This is to say that the tiger poem speaks of another and still common experience: to be confronted, typically at a very early age, with a parent, or two, who demand more care than they are able or willing to give. At some moment or moments one may scramble to find and give something to relieve the parent’s suffering, and thus also relieve one’s own. But it’s always too little too late.

A third reading of the poem could bridge the two others. As has happened to so many of us, Dickinson’s relations with her mother and her father stained her visions of, hopes for, and experiences of relations with people met later in life, potential male suitors included. I will not dwell on the strong possibility, suggested by so many poems, that Emily’s sexuality was more based in autoeroticism and homosexuality than heterosexuality. Yet we might say that the distance she so carefully guarded was rooted in a distrust, learned in early childhood, of thirsty tigers, male and female.

To those interested in exploring such paths, I recommend the beautiful, heart-wrenching Dickinson poem that begins “I bring an unaccustomed wine”. Above I quoted from the first stanza. I will close by quoting all of the first, third, and fifth stanzas (of the seven total):

I bring an unaccustomed wine  
To lips long parching, next to mine,  
And summon them to drink. . . .

The hands still hug the tardy glass;  
The lips I would have cooled, alas!  
Are so superfluous cold, . . .

Some other thirsty [person] there may be  
To whom this [dead person] would have pointed me  
Had it remained to speak.

## Afterword

I wrote this essay before reading Wendy K. Perriman’s *A Wounded Deer: The Effects of Incest on the Life and Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006). This valuable book argues that Dickinson was an incest survivor, sexually abused by her father or her brother or perhaps both. I read this book because the poetry had already convinced me that Emily had had incestuous sex with one or both of these male relatives. (Though I would note that “incest survivor” relocates her nineteenth-century life in a contemporary context.) After I read the book, however, my position both slightly shifted and solidified. Briefly here: even if he never gave her the least caress, Emily’s father was abusive. He ignored Emily’s intellectual

and literary accomplishments while overvaluing her brother's. A patriarch of his time and place, he essentially imprisoned Emily and her sister in the family home, not letting them go out without his permission and discouraging them from entering into relations with other men.

I will hardly be the first to note that in the United States we are obsessed with, and indeed make too much of, the possible evils of sexual relations. Among the shortcomings of our approach: it can lead us at times to ignore other noxious behavior, such as how fathers and mothers—self-absorbed, lazy, overworked, or otherwise—may withhold essential nurture, interest, encouragement, love, discipline; any number of things. For some children such withholding can be as damaging (and art-inspiring) as “acts of commission,” incest included.

*A special thanks to Camille, who brought the poem to my attention; to Gretchen, who discussed it with me as we machine-trained ourselves, side by side, at New York's McBurney YMCA; and to my publisher, friend and fellow Zeteo contributor Walter Cummins who published an earlier version of this essay in [\*\*Art, Sex, Politics\*\*](#) (Serving House Books, 2017).*

*Allow me also to note the recent publication of Emily Dickinson as a Second Language: Demystifying the Poetry by Greg Mattingly, one of the guides at the [\*\*Emily Dickinson Museum\*\*](#), in Amherst, Massachusetts, and a contributing member of the [\*\*Emily Dickinson International Society\*\*](#). The book may well prove an additional, useful guide to Dickinson's vocabulary. It includes a brief discussion of what Jay Leyda called “the omitted center” in Dickinson's work. Although Mattingly does not call attention to this possibility, certainly Dickinson's use of code words and riddles, her skirting of certain specifics: this is consistent with the idea that she had been involved in an incestuous relationship.*