

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#303 (c.1862)

The Soul selects her own Society –
Then – shuts the Door –
To her divine Majority –
Present no more –

Unmoved – she notes the Chariots – pausing –
At her low Gate –
Unmoved – an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat –

I've known her – from an ample nation –
Choose One –
Then – close the Valves of her attention –
Like Stone –

ANALYSIS

“Now we come to the famous poem which displays the image of the Soul electing her lover to be now her one ‘Society,’ her communing Fellow Soul even though physically absent. Renunciation has succeeded upon Despair; it has its own happiness and even an arrogance befitting a Soul assured by Heaven.”

John Crowe Ransom
“Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored”
Perspectives USA (Spring 1956)

“This is the poem invariably invoked when a biographer wishes to nominate a new candidate as Dickinson’s secret lover, the “One” chosen by Dickinson’s feminine soul before she closes ‘the valves of her attention.’ But if we read the poem without the intention of pimping, we see that the second stanza rules out worldly suitors, emperors, and their chariots. The chosen ‘one’ is a ‘what,’ not a ‘who,’ unnamed because its only name is ‘Mystery’; as a Grecian bard Dickinson writes, ‘Lad of Athens, faithful be / To Thyself, / And Mystery -- / All the rest is Perjury --’ The soul must attend to itself and its furthest goal; everything in between is perjury.”

Robert Weisbuch
“The Necessary Veil: A Quest Fiction”
Emily Dickinson’s Poetry
(U Chicago 1975)

“This poem is not usually conceived of as a riddle, but rather as a description of those instinctive preferences and choices, those defiantly nonrational elections and allegiances, like love, that we all make, without regard to personal advantage, to rank or to estate. To the degree that the poem has been construed as a private and guarded revelation of the poet’s emotional life, and to some circumstantial events in it, there is a dispute about whether the choice of ‘one’ means someone else or the poet herself; whether she is electing the solitude of a society of one, or committing herself to another. And it is not out of place, I think, to construe the poem as being about love. The mixed metaphor of the last two lines (‘Then close the valves of her attention / Like stone’) could be rather comfortably resolved if we substituted ‘heart’ for ‘soul,’ since hearts can be ‘stony’ and they have valves.

But I suggest that the power of this poem derives from a suppressed riddle, an unstated but implied parallel. As the soul is to its society (absolute, arbitrary, ruthless) so is God in His election and salvation of souls. Moreover, it seems to me that the second stanza not improbably suggests the adoration of the Magi, though I have no care to press that point. Still, the ominous quality of the final words is considerably amplified when the ultimate mystery of election is taken into account. We play at being God; it is characteristically human of us to do so.”

Anthony Hecht
“The Riddles of Emily Dickinson”
Obbligati (Atheneum 1986)

“Poem 303 is a strong statement about the power of the self alone. The soul is shown living within a space defined by door, gate, and mat. The external world, with its nations and their rulers, is kept outside... Traditional ideas about power are reversed here. Not control over vast populations but the ability to construct a world for oneself comprises the greatest power, a god-like achievement, announces the opening stanza. Not only is the soul alone ‘divine,’ but it is also identified as ‘Society’ and ‘Majority’: the poem also challenges our ideas about what constitutes a social group. Consequently, the enclosed space of the soul’s house is more than adequate for a queenly life, and ambassadors of the external world’s glories, even emperors, can easily be scorned. Yet while the speaker claims her equality with those most powerful in the outer world--they may be emperors, but she is ‘divine Majority,’ at the same time she asserts her difference from them; for her domestic vocabulary of door, low gate, and mat establishes her dwelling as not a grand palace but rather a simple house.

While associating power with the enclosed space of the mind, the poem also implies how isolation is confinement, too. When the soul turns in upon her own concerns, she closes ‘the Valves of her attention -- / Like Stone --.’ Valves permit the flow of whatever they regulate in one direction only: here, from outside to inside. Either of the halves of a double door or any of the leaves of a folding door are valves. Valves seen as doors reinforce the poem’s house imagery, while their association with stone makes the walls separating soul from world so solid as to be, perhaps, prison-like. Prison-like because they allow no escape from the kinds of conflict, the kinds of terror, even, that must occur within.”

Suzanne Juhasz
The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of Mind
(Indiana U 1983)

Michael Hollister (2014)