



Dickinson, Goldsworthy Lowes (1862-1932)

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Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, a Cambridge classicist, is significant for the glbtq legacy as the author of the immensely popular *The Greek Way of Life* (1896), in which he delicately broaches homoeroticism; as the creator of a frank and rather liberated or "modern" account of homosexuality in his posthumously published autobiography; as the subject of a biography written by his friend E. M. Forster, which, however, remains reticent on Dickinson's sexuality and may say more about Forster than Dickinson; and as an important disseminator of Plato and his idealization of male friendship.

Public Life

Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson was born in London on August 6, 1862. His parents were artists and early Christian socialists. Educated at Charterhouse School and King's College, Cambridge, he graduated in 1884, as an outstanding scholar and recipient of the Chancellor's Medal for a poem on Savonarola composed in imitation of Shelley's "Adonais." That same year, he was also inducted into the Cambridge Conversazione Society, the Apostles or *fratres*, a club that once included Alfred Lord Tennyson and Arthur Hallam and that became the progenitor of the Bloomsbury group.

Dickinson studied medicine but never practiced. Instead, he wrote, as he admits, bad poetry (except, maybe, "To the Heavenly Love," some Shakespearean sonnets, and the dialogue *Body and Soul*--all reproduced in his *Autobiography*) and pursued humanitarian projects, such as working on a cooperative farm and, like his friend Edward Carpenter, supporting the university extension program through lecturing. He also met with many members of the socialist Fabian Society (for example, George Bernard Shaw and Beatrice Webb) and immersed himself in classical and modern civilization, avidly reading Plato, Shelley, and Goethe.

In 1887, he was named fellow of his old college (based on a thesis on the neo-Platonist Plotinus), which provided a more stable professional environment. In 1892, however, his fellowship was not renewed. He then became a librarian, but was appointed college lecturer in political science in 1896. In 1920, he was given a pension fellowship, tenable for life. He worked also as a lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

In 1900, Dickinson made a visit to Greece, followed by lecture tours in the United States, and finally trips to India, China, and Japan, where he soon realized the ills of Western imperialism and colonialism. He experienced a mystical heightening of consciousness and began to form a new concept of civilization, shaped by Occidental humanism, Oriental philosophy, mystical religion, and classical wisdom.

When World War I broke out, Dickinson was deeply shocked. He founded the pacifist Bryce Group, became president of the Union of Democratic Control, joined Bertrand Russell in his stance against the war, advocated the establishment of the League of Nations (a phrase he possibly coined), and was instrumental in its conception. He hoped that his work on behalf of the League would help end future warfare. He died on August 3, 1932.

A prolific author and public intellectual, Dickinson has an impressive bibliography to his credit: *From King to King: The Tragedy of the Puritan Revolution* (1891), *Revolution and Reaction in Modern France* (1892), *The Development of Parliament During the Nineteenth Century* (1895), *The Greek View of Life* (1896), *The Meaning of Good* (1901), *Letters from John Chinaman* (1901), *Religion: A Criticism and a Forecast* (1905), *A Modern Symposium* (1905), *Justice and Liberty* (1908), *Religion and Immortality* (1911), *Appearances, Being Notes of Travel* (1914), *The European Anarchy* (1916), *The Choice Before Us* (1917), *The Magic Flute: A Fantasia* (1920), *War: Its Nature, Cause and Cure* (1923), *The International Anarchy, 1904-1914* (1926), *Goethe and Faust* (1928), *After Two Thousand Years: A Dialogue Between Plato and a Modern Young Man* (1930), and *Plato and His Dialogues* (1932).

Most of these books are now out of print and remain primarily of interest to specialists of the League of Nations and students of the influence of Platonism and Cambridge idealism. But the sheer number shows Dickinson's contribution to the society of his day and the unusually broad range of his interests and learning. The tomes range widely across cultures, histories, civilizations, denominations, philosophies, music, and more.

The Greek View of Life

Dickinson's most popular text, *The Greek View of Life* (1896), illustrates his fascination with Plato and with ancient Greece, often seen as a golden age of homoeroticism. Due to its popularity (it is still being used in college classrooms), the book exposed, probably for the first time, a large audience of non-specialists to, among other topics, Platonic love. The book is divided into sections on the Greek view of religion, the state, the individual, and art.

In the chapter on the individual--the most relevant for glbtq concerns--Dickinson quotes the famous allegory of the charioteer in Plato's *Phaedrus*, a *locus classicus* for homoerotic love, and adds that "the ultimate harmony is achieved, not by the complete eradication of desire, but by its due subordination to the higher principle. Even Plato, the most ascetic of the Greeks, is a Greek first and an ascetic afterwards." Dickinson's interpretation of Platonic love, then, is a liberal one that rejects the narrow view that equates Platonism with asceticism or abstinence.

Then Dickinson alludes to Socrates's homoerotic attraction and allure: "Young men and boys followed and hung on his lips wherever he went . . . His relation to his young disciples was that of a lover and a friend; and the stimulus given by his dialectics to their keen and eager minds was supplemented and reinforced by the appeal to their admiration and love of his sweet and virile personality."

After discussing the role of women in Greek society, Dickinson notes that "romance" took the form of "passionate friendship between men," which he illustrates by citing the Theban Sacred Band, an army of male lovers; several legendary homoerotic couples: Achilles and Patroclus, Pylades and Orestes, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, Solon and Peisistratus, Socrates and Alcibiades, Epaminondas and Pelopidas; and the entire speech of Diotima in the *Symposium*, the source *par excellence* for Platonic love.

Dickinson reaches a remarkably candid conclusion about Platonic love and homoerotic desire: "That there was another side to the matter goes without saying. This passion, like any other, has its depths, as well as its heights." Dickinson's candor here is especially noteworthy considering that he published *The Greek Way of Life* only one year after Oscar Wilde had been sent to prison for homosexual liaisons or "gross indecency." (Moreover, he insists on the significance of homoeroticism in Platonic thought even as he quotes the Benjamin Jowett translations of Plato, which considerably tone down the physical in Plato's erotic dialogues.) In *The Greek Way of Life*, Dickinson opens a fascinating window to Greek homoeroticism.

Private Life: Autobiography

Composed in middle age, but not published until some forty years after his death, Dickinson's *Autobiography* turns "to the curious, passionate, unhappy, ecstatic story of my love and loves." Even as he relates the story, however, Dickinson signals his wariness as to the reaction of his readers: "I do so with the feeling that those who read, if they are what is called normal men, will not understand, and if they are homosexual, likely enough will find it absurd." The *Autobiography* remains our most valuable source of information on Dickinson's (sex) life; it matters to glbtq culture for its explicitness and its "modern" outlook.

Dickinson describes how he had numerable crushes on attractive students and how he fell in love with several men, including the Bloomsbury art critic Roger Fry, the undergraduates Ferdinand Schiller and Oscar Eckhard, and the much younger Peter Savary. (According to Paul Robinson, one could add J. R. Ackerley, author of *My Father and Myself*, but Dickinson does not mention him in his memoir.) Judging from pictures, all these men were extremely good-looking.

In most (if not all) cases, however, it seems that Dickinson never consummated his love affairs. Paul Robinson summarizes Dickinson's adult sexual life as "an intensely romantic attachment, passionate kisses and warm embraces (with a hint of fetishism), followed by relief through masturbation." Another complication, of course, arose from the increasing difference in age between him and his objects of affection, who were also often mostly heterosexual.

Some passages of the *Autobiography* verge on the pornographic. Dickinson admits to a fetish for shiny leather boots and for sado-masochistic pleasure: "My earliest remembrance of sexual feeling was connected with boots At night, when I had gone to bed, I used to steal out to my father's dressing room, and excite myself over his boots." He found being trodden on especially arousing.

The editor of the 1973 publication of the *Autobiography*, Dennis Proctor, offers a revealing introduction to the volume, based on an expurgated manuscript entitled "A chapter in my autobiography--Privatissimum." According to Proctor, Dickinson apparently subscribed to Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' theory of the third sex ("a woman's soul trapped in a man's body"). In the excised chapter, he wrote: "My dream is always to be dominated, not to dominate. I have, so far, a woman's soul; and the only thing for which I should like to be a woman is that I might experience the dominating and aggressive love of a man."

Intriguingly, Proctor was also Dickinson's last lover. His assessment of his relationship with "Goldie," however, seems quaintly Victorian to modern ears: "Though I was having my own love affairs with girls (into which Goldie entered with sympathy and understanding) and had no homosexual tendency, I loved him too; and since it has always come naturally to me to give expression to my affection for anyone I am fond of, I did so quite spontaneously with him." One is left wondering exactly what kind of relationship Proctor had with Dickinson.

Although clearly anchored in its time (particularly as regards the theory of a third sex, schoolboy friendships, and teacherpupil interactions that might today be seen to border on sexual harassment and abuse of power), the *Autobiography* also seems very modern by virtue of what is absent: no apology for being homosexual, no real feelings of guilt or shame, no absurd attempts at conversion to heterosexuality, no disastrous visits to priests or psychiatrists, no desperate thoughts of suicide.

No doubt, Dickinson was conflicted and tormented, but not because of his attraction to men. He seems to have been incapable of physical intercourse because he believed in something more romantic, an ideal of friendship that privileges conversation and caresses, kindness and kinship.

E. M. Forster's Biography

E. M. Forster's biography of his friend, whom he also affectionately called Goldie, is reticent as to the details of its subject's sex life. Much of this reticence is indubitably due to the fact that the book was

published in 1934, when homosexuality was illegal and when more candid revelations could have had dire consequences for surviving members of Dickinson's circle. Still, careful readers of the biography would have had no trouble discerning Dickinson's homosexuality. Vague references such as "he was never drawn to women in the passionate sense, all his deepest emotions being towards men" abound.

Forster emphasizes Dickinson's life of frustration: "Much had to be sublimated, but that was a process which he expected, and which he furthered as well as he could. When he looked back, he could say with truth that his personal relationships had been enduring, though he was sometimes appalled by their austerity." Even more drastically, Forster claims that Dickinson was "almost the only man who has ever lived with whom no one has ever been in love."

Furthermore, Forster presents well the peculiarly Cambridge tradition of male romantic friendship--its privileging of personal relationships--that seems to have been a key element of Dickinson's sexuality. In a famous passage, Forster beautifully captures the elements of Cambridge homosocial bonding: "As Cambridge filled up with friends it acquired a magic quality. Body and spirit, reason and emotion, work and play, architecture and scenery, laughter and seriousness, life and art--these pairs which are elsewhere contrasted were there fused into one. People and books reinforced one another, intelligence joined hands with affection, speculation became a passion, and discussion was made profound by love."

What kind of man does Forster depict? His Goldie seems rather different from the candid and curious man of the *Autobiography*. It could be, as Claude Summers has suggested, that Forster's book is a thinly disguised exercise in autobiography, one that presents Dickinson in his own image.

Plato: Age and Youth

Last but not least, Dickinson's importance for the glbtq literary heritage rests in part on his role as a disseminator of Platonism, a philosophy that was often a means of expressing homosexual desire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his *Autobiography*, Dickinson recounts his ecstatic reaction to studying Plato's *Symposium* and his belief that Greek love "was a continuous and still existing fact."

Dickinson's excitement at the discovery of Platonic love was hardly unusual. It has analogues in both literature and life. In Forster's *Maurice* (written 1913-1914), for example, Clive Durham remembers the bewildering yet liberating effect of his Greek studies: "Never could he forget his emotion at first reading the *Phaedrus*. He saw there his malady described exquisitely, calmly, as a passion which we can direct, like any other, towards good or bad."

John Addington Symonds recollects in his *Memoirs* (composed between 1889 and 1893) a similar epiphany: "I went to bed and began to read my Cary's Plato. It so happened that I stumbled on the *Phaedrus*. I read on and on, till I reached the end. Then I began the *Symposium*; and the sun was shining on the shrubs outside the ground-floor room in which I slept, before I shut the book up . . . Here in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*--in the myth of the Soul and the speeches of Pausanias, Agathon, and Diotima--I discovered the true *liber amoris* at last, the revelation I had been waiting for, the consecration of a long-cherished idealism."

Even the more cynical Lytton Strachey had the same experience. Michael Holroyd relates in his biography how Strachey read the *Symposium* "with a rush of mingled pleasure and pain . . . of surprise, relief, and fear to know that what I feel now was felt 2,000 years ago in Glorious Greece. Would I had lived then, would I had sat at the feet of Socrates, seen Alcibiades, wondrous Alcibiades, Alcibiades, the abused, but the great, felt with them all!"

However, as Dickinson painfully realized, Platonic love was gravely threatened in the modern world. He wrote in the *Autobiography*: "For those who like young men, and have the maieutic [or Socratic] faculty, Cambridge, and especially King's, is ideal. But the position is precarious, and it is not very likely that even a

pale adumbration of Socrates will long be tolerated in an age at once scientific, utilitarian and unimaginative."

For this reason, Dickinson, in old age, returned to his passion for Plato. *After Two Thousand Years: A Dialogue Between Plato and a Modern Young Man*, written shortly before his death, attempts to harmonize friendship and love, learning and civilization. Sections include discourses on property, forms of government, socialism, the control of population, war, education, truth, art, and love.

In the dialogue, Philaethes (the "lover of truth") asks Plato: "In your treatment of that love [*eros*] did you not admit that the body has a part in it?" Plato responds: "When souls are shut in bodies do not the bodies, of necessity, take part in the affections of the soul?" Needless to say, this question has vexed readers of Plato for two thousand years and more. Does Platonic love exclude physicality or not? Eventually, Philaethes poignantly sums up the failure of Platonic *eros*: "Whereas your doctrine seems to most of us so terribly immoral, on the other hand you have the reputation of being so pure in your conception of love that we never speak of 'platonic' love without a touch of irony, because it is thought to be something impossible and therefore hypocritical."

Dickinson thus ultimately indicts Platonic love for its impracticability. Diotima's lofty ascent proves too high, too exacting, too strenuous. He found Plato's wonderful idea(l) utterly elusive in his own world.

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Nikolai Endres received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.