

EMILY DICKINSON'S CONCEPTION OF DEATH AND IMMORTALITY

Emily Dickinson, an outstanding American poetess died in 1886. But it is the year of her physical death. Her second life began much later, when her poetry was rediscovered by the literary world in the 1950s .

Emily Dickinson's poetry exhibits great intelligence and often evokes the agonizing paradox of the limits of the human consciousness trapped in time. She was certainly the most solitary literary figure of her time. This shy, withdrawn village woman created some of the greatest American poetry of the 19th century, became one of the great poets of all time, and perhaps the greatest of all women poets, without stirring from her garden in the quiet New England town. Her universe was that of her soul, her special task was to make that universe articulate.

Dickinson's poetry comes out in bursts. The poems are mostly untitled. They are short, many of them being based on a single image or symbol. But within her little lyrics Miss Dickinson writes about some of the most important things in life. She writes about love and a lover, about nature, about mortality and immortality.

For Emily Dickinson death is the logical culmination of nature, and the greatest example of the change which is constantly moving through nature. She regards nature as resembling death in that it can, for the moment, be brought within her garden walls, but still spreads around her life and beyond her door, impossible to hold or to measure. Both are forces which must be discussed and rehearsed constantly. They are too present and compelling to be pushed into the recesses of the mind. The brute energy of both must be leashed to the minutely familiar. Emily Dickinson's wild nights are bound and her fears assuaged with the images of her immediate reality. But this immediate reality is made up of her personal terms, and has come from her own heart, not from the tenets of her church.

In many of her narrative poems situated around a death, Dickinson distinguishes the Christian representation of death from the sensations she experiences as a witness of death. These distinctive poems are situated at the scene of death neither because Dickinson has any peculiar fascination for death, nor simply because she is using stock conventions also to be found in the poetry of her contemporaries. Dickinson uses the convention of the deathwatch as a way to consider the self at a moment when its culturally-assigned significance is weakest, and she does so in order to escape the Christian narrative frame.

According to Allen Tate for Emily Dickinson "The general symbol of Nature . . . is Death." Death is, in fact, her poetic affirmation. Yet he continues with a questionable declaration: ". . . and her weapon against Death is the entire powerful dumb-show of the puritan theology led by Redemption and Immortality."

A recurrent theme in her love poems is the separation of two lovers by death, and their reunion in immortality. But Emily Dickinson's conception of this immortality is centered in the beloved himself, rather than in any theological principle. The immortality which concerns her arises directly from her connection with a second person, and never exists as an abstract or Christian condition.

In this same way, redemption is also reduced to the simplest personal equation. In these poems redemption, as such, is never mentioned; rather, the awareness of it permeates the entire section. Redemption for Emily Dickinson is too synonymous with immortality to receive much individual distinction. There is little talk of heaven or hell, except as they exist within the poet herself.

She speaks of Death's coming for her, yet has him arrive in a carriage to take her for an afternoon's drive. She writes of Calvaries, but they are *Calvaries of Love*; the grave is *my little cottage*. . . The familiar and comforting words that, for her, spell everyday life are used to mask unrealized abstractions. It is by contracting the illimitable spaces of after-life to her own focus, that she can find peace, for *their height in heaven comforts not*. She fills the abyss with her talk of tea and carriages and the littleness of time. Puritan theology may have given her a fear of the loneliness of death, the Bible and hymnal may have provided her with patterns and phrases, but these equip her with terminologies, molds in which her personal conceptions can take form, rather than actual Christian conceptions.

Death for Emily Dickinson, therefore, was an uncomfortable lacuna which could in no way be bridged, except by transposing it into a more homely metaphor. Death as a caller, the grave as a little house—these are a poetic whistling in the dark. In a safe and ordered microcosm, she found death an ungoverned and obsessing presence. It could be neither forgotten nor accepted in its present form. Death had possessed too many of her friends to be reckoned with as a complete abstraction. But when she translated this oppression into a language of daily routine, she could blot out the reality of death with pictures conjured up by the surrounding images:

*What if I file this mortal off,
See where it hurts me,—that's enough,—
And wade into liberty?* (#277—Poems, 1891, p. 107)

*. . . this is said to be
But just the primer to a life
Unopened, rare, upon the shelf*

Clasped yet to him and me.

(#418—Poems, 1890, p. 132) *I sing to use the waiting.*

And tell each other how we sang

To keep the dark away. (#850—Poems, 1896, p.170)

The idea of filing it off, of wading into death and its liberty, of calling death a primer, or of singing away eternity, is the balance of known with unknown which Emily Dickinson must portion out to herself before she can rest.

Dickinson's poems are not from the elegiac poems about suffering the death of others, they are previsions of her own death. In neither of them Death present himself as absolute in some brutal majesty, nor in the role of God's dreadful minister. The transaction is homely and easy, for the poet has complete sophistication in these matters, having attended upon deathbeds, and knowing that the terror of the event is mostly for the observers.

Dickinson is surely unparalleled in capturing the experience of New England deathbed scenes and funerals. Of this kind the three best poems are "*How many times these low feet staggered*," "*I heard a fly buzz when I died*," "*I felt a funeral in my brain*" and "*Because I could not stop for Death*". Her most successful device in these poems is her juxtaposition of the sense of the mystery of death with the sense of particular material stresses, weights, motions, and sounds so that each clarifies and intensifies the other:

*And then I heard them lift a box,
And creak across my soul
With those same boots of lead, again.
Then space began to toll*

*As all the heavens were a bell,
And Being but an ear,
And I and silence some strange race,
Wrecked, solitary, here.* (#280—Poems, 1896, p. 168)

Few other writers have expressed such astonishing loneliness as this.

The point of view of most of her poems reinforces her theme that our most important moments are over as soon as they begin. "*I Heard a Fly Buzz*" reflects this theme, describing with beauty and simplicity a dying person's impression at the moment of death.

Like many people in her period, Dickinson was fascinated by death-bed scenes. How did this or that person die? In particular, she wanted to know if their deaths revealed any information about the nature of the afterlife. In this poem, however, she imagines her own death-bed scene, and the answer she provides is grim, as grim (and, at the same time, as ironically mocking), as anything she ever wrote.

In the narrowing focus of death, the fly's insignificant buzz, magnified tenfold by the stillness in the room, is all that the speaker hears. This kind of distortion in scale is common. It is one of the "illusions" of perception. But here it is horrifying because it defeats every expectation we have. Death is supposed to be an experience of awe. It is the moment when the soul, departing the body, is taken up by God. Hence the watchers at the bedside wait for the moment when the *King* (whether God or death) *be witnessed* in the room. And hence the speaker assigns away everything but that which she expects God (her soul) or death (her body) to take.

What arrives instead, however, is neither God nor death but a fly, *with Blue—uncertain--stumbling Buzz*, a fly, that is, no more secure, no more sure, than we are. Dickinson had associated flies with death once before in the exquisite lament, "*How many times these low feet staggered*". In this poem, they buzz *on the/ chamber window*, and speckle it with dirt (# 187, F, 152), reminding us that the housewife, who once protected us from such intrusions, will protect us no longer. Their presence is threatening but only in a minor way, *dull* like themselves. They are a background noise we do not have to deal with yet.

Given that the only sure thing we know about "life after death" is that flies--in their adult form and more particularly, as maggots--devour us, the poem is at the very least a grim joke. In projecting her death-bed scene, Dickinson confronts her ignorance and gives back the only answer human knowledge can with any certainty give. While we may hope for an afterlife, no one, not even the dying, can prove it exists.

In "*I heard a Fly buzz*" on the other hand, there is only one fly and its buzz is not only foregrounded. Before the poem is over, the buzz takes up the entire field of perception, coming between the speaker and the *light* (of day, of life, of knowledge). It is then that the *Windows* (the eyes that are the windows of the soul as well as, metonymically, the light that passes through the panes of glass) *fail* and the speaker is left in darkness--in death, in ignorance.

Emily Dickinson's finest poem on the funeral ceremony is "*Because I could not stop for Death*". On the surface it seems like just another version of the procession to the grave, but this is a metaphor that can be probed for deeper levels of meaning, spiritual journeys of a very different sort. At first reading, the orthodox reassurance against the fear of death appears to be invoked, though with the novelty of a suitor replacing the traditional angel, by emphasizing his compassionate mission in taking her out of the woes of this world into the bliss of the next. *Death* usually rude, sudden, and impersonal, has been transformed into a kindly and leisurely gentleman. Although she was aware this is a last ride, since his *Carriage* can only be a hearse, its terror is subdued by the *Civility* of the driver who is merely serving the end of *Immortality*. The loneliness of the journey, with Death on the driver's seat and her body laid out in the coach behind, is dispelled by the presence of her immortal part that rides with her as a

co-passenger, this slight personification being justified by the separable concept of the soul. Too occupied with life herself to stop, like all busy mortals, Death *kindly stopped* for her. But this figure of a gentleman taking a lady for a carriage ride is carefully underplayed and then dropped after two stanzas. "*Because I could not stop for Death*" is incomparably the finest poem of this cluster. In it all the traditional modes are subdued so they can, be assimilated to her purposes. For her theme there, as a final reading of its meaning will suggest, is not necessarily death or immortality in the literal sense of those terms. There are many ways of dying, as she once said:

Death—is but one—and comes but once—

And only nails the eyes— (#561—Poems, 1896, pp. 47-48)

One surely dies out of this world in the end, but one may also die away from the world by deliberate choice during this life. In her vocabulary 'immortal' is a value that can also attach to living this side of the grave:

Some—Work for Immortality—

The Chiefter part, for Time— (#406—Further Poems, 1929, p. 5)

As an artist she ranked herself with that elite. At the time of her dedication to poetry, presumably in the early 1860's, someone *kindly stopped* for her—lover, muse, God—and she willingly put away the labor and leisure of this world for the creative life of the spirit. Looking back on the affairs of *Time* at any point after making such a momentous decision she could easily feel *Since then—'tis Centuries—* 'Remembering what she had renounced, the happiness of a normal youth, sunshine and growing things, she could experience a momentary feeling of deprivation. But in another sense she had simply triumphed over them, passing beyond earthly trammels. Finally, this makes the most satisfactory reading of her reversible image of motion and stasis during the journey, passing the setting sun and being passed by it. For though in her withdrawal the events of the external world by-passed her, in the poetic life made possible by it she escaped the limitations of the mortal calendar. She was borne confidently, by her winged horse, *toward Eternity* in the immortality of her poems.

In "*Because I could not stop for Death*," perhaps her finest poem on the theme of what lies beyond death, both in cosmic terms and in the feeling of those bound to die, she presents us with the strangeness of such a condition. There are no lectures and no overt theological speculations, though the experience is every way conditioned by the abstract: motion and stasis; everlasting life; youth; nature; time; immortality; what it is to be. The poem allows us to feel our own discomfort at not fully knowing, despite what we might surmise, and to experience fears and wonders about time's evanescence and the mystery of death. We yearn for immortality, so he accompanies one of us, the one invited into death's carriage. We feel the yearning and the fear as Dickinson must once have, their expression being so palpable, and while we do the poem belongs to us, common readers.

"*Because I could not stop for Death*" is an imaginative creation. It is a single sustained metaphor, all of it analogue or "vehicle" as we call it nowadays, though the character called Death in the vehicle would have borne the same name in the real situation. Death's victim now is the shy spinster, so he presents himself as a decent civil functionary making a call upon a lady to take her for a drive.

The framework of the poem is, in fact, the two abstractions, mortality and eternity, which are made to associate in perfect equality with the images. Her intellectual deficiency contributed at least negatively to her great distinction. Miss Dickinson is probably the only Anglo-American poet of her century whose work exhibits the perfect literary situation— in which is possible the fusion of sensibility and thought. Unlike her contemporaries, she never succumbed to her ideas, to easy solutions, to her private desires.

On the surface, the first lines of "*Because I could not stop for Death*" appear to invoke orthodox reassurance against the fear of death. Death is portrayed as sensitive to the ordinary busy life of mortals--too occupied with life to stop--when he *kindly* stops and invites her for a carriage ride. The word *kindly* is particularly meaningful, for it instantly characterizes Death. This comes with surprise, too, since death is more often considered grim and terrible. He is in the driver's seat, and he drives as slowly as he likes.

There is a third occupant in the carriage, Immortality--shadowy, and if not a person, a condition to be desired. Immortality is consoling and recognizable, what one hopes will come with death. With Immortality as a companion, the speaker can accede to the trip in death's carriage; it becomes a leisurely afternoon drive--a gentleman taking a lady and her friend for a ride in the country. *And Immortality*, on a line by itself, helps to emphasize the importance of the presence of the other passenger. Without Immortality present, might not the speaker have been afraid? Perhaps she'd have refused to go along to the otherwise undisclosed destination. The central theme of "*Because I could not stop for Death*" is the interpretation of mortal experience from the standpoint of immortality. A theme stemming from that is the defining of eternity as timelessness. The poet uses these abstractions— mortality, immortality, and eternity—in terms of images. How successfully, then, do these images fulfill their intention, which is to unite in filling in the frame of the poem

In the next stanza the house, appearing as a *swelling of the ground*, the roof *scarcely visible* and the cornice, *but a mound*, suggests the grave, a sinking out of sight. *Paused* calls to mind the attitude of the living toward the lowering of a coffin into the ground, as well as other associations with the occurrence of death.

Centuries in the last stanza refers, of course, to eternity. *Each feels shorter than the day* ties in with *setting sun* in the third stanza and suggests at

the same time the timelessness of eternity. Indeed, an effective contrast between the time of mortality and the timelessness of eternity is made in the entire stanza.

Horses' heads is a concrete extension of the figure of the carriage, which is maintained throughout the poem. The carriage is headed toward eternity, where Death is taking the passenger. The attitude of withdrawal, or seeing with perspective, could not have been more effectively accomplished than it has been by the use of the slowly-moving carriage. Remoteness is fused with nearness, for the objects that are observed during the journey are made to appear close by. At the same time, a constant moving forward, with only one pause, carries weighty implications concerning time, death, eternity. The person in the carriage is viewing things that are near with the perspective of distance, given by the presence of Immortality. The supernatural journey ends in the graveyard, where the carriage pauses by a *House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground*, with its cornice *in the Ground*. By rhyming ground with itself Dickinson emphasizes the carriage's destination and the body's disposition. For her even death is a physical experience--the dead experiencing the cool damp air after the sunset and hard on that arriving at the tomb where one imagines a similar quality of air.

The inability to know eternity, the failure to be at one with it, is, we might say, what the allegory of "Because I could not stop for Death" makes manifest. The ride with death, though it espouses to reveal a future that is past, in fact casts both past and future in the indeterminate present of the last stanza. Unable to arrive at a fixed conception, it must rest on the bravado of its initial claim. Thus death is not really civilized; the boundary between otherness and self, life and death, is crossed, but only in presumption, and we might regard this fact as the real confession of disappointment in the poem's last stanza.

Death does not launch the persona of this poem into another world (Immortality would have to be enlisted for that, rather than sitting ignored in the back seat of the carriage in which she and Death will eventually ride off together after abandoning the speaker). Instead Death leaves his date buried within the margin of the circuit, in a *House* that she can maintain like one of those *Alabaster Chambers* in which numb corpses lie but which are designed and built of elegant materials still gratifying to the circuit-locked mentality. A quester for circumference would greet Death more enthusiastically, and would both value and cultivate Death's ties to Immortality. For such a quester, the destination of the journey might prove more wondrous.

Yet the ultimate implication of this work turns precisely upon the poet's capacity to explode the finite temporal boundaries that generally define our existence, for there is a third member of the party--also exterior to time and location--and that is *Immortality*. True immortality, the verse suggests, comes neither from the confabulations of a mate lover nor from God's intangible Heaven. Irrefutable *Immortality* resides in the work of art itself, the creation of an empowered woman poet that continues to captivate readers more than one

hundred years after her death. And this much-read, often-cited poem stands as patent proof upon the page of its own argument.

Death is essence of the universe as well as its end, and the self is wooed and won by this otherness that appears to define the totality of experience.

Indeed the trinity of death, self, immortality, however ironic a parody of the holy paradigm, at least promises a conventional fulfillment of the idea that the body's end coincides with the soul's everlasting life.

Death by itself in Dickinson's other poems and letters is not so gentle or refined. In "*He fumbles at your Soul*," for instance, death *scalps your naked soul* while *The Universe is still*. If *The Maker's cordial visage* provides something hopeful for the drowning man (who drowns), death produces a *Stiff stare*, a *Forehead that copied stone*, and *congealed eyes*. In her letters death is ever present:

I can't stay any longer in a world of death. Austin is ill of fever. I buried my garden last week--our man, Dick, lost a little girl through scarlet fever. I thought perhaps you were dead, and not knowing the sexton's address, interrogate the daisies. Ah! Dainty--dainty Death! Ah! democratic death--grasping the proudest zinnia from my purple garden,--then deep to his bosom calling the serf's child. Say, is he everywhere? Where shall I hide my things? Who is alive? The woods are dead. Is Mrs. H. alive? Annie and Katie--are they below, or received to nowhere? (letter to the Hollands, 1858).

Emily Dickinson's poetry is read today throughout much of the world. Some stress her mystical side, some her sensitivity to nature, many note her odd exotic appeal. One modern critic comments that Dickinson's poetry sometimes feels as is "a cat came at us speaking English". However there is no doubt that Miss Dickinson of Amherst, Massachusetts, is a writer of great power and beauty.

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