

The Verses that Breathed: Emily Dickinson, an Existentialist in an Era of Transcendentalism

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson was odd, reticent and private, in Amherst she was considered a mythological being. Loneliness, if ever she considered it to be -- was her choice. Yet her poems exult to a realm that is beyond space and time. Her mode of revelation was too difficult to decipher by people gifted with an average sense of understanding. Her Canvas was the entire universe and her technique indisputably her own, she strove to capture the telegraphic thoughts in her half-rhymes and in her irregularities of speech and rhythm. In her spasmodic quality, she mirrored the incongruities and frustrations of human experience the awkwardness in her poetry became a metaphor of life itself.

For nearly thirty years Emily Dickinson projected her consciousness into a world devastatingly hostile to the self. Her more private America was no less chaotic than the one Whitman or Emerson confronted, and her personal cosmos was ruled by terror and alienation. She eschewed the conventional supports of home, society, and religion to fight alone of life's hardest battleground – within the human soul. Unflinchingly she faced inner challenges and struggled to wrest spiritual victory from emotional defeat. Like many poets, she perceived man as a beleaguered, isolated creature, desperately seeking truth in a relativistic world. This paper aims at deconstructing her existential sensibilities that encounter the great moral universals: love, loss, doubt, death, life, pleasure, and pain elevating them to a space which is beyond the century she existed in.

The controversy between form and substance in Dickinson's poetry was a consistent one during the last decade of the nineteenth century, with critics somewhat divided in their attitudes. Many of them, accustomed to the conventional poetic patterns of the day, found Dickinson's departure from accepted forms highly distasteful, while others applauded her rare ability to achieve a sense of rhythm while disregarding the form of it. And, surprisingly, quite a number of critics combined these attitudes, acknowledging that their blending demonstrated Dickinson's capacity to achieve poetic thought in her own, quite original way.

Her achievement as prosodies now gives her first rank, where at first it was overlooked or excused in deference to the mysterious "Power" of her thought. Her thought too still attracts high praise, though now as in the words of her editor Thomas writes, "an existentialist In a period of transcendentalism" she merits rank not only for her skill with meters but also for her tragic vision."

Mabel Loomis Todd, in her comments on public reaction to Dickinson's poetry, claimed that the critics hardly knew where to place Emily Dickinson's "strangely compelling poems" when they were first published.

Love, desire for recognition, religious beliefs, and loneliness are the basic realities of human life. Failure to realize those leads to frustration, and frustration ultimately, leads to the formation of a tragically grievous attitude towards life. Emily Dickinson was no exception to these circumstances: caught in a situation that challenged all she had been made of, she reacted by becoming a complete recluse. Endowed with a keen poetic sensibility, she resolved to accept the Universe on her own terms. To Emily Dickinson, poetry was "a safety valve which released all the pent-up sorrow and created a world of beautiful images." Her work was her secular salvation."

Mainly her thwarted love, unfulfilled poetic ambition, and dissatisfaction with Calvinism furnished the crude clay from which she moulded her finished poems: From her limited, pain-filled experience, she wrung in intense exhilaration with the processes of life. In her poetry, she expressed these feelings so originally that the private and the provincial were often translated into enduring universal art.

Verse That Breathed

"I Smile when you suggest I delay' to publish' – that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin – If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her- and if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase ". wrote Emily Dickinson to her preceptor Col. Higginson when he cautioned her against publishing her poems.

Samuel Bowles, the editor of the 'Springfield Republican' maintained a polite indifference. That Emily Dickinson craved fame and recognition is beyond doubt. She wrote to Higginson asking if her 'verses breathed'. She put her faith into the great literary masters who were too timid to proclaim her to the great literary world. If at all they relented to introduce her to the public, it was on their own terms and which Emily Dickinson was too proud to accept. Hence, with the exception of few poems that were published in the 'Springfield Republican' by Samuel Bowles and by Helen Hunt Jackson in 'A Masque of Poets' that too, anonymously-the rest remained locked in her drawers, only to be found by her sister Lavinia after her death in 1886.

Of the major nineteenth-century American writers, only Emerson and Mark Twain achieved in their times a recognition at all commensurate with what later generations have acknowledged being their value as writers. Poe, Melville, James, and to some extent, Hawthorne failed to get a fairly laudable

reception by the reading public. The same is true of Emily Dickinson, with the significant difference that, unlike her peers, she had no literary "career" to be judged – and shaped by judgment –in her lifetime. Barely a handful of her poems was published while she lived, and except for Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, few outside her family and close friends ever saw any of her verse until 1890. In that year, four years after her death, the world was given the first volume of poems by Emily Dickinson, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, friend, and neighbour of the Dickinson Family, and Col. Higginson.

Discovery of the Poetess

The immediate critical response to these poems was mixed. Those like William Dean Howells, Who recognized a genuine and unusual poetic gift, reacted favorably. It was a signal recognition for Emily Dickinson that in 1891 a critic of Howells' reputation and influence should have high regard for her poetry. He speaks of her uniqueness and universality in such glowing terms, "If nothing else had come out of our life, but this strange poetry we should feel that in the work of Emily Dickinson , America, of New England rather, had made a distinctive addition to the literature of the world, and could not be left out of any record of it, and the interesting and important thing is that this poetry is as characteristic of our life as our business enterprise, our political turmoil our demagoguism our millionaires."

Jaded Response

Andrew Lang, the critic, immediately dismissed her as Ignorant and incompetent and went to the extent of remarking whether her poems should be read at all. Reacting against Howells, high praise he candidly remarks. "Mr. Howells praised it very highly. I cannot go nearly so far as Mr. Howells. Because, if poetry is to exist at all, it really must have form and grammar and must rhyme when it professes to rhyme: indeed, one turns over Miss. Dickinson book with a puzzling feeling that there was poetry in her subconscious but that it never became explicit". The reason for Andrew Lang's bewilderment is not far from seeking, Emily Dickinson's poetic techniques were too unconventional to be understood and followed by all.

Admirers and detractors, both American and British, were clear enough in their critical sentiments. Still, the present-day reader of their views neither saw with clarity the full nature of her poetic gifts.

A Modern Poet?

Emily Dickinson sustained attention as more and more of her poems- and her letters – were published, though from 1897 to the early 1920's that attention was meager. The interest in her poetry became broader in scope: to the problem of her unconventional form were added the problems of her biography, the significance of her major themes, and the reliability of the published texts. Especially in the 1920's and after, critics began to see the poems for what they are rather than for what they might have been. To some, Miss. Dickinson was more easily a "Modern" poet than a nineteenth-century one. To others, she was of her own time and heritage but also clearly beyond it. And in 1921, Norman Forester hesitantly said she would occupy an "Inconspicuous but secure place" in American Literary history. To be sure, there were British and American critics who maintained strong reservations about the poet's merits, but they were by 1930 a dwindling number.

Growth of Reputation

From 1930's to the present, the reputation of Emily Dickinson has grown steadily and immensely, not in the sense of discovery, of revival, rather in the sense of clarification, what her poetry is and what, consequently, her stature must be. We are accustomed to thinking of the past several decades as an age of criticism, with a very diverse and sophisticated range of beliefs and practices. That Emily Dickinson's poetry should find high favour in so many of these critical perspectives is itself a testament to her greatness. Furthermore, one sees in this criticism the frequent assumption that she is great, and then the careful exploration of her themes, her techniques, her method, the precise terms of her greatness. The facts and critical relevance of her biography and definitive editions of her work have been accomplished. Her significance to American Literature and culture is largely defined. The recognition of Emily Dickinson is now firm, and she joins Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, and the other company of great nineteenth-century writers.

New Trends: New Voices

The question of Emily Dickinson's growing popularity has often troubled us. Why a poet who failed to gain an ear for her poetry should suddenly be found ascending the ladders of fame? Why the great sages like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, who enjoyed public acclaim should recede into the background, and this thin, wren-like personality, dominate the literary scene with the great poets of the modern times?

The reason primarily attributed is to the changing literary trends in poetry. The 'boo-boo sob-sob theory of poetry' had long declined into oblivion, and writing poetry offered a challenge to all concerned. Romanticism and didacticism, which were the vogue in Emerson's days, lost their hold and the uneasy times initiated a new trend. The poetry of 1860s & 70s the poetry fraught with problems which the poets had begun to recognize the power of fresh, realistic material communicated by blunt, experimental methods." From this ground-swell of realism rises the adventurous poetry of Sidney Lanier and Emily Dickinson. Yet, the traditionalists clung to the old subjects. Tennyson, Byron, Shelley, and Keats echoed in their verses. American poetry had yet to adopt a singular course in the field of poetry. Although the material was fresh, the poetry itself was in the age-old conservatism encouraged a limited style of experiments by a few poets, such as Lanier and Emily Dickinson – experiments with techniques still contained within the old patterns' ad using the old materials. For these poets, an audience attuned adequately to their techniques was yet to come, which probably explains Emily Dickinson's reticence in proclaiming her poetry to the world. Recognition was to go to her, only after her death and that too amongst mixed reactions. But all the same, she was hailed as unusual. The poets of the twentieth century might almost be grouped according to their response to Emily Dickinson, poetry was a revelation of the mid. Each and every phenomenon of nature corresponded intimately with the activities in her mind. Although she professed no theory of poetry during her lifetime yet references scattered here and there reveal her poetry idea.

Poetry: An Alchemy

To her poetry was the essence wrung out of feeling and ordinary meanings. She remarks aptly in one of her poems:-

"This was a poet – it is that
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary meanings.
And attars so immense
From the familiar species
That perished by the door
we wonder it was not ourselves
Arrested it before".

And her mode of revelation was too difficult to decipher by people gifted with an average sense of understanding. "Her Canvas was the entire Universe and her technique indisputably her own, however

much it has puzzled other writers. She strove to capture the telegraphic thoughts. In her half-rhymes, her Irregularities of speech and rhythm, her spasmodic quality, she mirrored the incongruities and frustrations of human experience the awkwardness in her poetry became a metaphor of life itself.”

Sources and Influences

Her affinity with Donne, Henry Vaughan, and Sir Thomas Browne is quite evident. Keats. Keats was another favorite of hers – this might explain the dominant note of pain and despair in her poems. To John Donne, She owes her witty technique, and that probably accounts for the dilemma that her poems posed before Higginson or, for that matter Samuel Bowles. As Allen Tate passionately remarks, "Great poetry needs no special features of difficulty to make it mysterious. When it has, then the reputation of the poet is likely to remain uncertain. This is still true of Donne, and it is true of Emily Dickinson, whose verse appeared in an age unfavorable to the use of intelligence in poetry. Her poetry is not like any other poetry of her time. It is not like any of the innumerable kinds of verse written today ...it is a poetry of ideas and it demands the reader a point of view...It also requires the deep understanding that must go beneath the verbal excitement of the style, a highly developed sense of the specific quality of poetry – a quality that most persons accept as the accidental feature of something else that the poet thinks he has to say. This is one of the reasons why Miss Dickinson's poetry has not been widely read."

Allen Tate attributes the late recognition of Emily Dickinson to a lack of tradition of criticism, proper Intelligence to understand her poetry, and failure of the critics to grasp more than biographical details. "She is too near to possess the remoteness of literature," He says and continues in the same vein, "Perhaps her appropriate setting would be the age of Cowley or Donne. Yet in her historical setting, she is nevertheless, remarkable and special.”

Pure Poetry

Emily Dickinson was a poet in the purest sense. She passed by all the contemporary events, and no mention is made of any major happening in her poetry. Like Jane Austen, she kept within her "two inches of ivory" and, like Keats, refused to use poetry as a medium of social propaganda. She was concerned with greater events of Life, Death, and Immortality.

The personal revelation of the kind that Donne and Miss Dickinson strove for, in the effort to understand their relationship, is a feature of all great poetry: it is probably the hidden motive for the

writing. It is, in fact, the perfect literary situation it produces because it is rare, a special, and perhaps the most distinguished kind of poet. They show a variety of feelings. To use a Keatsian phrase, she loaded her poetry with ore, her paradoxical statements, punning, and her astounding style of verse-arrangement filled one with bewilderment and surprise. Her poetry is difficult but because it surprises us by its fine excess it sends a chill down our spine. This probably accounts for her steady growth of renown in the twentieth century.

The problem of judging her better poems is much of the time a subtle one. "Her meter at its worst,is a kind of stiff sing-song, her diction at its worst is a kind of poetic genius of the highest order "8

Mixed Reaction

Thus opinions vary sometimes on this side of the argument and sometimes on the other. Her reputation has suffered many ups and down. while critics come down hard on her for her lapses in verse, rhyme and expression, In the same breath they cannot help expressing a wonder for such 'an amazing sense Conrad Aiken declared her poetry" perhaps the finest in the English language" Harry Hansen another critic rates Emily Dickinson the greatest poet of America.

In 1915 F.L. Pattee said of Emily Dickinson "Her poems are disappointing. Critics have ached Higginson, until Emily Dickinson has figured, often at length, in all the later histories and anthologies, but it is becoming clear that she was overrated. To compare her 'eccentric fragments' with Blake's 'wildness' is Is ridiculous. They are more conceits vague jottings of a brooding mind, they are crudely wrought and like their author's letters, which were given to the public later, they are colorless and for the most part lifeless. They reveal Little of either Emily Dickinson or of human life generally. They should have been allowed to perish as the author intended" (9).

Yet a few years later, F.L. Pattee revised his opinion Emily's poems he stated, "are startlingly, even crudely original some of them remind one of the works of Blake .They are the record of the inner life of an abnormally sensitive soul – fragments. lyrical ejaculations, childish conceits, little orphic sayings, often illogical and meaningless, lines and couplets at times that are glimpses of another world, spasmodic cries, always brief, always bearing upon the deepest things that life knows- love, death, nature, time, eternity" (10).

The prevailing criticism seems weighted in the direction of A.L. Hamptons' appraisal, "The translation of quite everyday experiences into moments of startling beauty, the lightening and humorous acceptance of everything from bees and birds, and flowers to death, to loneliness and to

light all streaming through her mind into the scheme of the world, give one a fresh sense of life. the unerring aim of her words pins her quick understanding, quivering to the page. Her words and concerns may range from a whim, capitalized to a profound realization of the meaning and effect of experience common to us all "(11).

By 1914, however, when Martha Dickinson Blanch 1, the poets' niece and heiress to her literary estate issued 'The Single Hound' a new batch of poems, and this time refreshingly free from alterations poetry in America had taken out a new lease, and a new kind of audience was prepared to read Emily Dickinson, more nearly, on her own terms. A highly self-conscious poetic renaissance was in full swing and "modern poetry", under the aegis of one fad after another , Imagism, Free Verse, Vortices and so on claimed Emily Dickinson and "rescued" her from the popular crowd. The rescuing process continued over the next several decades as more of the poems were transcribed and published: 'Further Poem' (1929) 'Unpublished Poems (1935) and restoration in yet another sense came in 1950 in 'The Poems of Emily Dickinson', the product of masterpiece scholarship of Thomas H. Johnson. It comprised of 1775 poems and fragments. Numbered and arranged so as to preset them as precisely as could be determined in their order of composition, the text of each poem preserves with exact fidelity the form she herself employed, including the characteristic dash she used as a kind of musical notation, more to achieve dramatic emphasis, as If to make each word of phrase a character. Final restoration of the sort came with Mr. Johnson's three volume edition of 'The Letters of Emily Dickinson' (1958). Her letters are valuable for, she often used her letters to the actual world beyond the Amherst fence as trial flights for the "Letters" she winged over the fences of mortality.

Long Awaited Reaction

So she has been restored – restored as a professional poet of the first rank, not merely as a quaint female scribbler with petite but penetrating insights. And restored in a way that would not have surprised her, for she said that incredible was never incredible when it finally occurred. It is not so incredible after all, for her reputation from 1890 to 1955 has nearly always been tended by words of devotion. Her achievement as prosodies now gives her first rank, where at first it was overlooked or excused in deference to the mysterious "Power" of her thought. Her thought too still attracts high praise, though now as in the words of her editor Thomas writes, "an existentialist In a period of transcendentalism" she merits rank not only for her skill with meters but also for her tragic vision" (12).

An Existentialist

She fronted existence in all its dreadful breadth. Death and extinction, the way the way the individual personality perished bit by bit, agonized her. she fronted existence in all its minute particulars too. Each needling sensation of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell that told her she was alive also told her that life was passing, the experience was almost unbearable. But she rendered It bearable through sheer force of will, forcefully taking an ironic stance that could hold both life and death at a distance, permitting her to nibble away at the soul piece so that she could digest immortality a little at a time.

It is a tragic poet that she stands exclusively in her own right. Talk of her 'tragic vision' conjures up comparisons with the s Shakespeare of 'King Lear. Not a mad king but the robin she said, "was my criterion for Tune"

A Pocket Consmos

The province of New England served as her cosmos. She saw the Universe in a butter-cup or placed Death in a chariot and was entranced by Eternity in a rush of Cochineal. her first admires savoured her Universe, and her later critics the butte-cup. The difference, the originality of Emily Dickinson comes from the way she sings.

Emily Dickinson wrote once complaining.

"This is my letter to the world

That never wrote to me-

The simple News that Nature told –

With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed

To hands I Cannot See –

For love of Her-Sweet-Countrymen

Judge tenderly of me".

One is tempted to add: "The letter had been misplaced and remained in the 'Dead Letter Office' but suddenly a postman found the correct address and posted it. And now the world indeed judges "her tenderly (13).

'A poet recently restored', her popularity to-day speaks for its universal freshness. She appeals immediately for she deals with the basic problems of life. In her own times she had been ignored

'Like a Cinderella whom the Prince Fame did not claim'. But ultimately, in 1955, Thomas H. Johns on published the complete works of Emily Dickinson, tracing each and every trait. This is the first study of its kind and gives us some insight into the methods, techniques and thought processes of the poet.

Although as an explicit philosophical movement existentialism belongs to the twentieth century, its father-philosophers were Kierkegaard and, as a background presence, Kant, and all the conditions for its emergence as a stance or a way of life or an explicit philosophy already existed in the consciousness of Emily Dickinson's time - her distinction is that she brought to conscious expression in poetry what was potentially already there: and, in doing so, she speaks with a voice more recognizably attuned to our century than to her own. To use her own words, we see her better for the Years:

That hunch themselves between -

The Miner's Lamp - sufficient be -

To nullify the Mine Emily Dickinson not only confronted and explored in poetry the basic situation, the human predicament as it presented itself to the underlying consciousness of the age, in response to which existentialism as a working philosophy emerged: she also, first among the poets of our language, brought to conscious definition in poetry the emergent existentialist consciousness itself. Another poem in which she explores the consciousness both in itself and through some of its ramifications. First, this:

No Rack can torture me -

My Soul - at Liberty -

Behind this mortal Bone

There knits a bolder One -

You cannot prick with saw -

Nor pierce with Scimitar -

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