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“A WORD THAT BREATHES DISTINCTLY HAS NOT THE POWER TO DIE”: THE LIFE OF WORDS IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

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The article presents an analytical research of select works by Emily Dickinson, an author who, thanks to her original talent, stands out as a sui generis precursor of modernism in the American literary context. The poems which I have chosen are, in my view, emblematic of her work and best demonstrate the exquisite quality of her rare sensibility which might be said to exist in its own right. Being extremely intense and relentlessly acute, it forces both subjects and objects out of their familiar shapes and forms to create an extraordinary experience.

Key words: semi-mythological figure, anti-heroism, poetic evanescence, “word-breath” imagery, modern sensibility

The “Higginson-Dickinson” relationship: First Impressions and Initial Sketches of the American poetess

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an influential literary critic of the time, whom Emily Dickinson “appointed” as her literary counsellor and confidant[1] from 1862 until her death, described in a letter to his wife his impressions of the poet when they first met at her home in Amherst: “A step like a pattering child’s in entry”, he noted, “and in glided a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair and a face a little like Belle Dove’s[…] in a very plain and exquisitely clean white dress and a blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort

[1] A wonderfully evocative double portraiture of the devoted friendship and grace between Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a literary figure who first brought Dickinson’s work to the public, is given in the book *White Heat* by Brenda Wineapple. It is the first book which explored the relationship between one of America’s most beloved poets and Thomas Higginson, a fiery abolitionist, who, as the Civil war raged, ran guns to Kansas and commanded the first Union regiment of black soldiers.

of child-like way into my hand and said 'These are my introduction' in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice" (Baym, ed. 1989: 2407).

Higinson's initial portrayal of the American poet, fleeting and vague as it might seem, did not lack insight and in-depth perspective, though. Despite the fact that they saw each other for the first time on that day, they had known each other through the shuttling letters exchanged prior to their introduction and personal acquaintance. They had been in correspondence since April 1862 and their meeting occurred not until eight years later. It was a fascinating epistolary communication and friendship which was opened by Emily Dickinson who sought his opinion on her poems – and did not cease with their personal encounter.

According to Higginson's account the New England poet emerged as an odd, frail, reticent and childlike creature. From his description we get the impression of a fragile human being, a person of frightening vulnerability, a child-woman with a keen and perceptive eye. In his notions Emily Dickinson stood out as a woman of a delicate but willful character, a poet who lacked balance and sought for a spiritual preceptor to kerb her excessive liveliness and wayward sensibility, a "master" to give her "precepts" both for living and writing, (precepts which, as has become evident from her life and work, she never followed or took into serious account).

But she was such a person not only in his perceptions. In the eyes of her contemporaries in Amherst she had become a quasi-mythological figure, wearing her exquisite white pique as a fairy-like creature from another world, a white vision, whose aura of purity and divine perfection persisted even after her death.[2] People longed to touch her fabulous white

[2] "Despite the serious critical attention she has received, she has been stereotypically American literature's tragic-romantic heroine," wrote Elizabeth Philips. "Since she enjoyed being enigmatic and dodging the inquisitive, she was referred to as "the myth" while she was still alive. When people began to read the remarkable poems that seemed to reveal the private, intimate life of the poet, the myth was elaborated to satisfy the curious and to explain the exceptional woman". (Philips 1998: 2) In the Introduction to *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, Martha Smith and Mary Loeffelholz agree, too, that "the "myth of Amherst" [was] not quite, in any simple sense, a falsehood" and "the phrase began circulating about Dickinson in her own lifetime, passed from neighbor to Amherst neighbor, and Dickinson was surely aware that she existed as a character in town legend". But both critics also emphasize the fact that "in the past two decades [...] scholars have increasingly begun to challenge this picture's emphasis on mystery, isolation, frustration, and negation in order to focus instead on what is actually there to be known about Dickinson's life and writing – what was always there, but overshadowed by the myth" (Smith, Loeffelholz 2008: 2).

attire, children were yearning to get a glimpse of the Queen from the world of their fairy-tales. And when "an intruder" stood at the door and rang the bell of her house, she would escape deeper and deeper into the chambers of her "haunted house", where she could only meet "the corridors" of her own brain "surpassing/ material place." There and only there could she confront the "interior ghost", "the white host" of her own house, who was far more dangerous and challenging than an "external ghost" even at the witching hour of midnight: "Ourself, behind ourself concealed – /Should startle most – /Assassin, hid in our Apartment, /Be Horror's least" (Dickinson 1960: 333), she wrote in "One need not be a Chamber to be haunted". Her isolation and escapism from social life, from the strivings and passions of the small town's community has become a deliberately sought condition in which "The soul selects her own society – /Then – shuts the Door – /To her divine Majority – Present no more" (Baym, ed. 1989: 2378). It is evident that in all those poems which deal with the themes of human frailty and suffering, the concepts of "isolation" and "loneliness", "loss" and "absence", "agony" and "pain" come to function as signs of ontological significance and not simply as moody states of human existence. In *A More Beautiful Question* Glen Hughes wrote:

> Dickinson, the focus of this chapter, is revealed by her approximately 1,800 poems and poetic fragments to be, despite her unquestionable experiences of joy, loving, identification with natural creatures, and illuminative transcendence, more typically and generally a poet of doubt, loneliness, longing, inward struggle, fury, alienation, dread, and depression–a master, as Harold Bloom puts it, "of every negative affect" (Bloom 2002: 345). Also, contrary to her popular image, she is among the most cognitively demanding poets America has produced. And finally, she is a brilliant poetic explicator of what it means to live in the anxious openness of the "tension" of the *metaxy*– that is, in the unrestful, inescapable, and irresolvable tension of existence in-between world and transcendence, time and eternity, ignorance and knowledge, despair and faith, hope and fulfillment (Hughes 2011: 63).

However pointedly enforced on our perception by being driven to the pitch of human endurance, these states of "negative affect" in Dickinson's poetry inevitably lead to the accumulation of knowledge. Their philosophical contemplation is elevated to the status of a solid and sweet wisdom. By "climbing" to the "height" of the "wounds" and suffering in "A Wounded Deer – leaps highest" (Dickinson 1960: 77), or in "A Nearness to Tremendousness – /An Agony procures" (Dickinson 1960: 450), they have become self-contained justifications of their own existence, prerequisites for gaining insight into the mysteries of creation.

This machinery of Emily Dickinson's is characteristic of her entire work and betrays a specific kind of rare sensibility which might be said to exist in its own right. Being extremely intense and relentlessly acute, it forces both subjects and objects out of their familiar shapes and forms to procure an extraordinary experience. "It almost appears that Emily Dickinson welcomed pain and loss for the intensity they provoked; or, if that is excessive, that she was extraordinarily resourceful in finding power where common eyes see only pain" (Donoghue 1974: 463). There was, indeed, something heathen and barbaric about Dickinson's sensibility, for it persistently rejected well-established religious doctrines, common norms and standards of customary behaviour. Instead, the poet feasted upon the senses, found exhilaration in pain, and thus created an impression of "living upon her nerves" (Donoghue 1974: 460). Still, this was not a perverse exultation, a self-contained indulgence in suffering and pain, or a self-reflexive exercise in haunting romanticism, but a necessary step further into her acute liveliness, into her vivid imagination and original cognitive capacity, and, in the long run, an aiming of her shafts at a higher power, which the poet summoned and in which she found ultimate shelter beyond the exhaustions of the standard senses.[3]

Higginson was impressed by Dickinson's poems, but their rough-hewn structure, lack of polish and punctuation which withheld traditional syntactic markers – all signs of her wayward sensibility – perplexed him. Commenting on a letter in which she had enclosed some poems, in "Emily Dickinson's Letters" (October 1891), Higginson wrote:

> It was in a hand-writing so peculiar that it seemed as if the writer might have taken her first lessons by studying the famous fossil bird-tracks in the museum of that college town. Yet it was not in the slightest degree illiterate, but cultivated, quaint, and wholly unique. Of punctuation there was little; she used chiefly dashes, and it has been thought better, in printing these letters, as with her poems, to give them the benefit in this respect of the ordinary usages; and so with her habit as to capitalization, as the printers call it, in which she followed the Old English and present German method of thus distinguishing every noun substantive (Higginson 1891: 444).

[3] Harold Bloom exalts Dickinson's "literary originality" which, in his view, "achieves scandalous dimensions" (Bloom 1994: 295). Moreover, he brings to the foreground, in a daring comparison to Shakespeare, her "cognitive originality": "Except for Shakespeare, Dickinson manifests more *cognitive originality* [m.e.] than any other Western poet since Dante . . . at the height of her powers, [she is] the best mind to appear among Western poets in nearly four centuries" (Bloom 1994: 291, 305).

Brief stanzas, many capitalized words to bear the emphasis of her intended meaning, paradoxical juxtapositions, yoking of disparate images, daring expressions of the soul's extreme states, an inclination towards symbolical abstractions are all markers of her eccentric yet fully recognizable and characteristic style. The Word in her verse stands somewhat alone – in a strange relation to its own circumference, reminding of Dickinson's own relation to her society, of her deliberate seclusion from it. Quite often the Word is weighted with the semantic message of the whole poem and performs the function of a centrifugal force which holds the centripetal elements in a unified focus. Flanked by dashes – Dickinson's favourite graphic punctuation sign – it acquires a specific semantic weight. The syntax and the other linguistic means are all technical equipment which served Dickinson's purpose to make the Word stand out in its dazzling incisiveness, proud, challenging and bare, lacerated from its logical, grammatical and semantic connections, from its navel string to the other members of the sentence. The power which is thus acquired is a power to "breathe". The Word in Dickinson's poetry is the convulsive cry of a newborn baby, brought to life out of primeval chaos by the Creator-Poet. In her poems Life is the Word made flesh. "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive? [.] Should you think it breathed, and had you the leisure to tell me, I feel quick gratitude" (Dickinson qtd. in Higginson 1891: 444) were the words with which she addressed herself to Higginson and which have ever since become a famous phrase emblematic of her entire life and work.

Indeed, Dickinson's verse not only "breathes", but seems to be the very breath of Life. We can almost hear her taking breath in and breathing out, dashes being the pauses between inhaling and exhaling. The vivacity of her entire being, the passions and feelings of her unrestful heart and character had become the very texture of her poetry:

> Three times – we parted – Breath – and I –
> Three times – He would not go –
> But strove to stir the lifeless Fan
> The waters – strove to stay.
> […]
>
> The Waves grew sleepy – Breath – did not –
> The Winds – like Children – lulled –
> Then Sunrise kissed my Chrysalis –
> And I stood up – and lived –
> (Dickinson 1960: 294).

Choices of Anonymity: Metamorphic transformations on the Route of Anti-Heroism and Poetic Evanescence.

One paradoxical gesture which is an emblematic trait of Dickinson's overall personality and poetic expression is the gradual disappearance of the poetic speaker and, ultimately, the author herself. "I'm Nobody! Who are you?/ Are you – Nobody – Too?" (Dickinson 1960: 133). She exclaims in a short epigrammatic poem commending "small" existence. And the ensuing justification of anonymity and unheroic behavior is re-echoed: "How dreary – to be – Somebody! /How public – like a Frog – /To tell one's name – the livelong June – /To an admiring Bog!" (133). There is, of course, a great quantity of ironic playfulness and swaggering in this poem but it reasserts the old Dickinsonian rhapsody of seclusion and spiritual privacy which she opted for and achieved amidst her contemporary Amherst community. Paradoxically, to be a Nobody seems the only prerequisite to become a Somebody, to draw one's humble name out of circulation is to get out of the bog of pompous croaking frogs which commend their own self-importance, their being "Somebodies" all summer long.

This attitude is a logical consequence of the fact that in Emily Dickinson, generally, experiences are more intensely and thoroughly apprehended only after their loss. That is why her "imagination so often moves along "a route of evanescence", as if on one side everything were premonition, and on the other the fatality of loss" (Donoghue 1974: 463). True, in her life and poetry premonition is always on one side, fatality – on the other, and Emily Dickinson herself, as though doomed to hang in crucifixion between Earth and Heaven, in-between. The following lines are very indicative of this attitude:

> A Pit – but Heaven over it –
> And Heaven beside, and Heaven abroad,
> To stir would be to slip –
> To look would be to drop –
> To dream – to sap the Prop
> That holds my chances up
> (Dickinson 1960: 696).

The pinnacle in the variations on the themes of premonition, loss, evanescence and anonymity is reached, in my opinion, in the poem "A Solemn Thing – It was – I said." It is a climactic poem in the series not only because it holds the superiority of something sensibly gone, or the solid conviction that "finer is a going/ Than a remaining face" („Summer has two Beginnings"), to use a phrase from another poem, but because it

presents a specific retrospective re-affirming of evanescence as the only way of enforcing a more vivid presence. At first sight it is a very confusing poem in terms of grammar, "loosely" changing the perspective of the speaking persona, as well as the tense of the "happening" of the "event".

> A solemn thing – it was – I said –
> A woman – white – to be –
> wear – if God should count me fit –
> Her blameless mystery –
> (Dickinson 1960: 123-124).

On a closer inspection, however, we are assured that it is the same old machinery, the same old general Dickinsonian strategy to 'barbarically' hew words apart with dashes and make them "breathe", to split up her points of view in an attempt to build up a unified mythopoeic symbolical text in which her life and work not simply interpenetrate each other, but they "live each other's life and die each other's death", to use Heraclitus' phrasing.

In this emblematic poem the poetic speaker both reveals and conceals the complex personality of the author. Or rather, it seems more appropriate to talk about Dickinson's "multiple personas", the permanent guests of her "haunted" house. In all these complex positionings "evanescence" and "loss" are seen as painful but sensible, harrowing but necessary prerequisites for the artistic transformation of states and conditions. But there is something special and original in this metamorphosis: it demonstrates in a most skilful, almost magic way how the poetic speaker, being "nobody", an anonymous narrator of personal drama, disappears unheroically only to rise magnanimously in the texture of the poem itself. And this perspective is equally applicable to the poet herself, for, in the case of Emily Dickinson, poet and poetic speaker are almost identical.

Let us now focus specifically on the process of transformation from Dickinson's initial idea about herself as "a woman in white", which she accomplished in real-life experience, to the final symbolical transfiguration in which the sovereign image acquires the status of sanctified immortality: "A solemn thing–it was–I said/ A woman – white – to be – And wear–if God should count me fit–/ Her blameless mystery–".

Whom does this "blameless mystery" refer to? Is it the purity of Virgin Mary, or Dickinson's imaginative equation between the Mother of God and her own perception of her ideal self? If the first line starts as a generalization about the solemnity of a "woman – white – to be – ", the second changes the perspective to "me" – "if God should count ME fit", preparing the appropriation of "her blameless mystery" by "me" on the

condition that "God should count me fit". This is a poem which typically demonstrates the interpenetration between poetic speaker and poet through which, by the end of the poem, they merge in an original Dickinsonian unity. Next, it would be interesting to speculate on the significance and imagery of the "purple well" in the second stanza:

> A hallowed thing – to drop a life
> Into the purple well –
> Too plummetless – that it return –
> Eternity – until –
> (Dickinson 1960: 124).

Why should she "drop a life / Into the purple well"? Whose is this life – of the real Emily Dickinson or of her symbolic double? Why is the well purple? Is this the colour of the self-sacrificial blood of a Christ-like figure who, in another poem, "This World is not Conclusion," has to bear the "contempt of generations" and perform the act of self-Crucifixion: "To gain it/ Men have borne/ Contempt of generations/ And Crucifixion, shown" (Baym, ed. 1989: 2384). In my view, this plunge into the "purple well" has to be interpreted in the light of the Biblical story of Joseph and his brothers: similar to Joseph who was thrown onto the bottom of the abysmal well to receive initiation into biblical mysteries there, Emily Dickinson has to perform the ritualistic act of descending into the labyrinth of the underworld, whose symbolical expression is "the purple well", in order to conduct a secret communion with the visionary as in the hierophantic mysteries of initiates. In this enigmatic poem, one of the riddles in Dickinson's work, we become witnesses of the building up and superimposition of meanings until "mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show", to use W. B. Yeats' phrasing from his poem "The Statues". The well creates the effect of the optical illusion, it is a sui generis mirror, in which the two opposite ends of human existence – Life and Death meet and come to signify the beginning of eternity. From this perspective the size of life which even to the "Sages" seemed "small", that is, "anonymous", insignificant and unheroic, becomes the very equation of "eternity", symbolically expressed in the never-ending line of the horizon, the borderline between earth and heaven:

> And then – the size of this "small" life –
> The Sages – call it small –
> Swelled – like Horizons – in my vest –
> And I sneered – softly – "small"!
> (Dickinson 1960: 124)

The poem is shot through with ironic ardour, for it is an attempt to overcome the psychological doubts over the issues of mortality. In Dickinson's argumentative battle with her own self we become aware of the gradual "swelling" of her "small" life into "eternal" being. Even the status of Sages is overweeningly downgraded, exemplifying Dickinson's characteristic teasing and mocking attitude towards established moral standards and customary norms of behaviour. Such an attitude is justified, because only by destroying the dictates of existing reality can she become a Demiurgic figure, similar to God, who can create harmony out of Chaos. And the act of evanescence is required so that the Word can be made flesh. In this sense, "disappearance" and "evanescence" are never really thorough and definitive, but they bring to new life both poetic speaker and author, the resurrection being the very act of poetic creation, the composition of the poem itself.

Thus, in the long run, Emily Dickinson's anonymity and "unheroic" attitude („I am Nobody"; "To Fight Aloud is Very Brave"; "A Route of Evanescence"), her almost inhuman seclusion („The Soul Selects her Own Society"; "The Way I Read a Letter's This"; "A Solemn Thing it Was"), her suffering and pain („They Say that 'Time assuages,'„; "A Wounded Deer Leaps Highest"; "An Imperial Affliction Sent us of the Air") seem to be the cost which she had to pay for her immortality. Her life "dropped into the purple well", her gestures of self-crucifixion, the ecstasy at the height of despair, and the "distant strains of triumph" which "burst agonized and clear" on the "forbidden ear" of the "defeated" („Success is counted sweetest") – are all experiences on the verge of human endurance and prerequisites for the transformation of her anonymity into fame, so that her simple, modest and even ascetic existence in the Amherst community gains completeness in the life of eternity. In her defense of "unheroic" attitudes and her own "anti-heroic" stance she has become a heroicized semi-mythological figure both for her contemporaries and for the generations to come. By depriving herself of Life, she has gained Life.

All these distinctive traits of Dickinson's character and writings define her truly avant-garde stance which ranks her not only among the most pre-eminent heralds of modernism in the American context, but amongst those authors who have deservedly earned their literary fame on a worldwide scale.

Emily Dickinson's Love Poems

Undisputedly, love and death are among the most overwhelming passions and experiences in Emily Dickinson's life and poetry. "Love, indeed, is one of the two great absolutes in Emily Dickinson's world, the other being death", Denis Donoghue has observed (Donoghue 1974: 465). In a love lyric which I have chosen to portray her "philosophy" of love, she wrote:

> You left me – Sire – two Legacies, –
> A Legacy of Love
> A Heavenly Father would suffice,
> Had He the offer of;
> [ ]
> You left me Boundaries of Pain
> Capacious as the Sea,
> Between Eternity and Time,
> Your Consciousness and Me –
> (Dickinson 1960: 319-320).

The yoking together of Eros and Thanatos, of Life and Death, which Freud at a later period theorized as the two opposite instincts of human existence, is not, of course, a Dickinsonian invention. But in her life and work these concepts are absolutely vital for each other's existence, they seem to engender each other, to define each other, to complement each other and, ultimately, to co-exist in their indispensable unity – a true sign of her *avant-la-lettre* modernist attitude. In her love lyrics, as in other poems, the life instinct, "the Legacy of Love" is absolute in its divine origin but is inevitably flooded by pain. It is a feeling so grand and perfect it can please even the Heavenly Father, but is doomed to remain unrequited. Her love is sublime but desperate, it is enlightened but harrowing. It is a shattering experience that can transform her whole being:

> He touched me, so I live to know
> That such a day, permitted so,
> I groped upon his breast –
> It was a boundless place to me
> And silenced, as the awful sea
> Puts minor streams to rest.
> And now, I'm different from before,
> As if I breathed superior air –
> Or brushed a Royal Gown –
> My feet, too, that had wandered so –

My Gypsy face – transfigured now –
To tenderer Renown –
Into this Port, if I might come,
Rebecca, to Jerusalem,
Would not so ravished turn –
Nor Persian, baffled at her shrine
Lift such a Crucifixal sign
To her imperial Sun.
(Dickinson 1960: 246)

But the price for this "transfiguration" is the broken heart:

Not with a Club, the Heart is broken
Nor with a Stone;
A Whip so small you could not see it
I've known
(Dickinson 1960: 567).

This seemingly impossible duality of her love passion is enacted in many poems in a similar paradoxical way. It is an avant-garde Dickinsonian technique which she employs to suggest surprise, to convey her message in a most unexpected way. Usually she starts the verse in an emotionally neutral and unbiased tone, gradually builds its intellectual and emotional weight and ends up with a statement which is seemingly incompatible with the preceding ones. Thus the last line of the first stanza of the poem "You Left Me – Sire – Two Legacies" – "A Heavenly Father would suffice,/ *Had He the offer of*"(my emphasis) – has an extremely original suggestive power. With the help of the plain word and conversational tone it creates at once an atmosphere of playful suggestiveness and an ironically superior attitude toward "the Heavenly Father" who was not offered "the Legacy of Love." It is meant to both "acquaint" the Supreme Being with the passions of the human heart and thus to shorten the distance between human and divine, and accentuate, not without a certain amount of arrogance, on the lack of an offer of such Love Legacy for Him („had He the offer of"). This ingenious strategy – "domesticating" the extraordinary, while, at the same time, presenting what is common as something extraordinary – makes the text seem paradoxical, full of (bitter) irony and witticism. Still, her romantic mood and instinct for lyricism dominate the first part of the poem. In the second part, however, the romantic reverie is clouded by the Death instinct, to use Freud's phrasing. On the other shore is the kingdom of pain – as vast and "capacious as the Sea". A similar, truly modern, characteristic of holding the two motifs together we find in many other poems including "I've Got an

Arrow Here", in which the poetic speaker makes the following confession: "I've got an arrow here; /Loving the hand that sent it, /I the dart revere" (Dickinson 1960: 701).

The trespass of the boundaries between life and death; the seemingly paradoxical ambivalence of her love and passion; the initially neutral tone of her poetic expression which often ends in an uncontrollable intellectual and emotional burst; the ironic attitude which subverts in a most unexpected manner the high status of the Lofty being – are all characteristic traits which impart to Dickinson's poetry daring novelty, "scandalous" "literary" and "cognitive originality" (Bloom 1994:295). In other words, they add a *modern* [m.e.] flavour to Dickinson's essentially romantic attitude.[4] The skilful playfulness and sarcastic witticisms which eventually downgrade the romantic reverie of the "sublime" and shorten the distance between human and divine, are further signs which map and define Emily Dickinson's place within her contemporary world: a position of a singularly modern and innovative author, ranked among the most outstanding harbingers of modernism in the American context and on a worldwide scale. The prevailing mood of heightened senses and sharpened nerves which pervades the whole texture of her poetry hints at the forthcoming dramatization of the modern psyche – a process which will eventually lead to the emergence of Nietzsche's superhuman being[5]; a

[4] In *Emily Dickinson's Approving God* Patrick Keane wrote: "In emphasizing Emily Dickinson's place in the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition, I am sometimes interested in direct influence, more often in analogy and mutual illumination. In stressing, for example, a Dickinson-Wordsworth "connection," I am not proposing Wordsworth (as one might Shakespeare or Milton) as a precursor. An isolated and bookish poet, Dickinson was not, except when it came to Scripture, an allusive one, and her direct references to and echoes of other poets, including Wordsworth, are few. Her subjects (nature and the imagination, death and immortality, innocence and experience) and themes (transience and the yearning for the infinite, loss and compensation, experience transformed by consciousness) locate her in the great Romantic tradition. Yet she only rarely refers in her letters to Keats and Wordsworth, and never to the other major British Romantics. Absence of evidence, however, is not evidence of absence. She is, as Harold Bloom has remarked, "recognizably a post-Wordsworthian poet" , though, as with Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman and Melville, there is what Bloom calls "the American difference."" (Keane 2008: 3).

[5] Patrick Keane writes: "Emily Dickinson's creative life coincided with the momentous changes associated with Darwin and Nietzsche, and her poems and letters reflect Darwinian and other challenges to faith in an increasingly secular age" (Keane 2008: 2). He insists that in her poetry we can perceive "a post-Darwinian, almost Nietzschean sense that the old verities seemed no longer to hold" (Keane 2008: 14).

development which will engender the tolling and tormenting gongs of W. B. Yeats' famous "Byzantium", lacerating with their thunderous sounds the diachronic flesh of linear time.

Death poems

> *If in the universal turbidity and bewilderment in human affairs I still see one task set clearly detached before me, it is this: to confirm confidence toward death out of the deepest delights and glories of life: to make death, who never was a stranger, more distinct and palpable again as the silent knowing participant in everything alive…* Rainer Maria Rilke (Rilke 1948: 188).

If there is an eschatological aspect in Dickinson's real or imaginative experience of love, it can be felt much more vividly and powerfully in her poems dedicated to the other absolute in her poetry – death. "Death was important to Emily Dickinson. Out of some one thousand and seven hundred poems, perhaps some "five to six hundred" are concerned with the theme of death; other estimates suggest that the figure may be nearer to a half" (Nesteruk 1997: 25). The reason why the concept of death was so significant to Emily Dickinson remains an issue of debate for both literary criticism and the readers of her poetry.[6] The cultural influences which contributed to her concern with "the death impulse" can be traced to various sources such as the Bible and the hymnbooks she owned and read, the ethical and intellectual legacy of the seventeenth-century American Puritanism and the English "metaphysical" poets, or the influence of the Amherst Religious revival with its links to Transcendentalism. For a poet

[6] In his article "The Many Deaths of Emily Dickinson" Peter Nesteruk presents us with some critical typological conceptions of "death" in Emily Dickinson. He writes: "Critics differ on the general role and meaning of death in Dickinson's poetry. Thomas H. Johnson, her editor and biographer, suggests that, for the poet, death is a mystery to be explored, but he maintains that Dickinson remained undecided as to a solution throughout her work. Poetry as the exploration of limits is a central aspect of Jane Donahue Eberwein's, *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* (1985); she finds the poet fascinated with death as the ultimate form of limitation and transformation: "Death as circumference dominated her thoughts." Eschatology, the doctrine of last things of which death is but the first, is given, in Virginia H. Oliver's *Apocalypse of Green* (1989), as the frame within which Dickinson tests her religion, her faith, and her belief through the medium of her poetry. However, the theme of death need not only point towards last things. Katharina Ernst, in "*Death" in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (1992), perhaps the most thorough-going discussion of death in the poetry of Emily Dickinson so far, finds the poet's exploration of death to be at the service of life" (Nesteruk 1997: 1-2).

like Dickinson, however, it is more likely that personal factors, such as the specificity of her perceptions and sensibility, as well as the originality of her poetic genius play a domineering role in her conceptualization of death. Whatever the reasons, Emily Dickinson's poems of death remain amongst the most powerful and popular of her work. "Because I could not stop for Death" (Dickinson 1960: 350) is undisputedly a masterpiece of this series.

The poem starts as a simple account of an event which is beyond the powers of the (female) protagonist/poetic speaker to master. It is conducted in a conversational tone which demonstrates her willingness to familiarize and befriend herself, her soul in transition, with Death:

> Because I could not stop for Death –
> He kindly stopped for me –
> The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
> And Immortality.
> We slowly drove, He knew no haste,
> And I had put away
> My labor, and my leisure too,
> For His Civility –

It seems very apt to suppose that this communication is realized as a courtly relationship between a man and a woman, an amorous wooing in which Death is presented as a supple suitor, a courteous gentleman who wins at last the soul of his Beloved one. He is driving the carriage slowly, a gesture expressive of tact and consideration for the lady, but also of a sense of supremacy over her: he is holding the reins of the carriage, he is in control of the lady's failing life, he manages to subdue her soul to his will. But if Death is driving the carriage, who is the third passenger chaperoning them both? Why is He identified as Immortality, but remains a voiceless, gestureless and impassive companion of the other two travellers? We are left to surmise until the very end of the poem and beyond.

It is a quiet drive, with no bugles and fanfares of triumph, a silent journey of passivity and reconciliation along the routes of childhood, maturity, old age and ultimately, death. These stages of human life are presented as if they were slides of the speaker's past experiences, seen in a flash of lightning:

> We passed the School, where Children strove
> At Recess – in the Ring –
> We passed the fields of Gazing Grain –
> We passed the Setting Sun –

The emphasis on the word "passed" repeated three times in this stanza further accentuates that the world is contemplated as a dynamic process from the outside, from the distanced perspective of the passive observer. And after passing the sun, the very source of Vivacity and Life, they have to pause before a house "that seemed a swelling of the ground", which is evidently the grave:

> We paused before a House that seemed
> A Swelling of the Ground –
> The Roof was scarcely visible –
> The Cornice – in the Ground –

The conversational ease and dispassionate impersonality of the tone in which the speaker recounts the experiences makes the apocalypse of death seem an almost easy experience. Death has to be met in tranquility, it has to be experienced as part of the cycle of everyday life. "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died" is such an attitude to death described in yet another poem. "This is to say", writes Donoghue, "that Emily Dickinson uses a plebeian language with a patrician imagination; willingly, with the commitment of knowledge […]. Where both forces are fully engaged, the result is a classic poem, as near perfection as the association allows" (Donoghue 1974: 468).

The last stanza of "Because I Could not Stop for Death" comes only to re-affirm the idea that the poem emerges as a perfect product "of a dramatic imagination in league with a domestically inclined language" (Donoghue 1974: 467). It reveals in a "plebeian" simplicity the poetic speaker's "patrician" anticipation of immortality:

> Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
> Feels shorter than the Day
> I first surmised the Horses' Heads
> Were toward Eternity –

The end of the poem provokes further questions: If Death is a suitor whose courtly attitude subdues the soul of the Lady, how does she achieve immortality, then? Is her falling under the spell of the gentleman just a temporary delusion? Is it a momentary yielding, a necessary step toward the axiom of Eternity?

The poem's ending suggests that it is not a chance journey, after all. "Immortality", the silent, but indispensable companion in the carriage, Death's rival, looms as the intercessor of Life who wins against Death. He

is the only truthful gentleman, the invisible other, whose mighty hand turns the horses' heads towards eternity and brings the soul of the Lady on the route to Immortality.

Emily Dickinson's own "immortality" came much later. The magnitude of her work became clear only after her death, when her sister Lavinia discovered a cherry-wood box containing about eight hundred poems bound together meticulously in individual four or five-sheet groupings known as fascicles. The fascicles, together with her lifelong willingness to withdraw from public life, her widely known attitude to publication expressed in her famous phrase "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her", have provoked much popular interest and literary-critical attention and led to the meticulous and thorough examination of her life and work. Curiously enough, her "anonymous" and humble existence, her life, which, in her words, "has been too simple and stern to embarrass any", came only to increase the tremendous significance of her poetic output.

Her poetry became available to the readers in its full brilliance in 1955, when Thomas H. Johnson brought all the known poems together in three volumes in the scholarly variorum edition of "The Poems of Emily Dickinson." The acclaim the "provincial" poet has won in a little more than a century since her works first introduced her to the world has established her as one of the most widely recognized women poets to write in the English language. In less than a century after Dickinson's death, her "small" life "swelled like Horizon in her vest"; her "plebeian" words spoken from the height of her "imperial" imagination and heart („I bring thee the imperial heart/I had not strength to hold") have come to re-affirm that her presentiment of eternity has come true – that her poetry has won its completeness, its well-deserved and privileged place in the golden pantheon of literary fame and immortality.

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