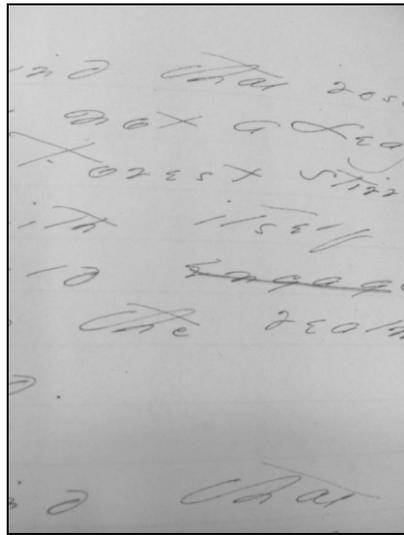


EMILY DICKINSON – *THIS AND MY HEART BESIDE*

It's all I have to bring today –
This, and my heart beside –
This, and my heart, and all the fields –
And all the meadows wide –
Be sure you count – should I forget
Some one the sum could tell –
This, and my heart, and all the Bees
Which in the Clover dwell.¹



Words are gestures that originate in the body's sensate experience of the world. The body speaks. Emily Dickinson's poems speak. They are sounds, sound-shapes, notes, chords, a singing.² They are the life-force of Emily Dickinson, singing, with, it has been said, an 'unorthodoxy of melodic pattern controlled by key words'³. And we can re-breathe the poet's breath-spirit not only in her mainly hymnal or ballad forms, but specifically within the long or short vowels, in the touch of the consonants, in the rhythmic relationship of vowel to consonant:

A something in a summer's Day
As slow her flambeaux burn away
Which solemnizes me.

A something in a summer's noon –
A depth – an Azure – a perfume –
Transcending ecstasy.

And still within a summer's night
A something so transporting bright
I clap my hands to see –

Then veil my too inspecting face
Lest such a subtle – shimmering grace
Flutter too far for me –
[...]⁴

And – ‘No titles or numbers for the poems [...] No titles for the packets she sewed the poems into. No manufactured print. No outside editor. [...] Conventional punctuation was abolished [...] to subtract arbitrary authority. Dashes drew liberty of interruption inside the structure of each poem. Hush of hesitation for breath and breathing’⁵ – the last two in this list being a question of what the poem does (gestures placed in air; syntax an experience) rather than what the poet intended it to do.

I want to imagine spirit *as* breath (*aspiration*), even though the two words cannot easily be used synonymously. I want to say that spirit-or-breath is a directing energy that moves between edges and borders, inner and outer, between the human and non-human worlds. It is apparent in the pattern of a poem’s imagery, its objects intuitively placed to symbolise and hold the – now I want to say *spirit’s* – essence; also apparent in the rhythm and sound and especially in the syntax, which also controls the reader’s breath. During the writing of my poem *Listening to moss* (poem follows article) I was dealing with botanical phenomena, a half-globe of star-green star moss, dense hairs, leaf tips, narrow fronds, powder-spores but it was what those natural objects came to be doing that created the syntax: ease up, reflect, brace, catch, “sly / slowing the air, slow air lip a long leaf” and that syntax to allow something to interrupt the poem from a different realm or sphere of consciousness (“*and I just couldn’t remember humanness [...] as if in death all were air and moss and fresh / floating love and death itself dissolved*”). The placing of these natural objects along the poetic lines had created the necessary space (and structure or channels) to accommodate the flow through, a ribbony floating through. This state of receptiveness in the writing of a poem is the poet’s great desire, and we can see why Emily Dickinson would seek solitude to the point of reclusiveness in order to conjure and maintain this state (“The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea – / Forgets her own locality”⁶) for this is where all is pure and unfettered; airy, timeless; light or dark without warning – it is the source! The place between wake and dream, a weightless place (the hands gather the ribbons, let the ribbons down).

We might see the ‘spiritual’ then as the breath-work of making an empty space a sacred space; for example, in the early Shinto (aspirational) practice of constructing a simple open structure for worship, four pillars, their tops tied with sacred ropes, nothing in the centre but the embrace of emptiness⁷ – designed to encourage a flow between realms, a valve for the interaction between material and ethereal. Emily Dickinson creates such a space both for and in her poems, conducting a spiritual inquiry that might be described, not as ‘seeking’ but as a ‘watchful, listening of the heart’⁸. Over time, this quiet practice strengthens her already highly-tuned religious sensibility (many others have written about Dickinson’s intricate dialogue with Christianity⁹) and enables her to slip as if between worlds (where “the pulse *just lisps*”¹⁰) – between the defined body in present time and that which is timeless, ineffable. Dickinson doesn’t seek to ‘capture’ the imperceptible in or through her writing, but to merge with it: “I breathed enough to take the Trick – / And now, removed from Air – / I simulate the Breath, so well”¹¹ and “What if I say I shall not wait! What if I burst the fleshly Gate”¹²,

My River runs to thee –
Blue Sea! Wilt welcome me?
My River waits reply –
Oh Sea – look graciously –
I’ll fetch thee Brooks
From spotted nooks –
Say – Sea – Take *Me!*¹³

Of course, the desire to slip between worlds can be seen as the desire to alleviate suffering and pain, and many critics have mined Emily Dickinson’s work for loss, grief, more recently mental illness (an alleged ‘bipolar trait’). Regarding loss or absence, Ruefle says, ‘poems and prayers are letters. The origins of poems, prayers and letters all have this in common: urgency. They each originate in the pressing need to make a message directed at something unnear, that the absence of the unnear be made to appear present’¹⁴. This may be true, and Dickinson’s sensitivity is indeed exquisitely acute (and sustained in this degree not only by suffering but by ‘the intensity of her drive to simplicity’¹⁵), though I prefer to consider her interest in eternity, immortality, neither as pathology nor even attempts to cope with the trials of her life, but operating, rather, at two levels that are completely entwined –

one is physical – an experiment with sensation (imagining, experiencing unboundedness) and the other a serious, courageous preparedness to face head on the deepest challenge of humanity – that is, to embrace the idea of one’s meaninglessness, and then to emerge having created meaning from within, in surrender to the grace of what we call God, or the capacity for love –

My Cocoon tightens – Colors tease –
I’m feeling for the Air –
A dim capacity for Wings –
Demeans the Dress I wear –

A power of Butterfly must be –
The Aptitude to fly
Meadows of Majesty implies
And easy Sweeps of Sky –

So I must baffle at the Hint
And cipher at the Sign
And make much blunder, if at last
I take the clue divine –¹⁶

So when Mary Ruefle states that ‘The main theme of the collected poems [...] is the beating of Emily’s loving heart and the torture an immense tenderness is subject to’¹⁷ I agree, but perhaps it can be said too that Dickinson’s curiosity is also intensely for texture, contrast, the physical sensations of language that cause the fleshly-beautiful pumping-beating of her heart: “A word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die”¹⁸; or as Dickinson famously told her literary mentor Higginson when she first met him, ‘If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry.’¹⁹ The Word made Flesh; flesh in the beautiful words.

Kay Syrad

¹ Poem 26, “It’s all I have to bring today”. This and all the poems quoted here are taken from Thomas H. Johnson (ed), *Emily Dickinson: The Complete Poems*, Faber & Faber, 1982.

² See David Abram (following Merleau-Ponty), in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Vintage, 1997:76

³ Johnson, Introduction to *The Complete Poems*, *ibid*:vi

⁴ Poem 122, “A something in a summer’s Day”

⁵ Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, North Atlantic Books, 1985:23

⁶ Poem 284, “The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea”

⁷ Kenya Hara, *White*, Lars Müller, 2017:39

⁸ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973:33

⁹ See for example, Helen Vendler, *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries*, The Belknap Press, 2010

¹⁰ From Poem 236, “If *He* dissolve – then – there is *nothing – more*”

¹¹ Poem 272, “I breathed enough to take the Trick”

¹² Poem 277, “What if I say I shall not wait!”

¹³ Poem 162 “My River runs to thee”

¹⁴ Ruefle, *ibid*:204

¹⁵ Howe, *ibid*:28. See also Merton, *ibid*, 82-7

¹⁶ Poem 1099, “My Cocoon tightens – Colors tease”

¹⁷ Mary Ruefle, in *Madness, Rack and Honey: Collected Lectures*, Wave Books, 2012:176

¹⁸ Poem 1651, “A word made Flesh is seldom”

¹⁹ Taken from Higginson’s letters, quoted in Vendler, *ibid*:508.

Listening to moss

I take a blindfold, lie down and listen
to a half-globe of star-green star moss,
hear dense hairs ease up, and reflecting
leaf tips brace, catch narrow fronds sly
slowing the air, slow air lip a long leaf
*and I just couldn't remember humanness
even though or especially because she died
and I wasn't there, nor she, all so very late*
while the star-green star moss sips dew
in the breath-seed between air and rock
*as if in death all were air and moss and fresh
floating love and death itself dissolved*
until the powder-spores are lifted high,
full-free on breezy swirls and vortices.

Kay Syrad

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