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*Emily Dickinson: A Bee Gatecrashing Eternity*

Viewed from the perspective of literary history, some poets, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edna St. Vincent Millay, suffer belated recognition, whereas others, such as John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Emily Dickinson, exist ahead of their time. The handful of poems Dickinson published under a pseudonym before her death lent no lustrous fame to the author in her lifetime.<sup>1</sup> The hermit poet had no influence in aesthetic circles. Even if she had published all of her prolific work during her lifetime, she might not have made a name for herself; or she might have become infamous like Edgar Allan Poe, who suffered abuse at the hands of his critics.

It was poets like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and John Greenleaf Whittier who were most popular and critically acclaimed in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. In great measure, what the reader of the time truly admired was pseudo-Romantic poetry, poetry whose theme was artless, whose expression was direct, whose rhythm and rhyme were consistent, and whose literary intent brought didacticism and morality to the fore. In contrast, those truly excellent poets, such as Walt Whitman, Poe, and Dickinson, suffered obscurity in their time. It was not until the early years of the twentieth century that Whitman was recognized as a master poet; only then was his influence felt in international poetic circles. By the same token, it was not until his discovery by the French Symbolist, Charles Baudelaire, that Poe was eventually recognized by the Americans as a great poet. Dickinson also gained a reputation posthumously. From 1890 (four years after Dickinson's death) to 1896, Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, then editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, co-edited and published three volumes of *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1890, 1891, 1896). It was not until the publication of *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1924), edited by the

famous poet Conrad Aiken, that this female poet came to arouse general attention amongst the public in British and American poetic circles.

Whitman and Poe needed to make a living by themselves; Poe depended solely on the meagre harvest from his literary labor, ploughing the field of words. Emily Dickinson was far luckier than her male peers. She grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts, USA. Her grandfather was one of the principal founders of Amherst College. Her father was a lawyer and Congressman, and he also assumed the role of an Amherst College trustee for four full decades. Lavinia, Emily's younger sister, also remained unmarried; Austin, her brother, married an ordinary New York girl, which outright violated his father's adamant intention. It was alleged that Dickinson's father was a rather strict and stringent patriarch. The family socialized with luminaries and celebrities in the cultural circles of the time, including Ralph Waldo Emerson.

It was alleged by later scholars of the poet that Emily Dickinson was the apple of the eye of the *beau monde* of Amherst during her girlhood; she was known for being a vivacious, graceful, and sylphlike belle. About her frustration in amorous relationships, critics' speculations in recent decades vary largely from each other. Some said that she might have fallen in love with Ben Newton, an assistant at her father's law firm, who was too poor and died of pneumonia at the age of 23. The next year, she went to Washington to visit her father, who was attending the Congressional sessions; she encountered the Rev. Charles Wadsworth in Philadelphia, whom she fell for immediately. Rumor had it that the already married Wadsworth visited her from time to time after she returned to Amherst. This continued until 1862, when he was summoned by the church to travel westward to carry out his administrative order in California: that is the year that inaugurates Dickinson's commitment to writing poetry. She once uttered the following autobiographical contemplation in one of her poems:

My life closed twice before it's close;  
It yet remains to see  
If Immortality unveil  
A third event to me,  
(Fr1773)

The third event seems to have never occurred, since henceforth she lived in deep seclusion with little contact with the outside world. She seldom left the old mansion known as "the Homestead" of the Dickinsons in Amherst, where she died. Of course, this did not mean that she was a nonchalant and indifferent

spinster lacking social intercourse or association. In fact, she remained in quite close contact with friends in literary circles. For example, the renowned Helen Hunt Jackson, author of the historical novel, *Ramona*, and the aforementioned Mr. Higginson were both literary confidants. Two years prior to her death, Emily Dickinson led a patient's life with declined mental power. She eventually passed away on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1886.

To everyone's amazement, this unmarried woman who knew so little about the world composed poetic lines that abound in the overflow of splendid magnificence as well as intense passion. There is no bizarrerie at all in the poetic creation of Emily Dickinson. A poet's appropriation of lived experience rests most importantly on his/her profound contemplations as well as sensitive sympathies. In the alchemy of poetic art, what is essential lies in the composite function of imagination that is artistically coupled with those contemplations and sympathies, rather than in braving fires and waters in person and undergoing the mills of life's hardships and ordeals. Admittedly, it is true that such poets as Geoffrey Chaucer and François Villon were deeply experienced in worldly affairs; a poetic mind so raw and tender regarding the mundane cares of day-to-day life on earth as that of John Keats may also arrive at the rare realm of a major poet of superb mastery. A poet's life resides mainly in the confines of his/her inner life; in a similar timbre, a poet's maturity resides mainly in the full development of his/her sensibility and intellectuality, as well as in the harmonious convergence and appropriate fusion of the two faculties. Some of the most outstanding female poets in the British and American poetic circles of the nineteenth century are single women. It is perhaps due to the fact that a life of sheer solitude prompts the development of female mental sensitivity and sensibility. Elizabeth Barrett Browning stands as an exception. But for Robert Browning's intrusion into her secluded life, she might have remained unmarried, just like Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, and Emily Dickinson, for she was already forty years old when she eloped with her beloved "Roberto" to settle down in Florence, Italy.

The interior life of Emily Dickinson is exceptionally plentiful. In light of both material surroundings and geography, her world seems to be rather narrow and limited. In stark contrast, in terms of her metaphysical imagination and her observations of and sympathies with countless creatures, her vast Universe, being infinite in itself, knows no bounds. Allen Tate once stated that her sensitivity and intellect are parallel to those of John Donne; like Donne, her mind was able to melt and mix metaphysical and sensorial experiences in one single pot, to form a highly composite experience of her own. The critic also mentions that Dickinson, like

Donne, was able to “perceive abstraction and think sensation,” which bespeaks Donne’s poetic hallmark that Modernist poets of the twentieth century considered worthy of their studious emulation (Tate 622). By the same token, it is on the basis of the Donnean converging metaphysical capability to “perceive abstraction and think sensation” that the Modernist poets claim to refute the poetic school of lyrical Romanticism, a school that tends to be keen on sensitive emotions but negligent of profound thinking. Because Emily Dickinson expresses composite metaphysical experiences of a unique type similar to Donne’s in her peculiar poetic representations, it is little wonder that her poetry was fairly favored by the twentieth century.

I would like to go so far as to point out that as far as natural observation and sympathy are concerned, Emily Dickinson seems to be more subtle, more sensitive, more vivacious, and even more heart-rending than the celebrated Metaphysical poet John Donne. Perhaps, by virtue of her female sex and gender, she is more inclined to showcase her genuine cares and concerns for a variety of fragile, furtive, and timid animals and plants that are physically petite in size. Bees, butterflies, earthworms, crickets, mice, and robins are all cherubic creatures in her idyllic landscape that possess veritable human spirit on the vivid canvas of her poems; plants such as the daisy, mushroom, clover, dandelion, and the like, in a similar vein, all feature the character of animals in the soulful imagination of her poetry. In addition, regardless of whatever life state the poem treats, every being under her hypnotic power tends to be unswervingly tinted with a humor that is both realistic and fantastic and to be abidingly tinged with a sense of peculiar surrealism. Furthermore, inanimate objects, ranging from a tiny patch of color and a stretch of shadow to the sun, the moon, the star, and the cloud, and even to a train car and a whip for the imperceptive ones without any human caliber of intellect, are all metamorphosed into characters of exuberant liveliness, assuming a dramatic mission of an importance either earnest or trifling. In the Dickinsonian universe, “The Dusk drew earlier in - . . . / As Guest, that would be gone - ” (Fr935); “Shadows” know how to “- hold their breath - ” (Fr320); “the news, like Squirrels, ran - ” (Fr204); God sets the stars aflame (Fr1415); the railway train is “prompter than a Star” (Fr383); the rapid eyes of a bird “looked like frightened Beads” (Fr359); “We [the dead] talked between the Rooms - / Until the Moss had reached our lips - ” (Fr448); the train howls like a preaching minister (Fr383); the frost is “a blond Assassin” (Fr1668); and even the far-lying motionless “Horizons” restlessly wish to “step / . . . away” (Fr962).

The typical poems of Emily Dickinson deal with abstract ideas and philosophical notions. Life, death, love, eternity, sorrow, joy, truth, and beauty are all themes that she often treats in her literary creations. Death above all lingers in her mind as a poetic obsession. A good number of her poems explore nothing but the time-lapse process of dying, the audaciously imaginative condition after death, and the prismatic significations of death *per se*. Apropos of human emotions and relationships, what she explores in her poetry resides constantly in extreme pangs and ecstasies, in other words, in the invisible, imperceptible Heaven and Hell. Words such as "agony," "suffering," "pain," "ecstasy," "exultation," and "transport" present themselves in her poems rather frequently. In this regard, she is in fact Romantic in nature and quite in accordance with Shelley and Blake. The difference between them lies in the fact that Shelley's poems lack much of the sense of reality, and that the Blakean poetic cosmos is always haunted by an overriding sense of guilt. Being not dissimilar to a gallery of Romantic poets, Emily Dickinson expresses a fascination for and infatuation with death that has been understood to verge on either morbidity or the pathetic. In effect, what makes Dickinson different from other Romantic poets is that she undertakes further to explore the intellectual aspects of death rather than indulge herself in roaming the abysmal realm of oblivious darkness. If we compare Christina Rossetti's famous poem "When I am dead, my dearest" with Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" (Fr479), we immediately discover that the former is purely Romantic and sheerly lyrical, whereas the latter abounds in metaphysical contemplations and complicated paradoxes. Dickinson's poem is more dramatic inasmuch as it grasps the entire significant process, if not procession, from cradle to grave and beyond. In Dickinson's poems of this kind, she has indeed been able, in Allen Tate's words, to "perceive abstraction and think sensation" (622). So has Emily Dickinson sent her "letter to the World" (Fr519): "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea -" (Fr143); "Much Madness Is divinest Sense - / To a discerning eye" (Fr620); "I can wade Grief - / Whole Pools of it -" (Fr312); "That Hunger - was a way / Of Persons outside Windows - / The Entering - takes away -" (Fr439); "A Death blow is a Life blow to Some / Who till they died, did not alive become -" (Fr966); "Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell" (Fr1773).

The poems of Emily Dickinson are teeming with wisdom without nagging didactic discourses, exuberant in emotions but not indulgent in self-pity, abundant in sensorial experiences that disallow her feelings to go rambling or rampaging. Imagism, an aesthetic movement prevailing in the early years of the twentieth century that promoted bright and brilliant images, carries the poetic torch lit by

Emily Dickinson. The works of those Imagists, however, have more often than not fallen into a dilemma wherein an image is created for the image's sake, making it new to serve as a feast for the sensual sight instead of further appealing to the soulful mind of all humankind. The image of Emily Dickinson, no matter how bold and vivacious in appearance, is brought about to meet the exigency of its poetic motif. Firmly and constantly does it stick to its motif, and it never loosens the controlling rein and harness, nor does it risk making the image overwhelm the poetic subject. It is in this particular dominion of poetry that Emily Dickinson sings the "Bandaged moments" of the "Soul," surpassing the Imagists and surmounting the surrealists (Fr360).

The reason why Emily Dickinson is always so engrossing, enchanting, and thought-provoking hinges largely on the fact that her essential imagination and manner of expression manifest themselves in the form of contrast (irony and/or paradox), that metaphors constantly prevail over similes when she employs figures of speech, and that she adopts a distinctive kind of narration featuring ellipses of non-linear thinking. A major poet is, above all, good at discovering the relativity and inconsistency of life and excels at harmonizing the two forces before she presents and represents them to impress the reader in an exceptionally succinct mode and manner. The ubiquity of this Dickinsonian poetics can be illustrated with such emblematic lines as "Heavenly Hurt" (Fr320), "An imperial affliction" (Fr320), "Grant me, Oh Lord, a sunny mind - / Thy windy will to bear" (Fr123); "Much Madness is divinest Sense - " (Fr620); "Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell" (Fr1773), and the like. To take the last two lines as an example, they reveal that what we know of heaven is nothing but departure, which amounts to sheer ignorance, while what we beg of hell is none other than separation, which results in requesting nothing at all in the long run. On the other hand, what we do know is no more than hell, while what we really beg for is none other than heaven. In other words, what we do know makes us feel pain, and we beg to depart in vain; what we do beg for disappoints us, and we beg to reside to no avail. This sort of self-ridiculing irony could go on endlessly, yet Dickinson knows it well enough to utter but two lines. How free and easy they appear to sound! Yet how profound in sorrow they are in truth!

Regarding the form of Emily Dickinson's poems, except for some three-lined or non-stanzaic works, the rest all belong to the style of nursery rhyme. Usually, such rhyme is composed of four lines in a stanza, whose first and third lines consist of eight syllables with four stresses and whose second and fourth lines consist of six syllables with three stresses, forming a rhyming pattern at the end of the second

and fourth lines. The nursery rhyme requires the rhythm to be lively and sprightly and the syntax to be precise and succinct. It is unable to assume either the stationary stability of iambic pentameter or the gargantuan turning and twisting and massive verbal discharge of blank verse. As a result, the poems of Emily Dickinson bear the hallmark of lucidity and swiftness that advances at a forceful, aggressive pace. They necessitate waging a quick skirmish in the battlefield of words and manifest themselves as a lightning apparition, as if they were an urgent telegraph delivered to you in which every single word counts. Curiously, the disadvantage of a writer looms often right behind his/her advantage. Dickinson compresses plentiful experiences into a poetic form that is tight and terse, resulting in an oeuvre whose density is enhanced and whose pattern appears to lack for either vastness or magnitude. Formal confinement notwithstanding, Emily Dickinson manages to be well-versed in exhausting all sorts of poetic possibilities in her limited and limiting domain of verse. For instance, she tends to employ feminine rhyme in the first and third lines to bring about a better rhyming effect; she makes timely adjustment to the iambic meters when occasion arises; she adopts a characteristic strategy of her own in the use of ellipsis as far as poetic wording is concerned; she flexibly changes the syntactic pause of her lines forward or backward to strike an optimal poetic consummation; she employs periodic clauses between a poetic line and its ensuing line to create an anticipatory feeling of suspense in the reader; in her poetic phrasings, clauses tend to intervene between subject and verb, and the noun and verb are oftentimes split by a line break, etc. However, such a nursery rhyme in the final analysis gives rise to a sense of confinement. In stark contrast, Whitman's poems may go rambling and rampant in structural construction conceived by formal liberty, whereas Poe's poems tend to be strait-laced in their formal presentation and obsessed with a Hellenistic longing. In comparison with their contemporary, Emily Dickinson, both Whitman and Poe far surpass their female peer in terms of formal scale as well as structural magnitude. Richard Blackmur once said that Dickinson is "neither a professional poet nor an amateur," which points out the fact that she does possess the talent of a major poet, but she still wants for a complete, comprehensive forging of poetics (195).

Of the three major American poets of the nineteenth century, Edgar Allan Poe belongs to the hell down below, Walt Whitman to the mundane world on earth, and Emily Dickinson to the paradise high above. In the perspective of chronology, Poe attaches himself to the bygone times of ancient charms, Whitman partakes in the far reach of the future, but Dickinson goes a-roving hither and yonder, outside and beyond the spheres of time, zigzagging across the threshold of endless



eternity. In light of temperament, Poe teems with the character of true nobility, Whitman belongs to the common people that populated his country, and Dickinson partakes of the secluded solitary world of either the monastery or the priesthood. Somehow, all this is closely related to the geographical societies in which the three poets were respectively situated, for Poe was born in the South, Whitman in New York, and Dickinson in New England. Born into a Puritan society where theocratic authorities reigned and moral imperatives ruled, Emily Dickinson, as a daughter of her time, was constantly pressed by both thearchy in heaven and patriarchy in the family, so much so that a subtle rebellious consciousness cannot help but stem from the habitually disciplined veneration that she learned to practice. A poet, in fact anyone of a sensitive mind, once situated at the contingent juncture of chaos between a soon dying past and a new order yet to be born, has to re-apprehend the relation between him/herself and the exterior world, so as to tease out a whole new set of values that are pursuable for a given human subject. This is the process by which Emily Dickinson succeeds in creating a universe of her own in the cosmos of *belles lettres*; it is the process along which all great writers conjure up the eventual and eventful naissance of their *chefs-d'oeuvre*. As a result, like a bee gatecrashing *la fête mobile d'éternité poétique*, Emily Dickinson keeps humming blameless songs of her peculiar "Syllables of Velvet - " (Fr380) which "bear the Human Soul - " (Fr1286) and, as such, the affrighting world cannot "shut . . . [her] up in Prose - " (Fr445).

### Notes

This essay was originally written in Chinese ("狄瑾蓀 (1830-1886) ——闖進永恆的一隻蜜蜂") by Mr. Yu Kwang-chung (1928-2017) as an introduction to his Chinese translation of thirteen well-chosen poems by Emily Dickinson published in *Anthology of American Poetry* in 1961. The Anthology was edited by Stephen Soong (1919-1996) and published by World Today Press, Hong Kong. The article was later included in Yu's *Anthology of Modern English and American Poetry* in 1968, which continues to be revised and was last published in 2017. As a rising star in the circles of Modern Chinese poetry across the Taiwan Strait, Yu was the first poet-translator whose rendition of Dickinson's poems boasts not only great success but also a solid comparative poetics of his own. Today, a good number of established scholars and poets in Chinese literature have gratefully acknowledged their debts to Yu's faithful translation and profound introduction, which first brought them to Emily Dickinson's brave new Universe of Imagination in the innocent good old days before they made their poetic debuts.

1. In fact, Emily Dickinson did not publish "under a pseudonym" in her lifetime. Franklin states in the introduction to his reader's edition that "at least ten of [her poems] . . . appeared in her lifetime, anonymously, mostly in newspapers, having been supplied by admiring friends and never seen through the press by the poet" (4). An alternative English translation to "published under a pseudonym" (隱名發表 in Yu's original Chinese wording) may be "published anonymously," which better attenuates Emily Dickinson's authorial agency in the actual publishing process of her poems.

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