

“Deconstructing The Spatiality of Captive Consciousness in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry”

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Abstract:

Emily Dickinson lived most of her life in her father’s Homestead– a red-brick mansion on Main Street that was built in 1813 by her paternal grandfather in Amherst, Massachusetts. It is a quiet college town in Hampshire County, the Connecticut River flows in blue veins through the County and encounters valleys and hills thickly populated with maples that turn brilliant red in autumn.

Emily Dickinson captures Amherst in anatomical metaphors and paints the season on a stormy day that haemorrhages in hues of red – blood, scarlet and vermilion throughout her poetry. Emily herself 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. This paper aims at deconstructing the Spatiality in her poems and in her sensibilities that encounter the great moral universals: love, loss, doubt, death, life, pleasure, and pain elevating them to a space which is beyond Amherst despite the fact that she rarely travelled out.

Dickinson’s imagination has a different object. She is not one of the great celebrants of life, the proof being how little of life, she chose to live. It is the peculiar nature of her sensibility that it deals with experience by exacerbating it, as if prompted by a conscious for which nothing less would do. She restricted the amount of life she was prepared to live, since the living had to be so intense so relentlessly acute that “The Consciousness” was held “Captive”.

Not only her homestead but the Bible too permeated her consciousness and space, making her captive to the form rhythm and meter of it, which became a basis from which she expressed her deepest longings and her loftiest aspirations. Dickinson’s poems expose the complexity of our spatial experience, relying on a hermeneutical dialectic that springs from

our preunderstandings.

Key Words

Spatiality, Captive Consciousness, existentialism, Calvinism, transcendentalism

“Mysteries that cling to spaces making them places worthy of reverence or awe.”

The poet Emily Dickinson lived all her life (1830 – 1886) in Amherst, Massachusetts. Yet from the large windows of her bedroom in the family Homestead, she observed a world as vast as her imagination. “I see New Englandly,” she wrote, alert to the drama of the weather, the lives and deaths of the people around her, and the events far beyond the horizon of her native town.

Emily Dickinson’s poetry, in particular, “makes” the worlds it describes. Not by creating alternative worlds, but by reshaping the ways we can see this world. She writes,

There is no Frigate like a Book

To take us Lands away

Nor any Coursers like a Page

Of prancing Poetry –

Rather than routinizing the world around her, Dickinson’s metaphors re-“make” her surroundings in ways that that are meaningful, and even magnificent. Her worlds are places where “forests galloped till they fell”, where the “elements” are interchangeable and reversible, where “ships of purple gently toss/On seas of daffodils”. Limits become prefaces, as questions like “Can I expound the skies?” in one poem are answered in others; “The brain is wider than the sky/For, put them side by side,/The one the other will include/ With ease, and you beside”.

Yet it is possible to suggest that alternative worlds are interwoven into Dickinson’s poetry in much the same imaginative way that Time, Nature and other concepts and themes are personified and familiarized.

Much of the special character of American life and American Civilization, at least until the Centennial of 1876, came from the continuing encounter of post Renaissance Europeans with

pre-iron Age America. Here was the first surprising promise of the New World, a promise that would be fulfilled in many ways: Americans would find new ways to work the land. They would build new kinds of cities- Cities in wilderness- and new kinds of schools and colleges, a new democratic world of learning. .

The Later Nineteenth century and the Twentieth century, between the Civil war and the First World War, were marked by remarkable changes in America, rapid industrialization, wide spread scientific development, increase in educational standards, human awareness of this predicament in relation to the universe wrought a sea-change in the way of life. As Jay Martin remarks, "Institution, systems of belief, ideological and social assumptions, ways of feeling at home in the world ... Since the Middle Ages, now passed away during this period, Confusion resulting from feeling of personal alienation amid the loss of social stability became more and more apparent"¹

America, now directed its course towards a more opulent and materialistic future. The rise of wealth as a result of intensive business activity opened up new vistas of education, literature, science, invention, the fine arts, social reforms and the uses of leisure. The promise that civilization could transform the raw land would explain why so many Americans were on the move, why they were so energetic at building canals, so precocious at laying railroads and at making their own kind of steamboats and locomotives. It explained the special opportunities for Americans to better their lot and rise in the world.

The period thus, takes on markedly variegated quality, in which men of letter variously mingling with their contemporaries, sensitively balanced and assessed the thoughts of their age. These thoughts or themes, were in fact, the changes that were amassing in the culture itself.

Besides the massive increase in wealth, the most important factor was the mental awakening which profoundly influenced the American mind. As J. Martin remarks. "Education opened up new ranges of experience where orating for knowledge seemed hardly satiable. For the first time, a large part of the mass of people was entering however tentatively, upon the life of mind"³.

SCIENCE VERSES RELIGION:-

The growth of science naturally emphasized on everything to be examined, tested and proved. As a result of this, everything could not be taken for granted. So far religion had been

the main head. Its voice commanded acceptance and belief. But the advent of science and "a Naturalistic Test of Truth" ⁴ produced doubt and fear. The clergyman, who for centuries together, had enjoyed authority and respect, had to make way for this 'Naturalistic Test of Truth'.

Darwinism had shaken the whole of Europe, and this continent across the Atlantic could not remain immune from it. Calvinism, till then had been the unquestioned belief, but the theory of evolution caused the entire structure to crumble down, the acceptance of Darwinism resulted in the revolt against Calvinism. According to J. Martin "Americans demanded a philosopher of the superman and rejected the philosopher of tragedy".

Certainly the old order of American culture was dissolving. The Civil War thus became "a symbol of the division between the New and the Old"⁶.

With the shattering down of the old beliefs and values, the need for a secular devotion was felt. New England was the focal point of spiritual and social thought. It consisted of groups of writers who gave shape to this situation in which they lived by transforming the crude realities into beautiful aesthetic quests. As J. Martin remarks: "Emily Dickinson, Howells, James, Twain, Dreiser, all were deeply experimental writers endeavoring to give shape to their chaotic new America"⁷.

THE GROWTH OF NEW ENGLAND MYTH:-

These New England writers and the famous New England Sages- Emerson, Longfellow, Holmes, Whittier, Lowell, and Charles Eliot, Norton, sought to provide to a healthy and beneficent tradition.

The Myth of the New England has its roots in the ideologies and Utopias of Europe and England. Elaborating upon the Elizabethan empire-builders notion that England had a holy and national destiny to fulfill in colonizing and exploiting the New World, the Pilgrims and Puritans saw America as a land blessedly set aside for them. "There God manifested His intention to people an uncorrupted wilderness with his holy elect"⁸.

The 'uncorrupted wilderness' has a special significance for it underlines the Puritan behavior itself. Purely religious they followed the strict Calvinistic code of the election of those, whom God chose exclusively for the spiritual atonement and a permanent place in

heaven, This was openly refuted by Jonathan Edwards, who believed that since God is all – pervading and benign, he could not extend spiritual atonement only to the elected few. And thus Unitarianism came into existence. This particular creed emphasized on the innate goodness of man. Ralph Wald Emerson and a group of other New England writers, inculcated the cult of Transcendentalism which profoundly influenced the American mind.

SEARCH FOR A MORAL ANCHORAGE AMIDST SHIFTING VALUES:-

Despite such a rush of moral enthusiasm which swept New England after the Civil War, it was curiously short-lived. To some, it afforded dignity, but the more sensitive ones succumbed and became introspective. As J Martin puts it: "While the ancestors of Emerson rose to noble heights of 'Self Reliant' individualism other were lost in the shadows of tragic solitude"⁹.

Elizabeth Stoddard's 'the Morgeson', whose nun-like heroine Veronica is almost a replica of Emily Dickinson, hinted at the result of a Puritanism that had ceased to ennoble and was beginning to degrade.

The philosophy of self-denial, self-abnegation and self-deprivation lost its value because the opportunity to exercise them were almost rare. The material progress overshadowed the Puritanical Character of New England. As R.P. Tristram Coffin remarks: "the New England philosophy of the Superior and Improving Man is a philosophy founded on prosperity"¹⁰.

It is in the above light that the situation has to be examine. The past was repeatedly questioned and the present was asserted with a full-blooded enthusiasm. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry Cooke and Mary Welkins were some of the enthusiastic writers who continually sought to deflate the New England Myth.

EMERSON'S INFLUENCE:-

C.H. Foster speaks of the "New England doubleness"¹¹. This is the balancing of deep introspection and humour. The serious and the mirthful in Emerson, Thoreau and Stowe Strived to balance it.

"Mirth is the Mail of Anguish",

Writes Emily Dickinson and it clearly indicates the struggle that went on imperceptibly

in the minds of everyone. Such "doubleness" is the stylistic vehicle of the New England writers in their ambivalent balancing of past and present.

Over and over again, the rational attack on Calvinism served only release energies which sought for new forms of expression in directions entirely opposite to rationalism. Some like Sylvester Judd, revolted against Calvinism, went into Unitarianism and then came under the spell of Emerson's Transcendentalist tuition.

With the publication of 'Nature and the supernatural Together Constituting one System of God' was preached a new the immanence of God in nature. "God is the spiritual reality of which nature is the manifestation and Calvinism itself was transcendent-alized"¹². At Amherst, Emily Dickinson's, mental climate in the 'Gilded Age' was still Emerson's. The break-up of Calvinism came I later in Amherst than in Boston but it had come and the poems of Emily Dickinson were filled with 'Emersonian echoes'. But Prof. Whicher refuses to acknowledge these resemblances as borrowings. He attributes them to the response to the spirit of the time.

Prof. Whicher says: "Their work was in various ways a fulfillment of the finer energies of Puritanism that was discarding the husks of dogms"¹³.

Thus, it is against the New England landscape that Emily Dickinson stands in bold relief. Born in Amherst, in 1830, on December 10, she came of a strictly Calvinistic stocks. Her father Edward Dickinson, we are told, was 'Authority personified'. Righteous and rigid, he never allowed his emotions to interfere with his role as a responsible leader of the town. He ruled his house like an absolute monarch, rearing his children with full assurance that they would become Christian citizens. Although over awed by his domineering attitude, she reserved for him affection unbounded. Of her mother she remarked, "I never had a mother, I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled"¹⁴. Here was a child-hood fraught with fear, doubts and curiosities which she could confide to no one, Parents were indifferent, and friends a bit too conventional to feel the deep-seated pain.

"Childhoods, citadel"¹⁵ was as somber place, the three children, Austin, Emily and Lavinia were devoted to one another, but their home did not provide gaiety. Gifted with an acute sensibility, she could not accept faith blindly. At school – at Amherst academy, she studies Latin, French, history, rhetoric, botany, geology, and mental philosophy. Knowledge widened her mental horizons and at school she was faced with religious dilemma. She tested everything, whether it was given by experience, or by imagination. Many of her poems apply

to the great religious doctrines great interrogative pressure. Of her own religious faith, virtually anything may be said, with some show of evidence, "She may be represented as an agnostic, a heretic, a skeptic, a Christains"¹⁶. She did not possess a talent for conviction. Emily Dickinson seems to have thought of religious faith as an enforced choice: "one must choose between God and man, between eternity and time. The question of faith was the question of affection and in the Calvinistic idiom one affection cancelled another"¹⁷

SHADES OF THE PRINCE OF DENMARK:-

Her Calvinist back ground revolted every now and then, and she often hovered between belief and disbelief. She was born, as one might say of Hamlet, in a time 'out of joint', but it was not in her power to set everything rights and thus she 'turned inward'¹⁸. She being, of somewhat a stubborn temperament, refused to bow down to any doctrine which demanded strict adherence. "What she wanted, was an orphic religion, in which dogmas and doctrines would penetrate her sensibility like music"¹⁹. Christianity offered itself as truth, embodied with whatever degree of divergence in doctrine, but it had to reckon with Emily Dickinson's sensibility. It was the mark of that sensibility either to discard what was offered or to translate it, imperiously, into her own terms. "So she took Christianity not as she found it, but as she altered it"²⁰. She read her Bible as a rhetorical manual. Her poems and letters are full of references to Genesis, Revelation, the Psalms and the Gospels but the reference are invariably rhetorical. "For Emily Dickinson, the estate of hymn is ablative rhythms and phrases are retained, but not their endorsing faith"²¹.

A POCKET COSMOS :-

The province of New England served as her cosmos. She saw the Universe in a buttercup 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 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 tenderly her"¹³

Her basic theme appropriately is the alienating dissolution of the social community. "I see – New England," she wrote. Her disintegrating New England could not provide the relevant community which might have kept her response public. The dissolution of her social community brought with it frustration and isolation but it also made possible her compensatory release into this community of the imagination.

ARTIST IN ISOLATION:-

The second factor, which makes her exclusive and singular and which was to some extent, a source of her tragic poetry- was the rejection of public recognition. Ruth Miller in her enlightening essay "The Poetry of Emily Dickinson – Through the Mist of Tears" – traces the cause of her Samuel Bowles, the editor of the 'Springfield Republican', hoping that he would publish them. But her efforts received a polite dismissal, indifference and bewildered tolerance. The final blow was his trenchant attack on some "women poets" who could not see objects through a mist of tears, and derided the "literature of misery"²²; although he offered to brighten up their countenance but it would not be by "exposing it to the gaze of a worthless world." She writhed under such a shame of rejection and called it her Calvary. She brought the literary side of her case to a new literary arbiter, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Between April 15 and June 7, 1862. Bowles' opinion of her poetry was confirmed by Higginson. Together they drove her into that total retreat, "that haven for her bruised soul, a place that admitted only God, furnished with a writing table, not an altar, pens, pencil or paper, not incense or candles"²³.

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!

Emily writes about her work as the letters she presents to the world. But the world never wrote back to her because they never realized how much talent she encompassed during the time that she was alive. She seemed to be able to predict that someday people will be reading her poems and learning about her world views. She wished to pass on the messages and lessons that nature had taught her. She saw the world as a place she wanted to shield herself against and so she never left her house and always kept in isolation to where she never stepped foot past her house. At the same time, she still wanted the world to see her work as something that is influential.

The two major efforts to achieve status in her life time as a professional poet, to achieve the success that publication would signify came to nothing in 1862. The ultimate fruition was that great opportunity of lyrics, those attempts to forget, those recollection of misery that plunged her to such depths of despair. She might have professed a 'frog-like' aversion to publicity and labelled 'Publication the auction of mind' –yet she was a human being: with all her keen perception, desire and intellectual make-up, - the desire for public recognition was there. This she tried to fulfil by mailing her poems to friends and relatives.

Publication – is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man –
Poverty – be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly – but We – would rather
From Our Garret go
White – unto the White Creator –
Than invest – Our Snow –

Thought belong to Him who gave it –

Then – to Him Who bear
 It's Corporeal illustration – sell
 The Royal Air –

In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
 Of the Heavenly Grace –
 But reduce no Human Spirit
 To Disgrace of Price –

ABSENCE OF LOVE :-

The third factor which has been discussed threadbare by biographers and critics is her unrequited love. That, Emily Dickinson never married and remained a maid all her life – may be because she chose to live so – yet, considering human psychology, it would be only fair to make allowance for this particular fact. She had met, mingled with them, had her heart – breaks – but they failed to break through her reserve. Her keen sensibility to observe life and its involvements only helped her complete seclusion. She preferred the role of a detached observer – viewing, life, death and nature from the window of her lonely garret. That she desired companionship, is unquestionable – but it was not to be so in physical confrontation. Her long chain of friends, preceptors, masters, philosophers and guides had to be contacted through letters and poems. Rev. C. Wadsworth, Samuel Bowles, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, knew her, only through her letters ; and when they did meet here, they were too astounded by her eccentricity and whimsicality to react normally. Her most impassioned relationship was with Judge Otis Lord with whom she was in Love and contemplated marriage. But destiny had decided otherwise. Moreover, marriage would have resulted in self complacency : the pain which is a prelude to any kind of poetic composition would have been absent. For, poetry is the final outcome of cumulative pain. It is the essence of pain. And in order to recollect it she needed solitude and seclusion. According to C. Griffith, "The truth is that Emily Dickinson was a tragic poet, endowed with tragic insight and a great tragic sensibility."²⁴ Her finest poems have to do with a man's lot in a world that is tragically 'other' than himself ; developing this theme, they anticipate the tragic sense of life as it had been formulated for our time by Unamuno and the existentialists. It was in the sense with which existentialism now defines these terms, an outlook suffused with dread and terror. It was uniquely responsive to the brutalities which life imposes on the individual, and acutely aware of the nothingness with which individual existence appears to be surrounded. Referring to it C. Griffith observes : "Born in some fashion or other, of personal frustration, the outlook passed the supreme test which art demands of suffering. It transcended the personal to become concerned with suffering

and frustration as universal themes."²⁵

Allen Tate in his most revealing essay on 'Emily Dickinson', traces this tragic mode of the poet to the Puritan theocracy which permeated the whole society. "It gave an heroic proportion and a tragic mode to the individual",²⁶ says Allen Tate. It dramatized the human soul.

The central intention here is to claim Miss Dickinson for the tragic tradition to which she properly belongs. And to inculcate this tragic mode, seclusion was necessary, Her creativity could only flow out into a thousandfolds in the wilderness of her being.

The main points to be considered are the causes of seclusion or retreat into her nun-like cell ; the result of which is the beautiful flowering of her poetic genius – and the themes which are marked by an underlying current of tragedy.

In her wit, her paradoxical technique, her dashes and slashes and her 'pregnant' syntax – are revealed the sensibilities which were fraught with fear, sorrow, doubt and loneliness – and death.

A DATE WITH ETERNITY :-

The eternal questions plagued her – the universe was transient, fleeting, hurtling towards an unknown destination. Eternity, Immortality, Death and human life – were riddles which she sought to solve but failed.

Her overt circumstances reveal only her personality, but that which reveals her more, is her poetry. It is with this, that we are mainly concerned. She spent her life solving universal riddles and left her poetic riddles to be solved by the posterity. That her poetry is difficult, goes without saying. It resembles Donne's and Browning's in obscurity. Elliptical and burdened with different shades of meanings, her poetry becomes extremely difficult to interpret.

'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 tis kind and gives us some insight into the methods, techniques and thought processes of the poet :

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