

Theosophical poetry of Emily Dickinson

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Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is a famous poet who was born and raised in Massachusetts (USA). In her copious literary work it is possible to find tracks of that Perennial Wisdom that humankind has attempted to investigate and approach since the ages of Myth. When a small volume of her poems arrived on the American scene in 1890, shock waves were generated and it seems that they have not yet subsided.

Against a background of a Christian religiosity conducted with sincerity, Dickinson had a strong will to investigate the mysteries of the imperishable, to converse with God and Nature, and to observe carefully the essence concealed in the occurrence of every fact – a unique voice in the philosophical debate of her time.

Constantly keeping herself in seclusion, Dickinson had as her main locus of investigation the inner world, plumbed with deep restlessness, showing a poetic mastery of language dragged and bent to express matters out of the ordinary.

Her self-imposed isolation and her focus on the inner-self enable her to explore the limits of the mind and imagination in an original way. Her purpose was not simply composing philosophical or religious verse, or gentle lyrics about nature, but to approach

the Self, deconstructing life, death, pleasure and pain. Conversations with consciousness, the recounting of an event, the observation of nature with almost Goethian devotion, become micro-cosmic models for representing universal human questions.

We have selected a few lines from the thousands left by our author, to embark on a journey through her fascinating work (the poems are followed by the number of the Johnson edition – 1955).

Our journey begins with a composition that shows the ordinary condition of man, scattered among the thousand rivulets of routine:

From Blank to Blank –
 A Threadless Way
 I pushed Mechanic feet –
 To stop – or perish – or advance –
 Alike indifferent –
 If end I gained
 It ends beyond
 Indefinite disclosed –
 I shut my eyes – and groped as well
 'Twas lighter – to be Blind –
 (761)

The author senses the meaninglessness of the habitual existence into which one is thrown coming into the world. Such an



abjectness, for most of humanity, remains so – the mechanical, gross (and therefore contrary to Spirit) character of daily life not being perceived at all (or being removed).

How noteless Men, and Pleiads, stand,
Until a sudden sky
Reveals the fact that One is rapt
Forever from the Eye –
Members of the Invisible,
Existing, while we stare,
In Leagueless Opportunity,
O'ertakenless, as the Air –

Why didn't we detain Them?
The Heavens with a smile,
Sweep by our disappointed Heads
Without a syllable –
(282)

Human beings, like the stars, and by extension every entity that appears to our gaze, are usually ignored in their reality and truth: we see them, talk to them, attend to them, but our actions are devoid of light – too busy and fleeting, caught up in “using” and reducing everything to our thirst for profit. Only when fate suddenly deprives us of a loved one or an object of habitual use, do we then become aware of their importance – as if death or absence highlights their contours: however, life and death are destined to remain a mystery to us: “The Heavens with a smile, / Sweep by our disappointed Heads / Without a syllable”.

I know that He exists.
Somewhere – in silence –
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes.
'Tis an instant's play –
'Tis a fond Ambush –

Just to make Bliss
Earn her own surprise!

But – should the play
Prove piercing earnest –
Should the glee – glaze –
In Death's – stiff – stare –
Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest –
Have crawled too far!
(338)

Dickinson foreshadows the possibility of another life and a new beginning, writing: “I know that He exists”: the divine plane is identified with a single deity, who remains secluded from the miserable lives of men. However, in the game of an instant and with an affectionate ambush, through an ecstasy that takes one almost by surprise, Being can reveal Himself in all His power. But the game is far from safe:

Touch lightly Nature's sweet Guitar
Unless thou know'st the Tune
Or every Bird will point at thee
Because a Bard too soon –
(1389)

When Truth presents itself it is dazzling, and in such light it is always better to use a turn of phrase, a metaphor, because seeing things in their precise contours would sometimes be too much of an experience for our souls. It is like having to explain lightning to a child, which is so frightening to him. We must therefore use measured steps in approaching the mysteries, because too violent and sudden light would make men blind:



Tell all the truth but tell it slant –
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind –
 (1129)

To open oneself to Being is to die to that version of oneself that rigidly chained our Spirit, but the risk is that one cannot handle the greatness of the vision. And in the following stanzas Dickinson reiterates the danger of playing with the Eternal:

Just lost, when I was saved!
 Just felt the world go by!
 Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,
 When breath blew back,
 And on the other side
 I heard recede the disappointed tide!
 Therefore, as One returned, I feel,
 Odd secrets of the line to tell!
 Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores -
 Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
 Before the Seal!

Next time, to stay!
 Next time, the things to see
 By ear unheard,
 Unscrutinized by eye –
 Next time, to tarry,
 While the Ages steal –
 Slow tramp the Centuries,
 And the Cycles wheel!
 (160)

The assault of the Eternal occurs when – suddenly – everything is revealed, appears naked, shows the outline, which is habitually concealed from our distracted gaze. The

manifestation of the Eternal, by and through forms, lifts the veil of the constructs that have always (and mostly) concealed the truth of all things.

The author feels like a sailor who has sailed the oceans, and she tells of her own voyages and the wonders she has observed. She is like a messenger out of “awful doors” which are now sealed. And when the tide subsides, the Eternal – which is not “form” – hides again among the usual forms. But there remains the desire to “stay” - to see once more things by ear unheard, unscrutinized by eye. So the character of truth or appearance lies not in things, but in how we open the channels of our perception:

To hear an Oriole sing
 May be a common thing –
 Or only a divine.

It is not of the Bird
 Who sings the same, unheard,
 As unto Crowd –
 The Fashion of the Ear
 Attireth that it hear
 In Dun, or fair –

So whether it be Rune,
 Or whether it be din –
 Is of within.

The “Tune is in the Tree” –
 The Skeptic – showeth me –
 “No Sir! In Thee!”
 (526)

And here the nature of the Eternal, existing among Forms but not itself so being, is made clear:



By homely gifts and hindered words
 The human heart is told
 Of nothing –
 “Nothing” is the force
 That renovates the World –
 (1563)

There is a shy hunch that Heaven is not
 a separate place from the one we usually
 inhabit. The spectacles that nature offers
 may be a foretaste of it. But what if heaven
 consists precisely in a renewed look at reality?
 And what will we be like when Grace gives
 us the gift of experiencing it?

“Heaven” has different Signs – to me –
 Sometimes, I think that Noon
 Is but a symbol of the Place –
 And when again, at Dawn,

A mighty look runs round the World
 And settles in the Hills –
 An Awe if it should be like that
 Upon the Ignorance steals –

The Orchard, when the Sun is on –
 The Triumph of the Birds
 When they together Victory make –
 Some Carnivals of Clouds –

The Rapture of a finished Day
 Returning to the West –
 All these – remind us of the place
 That Men call “Paradise” –

Itself be fairer – we suppose –
 But how Ourselves, shall be
 Adorned, for a Superior Grace –
 Not yet, our eyes can see –
 (575)

What if it is our ordinary “knowledge,”
 so sophisticated, that prevents us from
 grasping this secret?

“Nature” is what We see –
 The Hill – the Afternoon –
 Squirrel – Eclipse – the Bumble bee –
 Nay – Nature is Heaven –

“Nature” is what We hear –
 The Bobolink – the Sea –
 Thunder – the Cricket –
 Nay – Nature is Harmony –

“Nature” is what We know –
 But have no Art to say –
 So impotent our Wisdom is
 To Her Sincerity –
 (668)

Annie Besant, in a key passage in “Ancient Wisdom”, clarified that the mental body is a kind of involuntary reaction that generally opposes its every new beginning. In fact, it happens that this mental body, accustomed to vibrating in a certain way, does not easily adapt to new impulses. In this sense, the first stage of the path is an effort that will fail the purpose, but will arouse new preliminary vibrations, necessary to awaken a refractory body, which with time and patience will be overcome. Man will not be aware, at first, of the progress achieved; he will see numerous failures and it will seem to him that he remains at the starting point, given the stubborn resistance he encounters. But by persisting, the attempts will have a better outcome, and in the end, he will have achieved his goal. His bodies will take on that radiant form of the spiritually developed man.



The Blunder is in estimate
 Eternity is there
 We say as of a Station
 Meanwhile he is so near
 He joins me in my Ramble
 Divides abode with me
 No Friend have I that so persists
 As this Eternity
 (1684)

After all, it is up to us to choose:

Paradise is of the Option –
 Whosoever will
 Own in Eden notwithstanding
 Adam, and Repeal –
 (1069)

Once we discover that it is Nature that is
 the main source to draw from for contact
 with the Eternal – Nature that is perpetually
 renewing, even while returning to “ancient”
 forms – a challenge begins:

I cannot meet the Spring – unmoved –
 I feel the old desire –
 A Hurry with a lingering, mixed,
 A Warrant to be fair –

A Competition in my sense
 With something, hid in Her –
 And as she vanishes, Remorse
 I saw no more of Her –
 (1051)

The liberation from the “illusions” of the
 ordinary life is not achieved by the simple
 fact of having loosed the chains. It is not only
 the “absence of constraints”. But it starts –
 in a process that never ends – when the gaze
 is constantly fixed on the contours of things,

which stand as they are. Freedom consists
 only in addressing things oriented this way,
 which constitutes their Truth (in the Greek
 sense of *Alètheia*). However, this change of
 direction carries with it the risk of a relapse.
 In the myth of the cave, Plato doesn't stop at
 the description of the highest degree of
 wisdom achieved upon exiting the cave. On
 the contrary, he tells of a descent into the
 cave of those who have been freed, towards
 those who are still chained to appearances.
 But those who have been freed no longer
 know how to orient themselves in the cave
 and they run the risk of succumbing to the
 overwhelming power of the “truth” there
 determined. That is the pretense of common
 reality, as though it would count as though
 it were the only reality (it is the struggle
 between the would-be liberators and the
 prisoners, who oppose each other with every
 release). What is unveiled must be snatched
 from an obscurity, it must, in a certain sense,
 be kidnapped from it. For this reason, the
 word used by the Greeks to indicate what
 the Romans would call *Veritas*, is *A-lètheia*:
 the initial alpha indicates that the truth is
 wrested from a tenacious obfuscation, which
 can mean a sort of custody or conservation,
 but also concealment, cover, simulation –
 presentation in the form of appearance.

Had I not seen the Sun
 I could have borne the shade
 But Light a newer Wilderness
 My Wilderness has made –
 (1233)

And it's important to remain open in the
 waiting:



Not knowing when the Dawn will come,
I open every Door,
Or has it Feathers, like a Bird,
Or Billows, like a Shore –
(1619)

If we stop at apparent phenomena, without leaving a glimmer of Mystery, the Truth will remain hidden; we will mistake for His voice what is only an echo. Walking blind through the ways of the earth, we remember – often unconsciously – that we once could see: and sometimes, the more vivid the memory, the more we want to remove it for fear of falling short of such a vision.

Conscious am I in my Chamber –
Of a shapeless friend –
He doth not attest by Posture –
Nor Confirm – by Word –
Neither Place – need I present Him –
Fitter Courtesy
Hospitable intuition
Of His Company –

Presence – is His furthest license –
Neither He to Me
Nor Myself to Him – by Accent –
Forfeit Probity –
Weariness of Him, were quainter
Than Monotony
Knew a Particle – of Space's
Vast Society –

Neither if He visit Other –
Do He dwell – or Nay – know I –
But Instinct esteem Him
Immortality –
(679)

There is no man who has completely forgotten what Truth is. However instead of favoring the memory, penetrating the essence

of things – he tries to forget and to transfer the value of that reality into the here and now – the things in front of his nose. He senses the presence of that deeper reality, but cannot reach it without an effort of the Spirit.

Have you got a Brook in your little heart,
Where bashful flowers blow,
And blushing birds go down to drink,
And shadows tremble so –

And nobody knows, so still it flows,
That any brook is there,
And yet your little draught of life
Is daily drunken there –

Why – look out for the little brook in March,
When the rivers overflow,
And the snows come hurrying from the fills,
And the bridges often go –

And later, in August it may be –
When the meadows parching lie,
Beware, lest this little brook of life,
Some burning noon go dry!
(136)

Plant life regenerates through its apparent disappearance: it is an example and a hope. The same thing can happen for men. Regeneration is obtained through “magical gestures”, through the Great Goddess, thanks to the presence of the woman, through the power of Eros and with the collaboration of the entire Cosmos (rain, heat, etc.). We will say more: all this is possible only insofar as it is a repetition of the primordial gesture, obtained both by means of a holy union, and with the regeneration of Time, and through ritualisations of the primordial chaos. Nothing is achieved without effort, new life



can only be earned by “working”, that is, by acting in accordance with sacred norms: by repeating archetypal gestures. From the outset, man’s experiences in agricultural civilization were oriented towards the example of farming. Proceeding in a certain way, acting according to certain “natural” models, man can hope for regeneration. The ritual is indispensable; the ancient mysteries could not have organized themselves as primitive religions if they had not had a long prehistoric period of agricultural mysticism behind them, that is to say: if the spectacle of the periodic regeneration of plant life in nature had not revealed the solidarity between man and the seed – the hope of a regeneration obtained “after death” and “through death”:

Nature – the Gentlest Mother is,
 Impatient of no Child –
 The feeblest – or the waywardest –
 Her Admonition mild –

In Forest – and the Hill –
 By Traveller – be heard –
 Restraining Rampant Squirrel –
 Or too impetuous Bird –

How fair Her Conversation –
 A Summer Afternoon –
 Her Household – Her Assembly –
 And when the Sun go down –
 Her Voice among the Aisles
 Incite the timid prayer
 Of the minutest Cricket –
 The most unworthy Flower –

When all the Children sleep –
 She turns as long away
 As will suffice to light Her lamps –
 Then bending from the Sky –
 With infinite Affection –
 And infiniter Care –
 Her Golden finger on Her lip –
 Wills Silence – Everywhere –
 (790)
