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THE OBSCURITY OF EMILY DICKINSON, AN EXAMINATION OF “TELL ALL THE TRUTH”

Summary. The author invites the readers into the world of Emily Dickinson, an American female poet of the 19th century, through a detailed stylistic analysis of the poem, making it less obscure. Implications hidden behind the curtain of words have been disclosed revealing the deeper layer of the poem's message.

Key words: Emily Dickinson, poem, stylistic analysis, ambiguity, stanza, statement, explanation, morality.

No one should be surprised that some of the 1775 poems assembled in Dickinson's "Collected Poems", seem obscure. There are those that read like unfinished drafts, others that meander, and still others in which key references are never made clear. What is more amazing is how many of her poems draw us in. Still, although good poems need not be transparent, we tend to believe that concerted effort will eventually render what's obscure plain, that we can track down allusions, penetrate compressed expression. So why do we think that obscurity in Dickinson's poems is not just a matter of lack of sifting or weaker efforts on her or our parts, that it is, somehow part and parcel of the work?

It's easy to blame her crabbed style and the special vocabulary, which could have resulted from her abandoning thought of publication. I can't make sense of her use of "circumference." And her idea of "immortality" as a source, even in so striking and inviting a poem as "My life closed twice" seems odd, if not indulgent. But I want to propose something more drastic: that Dickinson's obscurity comes from writing on the very edge of what's decipherable, at the borders of what's intelligible. It is, I believe, the result of thinking along several lines at the same time coupled with a love of compression. If I'm right, then, with the exception of lighter poems like "I'm no one" and "Faith is a fine invention," she is ambiguous to her very core. Scholar Dorothy Oberhaus finds that the "salient feature uniting Christian poets ... is their reverential attention to the life of Jesus Christ" and contends that Dickinson's deep structures place her in the "poetic tradition of Christian devotion" alongside Hopkins, Eliot and Auden [1].

Dickinson is a poet who strikes even the casual reader as exceedingly intimate. She writes about subjective states of consciousness, admits to living on the border of madness. At the same time, she is extremely private. Dickinson left no formal statement of her aesthetic intentions and, because of the variety of her themes, her work does not fit conveniently into any one genre. She has been regarded, alongside Emerson (whose poems Dickinson admired), as a Transcendentalist [2]. After great pain, a formal feeling comes" plumbs the result of intense pain, follows the shutting down of attention that can lead, if not checked, to death, and yet the poem never once hints at the source of the speaker's pain. And pain is one of Dickinson's principal subjects. Though she can work out and express the ratio of pleasure to pain – "bitter contested farthings and coffers filled with tears" – in exquisite detail, she can't or refuses to give any details about the sort or source of pain she is contemplating in that or in other poems. Dickinson's poems reflect her "early and lifelong fascination" with illness, dying and death [3].

This refusal to blur personal or intimate with private is one major source of ambiguity in Dickinson. We sense something more she could explain that would provide context. Years ago, computer scientists interested in "artificial intelligence" discovered that there is an enormous amount of background information about the world we depend on for much of our understanding of particular situations, information of which we are virtually unconscious. Researchers started writing out "scenarios" for simple process: what was present physically, what was assumed about how things worked. They prepared a "buying toothpaste scenario," a "starting the car scenario," trying to make explicit the underlying assumptions that operated in these actions. Dickinson may similarly depend on information she assumes we have. It's possible that she thinks we think as she does.

And finally, it's crucial to consideration the "voice" of her poems. Though intimate, there is often little of the conversational in a poem of hers. Consequently, the voice of her speaker appears both open – direct, – and, at the same time artificial – indirect. The reader loses confidence

in any interpretation he or she could defend because of confusion about tone.

Rather than dealing in generalities, I want to take up a relatively clear, almost matter of fact poem, "Tell All the Truth." It has no special vocabulary, no obvious allusions and seems more public than many of her other poems. However, the rhetorical mode of the poem is unusual for Dickinson. As openings, she favors definitions like "Hope is the thing with feathers"; and narratives, particularly one with a speaker who is dead as in "I died for beauty." She also relies on the paradox, as in, "Success is counted sweetest/By those who ne'er succeed," and descriptions of flowers and birds. This poem, however, starts as an injunction. And that leads to an immediate question. To whom is the poem addressed? Poets? The speaker herself? The speaker as poet? The reader? Philosophers? It's impossible to answer. If we knew she meant poets, then the poem might be taken to be about aesthetics, whereas if the general reader were being addressed, then its subject could be taken to be morality. And if the confusion about who is addressed were not enough to insure some ambiguity, Dickinson's collapsed diction and religious rhetoric insures the first line will be ambiguous.

When she writes, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant," her "all" can be read two ways. For a long time I saw only the injunction to leave nothing unsaid — "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," as lawyers say. Read this way, the opening statement requires the speaker to be forthright. The truth may hurt at times, but that's no reason to spare the hearer. There is another reading, however, which takes "all" as the object of "tell," i.e. "tell the truth to all, to everyone." Read this way, the injunction resembles the one requiring Christians to spread the Gospel. Dickinson scholar and poet Anthony Hecht finds resonances in Dickinson's poetry not only with hymns and song-forms but also with psalms and riddles, citing the following example: "Who is the East? / The Yellow Man / Who may be Purple if he can / That carries the Sun. / Who is the West? / The Purple Man / Who may be Yellow if He can / That lets Him out again [4]. The end of the poem gives further credence to this reading, although the first reading is consistent with it as well. Some might say it is Dickinson's collapsed rhetoric, her compression that leads to this rich ambiguity. One could equally cite the artificial voice, the poem as sculpture with a carefully fashioned surface rather than as a type of speech that has produced this effect.

As the poem continues, "Success in circuit lies," ellipses of other sorts come into play. The poem's "success" is left unexplained. What sort of success

comes from "circuit," which, in keeping with the overall content of the poem, I take to mean being "round about" or "indirect?" The most likely success is in reaching the target audience. You'll succeed in conveying the truth if you're indirect. This fits with the idea of an injunction to communicate widely, to spread the good news. You succeed by reaching "all." However, Dickinson is a canny thinker. This is a poet who knows that "much madness is divinest sense," and that those whose opinions are at odds with convention are frequently kept in chains. Success may have to do, then, with setting out the truth and managing to escape with your freedom or even your life.

The next two lines, "Too bright for our infirm delight/ The Truth's superb surprise" could be joined to the last by an implied "for" — an elision that is kept vague so that it can pass as a statement rather than an explanation. The poem's subject seems to jump from "how" and/or "to whom" the truth should be told, to the nature of the truth in general. In any case, the association of light with truth would be standard, if Dickinson didn't wring so much out of it. What's "bright" is not truth *per se*, but the surprise it produces. The poem does more than imply that truth is far from obvious, that truth always catches us unawares: it revels in that fact. Truth is a "superb surprise," and the play of the sounds — the repeated "su" ("superb" and "surprise") with the slight echoing and displacement of "r" sounds around "p" sounds is a foretaste of the sound play to come in "dazzle gradually."

We're never prepared, of course, and thus, "infirm," incapable of sustaining or absorbing the force of truth. The problem is not with truth, but with us. However, Dickinson has slightly shifted the application of the adjective. It's reasonable see it as applying to "us," to say we receive the surprise and are infirm, unsteady, perhaps even slightly ill because we don't possess the truth. However the adjective actually applies to "delight." It is what's shaky, which suggests that "delight" is not quite trustworthy. If you can't trust "delight," what can you trust? And Dickinson, in other poems, has proposed the joys of earth as sufficient, suggested that we don't need a promised, other higher joy after this life. So, it maybe we who are fundamentally flawed, and, by the end of this poem, we who should not feel sure that any approach we take with truth can succeed.

Dickinson has still another card to play. Our "infirm delight" is a source of pleasure and illumination for us. The truth's force is stronger. By using "bright" in the first stanza, she prepares the way for the example of "lightening,"

which she employs in the second. She even manages to smuggle in a second “light,” in the word “delight.” The truth’s surprise is seen in the context of our normal experience of pleasure in the world.

The second stanza follows a structure Dickinson often uses: a statement, followed by an explanation. Frequently the explanation is furnished in the form of an illustrative example or a simile, or both, as in this case.

As lightening to the children eased
With explanation kind,
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.

The implied injunction is: don’t look directly at lightening or you will be blinded; try, instead, the indirect approach. If you’re unprepared, lightning can blind you. It’s a fascinating difference. You can receive illumination, a sort of gift, or you can be altered, rendered blind, a condition that may become permanent.

And there is more to it. If the truth is like lightening, then those to be told the truth — maybe the “all,” referred to at the start, are like children. They can only take “so much.” For the easily frightened, lightening is a scary phenomenon; and their ability to comprehend it is limited. The power of lightening is so awesome that it’s no “superb surprise,” but a threat instead, maybe of death. As such, it’s something to hide from. It needs to be “eased.” Again there is a displacement in the poem at this point, one similar to that with “infirm.” Although it is the children who must be comforted, and they who need to be “eased,” Dickinson has the lightening itself has “eased,” soothed, made more comfortable. The indirection that’s been counseled turns out to be an “explanation kind,” a fairly opaque phrase. You can take this as an inversion, in which case the phrase relates to a sort of explanation. But is a “kind” explanation one that eases, softens, and “fudges” the truth, one that simplifies or distorts the truth to make it more acceptable?

I’m reminded of a justification for the existence of a Mahayana and Theravada, “greater,” and “lesser” vehicles, of Buddhism. In one story, children are trapped on an upper floor of a burning pagoda. People gather, fetch a sheet and tell the child to jump. But the children are afraid. If they remain where they are, they will be burned to death. The parable has those below say that have candy. Rather than insisting they jump in order to save their lives, and fright to motivate them, it suggests offering sweets, a positive attraction. Address the children in terms they can understand or be persuaded by, it advises. Effective speech is speech that achieves

desired results. Similarly, the truth, which has the power to blind, must be transformed or at least considered from some other angle, vantage point. If we don’t gentle it or placate the observer, all may be lost.

We’re left with the wonderful Dickinsonian phrase, “dazzle gradually,” one of those constructions for which there is no name. Is it a contradiction in terms? Can anything dazzle except all at once? Can we prolong it? Can surprise, for that matter, with which it shares the same property, be drawn out? Neither phenomenon can spread over time or area, without lessening its intensity, its chief attribute. Is the speaker lying about how we can express truth, then, and how indirection can serve us? As Gary Lee Stonum says, “The hermeneutic zigzag of truth and error, blindness and enlightenment, or affirmation and insinuation may itself be a little dazzling. Indeed, the razzle-dazzle may be the point, and the zigzag is certainly the method” [5].

Be indirect and you might be able to get closer to the target. But, then again, you may fail; it may not be possible. Perhaps Dickinson doesn’t believe success can be achieved. She or her speaker may, instead, be expressing a wish or hope. It’s possible the injunction stems from the impossibility of the situation. Her poem “The bustle in a house...” appears to imply a false realm of possibility. Although that poem speaks of “sweeping up the heart and putting love away,” I doubt that Dickinson believed that could be done, or was even desirable. But I don’t deny that the wish to believe it is possible is realistic. Wanting to believe something untrue is, itself, emotionally true. We may long to believe, to give up trying to penetrate the mists or rosy-glassed view or other self-protective shields of those who will not see the truth.

The poem’s final phrase, “or every man be blind,” takes us back to that opacity that I think is at the heart of Dickinson’s mode. If you look at lightening, you may be blinded. If you tell someone the truth (directly) he or she may be blinded. On the metaphorical level, this is at odds with the initial verb, “tell”? Shouldn’t he or she be deafened? But the truth is a light, an illumination. To see the truth is to be set free from the darkness of ignorance. Moses was the only person permitted to look on the face of the deity, (truth?) and live. Who then is included in the “every man” of this final line? Are we back to the “all” we started with? Is one person’s ability to hear or bear the truth the cause for all other men or women to be blinded? Is “every man” the same as any woman, any man, which is to say everyman?

Conclusions. No poet of any twentieth century I can think of as talented as Emily Dickinson would

attempt a poem about truth this abstract, this unadorned and naked. The closest poem that comes to mind is Robert Frost's, "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," and it handles its subject via metaphor or symbol. But once this Dickinson's poem is underway, result is unlike a poem by any poet of the 19th or 20th century. What seems to be a poem about the nature of truth or Dickinson's esthetic, or of the weakness of human intellect or emotion, becomes all those and an example of Dickinson's artful artificiality, her construction of a voice that hovers and tests the limits of what can be communicated.

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Гальперин М. Приховані світи Емілі Дікінсон: аналіз поезії «Скажи всю правду». — Стаття.

Анотація. Стилістико-літературознавчий аналіз поетичного твору відомої американської поетки XIX століття Емілії Дікінсон, що є змістом статті, відкриває читачу багатобарвний підтекст твору, його внутрішню структуру.

Ключові слова: Емілії Дікінсон, поетичний твір, стилістико-літературознавчий аналіз, подвійність значення, ствердження, пояснення, мораль.

Гальперин М. Таинственные миры Эмили Дикинсон: анализ стихотворения «Скажи всю правду». — Статья.

Аннотация. Содержанием статьи является литературоведческий анализ стихотворения известной американской поэтессы XIX столетия Эмили Дикинсон. Автор открывает читателю богатый подтекст произведения, его внутреннюю структуру.

Ключевые слова: Эмилия Дикинсон, поэтическое произведение, литературоведческий анализ, двойственность значения, утверждение, пояснение, мораль.