

EMILY—HER POEM AND HER FLY

Jim Graham

A poem should not mean

But be.

— Archibald Mac Leish ⁽¹⁾

My definition of pure poetry, something that
the poet creates outside of his own personality.

— George Moore ⁽²⁾

Young men, why do you not study *Poetry*? It
can be used to inspire, to observe, to make you fit
for company, to express grievances; near at
hand, [it will teach you how] to serve your father,
and, [looking] further, [how] to serve your sover-
eign; it also enables you to learn the names of
many birds, beasts, plants and trees.

— Confucius ⁽³⁾

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I HEARD A FLY BUZZ WHEN I DIED

I heard a Fly Buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –⁽⁴⁾

Some may contend that dissecting poetry is a pedant's vocation, that it reveals nothing about the soul of the poet or the message of the poem. This may be proven true in the following brief overview – an anatomical exploration of the above offering by Emily Dickinson. It is my hope that somewhere along the way my scalpel may have occasion to release something more spiritual than spurts of jargon, perhaps to offer some

clues as to what makes a poem tick and what made the 'dying' Emily bother to fuss about something as unimbued with poetic beauty as a common housefly.

Our first problem with this poem is the well-known eccentricity of the aloof poet, her Victorian times and her New England heritage. This was, after all, no anonymous scribbling on a hospital wall. To get to the mechanical core of the above poem we should momentarily shut all prejudicial elements out of our minds, ignore the meaning and even the English. Instead, let us consider how the poem sounds, say, to ears as undiscerning of English phonetics as a Tibetan shepherd's. Certainly, it would it would all sound like gibberish to him. Or would it? Yet we can find his Lhamaist prayer on CD in most large music stores. Why would Emily Dickinson sound any more alien or chaotic to the shepherd? Don't t prayer and poetry have certain 'musical' elements in common? Obviously, they do. Therefore a focus only on the poet and the meaning of her words and images would leave the important musical features of the poem unaddressed.

What will our Tibetan shepherdhear? Alliteration, a repetition on sounds that unifies the lines. It can be at the beginning of words or hidden within them. *Blue*, *Buzz* and *Between* are very clear examples of alliteration in the fourth stanza, whereas the *z* sound of *Buzz* and *Heaves* in the first stanza are hidden alliterations. The *s* sound emerges once in each of the four lines in the second stanza with *Eyes*, *Breaths*, *Onset* and *Witnessed*. Similarly, the final *s* in *Keepsakes* becomes the *s* in *Signed away* which follows on the first line of the third stanza. *Be* of the second line corresponds to *-able* in *Assignable* of the third as *was* of

the third line goes with *-posed* of *interposed* in the fourth. Repetition is not alliteration, but appears frequently with *Stillness* twice in the first stanza and two *And thens* in the penultimate line, mirrored by the repetition of *see* in *see to see* in the final line.

Examples of assonance, a similarity in vowel sounds, can also be noticed. *Room/Storm*, *Between/Heaves*, *Eyes/dry*, *around/wrung*, *firm/Room*, *me/be* and *away/Fly* are examples, some rather loose, of yet another device that gives this poem its musical quality.

Assonance and alliteration provide the tone and tonguing of each phrase, but it is the meter that sets the toes a-tapping and, I would think, outside of meaning and other highly subjective factors, has more to do with how we react and recall than any other device. Anyone uninitiated in the mechanics of poetry who has memorized a poem or doggerel has probably memorized one with a distinct meter such as the risqué limerick. Limericks tend not to be forgotten easily since rhyme and meter harmonize in a fixed process that makes memorizing nearly effortless. We need not be moved or inspired to remember *A Hermit Named Dave* and what he did in his cave; indeed, we may just as soon forget it.

If dictionaries were zoos and words animals, literary terms would be in the darkly lit house of rarities. Behold the iamb, the trochee, and the anapest. And there the dactyl, the spondee and the pyrrhus do mingle 'neath the hungry eyes of the amphibrach and his cousin, the trisyllabic amphimacer. Such are the varied species of feet, combinations of stressed and unstressed sound that make a poem a *poem*. Ribald or sublime, a poem without feet goes nowhere.

While it may be of dubious value to an amateur like myself to play scientist with the entrails of prosody, let's glimpse through the lens and see what kind of feet are attached to the first two lines of Emily's *Fly* :
I heard / a Fly / Buzz - when / I died. The Still / ness in the Room.
 The dots mark the stressed sounds which fall on the second syllables of the two - syllable feet - an example of iambs.

Now that we know the type of feet, we count them: four in the first line (tetrameter), three in the second (trimeter). The meter is repeated in the third and fourth lines. There is no definite pattern for the poem in general, however, given that there is no uniformity of dialect, mental state or tolerance for martinis among Dickinson's readers. But see if you don't agree that from stanza to stanza there isn't a tetra / trimeter alternation of iambs all the way to the final line: *I could not see to see.* (Interruptions in meter, of course, do occur. But alas we find no "rhetorical accents" here.)

As we draw nearer to the soul of the poet, we come to the next device, rhyme. In *An Introduction to Poetry*, Louis Simpson is careful to emphasize that rhyme is not an essential feature of what makes a poem a poem: "Poems are made with words that express thought and feeling; merely repeating sounds is not enough. Of course, many poets have written in rhyme - great poets use it, little poets depend on it."⁽⁵⁾ But repeating sounds, along with alliteration, assonance and meter are what make a poem sound like something more than a lot of jibber-jabber to ears unfamiliar with the English language. Yet even with this as the case, it still would not be much. It is meaning that is needed to make a poem *be*, and rhyme is one way of making a symmetry within

the poem. It may reverberate with syncopated predictability, an unnerving echo; or it will surface unexpectedly to surprise, delight or shock. *I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died* contains few rhyming pairs we could consider identical twins. If it can be agreed that *Room* rhymes with *Storm* and *firm*, then all but the third stanza are written in ballad form with first and third lines ending in different vowels.

It is perhaps because of the lack of obvious rhymes that this poem is considered a 'great' one. If it is to be argued a masterpiece, then surely it is because Dickinson was not hellbent on forming every phrase from an obsession with crystal clear rhyme. So would argue opponents of rhyme in poetry. On the other hand, it was her very search for rhyme, if only of the remotest kind, that may have led her to the word choice she did make. If she had selected a word with even less similarity than *Storm* to rhyme with *Room*, the result would have been far less effective. Whatever one's position may be on the issue of rhyme, it cannot be denied that it supports poetry with at least a *fancied* vitality that is nevertheless integral to the *popular* concept of what poetry is all about, and Dickinson's works are widely known.

With the mechanics behind us, we can now direct our attention to the purr of the machine itself and its designer, Emily Dickinson (1830–1886).

I heard a Fly Buzz—when I died
 The Stillness in the Room
 Was like the Stillness in the Air
 Between the Heaves of Storm

Death has been a traditional theme for as long as poets have been dying. Emily Dickinson's well-known fascination with death is illustrated in a large body of poetry of which this is but a single often-cited example. Dickinson described death as being "the first form of Life which we have had the power to Contemplate . . . it is amazing that the fascination of our predicament does not entice us more."⁽⁶⁾ It was an adventure to consider, an attitude derived from the Transcendentalism popular among the sophisticates of her day, a philosophy that advocated an intuitive inquiry into the spiritual absolutes that lie beyond reason. Her treatment of death in poetry has ranged from the satirical to the gravely serious, and here her attention turns to her own mortality. Some critics view it as a "sort of comic or Gothic relief"⁽⁷⁾ given that an event as commanding and ominous as death should be upstaged, if only momentarily, by a fly. I would disagree with this, as the biological connection between death and flies, a crucial decomposer in the cycle of life, is as plain in nature as that between death and vultures.

Buzz the dull flies – on the chamber window –

Brave – shines the sun through the freckled pane –⁽⁸⁾

The buzzing of flies is the only sigh of life in these lines from a different poem about a mortuary room where a woman's corpse lies. One idea conveyed by the fly is that life is power. Flies in all their filth and meagerness have it. The woman of "cool forehead" and "listless hair", for all her former superiority over those flies, does not. In *I*

Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died, the poet's resignation at the onset of her own death is met with the buzzing of a single fly, a signal that almost seems predicted, for such deathbed dramas were a regular part of small town life in the Amherst of 1862. Yet there is calm in the drone of that fly, and we are spared both the shrill trumpets of deliverance and the ghoulish specter of hell.⁽⁹⁾

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

The witnessing of the King. Is it God? Or is it Death himself? Some critics tend to suggest the latter, claiming that Dickinson is not attempting to portray her own final seconds of consciousness at all, nor was she guessing the destiny of her spirit.⁽¹⁰⁾ Rather, she was exploring death as intellectual speculation in a general sort of way, a daring and novel approach in an age of Gothic angel gravemarkers.

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a fly

Now with her worldly goods accounted for and divided among the loved ones who surround the bed, that which only can belong to her, the

keenly conscious but weakening Self, encounters the 'interposing' fly. What can be more anticlimactic than this? And of what importance could those keepsakes have been for her to exert her final spark in dull conversation over them? The fly's buzz is at once a grave omen of death, as if a messenger from the Unknown, and a parody of death as an uninteresting conclusion to an overrated phase of human existence.⁽¹¹⁾ Which aspect is more potent is a question of the reader's own sentiments.

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
 Between the light – and me –
 And then the Windows failed – and then
 I could not see to see –

The *Blue* of the final stanza has intrigued critics for its strange lack of clarity. A 'blue buzz'? It is a charming alliteration, but what does it mean? The poet imagines the world fading before her eyes as *the Windows failed – and then; I could not see to see* –. Of course, it is she that is fading, serenaded by the interposing buzz that we might assume lifts her soul into the next world. But why blue? Is it meant to convey a sense of sadness or gloom? Or is it the blue of some kind of aristocratic dignity? Or is the *stumbling Buzz* one final call from the blue Puritanism of New England thinking, a view of increasing irrelevance in the face of this anti-climactic death that mocks it so savagely?⁽¹²⁾

She was a New Englander, a provincial and, most notably, a woman. The combination of these features set Emily Dickinson apart from her

19th century literary contemporaries. Her Puritan social environment was intensely conformist and it is Dickinson's respectful rebellion from the musty values of Amherst that may have made her the quietly insane island of genius that she was. A brilliant intellect was not a feminine virtue in Dickinson's day. Rather, attributes such as "delicacy and purity" were treasured in the proper female as Alonzo Potter stated in his 1842 manual, *School and the School Master*. Wrote Potter: "She is to have all accomplishments which lend a charm to her person and manners; but these must be held as insignificant, when compared with those which qualify her for the duties of a wife and mother ... Her chastity is her tower of strength, her modesty and gentleness are her charm, and her ability to meet the high claims of her family and dependents, the noblest power she can exhibit to the admiration of the world."⁽¹³⁾ To stray from this honored path was to meet with outright ostracism. Dickinson was stuck in a small-minded world that the common woman would feel obliged to accommodate.⁽¹⁴⁾ Amherst was no exception to the "universal uniformity" that "saddened and chilled" Alexis de Toqueville on his study tour of the young American republic;⁽¹⁵⁾ it was perhaps even more evident in the dull gray routine of a small collegiate town in New England. There the citizenry actually *knew* how boring they were. This mediocrity may be taken as the dark side of Dickinson's age and she, the poet, was quite right in seeking to "repudiate" it.⁽¹⁶⁾

In his biography of Emily Dickinson, Richard Chase writes of Dickinson's talent in drawing the unlikely from the uninteresting when depicting her world in poetry. When her society was vague and ambivalent,

her poems were sharp and precise. When the world dragged along with unrelenting plainness, Dickinson was able to portray it in quick sparks of intuition. When society went public with an emotional issue, Dickinson withdrew into her own mind. Adjective – opposite. Verb – opposite.⁽¹⁷⁾ The Gilded Age was an era of rigid social conformity ostensibly based on the old Puritan doctrine. The core of that conformity was vague and uncertain, demonstrated less as an expression of the spirit than as simply being nice to your fellow man.⁽¹⁸⁾ Non-conformity, therefore, was an intelligent response to this hollowness, and it comes as little wonder, therefore, that an image as ordinary as a fly buzzing in her own dying ear would resound in a far more extraordinary manner than the popularly imagined choir of angels.

Much has been made of Dickinson's seclusion, often expressed in terms more suited for a medical journal or *Harlequin Romance* than a literary critique. Was it a disappointment in love that compelled her to shut herself off? An exasperation with male-dominated society? Her bad eyesight? While these questions may not appear to relate directly to that *Bbue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –*, it was her seclusion that magnified the stillness that inspired poetry. Filled with a sense of accomplishment and a Puritan notion of mastering the world by withdrawing from it, Dickinson's resolve to lead the life of a recluse never waned. The communication void was her empty canvas to be filled with words, words, words. It was both Dickinson's joy and agony to compose in that medium day after day in the confines of her room. Her mystical obsession with tapping the power concealed within the limits of language would continue for the duration of her life – a life

lived, in the words of Chase, as “one of the notable public acts of our history.”⁽¹⁹⁾

SOURCES FOR TEXT AND NOTES

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NOTES

1. See Davidoff, p. 284, (quoted from *Ars Poetica*).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 284, (quoted from *Introduction to Anthology of Pure Poetry*).
3. See Liu, p. 109 (translated and quoted from *The Analects*, x VII).
4. The Todd – Higginson version of this (1896) offers a more abstract poem which, strictly speaking, is not Dickinson's at all. Nevertheless, it has been frequently published over the decades and is therefore often encountered in texts. Differences as "round my form" for "in the room" indicate a discomfort with a less than perfect rhyme. Several other instances of 'doctored up' rhyme and word usage suggest that in the years immediately following her death, Dickinson's directness and divergence from convention made her too far ahead of her time to be enjoyed as is in literate Victorian society. See Chase, p. 248.
5. See Simpson, p. 38.
6. Dickinson quoted by Anderson, p. 228. The year she wrote *I Heard A Fly Buzz When I Died*, 1862, was also the year she wrote to Higginson asking him if her poetry was "alive." (He replied that it

was metrically “spasmodic.” He should have tried singing *I Heard A Fly Buzz* to the tune of *Old MacDonald Had A Farm*. It fits more or less.) The poem is an early work by a poet still unsure of herself. While she wrote a great many poems on the subject of death, it was the impersonal poetry on the subject which critics find of highest quality, *I Heard A Fly Buzz When I Died* being among them. See Chase, p. 193 and Anderson, p. 227.

7. See Sewall, (*Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored* by John Crowe Ransom), p.90. What is it that is “comic” about flies? The fact they feast off fecal matter? That their reproductive habits make them obscenely expendable (120 to 160 eggs at a time)? Or that their lifespan is less than miniscule? What is certain is that they lack the poetic grace of butterflies or even grasshoppers. They are disgusting. We shriek in terror to think of a beast half man and half fly as in the science fiction tale. Yet at the same time we frown on the little boy who catches them and pulls off their wings for sport. It is its life, seemingly infinite in unimportance, that compels us to reflect on our own life and the manner in which we view life in other creatures. The poem *On a Fly Drinking Out of His Cup* by William Oldys (1691–1761) comes to mind:

Busy, curious, thirsty fly!
 Drink with me and drink as I :
 Freely welcome to my cup,
 Couldst thou sip and sip it up :
 Make the most of life you may,

Life is short and wears away.

Both alike are mine and thine
Hastening quick to their decline :
Thine's a summer, mine's no more,
Though repeated to threescore.
Threescore summers, when they' re gone,
Will appear as short as one!

(See Williams, p. 186)

Around the world, the ubiquitous fly touches the heart and head of the poet. The Japanese *haiku* poet Issa Kobayashi (1763–1827) penned a tribute to a fly that is popularly regarded as comic given that the despicable fly, of all God's creatures, is the least likely candidate for sympathy.

Hey! don't swat him!
The fly rubs his hands, rubs his feet
Begging for mercy. – trns. Donald Keene

Kobayashi Issa's fascination with creepy crawlies stemmed from emotional inadequacies which, by some stretch of the imagination, we can find in Dickinson. While both were provincials, Dickinson was clearly never plagued by the constant poverty that afflicted Issa; yet both experienced an alienation from the world that

turned them inward to things visible but seldom seen. Issa saw the fly as himself. Dickinson saw it as being an equal of sorts in the scheme of Nature and Life. Their flies may strike us as comic at first, but the intent goes far beyond mere humor. They are plainly holding the less savory to our noses and asking us to sniff a vital part of the universe that popular tastes and prejudice wage an endless war upon.

8. Dickinson was fond of the fly as a device for adorning deathly stillness even in her prose. The following is from a letter to her brother which gives an enthusiastic account of an inspiring sermon: "... I never heard anything like it, and don't expect to again, till we stand at the great white throne ... The students and the chapel people all came to our church, and it was very full, and still, so still the buzzing of a fly would have boomed like a cannon. And when it was all over ... people stared at each other ... and wondered [if] they had not died." See Chase, p. 19.
9. See Sewall, (*Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored* by John Crowe Ransom), p. 90.
10. Expert critics Ransom (see Sewall, p. 90) and Anderson (p. 232) disagree on just what frame of mind the poet wants her reader to visualize. Ransom writes: "[*I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died* is] not from the elegiac poems about suffering the death of others, [it is a prevision] of her own death." Anderson, on the other hand, claims "... this is *not* an imaginative projection of her own death (*italics mine*). In structure, in imagery it is simply an ironic reversal of the conventional attitudes of her time and place toward the

significance of the moment of death.” The latter opinion is more interesting since it is articulated, but I nevertheless find no reason why both can't be right. This is, after all, the humanities, not applied mathematics.

11. See Anderson, p. 232.
12. See Morris, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, p. 144.

There is some suggestion of the occult and reincarnation in this image of a fly and its ‘blue and uncertain buzz.’ Psychics note that animals present when a spirit is in motion will sometimes become possessed by that spirit and serve it as a more convenient vehicle for getting around from place to place. This, supposedly, explains the sudden disappearance of pets owned by recently deceased or those who had just been plagued by poltergeists in their homes.

But a fly? A Hindu might look upon it as a just embodiment for an *atman* stained by bad *karma*. Dickinson goes from gifted and respectable New England maiden of solid Puritan upbringing to shit-eating insect. Could that ‘uncertainty’ and ‘stumbling’ be signs of a new life preparing itself to take on Dickinson’s *atman*, an *atman* so reduced that it can only squeeze into the body of a fly? And what had she done to merit this drastic demotion in status? As laughable as this may be, we can’t help but wonder from the poem if Dickinson didn’t long for such a non-judgmental conclusion to this life, a conclusion lacking all the fire and brimstone of the standard Puritan line.

In fact, only seven years after Dickinson’s death in 1886, Indian

Swami Vivekananda arrived in the United States for the Parliament of Religions held at the Chicago World's Fair. His colorful appearance and exotic wisdom made him all the rage, particularly among New England women who were electrified by his lectures on Indian culture and society that were held throughout Massachusetts prior to the fair. This could have been the one event big enough to draw the reclusive Emily from hiding had she lived. The Swami had the right things to say where Dickinson was concerned: "It is the women who are the life and soul of this country. All learning and culture are centered in them ... Nowhere have I heard so much about love, life and liberty as in this country, but nowhere is it less understood. Here God is either a terror or a healing power." (See Pachter, p. 239-246)

Dickinson may have heard a fly buzz when she died, and it may have been herself.

13. As quoted by Tyler, p. 254.
14. At Mary Lyon's Mount Holyoke College which Dickinson attended, Christmases were spent in fasting and solitary meditation confined to one's room. Most of the women at the all-female institute went along with this forced and uninspiring manner of spending the Yuletide, but not Emily. She rebelled without flinching and caught a coach for Amherst to spend Christmas with family. (See Tyler, p. 252-253)
15. As quoted by Chase, p. 22.
16. See Chase, p. 23.
17. *Ibid.*

18. See Sewall (*Emily Dickinson* by Allen Tate), p. 19.
19. See Chase, p. 249.