

Transformation by Nature

Emily Dickinson's Mystic Poetry

— by Graham Brown

**You'll know it as you know 'tis Noon—
By Glory—
As you do the sun—
By Glory**

It was with these words that the 19th century New England poet Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886) described a transformative experience of Self Realisation. Her change of consciousness could be likened to a conversion, but not the kind of conversion her Calvinist community were hoping for. Despite relentless pressure from her family and fellow townspeople, she stubbornly resisted organised Christianity while having a continuous mystical communion with what she liked to call 'Eternity', a concept beyond the associations of the word 'God'. Hers was a conversion to the world of the spirit by Nature Herself, action through the faculty of intuition. This is a notion she held in common with the Transcendentalists, in these of her poems:

*By intuition, Mighty Things
Assert themselves – and not by terms –
"I'm Midnight" – need the Midnight say –
"I'm Sunrise" – Need the Majesty?
Omnipotence – had not a Tongue –
His lisp – is lightning – and the sun –
His Conversation– with Sea –
"How shall you know" ?
Consult your eye!*



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“Transcendentalism was a philosophic and literary movement that flourished in New England as a reaction against 18th century rationalism, the sceptical philosophy of Locke, and the confining religious

orthodoxy of New England Calvinism. Its beliefs were idealistic, mystical, eclectic and individualistic, shaped by the ideas of Plato, Plotinus, as well as the teaching of Confucious, the Sufis, the writers of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, the Buddhists and Swedenburg. Transcendentalism had at its fundamental base a monism holding to the unity of the world and God and the immanence of God in the world. Because of this indwelling of divinity, everything in the world is a microcosm containing within itself all the laws and the meaning of existence. Likewise the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world, and latently contains all that the world contains. Man may fulfil his divine potentialities either through rapt mystical state, in which the divine is infused into the human, or through coming into contact with the truth, beauty, and goodness embodied in nature and originating in the Over-Soul. Thus occurs the correspondence between the tangible world and the human mind, and the identity of moral and physical laws. Through belief in the divine authority of the soul's intuitions and impulses, based on the identification of the individual soul with God, there developed the doctrine of self reliance and individualism, the disregard of external authority, tradition, and logical demonstration, and the absolute optimism of the movement". The most important literary expression of transcendentalism is considered to lie in Thoreau,s "Walden" and in the works of Emerson. Others in the movement were A.M. Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott. German transcendentalism (Goethe, Richter, Novalis) influenced Coleridge, Carlyle, and Wordsworth. The greatness of these figures and the universal respect for their ideas has led to the use of the word 'transcendental' by business organisations masquerading as spiritual paths.

Much present in the poetry of Dickinson is the idea of the proximity of the Eternal in the here and now. Like other visionaries she was not content to await Judgement Day for a glimpse of Paradise but, like William Blake, knew that it was visible if the doors of perception could be cleansed.

Not "Revelation"— 'tis— that waits, But our unfurnished eyes—

'Eternity' recalls Blake's "eternity" glimpsed 'in a grain of sand' and has the oceanic quality described by mystics of all ages.

*Exultation is the going
of an inland soul to the sea
Past houses — past headlands—
Into deep Eternity.*

The 'lover' in many of her poems is Eternity itself. There is even a sense of the individual 'I' consciousness dissolving into Divinity, the oceanic consciousness:

*'Tis little I — could care for pearls
Who own the ample sea —
Of Periods of seas —
Unvisited of Shores Themselves the Verge of Seas to be
Eternity — is Those—*

In keeping with the tradition of the mystics is the idea of transcending mental processes:

*Let not Revelation
By theses be detained*

Akin to the writings of the mystics and great religious teachers is the call to self knowledge:

*Explore thyself
Therein thyself
shall find
The "Undiscovered Continent" No Settler had the Mind*

Once realised this Self is known to be limitless:

*The Brain – is wider than the sky–
For put them side by side –
The once the other will contain With ease –
and You – beside –*

Compare this to Muso Soseki's Zen Buddhist perspective:

*For a person of Zen
No limits
The blue sky must
feel ashamed to be so small.*



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Wales.

The sense of paradox so fundamental to Zen is also ever present in Dickinson. The similarities to Dickinson's insights despite the fact that she had direct access to Eastern wisdom is testimony to the universality of the experience of self realisation. To the Indian Yogi self realisation is the gift of an inner energy known as Kundalini which manifests itself as a cool wind. During yogic states the heat of sympathetic nervous activity subsides and the parasympathetic nervous system comes into play relaxing and refreshing the body, with a breeze or fountain like energy, so that the attention can transcend physical needs and merge with the Atman or Self. According to Dickinson the moments of At-One-ment with Nature/Self happen "when the wind is within" (Thoreau wrote of "ecstasies begotten of the breezes") For the yogi or realised soul the sensation of this cool energy becomes his means of being sensitive to manifestations of Truth-Beauty-Love (Keats' tripartite Unity). Dickinson stated that she had no other means to discriminate these qualities in art.

"If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel

physically as if the top of my head were taken off I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know of."

and in one of her poems:

*"Your breath has time to straighten,
Your brain to bubble cool*

*Deals one
imperial thunder bolt
that scalps your
naked soul”*

Interestingly the yogi also experiences concentration of the Kundalini, or cool breeze at the top of the head, during union with the Self (the unity behind Truth–Beauty–Love). The yogic experience of self realisation is a simultaneous reception of grace, poured down from celestial realms, and an upsurging, or erupting, of energy from the unconscious depths within. Dickinson referred to herself as a “volcano at home”. “On my volcano grows the grass”; there is a sense of a vast underlying power of unconscious creativity waiting to be brought forth.

A final point of comparison with the yogis of the East is Dickinson’s spiritual detachment from a world that was unready to share her vision. She spent the second half of her life as a virtual hermit, just as Indian yogis and the Desert Fathers of early Christianity (some of whom went to the extreme of meditating for years on the tops of columns) isolated themselves from the materialism they saw in human society, in order to achieve yoga.

“I dwell in possibility”, she wrote. She had little time for the gossips and church people of 19th century Amherst with its restrictive Calvinist beliefs. “The soul selects her own society and then shuts the door”, perhaps things would have been different if she had been born 100 years later. Not everyone was turned away, however, the local children were especially welcome since they were relatively uncalcified by dogma and selfishness. She wrote of her “Columnar Self”, referring to her strength in standing alone, connected perhaps to other columns by celestial vaults in the great palace of the Self.

Technique

Her genius lay in expressing the Infinite in terms of close-by things, “her basket”, she said, “held firmaments”. “Extreme psychological states could be expressed if the right words were hunted down, yet a poem is not method. For those on friendly terms with cherubim, riffling through dictionaries is not always necessary.” Unusual word pairings which jolt the mind, are her trade mark “confiscated gods”. She made use of legal terms (she was born into a legal family) and scientific or theological vocabulary, “Enchantment’s Perihelion”.

Legacy

To the self addressed question: Wherefore sing...since nobody hears?”, Dickinson affirms; “My business is to sing”.

After her death Dickinson’s sister Lavinia discovered hundreds of poems in a single locked box. In all she left us over 1, 700 poems. In them she envisaged worlds far beyond the apparent simplicity of her daily life. Virtually unknown in her lifetime(only ten of her poems were published) Dickinson now ranks with Walt Whitman as one of the two great visionary names in 19th century American poetry, and has had an enormous impact on modern poetry generally. She was ahead of her time both in terms of form and idea Jane Langdon Writes in her selection of Dickinson’s poems:”In the end it is perhaps the sense of



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vastness that carries her poems so powerfully forward into this or any other century, the immensities that spread outward from her short quatrains, the firmaments that fill her basket, her acquaintance with eternity.”



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