

# EMILY DICKINSON, MARTIN HEIDEGGER AND THE POETRY OF DREAD



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We do not need to question the power and immediacy of Emily Dickinson's voice. Time, and the overwhelming weight of critical adulation, have proved that the personal language which her poetry composed, with all of its solecisms and violations of grammar, holds a deeply moving strength, a mysterious quality akin, perhaps, to the very enigma of truth itself, which all serious language labors to reveal.

And while untold pages have been given to describe the effectiveness of Emily Dickinson's words, to elucidate the «how» of her palpable phrase, few have been expended to tell us *why*. Still, once having accepted the familiar supremacy of her work, we are faced with this second, more fundamental question: *Why* is the poetry of Emily Dickinson so consummately and so irreproachably right? This question is not intended to repeat, in an opaque form, the wellworn query into the mechanics of her verse. It means, instead, to strike to the very roots of her language, as the words emerge from her perception and desire, and to grasp them in that process of emergence. Why does this poetry, this highly personal expression, beam so effortlessly into the darkness of our own perception and desire?

Our deeper subject, then, is the character of language itself. To perceive why, within the totality of linguistic experience—the confusion of verbal interchange and misunderstanding—one person's words ring out sharply above the babble of history, we should judge those words against some coherent theory of how language functions in the world. In his essays on language and poetry<sup>1</sup>, Martin Heidegger constructs a

<sup>1</sup> The essays which most concern this paper are «Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry», «On the Essence of Truth» and «What Is Metaphysics?». They are published in English, along with a fourth selection, «Remembrance of the Poet», under the title *Existence and Being*, with an introduction and analysis by Werner Brock (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, Gateway Edition, 1970). All subsequent cita-

complex and fascinating «explanation» of the role of language within the circumference of human activities.

To criticize Dickinson's poetry against Heidegger's ideas is not as far-fetched as it may at first appear. Heidegger himself calls for such a testing of his thought against diverse examples of world literature in «Holderling and the Essence of Poetry»<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, such a consideration should broaden our understanding and appreciation of them both, and serve, at the same time, to substantiate each in the reflected validity of the other.

In those four essays brought together in English under the title *Existence and Being*, Heidegger unveils a concept of language which construes it as a kind of non-spatial region, a region in which the constituents of the world enter into the arena of existence through the interaction of human thought and the material environment. The result of this mingling of intellectual reflection and physical fact is the word. Human thought plays upon a thing, as it were, catching it up from the indiscriminate stream of natural process, to recognize it as *that which it is*. The act of language distinguishes parts from the whole. The word allows a thing to come out of the mist of unknowing and to take its place as what it is. Language tames the mystery and delivers it to knowledge in the form of the particular concept, whose realization is the word.

Here we can begin to grasp the Heideggerian concept of «letting-be». This fundamental creative act of language allows that which is outside of us to be what it is *for us*. It brings the things of the world into «the openness» of language; it «discovers» them from the unknown for human appropriation and appreciation. «To let what-is *be* what it is means participating in some thing overt and its overtness, in which everything that 'is' takes up its position and which entails such overtness. Western thought at its outset conceived this overtness as τὰ ἀληθέα, the Unconcealed» (*EB*, p. 306). This open region, this overtness, where what is takes its place as the «Unconcealed» is what I have called the non-spatial region of language.

Within this framework, the «world» is only that which human awareness has encountered and through the creation of language, brought out of the dark. This way of thinking seems to agree with the famous opening proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: «Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist.» That which has not come into the light of language is unimaginable. It cannot be an issue. It remains, very simply, in the dark. So, were it not for the words, which separate particular concepts

tions from this book will be identified by the letters *EB* followed by appropriate page numbers, given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 270-271.

out of the seamless web of process, then everything that is would rest beneath a pall of undifferentiated silence, as if buried in some vast Jungian Unconsciousness. And indeed, without the «unconcealedness» of language, not even time would exist.

For Heidegger, history begins at that moment when the spark of selfreflection flickers in intelligence, and man can separate his own thinking from the flow of natural change: «... the existence of historical man begins at that moment when the first thinker to ask himself about the revealed nature of what-is, poses the question: What is what-is? With this question unconcealment and revealment are experienced for the first time» (*EB*, p. 308). Thinking extends into the unknown of material circumstance, and in the act of shedding light upon it, creates phenomena which remain in the world as language. By picking concepts out of physical evanescence, language fixes them into its more or less perpetual overtness. Thus language establishes a contrast between the idea of permanence, implicit in the word, and the transience of natural process; and time emerges, or «opens out», as the discrepancy between «that which goes» in the flux of being, and «that which stays» in the unconcealedness of the word. «After man has placed himself in the perpetual, then only can he expose himself to the changeable, to that which comes and goes; for only the persistent is changeable» (*EB*, p. 279).

Considered in this manner, language actually brings the world—everything that human sentience can grasp, «*alles was der Fall ist*»—into existence. For it is language which allows the things of the world to emerge from the undifferentiated ground of being, to come forth and stand out, to «ex-ist» as themselves. And poetry is the purest form of language. It is the poet who stands between the Unknown and the Known, who, in the practice of his miraculous art, expands the unconcealedness of language where the things of the world discover themselves to man. Poetry is the *creation* of language, not its appropriation. Poetry establishes the world: it «... never takes language as a raw material ready to hand, rather it is poetry which first makes language possible. Poetry is the primitive language of a historical people. Therefore... the essence of language must be understood through the essence of poetry» (*EB*, pp. 283-4).

We have now found a place from which to question the language of Dickinson. Is it a poetry which dwells on the «borderline» between the unknown and the known? Is it a language which pushes back the darkness and allows the world to take its place around us *as it is*? Does it make us, at the same time, aware of ourselves and our mysterious involvement in the world in which we move?

Perhaps we can begin with some perceptive advice from the poet and critic Allen Tate, from a series of essays on four American poets. There, he says of Dickinson's work that «The two elements of her

style, considered as point of view, are immortality, or the idea of permanence, and the physical process of death or decay»<sup>3</sup>. He also tells us that the recurrent symbol of death in her work represented, for Emily Dickinson, an attitude toward nature which was implicit in her puritan heritage. «Now the enemy», he says, «to all those New Englanders was Nature, and Miss Dickinson saw into the character of this enemy more deeply than any of the others. The general symbol of Nature, for her, is Death, and her weapon against Death is the entire powerful dumb-show of the puritan theology led by Redemption and Immortality»<sup>4</sup>. Now this is undoubtedly a very subtle observation, which implies more than it displays. Although her «general symbol» for nature may well be death, it is quite obvious that she considered neither one to be a personal enemy. We all know that Emily Dickinson was not a believer in, nor a practitioner of the puritan theological doctrine. It seems more probable that, like all persons of innate genius, she used those intellectual tools which were available to her—in this case the terms and concepts of the puritan tradition—to express the more fundamental truths that lie beyond all doctrine and cant.

One of those truths is the paradox which Heidegger has revealed for us: that time and eternity are complementary opposites which depend, for their existence, on the exercise of words. These are the polar elements of permanence and decay to which Mr. Tate alludes. The realization that language is the arbiter of immortality is the painful essence of much of Emily Dickinson's best poetry. Number 1593 of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* is a noteworthy example:

There came a Wind like a Bugle—  
It quivered through the Grass  
And a Green Chill upon the Heat  
So ominous did pass  
We barred the Windows and the Doors  
As from an Emerald Ghost—  
The Doom's electric Moccasin  
That very instant passed—  
On a strange Mob of panting Trees  
And Fences fled away  
And Rivers where the Houses ran  
Those looked that lived —that Day—  
The Bell within the steeple wild  
The flying tidings told—

<sup>3</sup> TATE, Allen: *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12.

How much can come  
And much can go,  
And yet abide the World!

What is the uncanny mystery that lies at the heart of this poem? What characteristic of the world is it trying to expose? The entity, or quality, that passes like a wind through this world is never really identified. The poet pointedly avoids an outright *naming* of her subject through the use of simile and metaphor.

We know that it shows the qualities of a piercing, military wind; yet at the same time it quivers through the grass. It inspires a «Green Chill» over the heat of life, as ominous as some «Emerald Ghost». And the thing itself is only referred to as «The Doom's electric Moccasin».

With this strategy of evocative evasion, the poet, in effect, places a mold of concrete words around the abstract soul of her poem. As Mr. Tate so aptly remarks: «... she does not separate [abstractions] from the sensuous illuminations that she is so marvelously adept at; like Donne, she *perceives abstraction* and *thinks sensation*»<sup>5</sup>. The subject of this poem is not some palpable quantity, some object of experience. Instead, it is an undefinable *quality* of experience itself. It is the transitory character of the world, as subtle as the quivering of the wind and as irrevocable in its ultimate implications as the final voice of doom.

So we are brought, once again, to consider those two essential qualities of her language, «immediacy, or the idea of permanence, and the physical nature of death or decay». As Heidegger proposes, it is just this paradoxical aspect of language—that it brings permanence out of the process of change—which allows us to experience time, which lets time «open out» for man. Only against the permanence of the word can we measure the transience of the world.

But such is the delicacy of Heidegger's thought that the relationship is necessarily reversible. Only against the transience of the world can we measure the permanence of the word. To enjoy the luxury of changelessness, we must be painfully aware of the depredations of time. Emily Dickinson seems to have guarded this elemental wisdom in the deepest part of her soul. It must have been an awareness of this mutual dependence between the sharp pain of loss and the victory of language which led to her reclusion. As John Crowe Ransom has put it: «Her sensibility was so acute that it made her extremely vulnerable to personal contacts. Intense feeling would rush out as soon as sensibility apprehend-

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

ed the object, and flood her consciousness to the point of helplessness... The happy encounter was as painful as the grievous one»<sup>6</sup>. This agonizing sensibility bound her into an intimate complicity of love for the experiences of life; and yet, at the same time, it made her almost pitifully vulnerable to the transitory quality of that experience. For such a sensibility even the slightest event can yield a universe of recognition. To hold on to this glorious recognition, to make it permanent in language, she had to withdraw from that very world of experience which occasioned it.

But this is the true nature of renunciation. It does not simply mean to sacrifice the pleasures and satisfactions of the world. It means to go beyond them, for a greater satisfaction of which only the highest sensibilities are capable. Emily Dickinson's excruciating sensitivity to life forced her to renounce all *outward* participation in experience. But this very act of renunciation freed her to exercise her love of experience in the fullest manner possible, by bringing it into permanence through words. That she was fully aware of the price which she paid, and the complicated blessing that she won, is made clear in any number of her poems on the problem of renunciation. One good example, for our purposes, is number 306:

The Soul's Superior instants  
Occur to Her —alone—  
When friend —and Earth's occasion  
Have infinite withdrawn—  
Or She —Herself— ascended  
To too remote a Height  
For lower Recognition  
Than Her Omnipotent  
This Mortal Abolition  
Is seldom —but as fair  
As apparition— subject  
To Autocratic Air  
Eternity's disclosure  
To favorites —a few—  
Of the Colossal substance  
Of Immortality

If her reclusion allowed her to write poetry, then the composition itself of that poetry became, for her, eternity's disclosure of immortality. Shrinking away from a transients world, she fixed that world into amber scenes of immortality with her verse.

<sup>6</sup> RANSOM, John Crowe: «Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored», *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed., Richard Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1963), p. 100.

But here again, another difficult question arises. What is the character of this impermanence that inspires her resort to words? It is a quality that lies at the heart of her «Wind like a Bugle» —at the heart, it seems, of all of her valid poetry. And yet, it remains a mystery. Although, as critics often do, it is easiest to dismiss in the guise of that grandiose abstraction, Death, such an answer does not really satisfy the problem. What, exactly, is this peculiarly haunting thing called transience?

Once again, the profound thought of Martin Heidegger can shed some light into this darkness. In his inaugural address to the Freiburg Chair of Philosophy, entitled «What is Metaphysics?», he considers what may be the essential philosophical question: What is Nothing?

The answer, of course, cannot really be expressed, for nothing lies beyond, or behind, everything that is, and to express any concept brings it into existence as language. But though it cannot be expressed, we do come face-to-face with Nothing when we experience the «key-mood of dread (*Angst*)». What differentiates dread from the related mood of fear is the fact that we always have a fear of *something*. In the case of dread, though, no such object can be named: «... although dread is always 'dread of', it is not dread of this or that. 'Dread of' is always a dreadful feeling 'about' —but not about this or that. The indefiniteness of *what* we dread is not just lack of definition: it represents the essential impossibility of defining the 'what'» (*EB*, p. 335).

What happens in dread, according to Heidegger, is that in a moment of profound sensibility, and shorn of our everyday concerns —which tend to fractionalize the world and make it familiar, we are confronted and oppressed by the totality of what is in its blunt evanescence. We realize that everything is slipping away, ourselves included. Filled with the uncanny sense of dread as everything in the world slips out of our grasp, we come face-to-face with that Nothing which is an inextricable element of the process of being.

It is, in fact, the Nothing which allows the process of being to take place; for the Nothing is vanishment, the slipping-away of what is. It is the functioning of *nihilation*<sup>7</sup>, which provides all change.

Coming face-to-face with Nothing, with nihilation, we «see» the totality of what is in its essentially evanescent character, as it vanishes from being. «Nihilation is not a fortuitous event; but, understood as

<sup>7</sup> The word «nihilation» has been coined by translators R. F. C. Hull and Alan Crick to approximate Heidegger's use of the German term *Nichtung*. They say, in a note on this word: «*Nichtung* is a causative process, and *nichten* a causative and intransitive verb. Ordinarily we would express the process in positive terms and would speak, for instance, of the 'becoming' of Nothing of the 'de-becoming' of something, as would be clear in a term like *Nichtswerdung* or the *Entwerdung* of Meister Eckhart» (*EB*, pp. 368-369).

the relegation to the vanishing what-is-in-totality, it reveals the latter in all its till now undisclosed strangeness as the pure «Other» —contrasted with Nothing. Only in the clear night of dread's Nothingness is what-is as such revealed in all its original overtness... that it 'is' and is not Nothing» (*EB*, p. 339).

Such would appear to be the character of that impermanence which Emily Dickinson addresses in «There came a Wind like a Bugle». Much of her finest poetry is devoted to the disclosure of this essential mystery of existence. Yet notice that she does not try to identify, to name, the mystery precisely, but works by that evocative indirection, content to let it dwell in its original character as mystery. As she says in number 1129, reflecting on her own method of poetic composition: «Tell all the Truth but tell it slant— / Success in Circuit lies...». And she certainly follows that advice, impeccably, in her «Wind like a Bugle». When, in line 7, she does come to name the Nothingness that inspires her dread, she uses a collage of words, «The Doom's electric Moccasin», which metaphorically associates it with the stealth of the Indian, the ineluctability of natural force, and the inevitability of death.

But the interesting part of the poem comes next, following this metaphorical letting-be of the mystery of temporality. While the first eight lines constitute a revelation of dread, the last nine are an accurate description of its jarring effects. The mood dread strips the world of its familiarity. In the presence of the evanescent, nihilating Nothing, we suddenly perceive that the things that make up the world *are not* in complete accord with those permanent concepts which language assigns them. We perceive that everything is slipping undeniably away, beyond the power of intellect or emotion to hold it. It thus becomes uncanny, unfamiliar. We feel that the world is not that comfortable, receptive place in which we are accustomed to reside. This is the revelation of what-is in totality in its «undisclosed strangeness as the pure 'Other'» already noted above. In lines nine through twelve we are given the uncanniness of a vanishing world.

The syntax is excessively convoluted here, but that is, after all, one way to convey a sense of unfamiliarity and discomfort. The world of nature, represented by the trees, is momentarily transformed into a «strange Mob» panting as though running in unison toward some disaster. The fences, normally stationary demarcations of space, «fled away» into the distance. And rather than the rivers running by the houses on the banks, in a reversal of normality the «Houses ran» by the rivers. This is the weird panorama that was seen by those «that lived—that Day», those who were living in that particular moment of dread, and those who looked. But really looking at nature means seeing the passage of the Nothing through the world. And only those who can really *confront* the protean aspect of dread are capable of fully living within the mystery of life. It is they who, alive with that awesome



knowledge, can see the world in its essential «otherness», cognizant of the fugitive disappearance of what is.

After this profound revelation, the sound of a bell strikes upon the heightened sensibility of the poet—a bell, most likely, activated by that same wind whose movement through the grass began this poetic chain of association. Therefore, the bell, sounding from a «steeple wild» would be sound of nihilation itself, the voice of disappearance arising out of the natural world. And as such, of course, it represents the poem, or the language of the poem, which speaks at the behest of the same invisible power. And the bell tells, very simply, as has the poem, «How much can come / And much can go / And yet abide the World!»

The poem is a celebration of the transience of life. And yet, in the very act of celebrating that transience, it monumentalizes it. Operating, as Heidegger postulates that all authentic language must, within the very nexus of change, it rescues permanence out of loss and thus allows us to understand them both, in their most fundamental character. But the stable world of the poem is not simply founded upon the shifting passage of nihilation which it reveals. That «World» which abides is the language of the poem, which accomodates the evanescent wind of nihilation much as it accomodates the transitory understanding of the reader as he reads.

Emily Dickinson's poetry is, very often, a forthright confrontation with dread. Detaching herself from the world, she encountered it in its most essential quality, that of evanescence. Out of this encounter arose the honest creation of a language which salvaged her world from annihilation and brought it into the stable «openness» of words. This explains the power, and the importance, of her nature poetry. It is a kind of beacon of human observation which brings the world of nature into our awareness. Lavishing her own particular slant of light upon the manifold things around her, she lets them «be» for us in ways that we would never notice for ourselves. Her poetry of nature's whims provides us with images of the world, and attitudes toward it, whose origin and validity we seldom, if ever, really bother to question.

However, when we do bother to question her *language*, we discover the sensitivity and precision which allow us to grasp the magical aspect that cloaks the world without destroying its magic. Dwelling upon the abstract foundations of human existence, she makes them concrete without making them brittle. Her penchant for capricious metaphor partially names the abstract, but cannot ever exhaust it. This poetic naming allows us to «see» the mystery, but always to see it *as* mystery. In this way her language brings metaphysical inquiry into the homely realm of everyday experience.

Her position was that of her words; she occupied that pallid zone between the two distinct worlds of mystery and experience. She could

often write from the viewpoint of the dead because, speaking behind the closed door of renunciation, she conceived herself outside of life. «'Tis not that Dying hurts us so—» she says with an authoritative voice, «'Tis living—hurts us more». And that symbolic death of renunciation occasioned by the painfulness of life, becomes in the case of Emily Dickinson, a conscious apotheosis into the immortality of language:

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some  
Who till they died, did not alive become—  
Who had they lived, had died but when  
They died, Vitality begun (816).

With her poet's sensibility, she deeply felt the transforming power of words. She, alone, realized that language, properly created, was a certain transcendence of life, a kind of immortality, the permanence beyond the flux, and that, in exercising this transcendence, she *became* her words.

Therefore, it should not be objected that we compare a poet of one century with a philosopher of the next, who very likely did not even know her work. Their common field is language, which preserves them both in time. Existing, for us, *as* language, they are a part of that historical conversation which composes the human spirit. As Heidegger says:

Obedient to the voice of Being, thought seeks the Word through which the truth of Being may be expressed. Only when the language of historical man is born of the Word does it ring true... The thinker utters Being. The poet names what is holy. We may know something about the relations between philosophy and poetry, but we know nothing of the dialogue between poet and thinker, who «dwell near to one another on mountains farthest apart» (*EB*, p. 360).

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