

## Paula Bennett: On 465 ("I heard a Fly buzz--when I died--")

Like many people in her period, Dickinson was fascinated by death-bed scenes. How, she asked various correspondents, did this or that person die? In particular, she wanted to know if their deaths revealed any information about the nature of the afterlife. In this poem, however, she imagines her own death-bed scene, and the answer she provides is grim, as grim (and, at the same time, as ironically mocking), as anything she ever wrote.

In the narrowing focus of death, the fly's insignificant buzz, magnified tenfold by the stillness in the room, is all that the speaker hears. This kind of distortion in scale is common. It is one of the 'illusions' of perception. But here it is horrifying because it defeats every expectation we have. Death is supposed to be an experience of awe. It is the moment when the soul, departing the body, is taken up by God. Hence the watchers at the bedside wait for the moment when the 'King' (whether God or death) 'be witnessed' in the room. And hence the speaker assigns away everything but that which she expects God (her soul) or death (her body) to take.

What arrives instead, however, is neither God nor death but a fly, '[w]ith Blue?uncertain--stumbling Buzz,' a fly, that is, no more secure, no more sure, than we are. Dickinson had associated flies with death once before in the exquisite lament, 'How many times these low feet/staggered.' In this poem, they buzz 'on the/ chamber window,' and speckle it with dirt (# 187, F, 152), reminding us that the housewife, who once protected us from such intrusions, will protect us no longer. Their presence is threatening but only in a minor way, 'dull' like themselves. They are a background noise we do not have to deal with yet.

In 'I heard a Fly buzz,' on the other hand, there is only one fly and its buzz is not only foregrounded. Before the poem is over, the buzz takes up the entire field of perception, coming between the speaker and the 'light' (of day, of life, of knowledge). It is then that the 'Windows' (the eyes that are the windows of the soul as well as, metonymically, the light that passes through the panes of glass) 'fail' and the speaker is left in darkness--in death, in ignorance. She cannot 'see' to 'see' (understand).

Given that the only sure thing we know about 'life after death' is that flies--in their adult form and more particularly, as maggots--devour us, the poem is at the very least a grim joke. In projecting her death-bed scene, Dickinson confronts her ignorance and gives back the only answer human knowledge can with any certainty give. While we may hope for an afterlife, no one, not even the dying, can prove it exists.

Like 'Four Trees--upon a solitary/Acre,' 'I heard a Fly buzz' represents an extreme position. I believe that to Dickinson it was a position that reduced human life to too elementary and meaningless a level. Abdicating belief, cutting off God's hand, as in 'I heard a Fly buzz' (a poem that tests precisely this situation), leaves us with nothing. Not just God, but we ourselves are reduced--a fact that has become painfully evident in twentieth-century literature.

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