

Richard Chase: On 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death")

Emily Dickinson's poems on death are scattered in clusters through the two volumes which contain her poetic works. Drawn together in one of the several orders that suggest themselves, they constitute a small body of poems equal to the most distinguished lyric verse in English.

She is surely unparalleled in capturing the experience of New England deathbed scenes and funerals. Of this kind the three best poems are "How many times these low feet staggered," "I heard a fly buzz when I died," and "I felt a funeral in my brain." Her most successful device in these poems is her juxtaposition of the sense of the mystery of death with the sense of particular material stresses, weights, motions, and sounds so that each clarifies and intensifies the other:

And then I heard them lift a box,
 And creak across my soul
With those same boots of lead, again.
 Then space began to toll

As all the heavens were a bell,
 And Being but an ear,
And I and silence some strange race,
 Wrecked, solitary, here.

[#280?Poems, 1896, p. 168]

Few other writers have expressed such astonishing loneliness as this.

The objection has been made that no poet ought to imagine that he has died and that he knows exactly what the experience is like. The objection does not apply, at any rate, to "I heard a fly buzz," since the poem does not in the least strive after the unknowable but deals merely with the last sensations of consciousness. . . . /247/

[The differing versions] remind the reader of the textual difficulties in the Dickinson canon which are still to be cleared up. "I heard a fly buzz" has again and again been reprinted in the

altered version of the early Todd Higginson editions. This version substitutes "round my form" for "in the room" (second line), preferring an insipidity to an imperfect rhyme. It reads "The eyes beside" instead of "The eyes around," substitutes "sure" for "firm," and says in place of "witnessed in the room," "witnessed in his power." Both "sure" and "power" have generalized moralistic and honorific connotations which Higginson and Mrs. Todd thought (perhaps rightly) would be more pleasing to late Victorian readers than the poet's more precise, concrete words. These editors left the fourth stanza intact but wrote the third stanza thus:

I willed my keepsakes, signed away

What portion of me I

Could make assignable?and then

There interposed a fly.

[#465?Poems, 1896, p. 184]

To gain a rhyme, that is, they did not scruple to add the gratuitous and poetically neutral "Could make" and to sacrifice the voiced "s" sound which the poet had provided in "It was." Higginson and Mrs. Todd did not publish this poem at all until *Poems, Third Series*, in 1896. This leads one to conjecture that they thought it unusually awkward in its versification and that, consequently, when they did get around to publishing it, they edited it with unusually free hands. These are questions which can be answered only by the much desired definitive edition of Emily Dickinson's work.

Of the several poems which describe death as a gentleman visitor or lover the most familiar is also incomparably the best ["Because I could not stop for Death"]. . . . The only pressing technical objection to this poem is the remark that "Immortality" in the first stanza is a meretricious and unnecessary personification and that the common sense of the situation demands that Immortality ought to be the destination of the coach and not one of the /249/ passengers. The personification of death, however, is unassailable. In the literal meaning of the poem, he is apparently a successful citizen who has amorous but genteel intentions. He is also God. And though as a genteel citizen, his "civility" may be a little hollow?or even a confidence trick?as God his "civility" is that hierarchic status which he confers upon the poet and for which she gladly exchanges the labor and leisure of the less brilliant life she has been leading.

The word "labor" recalls Emily Dickinson's idea that life is to be understood as the slow labor of dying; now this labor is properly put away. So is the leisure, since a far more desirable leisure will be hers in "eternity." The third stanza is a symbolic recapitulation of life: the children playing, wrestling (more "labor") through the cycle of their existence, "in a ring"; the gazing grain signifies ripeness and the entranced and visionary gaze that first beholds the approach of death of which the setting sun is the felicitous symbol.

The last two stanzas are hardly surpassed in the whole range of lyric poetry. The visual images here are handled with perfect economy. All the poem needs is one or two concrete images?roof, cornice?to awake in our minds the appalling identification of house with grave.

Even more compelling is the sense of pausing, and the sense of overpowering action and weight in "swelling" and "mound." This kinaesthetic imagery prepares us for the feeling of suddenly discerned motion in the last stanza, which with fine dramatic tact presents us with but one visual image, the horses' heads. There are progressively fewer visible objects in the last three stanzas, since the seen world must be /250/ made gradually to sink into the nervously sensed world? a device the poet uses to extraordinary effect in the last stanza of "I heard a fly buzz." /251/

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