

Paula Bennett: On 754 ("My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--")

No poem written by a woman poet more perfectly captures the nature, the difficulties, and the risks involved in this task of self-redefinition and self-empowerment than the poem that stands at the center of this book, Emily Dickinson's brilliant and enigmatic "My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun":

[. . . .]

Composed during the period when Dickinson had reached the height of her poetic prowess, "My Life had stood" represents the poet's most extreme attempt to characterize the Vesuvian nature of the power or art which she believed was hers. Speaking through the voice of a gun, Dickinson presents herself in this poem as everything "woman" is not: cruel not pleasant, hard not soft, emphatic not weak, one who kills not one who nurtures. just as significant, she is proud of it, so proud that the temptation is to echo Robert Lowell's notorious description of Sylvia Plath, and say that in "My Life had stood," Emily Dickinson is "hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another 'poetess.?"

Like the persona in Plath's Ariel poems, in "My Life had stood," Dickinson's speaker has deliberately shed the self-protective layers of conventional femininity, symbolized in the poem by the doe and the deep pillow of the "masochistic" eider duck. In the process the poet uncovers the true self within, in all its hardness and rage, in its desire for revenge and aggressive, even masculine, sexuality (for this is, after all, one interpretation of the gun in the poem). The picture of Dickinson that emerges, like the picture of Plath that emerges from the "big strip tease" of "Lady Lazarus" (CP245) and other Ariel poems, is not an attractive one. But, again like Plath, Dickinson is prepared to embrace it nevertheless--together with all other aspects of her unacceptable self. Indeed, embracing the true or unacceptable self appears to be the poem's *raison d'etre*, just as it is the *raison d'etre* of Plath's last poems.

In writing "My Life had stood," Dickinson clearly transgresses limits no woman, indeed no human being, could lightly afford to break. And to judge by the poem's final riddling stanza, a conundrum that critics have yet to solve satisfactorily, she knew this better than anyone. As Adrienne Rich has observed, Dickinson's underlying ambivalence toward the powers her speaker claims to exercise through her art (the powers to "hunt," "speak," "smile," "guard," and "kill") appears to be extreme. Of this ambivalence and its effect on women poets, Rich has written most poignantly, perhaps, because of her own position as poet. For Rich there is no easy way to resolve the conflict entangling Dickinson in the poem. "If there is a female consciousness in this poem," she writes,

it is buried deeper than the images: it exists in the ambivalence toward power, which is extreme. Active willing and creation in women are forms of aggression, and aggression is both "the power to kill" and punishable by death. The union of gun with hunter embodies the danger of identifying and taking hold of her forces,

not least that in so doing she risks defining herself--and being defined--as aggressive, as unwomanly ("and now We hunt the Doe"), and as potentially lethal.

Yet despite these dangers and despite her recognition of the apparent dehumanization her persona courts, in "My Life had stood" Emily Dickinson does take precisely the risks that Rich describes. In the poem's terms, she is murderous. She is a gun. Her rage is part of her being. Indeed, insofar as it permits her to explode and hence to speak, rage defines her, unwomanly and inhuman though it is. Whatever constraints existed in her daily life (the breathless and excessive femininity so well described by her preceptor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson), inwardly it would seem Emily Dickinson was not to be denied. In her art she was master of herself, whatever that self was, however aggressive, unwomanly, or even inhuman society might judge it to be.

Given Dickinson's time and upbringing, it would, of course, have been unlikely that she, any more than we today, would have been comfortable with the high degree of anger and alienation which she exhibits in this extraordinary poem. But the anger and the alienation are there and, whether we are comfortable or not, like Dickinson we must deal with them. If, as Adrienne Rich asserts, "My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun" is a "central poem in understanding Emily Dickinson, and ourselves, and the condition of the woman artist, particularly in the nineteenth century," it is so precisely because Dickinson was prepared to grapple in it with so many unacceptable feelings within herself. Whatever else "My Life had stood" may be about, it is about the woman as artist, the woman who must deny her femininity, even perhaps her humanity, if she is to achieve the fullness of her self and the fullness of her power in her verse.

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