

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#293 (c.1861)

I got so I could take [hear?] his name –
Without – Tremendous gain –
That Stop-sensation – on my Soul –
And Thunder – in the Room –

I got so I could walk across
That Angle in the floor,
Where he turned so, and I turned – how –
And all our Sinew tore –

I got so I could stir the Box –
In which his letters grew
Without that forcing, in my breath –
As Staples – driven through –

Could dimly recollect a Grace –
I think, they call it “God” –
Renowned to ease Extremity –
When Formula, had failed –

And shape my Hands –
Petition’s way,
Tho’ ignorant of a word
That Ordination – utters –

My Business, with the Cloud,
If any Power behind it, be,
Not subject to Despair –
It care, in some remoter way,
For so minute affair
As Misery –
Itself, too vast, for interrupting – more –

ANALYSIS

“Nothing is more remarkable than the variety of inconsistency this effort displays. The first three stanzas are at one level of sensibility and of language and are as good verse as Emily Dickinson ever wrote. The next two stanzas are on a different and fatigued level of sensibility, are bad verse and flat language, and have only a serial connection with the first three. The last stanza, if it is a stanza, is on still a different level of sensibility and not on a recognizable level of language at all: the level of desperate inarticulateness to which no complete response can be articulated in return.

One knows from the strength of the first three stanzas what might have been meant to come after and one feels like writing the poem oneself—the basest of all critical temptations. We feel that Emily Dickinson let herself go. The accidents that provided her ability here made a contrivance which was not a poem but a private mixture of first-rate verse, bad verse, and something that is not verse at all. Yet—and this is the point—this contrivance represents in epitome the whole of her work; and whatever judgment you bring upon the epitome you will, I think, be compelled to bring upon the whole.

No judgment is so persuasive as when it is disguised as a statement of facts. I think it is a fact that the failure and success of Emily Dickinson's poetry were uniformly accidental largely because of the private and eccentric nature of her relations to the business of poetry. She was neither a professional poet nor an amateur; she was a private poet who wrote indefatigably as some women cook or knit. Her gift for words and the cultural predicament of her time drove her to poetry instead of antimacassars. Neither her personal education nor the habit of her society as she knew it ever gave her the least inkling that poetry is a rational and objective art and most so when the theme is self-expression.

She came, as Mr. Tate says, at the right time for one kind of poetry: the poetry of sophisticated, eccentric vision. That is what makes her good—in a few poems and many passages representatively great. But she never undertook the great profession of controlling the means of objective expression. That is why the bulk of her verse is not representative but mere fragmentary indicative notation. The pity of it is that the document her whole work makes shows nothing so much as that she had the themes, the insight, the observation, and the capacity for honesty, which had she only known how—or only known why—would have made the major instead of the minor fraction of her verse genuine poetry. But her dying society had no tradition by which to teach her the one lesson she did not know by instinct.”

Richard P. Blackmur
Language as Gesture
(Harcourt 1952)

“A...sort of heresy animates ‘I got so I could hear his name,’ another early work of consummate artistry. By the fourth stanza, having by painfully slow degrees and great effort become sufficiently detached from the anguishing experience of separation from a loved one, the speaker is able to contemplate an attempt for comfort in prayer, even though it is an unfamiliar gesture. We see how the soul's agony is made by the imagery of physical pain: ‘I got so I could hear his name --’... Having so effectively brought emotional disturbance under control, the speaker in the final stanza rejects the thought of pleading for divine aid, for, she believes, though she prays to the ultimate power, if that power has not also known despair it can offer comfort only in some disinterested and ineffectual way. The ultimate power may consider her misery trivial, but to her that ‘minute affair’ of anguish is so enormous it excludes any sort of interruption, including (she says finally) even the offering up of prayer: ‘My Business, with the Cloud, / If any Power behind it, be...’

Reading the first line of this last excerpt as if it ended with a period clarifies the meaning. The fusion of agonizing experiences, mental and physical, the sharp metaphorical depiction of pain, and the articulation of how the person is ravished by the experience of loss—how first the physical senses respond, then the emotions, then the mind, as each is in turn called back to activity from paralysis—are highly effective. The vision is a tragic one: even if God is attentive to individual anguish, He is effectually indifferent. In this poem, as in...other works...Emily Dickinson's genius clearly had guided her expression beyond the level of conventional sentiment and emotional cliché to the level of mature poetry.”

David Porter
The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry
(Harvard 1966)

“The first three stanzas, with their fusion of agonizing physical and emotional pain, are clear enough. The remembered transport of agony, the marriage of excruciation and ecstasy, the subsequent mastery of emotion—and the speaker's distancing of all of these in the past tense—lead us to expect a peripety [sudden turn of events or unexpected reversal]. Control recollected may be control that has suffered a collapse; and the stress on the past-tense nature of the control at the beginning of the initial stanza suggests that the space between the stanzas, to which the speaker's mind temporarily reverts, is occupied by a less manageable present that will eventually overwhelm even memory. But instead of the collapse of control with which the poem tantalizes us, we get a distraction from it: an appeal to God that becomes a way of avoiding feeling, and the poem ends not with passion, as we might expect, but rather with passion defended against. For passion would need to acknowledge directly the attendant circumstance of its loss, the ‘him’ whose most palpable fact is absence.

Thus in the last stanza, confounded by the requirements of the present, utterance is most in disarray. There the speaker seems to be suggesting she would have commerce with a cloud *if* she could be sure a God were behind it, and, in addition (for 'be' in the stanza functions as the verb for two subjunctives), that, could she determine such a power were not itself subject to despair, she would cease petitioning it for relief from an affliction that, failing to understand experientially, it could not mitigate. As my paraphrase suggests, the pronoun referent, like the reason for speech itself, is a matter of confusion. Though 'It [would] care' refers grammatically to the cloud, the pronoun would be a less enigmatic 'He' if the speaker had any confidence in the power behind it. But although the fifth stanza claims to invoke a God, it is clear by the last stanza that the speaker does not know to whom she is talking, does not know whether she wishes to be talking, and ignorance finally gives way to the acknowledgment that, in such a state, no more can be or must be said. For the breaking off of utterance comes at a point when 'more' would be an affront not only to God, who may or may not be attending from a distance, but also to the speaker, who acknowledges, albeit covertly, that she has herself become distanced from her subject.

Indeed, what begins as the endurance of great feeling turns into blasphemy on two counts, first with respect to the earthly lover and second with respect to the God who displaces him, for the poem's initial line suggests a pun on 'taking His name in vain.' To take it in vain is to take it without comprehending its significance, and this the speaker does initially when his name (the lover's) fails to tap the current of meaning, and later when His name (God's) becomes a denomination so remote in significance that it can barely be summoned, and, once recalled, is attributed to someone else ('I think, they call it "God" --').

Though the reduction of the experience is attributed to God, 'remote[ness]' is a psychological remedy, not the divine cause. Put briefly, God is a way out, an object of simple projection. To the extent that Dickinson fails to know this and does not, I maintain, intend it, we have a complex hermeneutic situation here. Meaning breaks off, dissolves, goes under, at the moment when it is perceived as too painful, and that fact is attended by the rhythmic transformation in the last three stanzas; full rhyme disappears, the common particular meter established in the first three stanzas gives way to variation, as does the regular four-stress line. Such rhythmic change also counterpoints the paraphrasable sense of the lines.

The message of the words (their meaning insofar as it can be figured) is 'God does not understand and hence cannot care.' The rhythmic message of the last three stanzas, however, is 'I myself no longer wish to understand and therefore, of course, you must not either.' Such a proposition may be arguable, but it makes experiential sense. It is, in fact, the only explanation that makes sense of the abrupt and rather elaborate confusions with which the poem concludes. Agony—in fact all meaning—goes dead on the speaker when she summons distance from her experience and, in so doing, relinquishes it. The poem, though not, I suspect, intentionally, is about what it is like to trivialize feeling because, as is, feeling has become unendurable. Better to make it nothing than to die from it.

The disjunction between the two parts of 'I got so I could take his name' is revelatory of narrative breakdown, not of controlled narrative transformation. The speaker is not in possession of her story, or rather she is in possession of two stories, the bringing together of which points to a fundamental ambivalence and an attendant obfuscation of meaning. As a consequence of the ambivalence, meaning becomes symptomatic, breaks out into gesture where it cannot be fully comprehended and where it often expresses feelings that seem antithetical to the earlier intention of its speaker or author—it is difficult to distinguish adequately between the two in such instances, since both are victims of the same confusion."

Sharon Cameron
"A Loaded Gun": The Dialectic of Rage"
Lyric Time
(Johns Hopkins U 1979)

Michael Hollister (2014)

