

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#214 (c.1860)

I taste a liquor never brewed –
From Tankards scooped in Pearl –
Not all the Frankfort Berries
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air – am I –
And Debauchee of Dew –
Reeling – thro endless summer days –
From inns of Molten Blue –

When “Landlords” turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove’s door –
When Butterflies – renounce their ‘drams’ –
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –
And Saints – to windows run –
To see the little Tippler
From Manzanilla come!

ANALYSIS

“The editors have discharged their delicate duty toward it with unimpeachable discretion, and Colonel Higginson has said so many apt things of her work in his introduction, that one who cannot differ with him must be vexed a little to be left so little to say. He speaks of her ‘curious indifference to all conventional rules of verse,’ but he adds that ‘when a thought takes one’s breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence.’ He notes ‘the quality suggestive of the poetry of William Blake’ in her, but he leaves us the chance to say that it is a Blake who had read Emerson who had read Blake. The fantasy is as often Blakian as the philosophy is Emersonian; but after feeling this again and again. One is ready to declare that the utterance of this most singular and authentic spirit would have been the same if there has never been an Emerson or a Blake in the world. She sometimes suggests Heine as much as either of these; all three in fact are spiritually present in some of the pieces; yet it is hardly probably that she had read Heine, or if she had, would have abhorred him.

[“I taste a liquor never brewed”] is something that seems compact of both Emerson and Black, with a touch of Heine too... But we believe it is only seeming; we believe these things are...wholly her own.... Occasionally, the outside of the poem, so to speak, is left so rough, so rude, that the art seems to have faltered. But there is apparent to reflection the face that the artist meant just this harsh exterior to remain, and that no grace of smoothness could have imparted her intention as it does. It is the soul of an abrupt, exalted New England woman that speaks in such brokenness....

If nothing else had come out of life but this strange poetry we should feel that in the work of Emily Dickinson America, or New England rather, had made a distinctive addition to the literature of the world, and could not be left out of any record of it; and the interesting and important thing is that this poetry is as characteristic of our life as our business enterprise, our political turmoil, our demagogism, our millionairism... ‘There never was an artistic period. There never was an art-loving nation.’ But there were moments of and there were persons to whom art was dear, and Emily Dickinson was one of these persons,

one of these moments in a national life, and she could as well happen in Amherst, Massachusetts as in Athens, [Greece].”

William Dean Howells
Editor's Study
Harper's New Monthly Magazine LXXXII
(January 1891) 318-21

“The English critic who said of Miss Emily Dickinson that she might have become a fifth-rate poet ‘if she had only mastered the rudiments of grammar and gone into metrical training for about fifteen years,’—the rather candid English critics who said this somewhat overstated his case.’ He had, however, a fairly good case. If Miss Emily Dickinson had undergone the austere curriculum indicated, she would, I am sure, have become an admirable lyric poet of the second magnitude. In the first volume of her poetical chaos is a little poem which needs only slight revision in the initial stanza in order to make it worthy of ranking with some of the odd swallow flights in Heine’s lyrical *intermezzo*. I have ventured to desecrate this stanza by tossing a rhyme into it, as the other stanzas happened to rhyme, and here print the lyric, hoping the reader will not accuse me of overvaluing it: ‘I taste a liquor never brewed / In vats upon the Rhine; / No tankard ever held a draught / Of alcohol like mine....’

There are three or four bits in this kind in Miss Dickinson’s book; but for the most part the ideas totter and toddle, not having learned to walk. In spite of this, several of the quatrains are curiously touching, they have such a pathetic air of yearning to be poems....That Miss Dickinson’s whimsical memoranda have a certain something which, for want of a more precise name, we term *quality* is not to be denied except by the unconvertible heathen who are not worth conversion. But the incoherence and formlessness of her—I don’t know how to designate them—versicles are fatal.... An eccentric, dreamy, half-educated recluse in an out-of-the-way New England village (or anywhere else) cannot with impunity set at defiance the laws of gravitation and grammar.... Miss Dickinson’s versicles have a queerness and a quaintness that have stirred a momentary curiosity in emotional bosoms. Oblivion lingers in the immediate neighborhood.”

Thomas Bailey Aldrich
“*In Re Emily Dickinson*”
The Atlantic Monthly LXIX
(January 1892) 143-44

“[The earlier poem, “Bring me the sunset in a cup,”] is almost a total waste, but it hit upon one fine phrase: ‘debauchee of dew’—the kind of phrase Emily could not, for all her false starts, sacrifice to lesser phrases; and so presently she wrote another poem (we cannot tell how many she wrote in the meantime) which did the phrase full justice.

Out of this overwritten early attempt comes one of Emily’s most dazzling poems [“I taste a liquor never brewed”].... In twenty-five years of writing Emily was not going to excel it very often.... In the earlier poem there are four attempts at the inns of molten blue, the tankard, the vats, the dram, and the landlord of the foxglove. But the effect is cloudy. Emily uses ‘spun the breadths of blue,’ and ‘withes of supple blue’; she makes two of the four stanzas turn on the rhyme *blue* with *dew* and *due*. In [“I taste a liquor never brewed”], the phrase chimed, at last. There are many reasons why. And the second poem is in quatrains—Emily’s destined form; the first tries with adjectives and rhymes to make a stanza form of six lines. Many of the early poems resist the quatrain form.... Mr. Aldrich’s tinkered stanza follows.... *Idiotic meddler!* [emphasis added] What has he dared to do to one of the most delicious lines in the English language! Mr. Aldrich takes one line of Emily’s and then writes three nondescript of his own, in the interest of ‘swallow flights’ and ‘lyrical intermezzos.’

‘From tankards scooped in pearl’ enjoins our attention, after being so vandalized. Quite apart from the sounds received and carried on by it, it runs the voice from the *a*’s in ‘tankards’ to the *o*’s in ‘scooped’ and then produces the word ‘pearl,’ on which to let them culminate; the *nk* and the *r* in ‘tankard’ catching all the other consonants as the ripple of tone-colour runs down the line. If anyone needs the pale device of rhyme after such interplay of sound, culminating in ‘Yield such an alcohol,’ he is tone-deaf and deserves to be so. But he should be told that, while he was hearing nothing, the stanza as a whole has been giving off

the variations on the sound of *I*, firmly placed in the middle of the first line, at the end of the second, near the beginning of the third to culminate in 'yield' and the *I*'s of 'alcohol.'

The next stanza is equally, although differently, inebriate. 'Inebriate of air am I' plays with the delicate *I* sound in the first word, repeats in it 'air' and then grounds it in the word '*I*.' Line two is all *e* and *ew* sound, alliterated and emphasized by the *ee*'s running into 'reeling.' Then comes 'inns of molten blue,' which would be only a phrase if the *I*'s of the stanza were not still in the ear and the *ou* and the *u* in 'moulten' and 'blue' did not come as a perfect conclusion, a sensuous resolution."

Genevieve Taggard
The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson
(Knopf 1934) 267-70

"Another famous poem...is more purely rococo... Like her poem about the train, ["I taste a liquor never brewed"] is on several technical grounds a fully created and successful piece of verse. Again it is the tone, the attitude the writer displays, which makes one uncomfortable. This is of course not a poem for children or about children; it is a poem for adults who like to play at being children but have not the relaxation or the sympathetic insight to succeed. One distinguishes as peculiarly rococo the emphasis on a sort of delicate epicureanism, the idea that a tankard ought to be of peal, the assumption that aesthetic pleasure is to be found in smallness, feminine delicacy, capriciousness, coqueting with the masculine or bestial pleasure of drunkenness, and flirtation with death.

Egon Friedell has brilliantly summarized the characteristics of the rococo style. He describes it as issuing from a 'last craving for illusion to carry one over the gateway of death' and as taking for its formula 'loving and dying.' The style is, as he says, feminine and affectedly 'infantine.' It is 'forever ambiguously smiling...amusing, piquant, capricious, epicurean, witty, coquettish, full of anecdote, short story and point...with an atmosphere of comedy, theatrical and yet domestic.' It stresses, above all, smallness, retirement, solitude, and fragile charm... It abandons literature and philosophy on the large scale and cultivates lyric, the epigram, the sharply phrased aphorism. It plays at love according to its particular convention of capricious mistress and chivalrous adorer; it eschews the grand passion of love for fear of spoiling the delightful playfulness of the game and dispelling the illusion of naivete and childish innocence. It creates an illusion of agelessness by requiring a powdered whiteness of the hair.

One need not press the comparison very far to see the genuine elements of rococo in Emily Dickinson's elaborate poetic game of playing at being married or dead or at being an immortal queen or a child in a withdrawn miniature world capriciously embellished with jewels, robes, diadems, liquors, flowers, animals, and birds. Emily Dickinson is not Marie Antoinette and her private rococo is not that of eighteenth-century France. Yet...the historical view allows us to understand her imagery of clothes, for example, as a late rococo version of similar imagery in Shakespeare, or her imagery of intoxication as a rococo version of, let us say, Jonathan Edwards's imaginative theology of experience."

Richard Chase
Emily Dickinson
(William Sloane 1951) 224-30

"["I taste a liquor never brewed"] is an excellent example of both [Emily Dickinson's] concern with and indifference to rhyme and metrical exactness... The poem uses Common Meter, but the regularity is broken in two ways. The third lines of the first and fourth stanzas are both catalectic, and the rhymes of those stanzas are imperfect. These variations unquestionably were deliberate, for they are typical of her modifications of traditional forms. Yet the only surviving manuscript of the poem is a semifinal draft on which she offers alternative readings for two lines. For line three she suggests: 'Not all the vats upon the Rhine,' and for the final line: 'Leaning against the sun.' The first alternative, if adopted, would supply the missing half-foot: the second would create an exact rhyme. We cannot infer from the fact that the suggested changes exist that she would have adopted them in a fair copy. She frequently did not do so. There are instances where two fair copies, each sent to a friend, show like indifference to rhyme and metric patterns. One may hazard the opinion that her choice in any event would have been determined by her preference for one image rather than another, not by a desire to create exact meter and rhyme."

Thomas H. Johnson
Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography
(Harvard 1955) 91-92

“In an early poem, drunk with the joy of living, she expresses her transport in terms of a cosmic spree. Borrowing from the humorous tall tale its hyperbolic fantasy and other extravagant techniques, she writes: ‘I taste a liquor never brewed --’... The temptation can hardly be resisted to read this as a parody of Emerson’s transcendental rendering of poetic inspiration in ‘Bacchus,’ which begins: ‘Bring me wine, but wine which never grew / In the belly of the grape...’ It adds to the burlesque that hers is a malty brew instead of the traditional Dionysiac wine. Having repudiated the false, she proceeds to extol the true in soaring imagery: ‘Inebriate of Air – am I --’...

All nature participates in her bacchanal.... At this point the poems diverge widely. Nature is brought into Emerson’s revel too but in a very different way.... His wine is the Platonic ‘flowing’ of divine spirit. Drunk with it, the poet merges with nature, breaks through convention, annihilates time and space, and recovers his lost heaven. The ‘remembering wine,’ by analogy with the Platonic doctrine of ‘reminiscence,’ enables him once again to draw on the blue tablets ‘The dancing Pleiads and eternal men,’ as on the first day of creation. Dickinson declines to participate in any such inebriate visions. Her beery spree lands her in heaven too, but in a different condition. She continues to drink ‘Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats’... This unorthodox scene of hurraing in heaven, with its bold metaphor converting the sun into a celestial lamp-post, may well be a comic version of spiritual intoxication as set forth in the Book of Revelation...

But the parallels with ‘Bacchus’ are even more striking. The close echoes of its language up to a climactic point and the sudden turn to an opposite conclusion seem to suggest a conscious parody of its doctrines. At any rate, neither here nor elsewhere is there any evidence that she accepted the mystical bases of Emerson’s transcendental esthetic: that the poet can absorb the spirit that energizes nature and so achieve merger with the Oversoul. Parody or not, this is simply a humorous fable of the poet’s inspiration, drunk with the joy of life and elevated into a very sensuous heaven.

Yet there is a significant meaning to be drawn from it too. Cosmic inebriation is another deliberately extravagant metaphor to go along with thunder, fires, and volcanoes. For hypersensitivity to natural beauty was another of the pressures that produced her poetry.... At times her reaction to beauty in nature sounds like the lyric cry of pain that had become a convention since the early nineteenth century.... But this has less kinship with her romantic predecessors than with Jonathan Edwards, who held that the visible universe is ‘an emanation of God for the pure joy of creation, in which the creatures find their justification by yielding consent to the beauty of the whole even though it slay them.’ She rejected the theological dogma implied in this thesis, for she kept God and nature sharply differentiated, even while she seized for her own purposes its esthetic doctrine.

Beauty is her name for the ecstasy with which we perceive that nature is the process of dying into immortality. She also kept man and nature separate, but as a sensitive and perceptive poet she was constantly drawn to speculate on its [nature’s] possible meanings for her... She herself has left a subtle aphorism defining its relation to her poetry: ‘Nature is a Haunted House – but Art – a House that tries to be haunted.’ This is her cryptic explanation.”

Charles R. Anderson
Emily Dickinson’s Poetry: Stairway of Surprise
(Holt 1960) 73-76

“The whole sense of the poem is that in nature one may find the stimulants for intemperate joy. The engaging qualities of this poem are not, of course, in the hackneyed notion that nature is the aliment of happiness. Rather, those qualities issue from Emily Dickinson’s wit in appropriating nature imagery to the underlying metaphor of inebriation. The ultimate triumph of her virtuoso performance in this poem is that she sings the scandalous behavior of the speaker (perhaps a bumblebee, but very unlike Emerson’s) in the stately rhythms of the common meter of hymnody.”

David Porter
The Art of Emily Dickinson’s Early Poetry

(Harvard 1966)

Michael Hollister (2014)