

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#1129 (c.1868)

Tell all the Truth but tell is slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our inform Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –

ANALYSIS

“Again, this poem has been read as an instance of Emily Dickinson’s deliberate tact and poetic strategy ‘in a generation which did not permit her, without the ambiguity of the riddle, to “tell the truth”... She early learned that “success in circuit lies”.’ I cannot disprove that notion, nor do I feel obliged to; but the poem seems to me to have a good deal of religious significance that such a statement inclines altogether to flout: And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightening and thick clouds upon the mount.... And the Lord said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish. (Exodus 19:16-21)

The blinding effect of direct access to the Godhead, which is to say the Truth (except in the case of selected few, and Moses one of them), has been a commonplace of religious poetry from long before Emily Dickinson to our own century. And there is what might be called a New Testament version of the same idea. Jesus has just told his followers the parable of the sower and the seed: ‘And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. And he said unto them, Unto you is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables.’ (Mark 4:9-11)

Christ himself has been seen as that human manifestation of the Godhead which allows all men to look upon that Truth which would otherwise be blinding. Milton clearly has such a meditating notion in mind in the ‘Nativity ode’.... The same idea is, as I understand it, somewhat blasphemously paralleled by John Donne in ‘The Extasie,’ in which, like Christ undergoing human incarnation, the Truth and the Word becoming flesh, so must the pure lovers’ ‘souls descend / T’affections and to faculties,’ and he continues, ‘To our bodies turne we then, that so / Weak men on love revealed may look.’ I am not asserting an influence of either Milton or Donne on Emily Dickinson. I am, however, convinced that the success that lies in circuit, that dictates that all the truth must be told, but told slant, has behind it the authority of both the Old and New Testament: that parables, riddles, the Incarnation itself are, but aspects of a Truth we could not comprehend without their mediation.”

Anthony Hecht
“The Riddles of Emily Dickinson”
Obbligati (Atheneum 1986)

“As directly as any poem Dickinson ever wrote, this one posits a message. The gist of the poem is clearly a recommendation that truth be stated obliquely, lest sudden or direct exposure to it damage us. Furthermore, the poem is organized as a serial repetition and amplification of the single central theme. Dickinson less develops her theme than rewords it. Each of the poem’s four complete but unpunctuated sentences (line 1, line 2, lines 3-4, and lines 5-8,) advances a self-contained variation of what the first already states with reasonable fullness. The second line, for instance, parallels and reiterates the first

mainly by altering the linear 'slant' to a curvilinear 'Circuit,' thereby advantageously suggesting circuitousness as well.

Repeating a single theme in several vivid and rather direct versions makes the poem itself strikingly uncircuitous, it would seem, particularly in comparison to the elliptical, periphrastic, and catachretic extravagances of many Dickinson poems. The repetitions work to limit what more extravagant poems license, attention to any waywardness, equivocality, or recalcitrance in a poem's details. In details, however, is where Dickinson usually finds the cherished wildness of language. 'Superb,' for instance, must primarily be taken as a word of praise, representing the worthiness of truth and the desirability of our being dazzled by it, though the word can have more negative connotations: pride, haughtiness, even cruelty. Similarly, 'infirm' mainly signifies a regrettable but forgivable weakness we are all said to have, our irresolution about bearing truth.

However, the term can also suggest a more thoroughgoing incompatibility between truth's brightness and our delight. The legal meaning of the word is 'invalid,' as of an infirm title to a piece of property; that meaning would ascribe the incompatibility more to the essence of truth and delight than to a curable weakness in delight. Finally, 'surprise' chiefly denotes the suddenness of our being delighted by truth, a slantwise telling accordingly being recommended so that the brightness is not too astonishing. On the other hand, 'surprise' belongs grammatically to the truth, not the telling or our response. The grammar may make a difference, for when surprise is ascribed to an active agent rather than to a recipient, it commonly implies aggression. Macbeth's surprise of Duncan would thus be his unexpected attack upon him. (A manuscript variant for 'bright' is 'bold,' which likewise makes truth the agent that intends its own shocking advent.)

I do not call attention to these generally more sinister possibilities in the first four lines in order to propose that they make up the poem's true but covert theme. About a work that less insistently repeated a single, central exhortation (and perhaps had a looser structure than this one), one might plausibly claim just that. In considering 'Renunciation is a piercing virtue' (#745), for instance, no respectable interpretation could fail to notice the image of laceration which is inherent in 'piercing' and which ironizes the commendatory sense of 'valuably keen or emphatic.' Here, however, the repetition of the central theme discourages such regard for semantic deflections, which otherwise can often be crucial in reading Dickinson. The question then is what effect or function to ascribe to the combination of reiteration and potential waywardness.

In fact, without ceasing to reaffirm the central theme, the poem's repetitions gradually pull free of it. The more the poem insists, the more it raises up divergent possibilities. The epic simile that begins the second half of the poem, for instance, seems designed to reinforce once again the need for slantwise telling, but the analogy it proposes breaks down on close inspection. Lightning is surely an image of truth, for instance, and children of ourselves, truth's beholders. But how exactly does an 'explanation kind' ward off the dangers of direct exposure to truth? A child, frightened by a storm, may be reassured by its parents, but the child's vulnerability is not thereby lessened. If we assume an elided auxiliary in line 5, understanding it to say that the lightning is or must be eased by an unnamed adult's explanation, we are offered a highly unlikely claim. Explanations do not ease the force of a storm. Imaginary dangers may be dispelled, but the real ones are quite enough; and this poem offers no support for the possibility that truth only seems dangerous to the childishly ignorant or superstitious. Alternatively, if we construe 'eased' as a verb in the active voice, the poem claims that lightning itself eases up by means of some kind explanation, muffling its force on our behalf. This is meteorologically unlikely, to say the least. Either way we construe the syntax, lightning remains the same potentially deadly bolt of electricity.

This fact might encourage us to glance back to the second line and wonder if we have not overlooked a ghastly, proleptic pun in 'Circuit.' Closing such a circuit would then be the lightning's success, anyway its natural destiny, but read in that way the rhythmically and rhetorically evident parallelism of lines 1 and 2 would be sharply disrupted. We would now be advised to tell it slant to avoid a murderously successful circuit. The second line then offers itself up to two contradictory and incompatible readings, an obviously dominant one cued by the repetitions in the poem as a whole and by the links to the first line and also a subordinate one cued retroactively as it were by the imagery in lines 5-8.

The phrase 'dazzle gradually' contains the same problem in miniature, though here it is not the sense of the phrase that is in question but its felicity. The words make an oxymoron that in most respects seems admirably constructed. Such figures are usually striking, and here the effectiveness is reinforced by vowel assonance. But dazzling gradually is the act to which the simile in lines 5 and 6 is being compared. And one function of the comparison is to put asunder what the oxymoron hath writ. It insinuates that no phonetic or rhetorical trick ought to convince us, like some grownup's hasty story to frightened children, that dazzling gradually is anything more than a comforting but preposterous fiction.

According to the insinuations of the lightning image, then, we can never see or grasp the truth's illumination. Unless the truth dazzle gradually, at best a miraculous event, we are all blind.... If we play Ben Franklin, seeking truth in a thunderstorm, we blind ourselves at the moment of success. If we sensibly eschew such folly, then we are blind in another, more traditional sense. Not having seen the light, we wander in error and falsehood, perhaps comforting ourselves with kind but false explanations on the order of Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and a prescientific mythology of thunderbolts. Moreover, the 'we' apparently includes the poet, who claims no exemption from infirmity. This further destabilizes the poem's nonetheless emphatic truth claims. Supposedly truthful and unmistakably confident statements emerge from a place of blindness, the situation perhaps thereby disaffirming the negative insinuations and the cheery exhortations as well.

The hermeneutic zigzag of truth and error, blindness and enlightenment, or affirmation and insinuation may itself be a little dazzling. Indeed, the razzle-dazzle may be the point, and the zigzag is certainly the method. Dickinson's double writing differs itself, always actively and often flagrantly, from any singularity it has itself signified. This poem accordingly works by both repeating and displacing the exhortation made in the first line, without ever arriving at a point where the divergent possibilities are gathered up into some more comprehensive or coherent view. Moreover, the divergences from whatever we take as the first or primary reading do not collect into some single, rival counterargument, as with a text that says one thing on the surface and another covertly or esoterically.

Consistently antithetical propositions about whether the light of truth delights can be read out of the poem, but the other displacements and deflections from the central exhortation are more fragmentary and uncertain. The first part of the poem insinuates, for instance, that truth may be a malevolent aggressor giving the lie to our fatuous expectations of delight. The second half, however, makes the danger more impersonal or even, if one takes seriously the possibility of the lightning kindly explaining itself, an unfortunate and unintended consequence of an otherwise considerate natural force. Likewise, the sinister possibilities offer neither a contrary justification for the value of slantness nor a covert recommendation that truth be told some other way or avoided in silence.

The self-differing significations of 'Tell all the truth' can be separated and diagramed more easily than their counterparts in other poems, but a comparably central verbal wildness is at work throughout Dickinson's poetry. This wildness is, indeed, a chief effect of her literary style, and under other names and descriptions ('riddle,' for instance) may be the best-known aspect of her poetry. However, we know more about the repertoire of techniques contributing to wild-ness than about Dickinson's reasons for fostering it so conspicuously. The more challenging question then is why Dickinson wrote this way. And part of the answer can be seen in the fact that, typically, 'Tell all the truth' focuses mainly upon the effect that some expression will have on an audience. In other words, like 'This was a poet,' 'I reckon when I count at all,' and numerous other poems or remarks on poetry from Dickinson's letters, 'Tell all the truth' imagines literature from the point of view of the reader. Although cast as advice to an author, it defines truth telling in terms of the effect on an audience, not of the author's powers and predicaments nor of the textual properties of the utterance.

As we have seen earlier, the effect Dickinson most prizes from her own reading is affective intensity, especially if—as in the poetry of sensation—such intensity does not coercively disclose meaning. Dazzling can accordingly be something of an end in itself, whether or not it happens gradually and whether or not it conveys truth. And Dickinson's form of double writing thus differs somewhat from each of the theories it otherwise resembles. For example, a slantwise style differs from deconstructive effects in being intentional and voluntary. By contrast the rigorous undecidability explored by Derrida or de Man and formalized

earlier by Godel (at least for syntax) surpasses any unitary subject's intention or will; indeed, it bespeaks a propositional machinery autonomically generating meanings it cannot master.

More than the majority of Dickinson's poems, 'Tell all the truth' meets New Critical standards of formal integrity. The poems wildness thus could be considered to exemplify irony, tension, or paradox, these three being roughly interchangeable terms for the ideal state of formal equilibrium achieved when divergent possibilities are suspended in a single artistic monad. Unlike most of the New Critics, however, Dickinson shows very little concern with form as such, and she manifests a positive dislike for achieved stability. Indeed, her willingness to disrupt formal integrity in order to achieve some specific, local effect is the despair of critics such as Blackmur. More generally, poems for Dickinson are not ends in themselves, which exist in an esthetic space ideally transcending other aspects of life, but rhetorical stimuli, which exist in an equally ideal space of elite readers and writers.

Finally, Dickinson's rhetorical and stylistic wildness differs also from defamiliarization, although both share a concern with producing effects and responses in the audience and both are deliberate, voluntary phenomena. A Formalist account of 'Tell all the truth' might say that it defamiliarizes stale, habitual notions of truth, freshening the reader's understanding by showing us the object—here, truth—as we had not previously seen it, that is, as a powerful and dangerous thing. On the other hand, the idea of truth as dangerous, even deadly, is as conventional as the rosier view and if anything has the older pedigree. More important, the poet has not masterfully and authoritatively exposed our inadequate understanding in favor of a better one or even for the austere joy of a purely negative cognition. She cannot be credited with bestowing wisdom where foolishness prevailed before, because her own wisdom is highly doubtful. Like New Criticism, Russian Formalism generally imagines the poet as a genius, a master, someone who can imagine or envision or fabricate what lesser mortals cannot and who can convey the products of the imagination to us mortals. Dickinson, however, eschews such imaginative authority. Indeed, quite as much as the many poems explicitly dramatizing, the speaker's quest for certainty, understanding, or knowledge, 'Tell all the truth' may be said to end in authorial bewilderment. It differs itself not only from univocal meaning but from its own authority to determine meaning.

The point of these comparisons can perhaps be put more succinctly by saying that for Dickinson poetics is always at the service of rhetoric rather than the other way round. Her style may loudly call attention to itself, but it does not usually do so as a construction to be admired in its own right or as evidence of authorial genius. Like all the other isolable devices contributing to the double writing of 'Tell all the truth,' Dickinson's conspicuously deviant style is part of a larger rhetoric of stimulus. It is meant to cherish a power that extends considerably beyond the author's direct control."

Gary Lee Stonum
The Dickinson Sublime
(U Wisconsin 1990)

Michael Hollister (2014)