

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#1463 (c.1879)

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel –
A Resonance of Emerald –
A Rush of Cochineal –
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head –
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning's Ride –

ANALYSIS

“Fortunately we are able to compare her final triumphant poem on the hummingbird with an early version [“Within my Garden rides a Bird”], and to note what happened as she condensed the original twenty lines to eight... [The earlier version] is all very well for what there is of hummingbird in it: a fine image of the rapid wings like the spokes of a whirling wheel, another of the bird's sudden departure, and a vivid sense of the adjustment to emptiness that ensues. But how much is there that distracts us from the single impression—the motion and the sound of the wings given consecutively (a ‘travelling mill’ to blur the clear image of the ‘single wheel’), then the movement of the whole bird from rose to remoter atmospheres, and finally a spectator and her dog, new characters introduced, through whom the final psychological notation is registered.

Surely one might come nearer to the essential object by stripping off the matrix of external circumstance and preserving simply a description of the bird as it existed in ‘the garden of the brain. So, it is said, Japanese artists study bird or fish or flower until they have absorbed it into themselves, and when they paint, paint not an object before them but a mental image. Perhaps twenty years later, when Emily Dickinson rewrote her hummingbird poem, she had mastered the secret.... [In “A Route of Evanescence”] is the whole *sensation* of hummingbird: first, a dazzle of sudden sense impressions, movement, motion of wings, color, and whirl (in the reiterated *r*'s), all at once; then (the bird's departure taken for granted) the emptiness emphasized by the clear picture of nodding blossoms; and finally the startled mind of the (assumed) spectator regaining its poise with a whimsical comment. Nothing could be spared and no more is needed. Emily Dickinson was never to write a better nature poem than this, but the stepping-stones that led up to her finest achievement are, many of them, monuments of an artistry only slightly less perfect.”

George Frisbie Whicher
This Was a Poet
(Scribner's 1938) 261-62

“The focal image of the poem...is a ruby-throated hummingbird in flight. The astonishing rapidity of the bird's movement justifies the phrase ‘A route of evanescence.’ This is a metonymy equating the bird with its own path across the field of vision. The visual effect is the converse of that obtained photographically by multiple rapid-exposures of a moving object on a single plate; here the poet describes not the simultaneous presence but the simultaneous vanishing of the bird at every point. The ‘revolving wheel’ is of course the whirring blur of its wings, with whose peculiar drone, by synaesthesia, the iridescent color the hummingbird's head and back is blended—‘A resonance of emerald.’ The brilliant red of its throat (a coloring, incidentally, found only in the male) is the flash of cochineal as the bird rushes past. This line and the preceding one contain a vivid onomatopoeia. Darting and hovering then, the hummingbird dishevels the petals of the flowers, so that they must bob up to recover their poise which the flurry has shaken.

In the final two lines the imagery is varied through the metaphor of 'mail,' which compels a second interpretation of the earlier part. Beyond the image of the hummingbird is implicit that of a speeding railroad train, the mail and express, and also that of the more common kind of mail—a letter. It is this which provides the perhaps wistful irony of the concluding line. A train travels upon a 'route,' it is borne along by many a 'revolving wheel,' its sound is a 'resonance' and a 'rush,' and on it people 'ride.' These words thus have a double value: they remind us that like the hummingbird itself, a railway train gives a look at the far places of the earth—for those who journey with it.

But the bird as passenger train is also an ironic impossibility; not train crosses the sea from Tunis, and no 'easy morning ride' will take us there. The hummingbird is an envoy of curious lands ('Tunis'), or tropic color ('cochineal'), of oriental opulence ('emerald'). These particular images transform the bird into remoteness invading the familiar garden, which they contrast with their own splendor. The hummingbird, in point of fact, is not a trans-Atlantic migrant, but cochineal was and perhaps still is associated with North Africa. The gleam of green and ruby is moreover, as is clear enough, a message, a letter, from a distant country. It is only in one direction that, for the poet herself, this message can fly; the train, however ironically, suggests what the bird cannot, that if one could, oneself might go.

But again, the way is 'A route of evanescence,' a route that has vanished. Because Emily Dickinson's own situation was always so crucial to her poems as she created them, it may be not unjust to refer this poem to it. Both the train and the letter were doubtless obsessions; they appear, of course, elsewhere in her work. It is right indeed that here the train should be so obviously inadequate to the dream. Quite probably the best symbol she could find for herself was the flowers with tumbled, or humbled, heads, greeting with alarm, though not without humor, the disconcerting stranger. So too, in expectation of a letter, she must often have adjusted her tumbled hair before answering the post man's morning knock."

Grover Smith
"Dickinson's 'A Route of Evanescence'"
The Explicator VII (May 1949) Item 54

"The driving energy, which gave mystical beauty to poems concerned with abstract idea, overreached herself when she applied it to subjects calling for description only. The point can be made clear by contrasting her two portraits of the hummingbird. The first she wrote about 1862. A poem in five quatrains, it is an attempt to suggest motion. She sees a vibration and hears a whirl so rapid that only the stir of blossoms after the hummingbird's departure assures her of the truth of its presence. But the lines have been assembled laboriously and the figures remain awkward: 'Within my Garden, rides a Bird / Upon a single Wheel --'... The awkwardnesses are intrusive: the hummingbird praises, and the rejoined dog is perplexed whether he too (or the poet?) saw the bird. Emily Dickinson's skill in handling such themes she acquired much later. She never forgot what she wanted to express about the hummingbird, as sound, iridescent color, vibration; as instantaneous translation through space. Some eighteen years later she returned to the theme, and in eight lines wrote a new poem on the ubiquitous creature ["A Route of Evanescence"]... The fulfillment of her art as a creator of the pageantry of nature in motion she achieved in 1879, thereby adding abundantly to the treasury of English verse."

Thomas H. Johnson
Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography
(Harvard 1955) 201-02

"Among the nearly seventeen hundred poems of Emily Dickinson are two describing the visit of a hummingbird to a garden of flowers. The first, apparently written about 1862, begins, 'Within my garden rides a bird.' It likens the rapidly bearing wing to the wheel of a 'traveling mill' and to a 'fairy gig' and then dismisses the bird to 'remote atmospheres' while the spectator rejoins her dog and wonders whether the visitor was not imaginary, a product of the 'garden of the brain.' It is a comparative failure.

The second hummingbird poem, according to manuscript evidence, was written in the summer of 1879.... That ['A Route of Evanescence'] is better seems to be a happy accident. The improvement can hardly be attributed to the maturing of Emily Dickinson's talent, for some of her best poems were in manuscript as early as 1862 and she had completed two-thirds of her poetry by 1865. But the happy accident deserves to be and can be analyzed. In its 1879 version the poem is beautifully compact; it has

mastered the plethora of images that confused the earlier version; and it is rich in allusiveness. Like all good poems, it vibrates in ways of which the reader has little conscious awareness, however deeply he may be affected. Analysis of its construction, far from diminishing its interest, should only increase respect for the poetic process.

In 'A note on Emily Dickinson's Use of Shakespeare' Frank Davidson has suggested an indebtedness to *The Tempest* for the phrase 'the mail from Tunis'...as an example of the hummingbird's incredible speed.... Emily Dickinson's hummingbird is plausibly identified with Ariel as well as with the sun that could be 'post' from Tunis. But the poet discarded Shakespeare's word 'post' and substituted the word 'mail,' a significantly appropriate choice for this poem because it involves an unconscious pun. The hummingbird is a male symbol; he is the *male* from Tunis.

That the symbolism is erotic hardly admits of a doubt, although the identification must be made by analysis of the far more common bee and flower symbolism. In the poetry of Emily Dickinson the bee is at times embarrassingly phallic. For example, one poem begins: 'Did the harebell loose her girdle / To the lover bee....' Still another poem ('Come slowly, Eden!') concludes with these lines: 'As the fainting bee, / Reaching late his flower, / Round her chamber hums, / Counts his nectars – enters, / And is lost in balms!'.... A poem beginning 'A bee his burnished carriage / Drove boldly to a rose,' describes the encounter in almost literal detail, then concludes: 'Their moment consummated, / Remained for him to flee, / Remained for her of rapture / But the humility.'

Bees and flowers, it need hardly be added, are among the commonest inhabitants of Miss Dickinson's poetic garden, and most of them are simply bees and flowers. A brief review of the earlier hummingbird poem would suggest that it has no erotic double meaning (and in consequence is less powerful), or if any there be, then it is buried in a heap of discordant images: garden, bird, wheel, traveling mill, spice, fairy gig, dog, brain, vibrating blossoms.

The imagery of the second poem is at once terser and more intricately connected. The absurd traveling mill has been compacted to a revolving wheel, and the intrusive dog and spectator are gone. The bird itself is nowhere named but is vividly suggested as a blur of color and a whirl of wings; and the individual blossom has apparently become spectator, passive recipient of the bird's attentions, and narrator of the poem. Most important, the imagery turns upon a carefully defined contrast (the first of several such contrasts that work to strengthen and unify the poem): The flowers are home-grown, earth-bound, rooted in the familiar New England soil; the bird and all things connected with him are exotic.

Although the ruby-throated hummingbird nests in New England and must occasionally have been a visitor to Miss Dickinson's garden, he is treated in the poem as an exotic, a migrant from southern latitudes. He carries the mail from Tunis; his colors are those of the cochineal and the emerald, both of them exotic and tropical or near-tropical products. By the imagery of this poem (not of the earlier version, which has nothing tropical about it except the word 'spice'), the hummingbird is allied with the south.

Poem after poem could be cited to demonstrate that for Miss Dickinson, as perhaps for all poets, the tropics or the south symbolizes love... The hummingbird, tropical migrant and deputy of the sun, enters the poet's northern garden as a lover. Imagery, symbolism, and literary allusion, all working toward a common effect, are strongly reinforced by the sound system of the poem. It has been pointed out that the imagery turns upon a distinct contrast between the exotic hummingbird and the homebound flower. The first quatrain is concerned with the bird, the second with the flowers; and a little observation will show that the two are further distinguished from each other by means of meter and of vowel and consonant patterns.

The first quatrain, which belongs to the hummingbird, has an appropriately rapid movement. The opening line, 'A Route of evanescence,' is a swift iambic trimeter, with a leftover, unstressed syllable vanishing into nothingness almost in the sense of the words. In the third line the concluding word 'emerald' with its lingering, attenuating r and l appears to create much the same effect. All even-numbered lines in both quatrains are regular iambic trimeter (except for the initial reversed foot of line 2); and in so short a poem, where all is so nearly uniform, even small variations appear momentous. In the flower stanza the poet has created a deliberate, earth-bound movement by stretching out the odd-numbered lines to four feet.

The effect is particularly marked in line 5, which closes heavily on the word 'bush.' It appears slow-paced, almost rooted, in contrast to the swift trimeters that have preceded it. The seventh line closes less heavily on the word 'probably,' but at this point, as will be shown, the poem is returning to the rapid, triumphant movement of the hummingbird quatrain.

The vowel pattern may be described as beginning with vowels that are predominantly high and shrill but modulating in the fourth line toward the dark back vowels that characterize the flower quatrain. The impression is that of the bird rushing down upon the flowers, then wheeling abruptly to vanish on the last high vowel of 'cochineal.' For a time the vowels remain dark and low—'blossom,' 'on,' 'bush,' 'adjusts,' 'tumbled'—come a little forward with 'head,' 'mail,' recede again on 'Tunis' and the first syllable of 'probably,' rise shrilly on the last syllable of 'probably' and on 'easy,' as if striving toward the now-vanished hummingbird, and end near the median position on 'ride.'

With respect to the consonant pattern, even a cursory glance suggests the importance for the hummingbird quatrain of the sibilants, the nasals, and the so-called liquids. G. F. Whicher pointed out that the alliterative r's—stressed in 'route,' 'resonance,' and 'rush,' unstressed in 'revolving' and perhaps 'emerald'—suggest the whirring sound of the bird's wings. It should be noted that the r sound continues through the second quatrain, but obscure, unnoticed, until it re-emerges emphatically on the final word 'ride.' Indeed, the whole poem is strongly onomatopoeic....

The hummingbird quatrain has three or at most four stops. Whether the d of 'emerald' is sounded must appear doubtful: but if it is sounded, then the plosives account for no more than 11 percent in a total of 36 consonants, and if it is not then the stop consonants fall to a bare 8 percent in a total of 35 consonants. In either instance the percentage is surprisingly low. When it is remembered that in poetry as well as in prose the stop consonants are important out of all proportion to their number, usually representing 30 percent of the total (the flower quatrain does contain 30 percent), then it would appear that the poet had a motive, conscious or not, for reducing the percentage of stops to something like the minimum. The explanation is not difficult to find. Although the plosives have little true sound, they are tremendous interrupters. If the hummingbird is to appear the magnificent conqueror he is, there must be no let or hindrance to his powerful rush; and that is apparently how the poem is to be read.

From the fixed point or springboard of the stop consonant in 'route,' the hummingbird launches out on his furious, irresistible course. There is a whirl and a blur of wings—a buzzing of sibilants and spirants, a gliding and swooping of sonorants, then a pivoting upon the stopped k and t of 'cochineal,' and the bird is off and away on the long high vowel and consonants of the concluding syllable '-neal.' The emphatic alliteration of 'route,' 'resonance,' and 'rush' augments the impression of irresistible force.

The poem now takes a turn that is surprising and yet deeply, persuasively feminine. Each single blossom (or we might prefer to think of the bush, which sums up the diverse femininity of the individual flowers) has, it would seem, passively sustained the onslaught of the hummingbird. Although the flower or bush does not appear in the first quatrain except by implication, she is clearly the narrator; and the admiring, sympathetic description of her lover suggests that she surrendered consentingly. But she was never wholly passive. Ravished, delighted, momentarily carried away, in the fifth line she nevertheless asserts her separateness. In the sixth line she 'adjusts' herself; and she does so with the little explosive tugs and pats of stop consonants. First come the emphatic b's of 'blossom' and 'bush' (if it occurs to a reader that the choice of these words was necessitated by the sense of the lined, he might try the experiment of substituting 'And every flower on the vine': the difference in meaning is slight, but in poetic values immense). In the sixth line there is a whole series of little explosions—d, t, t, t, b, d, d. In the seventh line the flower is still uttering little explosive protests in the t of 'Tunis' and the p, b, b of 'probably.' But the eighth line resolves this trifling and amusing conflict of the sexes with a gliding return to continuants before the final stop in 'ride.'

The concluding elliptical sentence offers a slight, pleasant ambiguity. We could read, 'It's probably the mail from Tunis,' with the emphasis on the 'mail' or 'male.' Or we could read, 'The mail from Tunis would probably be an easy morning's ride for *that* fellow,' with its half-mocking admiration. In whatever

way we take it, the poem is all very delightful and wonderful—and quite beyond the experience of the Miss Dickinson who wrote the 1862 version.”

Rebecca Patterson
“Emily Dickinson’s Hummingbird”
The Educational Leader XXII (July 1958) 12-19

“Of all Emily Dickinson’s bird poems there is only one that realizes the full potential magic in a flash of color and whirl of wing, and it does so paradoxically by concentrating on their disappearance rather than their appearance. This is her famous eight-line snare for the hummingbird, set late in life. Deservedly admired as a flawless lyric, it is also significant in relation to her theory of perception, being her most vivid rendering of the elusive, even perhaps illusory, quality of objects in nature.

She made two attempts to catch this bird, nearly twenty years apart, and a comparison of the early with the late will show her progress from an attempt at literal description of an object to the discovery of a perfect image for its evanescence. The beginning of her poem in 1862 [“Within my Garden rides a Bird”] was particularly discursive.... The rape of the rose was too long drawn out, the speed of flight blurred by conflicting images, and for the bird’s magical disappearance she fell back on a fanciful cliché from fairy tales. More significantly, very little of the hummingbird was there in fact or in effect, as none of the special techniques by which she finally caught him were employed.

When she returns to the theme in 1880 all this sprawling first half of the poem is reduced to a single stanza, which approaches a Japanese haiku in the conciseness of its notation and in its reduction of a natural phenomenon to a mental image...The esthetic problem of imitation is raised at the outset by ‘Evanescence,’ a word that in her day had not yet acquired the modern abstracted sense of fleeting or transitory, but held strictly to the root meaning of ‘vanishing.’ How can the artist represent a hummingbird if its flight is a ‘disappearance from sight,’ as her Lexicon defines it, ‘by removal to a distance’? She undoubtedly chose such an extreme example of elusive form in nature because of its dramatic value. But for her it also represented a general truth, as she phrased it in a letter of the same period: ‘All we secure of Beauty in its Evanescence.’ This miracle is then rendered in terms of motion, sound, and color intricately woven into an image pattern by synaesthesia. To begin with, the outline of the bird’s figure is replaced by its disappearing path across the field of vision. The visual effect is the converse of the photographic one of multiple rapid exposures of a moving object on a single plate.

Her first line records not the simultaneous presence but the simultaneous vanishing of the bird at every point. The second, even in the phrasing given above, ‘With a revolving wheel,’ helps to complicate this effect because it does not describe the actuality of vibrating wings so much as the optical illusion created by them. Better still, a rough pencil draft offers a fascinating series of variants: ‘With a delusive, dissolving, dissembling, renewing wheel.’ Almost any of these would have been more pertinent to her purpose, especially ‘dissolving’ which would have turned the motion of the whirling wheel into a trick of prestidigitation, the bird vanishing before astonished eyes.

‘A Resonance of Emerald’ transmutes the humming sound by sympathetic vibration into iridescent color. Lest this be thought extravagant, one can quote from the normally sober *Encyclopedia Britannica* in the edition available to her. There the great zoologist Alfred Newton, in his article on the hummingbird, declared that ‘ornithologists have been compelled to adopt the vocabulary of the jeweler in order to give an idea of the indescribable radiance’ of its plumage. Dickinson’s ecstasy was shared by contemporary scientists, though the use of synaesthesia to make the music become visible in the emerald sheen of wings and back is her own effective contribution. Again she showed her originality by avoiding such a hackneyed image as ‘ruby throat’ and writing instead ‘A Rush of Cochineal.’ No jewel offered quite the brilliance of this rare pigment used since ancient times to make especially vivid reds, like crimson and scarlet. To see this spot on the hummingbird’s throat, the poet-spectator must take the stance of the flowers themselves. Then, as color is transformed into a rushing assault, the miracle of the hummingbird vanishes in a blinding flash of cochineal....

[She makes] a structure of images instead of logic. Here, after the mounting tension of her brilliant notations of color, sound, and motion in the first stanza, she relaxes for two lines, in which the

hummingbird is conspicuous by his absence, in order to catch her breath before launching the daring image of her conclusion... That jet planes can actually accomplish this today is not a sign of her prophetic powers, but a reminder of the modern reader's need to understand her metaphor in its own terms if he is to feel the full effect of her bird's flight beyond the barriers of space and time. 'The mail from Tunis,' when connected with the idea of 'resonance' and 'revolving' wheels, may suggest the speed with which sound and light are dispersed through space. 'Tunis' was infinitely remote to her, and an 'easy Morning's Ride' from there could only have been achieved on a magic carpet. Yet from this exotic place at such incredible speed comes the commonplace daily 'mail,' the familiar figure of the postman on his 'Route' jostling the wonder of it all.

She may well have found the suggestion for her image in a passage from *The Tempest*: The Queen of Tunis, who dwelt 'Ten leagues beyond man's life,' could not possibly get letters from Naples 'unless the sun were post.' For the reader intimate with Shakespeare, as she assuredly was, this sidelong allusion may extend the poem's meaning far beyond the specific lines of the source. It brings to mind the figure of Prospero gazing in wonder at the elusive beauty of this green earth, and the even more shimmering beauty of the unseen world within which the poet can create by invoking his muse Ariel. As she developed her theory of perception, she gradually came to believe, as the twentieth-century scientist does also, that objects in nature cannot be literally grasped by the sense or reproduced by mimetic skill. She does not pretend to offer a real hummingbird snared from the external world but a poetic hummingbird, the perception of one in the garden of the brain. 'All we secure of Beauty is its Evanescences.' Bird or poem? Her own flight from Tunis, the packets of extraordinary poems left in manuscript, she described elsewhere as her 'Letter to the World.'

A passage in her correspondence during the same period clarifies the significance of all this for her esthetic theory and relates it specifically to this poem. Thanking a friend for painting her a small panel representing a group of Indian Pipes, she first referred to her life-long preference for this weird flower, saying that 'when a wondering Child [it seemed] an unearthly booty, and maturity only enhances mystery, never decreases it.' Then, turning to the painting itself, she made a cryptic comment on the temerity of man's attempts at representing nature: 'To duplicate the Vision is even more amazing, for God's unique capacity is too surprising to surprise.' A few days later she wrote to the same friend, 'I cannot make an Indian Pipe but please accept a Humming Bird'.... The only change she made in the draft of the poem included in her letter was to omit the comma before 'probably,' making the modifier restrictive. This removes any doubt that it is all a metaphor."

Charles R. Anderson
Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise
(Holt 1960) 113-17

"'A Route of Evanescence' is a revision of an earlier version, and Professor Whicher (*This Was a Poet*, 261-62) gives an interesting analysis of the changes made. 'Here,' he says of the final version, 'is the whole *sensation* of hummingbird: first, a dazzle of sudden sense impressions, movement, motion of wings, color, and whir (in the reiterated *r*'s), all at once; then (the bird's) departure taken for granted) the emptiness emphasized by the clear picture of nodding blossoms; and finally the startled mind of the (assumed) spectator regaining its poise with a whimsical comment. Nothing could be spared and no more is needed. Emily Dickinson was never to write a better nature poem than this, but the stepping-stones that led up to her finest achievement are, many of them, monuments of an artistry only slightly less perfect.' As this analysis indicates, the poem is a striking example of the author's skill in giving concrete expression to abstract ideas—one of her most notable abilities."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States II
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 203-04

"In 'A Route of Evanescence' both parts of her heritage and all three of her favorite 'books'—the Bible, Shakespeare, and Emerson—are drawn upon and imaginatively fused.... The hummingbird that disappears almost before it is seen brings news of what Emerson, in 'Circles,' called 'the Unattainable, the flying Perfect, around which the hands of man can never meet.' But its very evanescence, the fact that it cannot be grasped by the intellect but only glimpsed, suggests the existence of larger circles or wheels. Its wings beat

so rapidly that they are not seen separately as wings, only as a circular blur, like a segment of a revolving wheel, which only the imagination can complete. Even its colors, emerald and cochineal (red) are revelations: They are the colors of the throne of God as described in the book of Revelation, 4:3.

The message brought ('probably') by the visitor to the garden who disappears so quickly that his presence is known chiefly by its effect on the flowers, *may* be from 'the Queen of Tunis,' who, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (II,1, 246-248) is said to dwell 'ten leagues beyond man's life.' If so, he is bringing news from beyond the grave ('When Cogs – stop – that's Circumference -- / The Ultimate – of Wheels'), news of realities we can never really *see* or *know*, but that the poet, who imaginatively completes the circle suggested by unseen wings, can make available to our imaginations. Where the plain man would have seen only a spot of bright color and a blur, the poet has seen an illimitable circumference. This is what she thought was the true business of the poet. As she had put it some fifteen years earlier, 'Poets light but Lamps -- / Themselves – go out -- / Disseminating... / Circumference'."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 197-98

Michael Hollister (2014)