

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#585 (c.1862)

I like to see it lap the Miles –
And lick the Valleys up –
And stop to feed itself at Tanks –
And then – a prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains –
And supercilious peer
In Shanties – by the sides of Roads –
And the a Quarry pare

To fit its Ribs
And crawl between
Complaining all the while
In horrid – hooting stanza –
Then chase itself down Hill –

And neigh like Boanerges –
Then – punctual as a Star
Stop – docile and omnipotent
At its own stable door –

ANALYSIS

“Several generations of looking at little but the bare, unpoeticized facts of pioneer experience transformed the New Englander into a small man of affairs, with an abnormally developed bump of ingenuity for dealing with practical issues. He had no time to waste on poetry, which indeed he was right in thinking had lost connection with what vitally concerned him. The Bible, the almanac, and the newspaper comprised his staple reading. Truth, in the most literal and narrow sense, had come into its own. The ground was prepared for the extraordinary extension and application of physical science which nineteenth-century America was to witness. It looked as though poetry had no further function; the facts that the world valued could be better expressed in scientific idiom.

Two courses remained open to poets. They could, remembering poetry’s former glory, wring their hands at its neglect and wonder what to make of a diminished thing. Or they could absorb the spirit of the age and stumblingly at best attempt to create an aesthetic to match it. The latter course, somewhat bumptiously formulated, was Walt Whitman’s program... Emily Dickinson with entire unconsciousness contributed to the same result. She was very much a child of the age and she was also an instinctive artist; it was her business to find forms of expression that did not blur her sharp awareness of fact nor fail to rouse a latent beauty. Her poems were demonstrations that the simplest commonplaces of life in practical America could be vitalized and made precious to the mind.

Others besides Whitman had proposed that poems be tested by their power to meet modern discoveries face to face, and had received an indifferent answer. To conventionally minded writers the machine age brought nothing that they could assimilate. They preferred to ignore it or to recognize it only in protest. Thoreau, it is true, could take a dreamy pleasure in the hum of telegraph wires, the aeolian harp of industry, but he balked at the Atlantic cable.... Whitman’s... ‘To a Locomotive in Winter’ is as lifeless as any seventeenth-century poet’s itemized list of his mistress’s charms. Emily Dickinson, on the contrary, wrote as simply and directly of the locomotive as of any bird in her garden. The Amherst & Belchertown

Railroad, her father's darling project, gave her a new fact to tell, and ["I like to see it lap the Miles"] sparkles with her pleasure in telling it."

George Frisbie Whicher
This Was a Poet
(Scribner's 1938) 158-60

"Emily Dickinson's imagery of natural objects is usually nothing more than decoration or, at best, imagism (several critics, including Amy Lowell and Miss Marianne Moore, have remarked that her nature poems anticipate imagism and that like many imagist poems they show an affinity with Chinese and Japanese practice). The bee-blossom imagery has rather more resonance than anything else in her decorative nature poems. It gains in complication and interest by being associated with the cluster of images related to death. But one can hardly demonstrate that Emily Dickinson's paraphernalia of phoebes, leontodons, Indian pipes, orioles, and robins ever issues in major poetic statement.

There are limits to the utility of comparing Emily Dickinson with Shakespeare, yet her preference for Shakespeare above all writers lends plausibility to the comparison. One has only to read through Miss Caroline Spurgeon's treatment of Shakespeare's imagery to see afresh how Emily Dickinson failed to explore the implications and possibilities of her private convention....What Emily Dickinson might have learned from Shakespeare, or from any great poet (she might have learned it from her own best poems), was the poet's task of involving his images intricately and solidly with the intellectual meaning, the emotional tone, and the dramatic movement of his poems....

One of her most famous poems [is "I like to see it lap the Miles"]... This poem might be justified on the score of its coherence of imagery, its perspicuity of language, the felicity of its rhythms. Yet in that larger element of style which is called tone the poem fails. The phrase 'punctual as a star' is successful on every possible account, but that is because it entirely escapes the tone of the rest of the poem, and has in fact nothing to do with the poem at all. The trouble is that the grace, the quickness, the fancy, or even the metaphysical wit which the poem is supposed to convey cannot be achieved by a woman who had a large capacity for play and who played, in fact, almost on principle, but who has also a final incapacity which usually, though not always, made inspired poetic play impossible for her. It was an incapacity which differed only in degree from the analogous incapacity of her father, and indeed of the whole Puritan tradition."

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

"In her poem about a train beginning 'I like to see it lap the miles,' Emily Dickinson employed a metaphor which had inevitably been a common one since the beginning of railroads: the locomotive as an iron horse. The images in the last stanza suggest, however, that she was inspired by a particular earlier treatment of the subject in which this metaphor was dominant, that by Thoreau in the chapter entitled 'Sounds' in *Walden*. Nearly half of this chapter is devoted to a description of the Fitchburg Railroad, whose tracks passed within a hundred rods of Thoreau's house by the pond. It is primarily an aural description; the escaping steam and the whistle of the locomotive, the vibration of the wheels, the shouts of the passengers, the commotion of transporting livestock are heard, and onomatopoeic words like 'hissing,' 'whizzing,' 'rumbling' occur. Figuratively it is a description constructed from the basic personification of the locomotive as a horse and from a cluster of images drawn from the air, the heavens, and mythology.

Emily Dickinson's poem, too, appeals chiefly to the sense of hearing, and her iron horse also is associated with what may be called a meteorological-mythological image and an astronomical one. Both trains traverse mountains and valleys and pass beside shanties (Thoreau's dwelling was built of boards from James Collins' 'shanty'). Particularly notable is the fact that the image in the poem 'prompter than [punctual as] as Star / Stop...at its own stable door' is a combination of two locutions in the prose: 'he will reach his stall only with the morning star' and 'Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the railroad was invented?' But most remarkable of all, the poet's striking simile 'neigh like Boanerges' is a transformation of the essayist's 'snort like thunder'....

External evidence that Emily Dickinson read *Walden* appears to be wanting, but it seems reasonable, especially in view of her interest in Transcendentalists, to suppose that she did. The manuscript of her poem has been tentatively dated 1862, which was the year of Thoreau's death. The hermit aspects of the two authors' characters have often been compared. Their imaginations, however, ranged different realms and were fed on different lores. Even in these brief descriptions from their pens of the same noisy and fantastic object, it is significant that the poet's single allusion evokes the Bible and the essayist's New England sounds are so often echoes from Olympus."

Nathalia Wright
"Emily Dickinson's Boanerges and Thoreau's Atropos: Locomotives on the Same Line?"
Modern Language Notes LXXII
(February 1957) 101-03

"The America of [Emily Dickinson's] day with its naïve idealisms and blind belief in materialism offered many targets for the social satirist, and some of her light verse was aimed at these—abolitionism, balloon ascensions, the proliferation of journalism, the triviality of most messages sent over the newly invented telegraph. Her cartoon of the railway train, the most spectacular symbol of progress in that age, will serve to illustrate her talents in this line.

It was the one great enthusiasm in the life of Squire Dickinson. He was a leading spirit in founding the Amherst-Belchertown Railroad, and the success of his project filled the household with excitement. By April of 1852 gangs of Irish laborers had begun work and clusters of little 'shantees' had sprung up along the proposed route. About a year later the line was formally opened with a nineteen-gun salute from the Amherst Artillery, and a train of three cars drawn by 'a comical little engine' made the twenty-mile run in fifty-five minutes, 'glory enough for one day' as her father commented.

But her tendency to withdraw from all such events was already marked. When a delegation of Connecticut citizens celebrated the establishment of the new road by coming up to pay a 'morning call' on Amherst the next month, she reported to her brother: 'Father was as usual, Chief Marshal of the day, and went marching around the town with New London at his heels like some old Roman General, upon a Triumph Day... They all said t'was fine. I spose it was – I sat in Prof Tyler's woods and saw the train move off, and then ran home again for fear somebody would see me.'

Instead of participating in the gala occasion itself, she staged a private celebration in her mind, embodied ten years later in a bright piece of wit ["I like to see it lap the Miles"]... The comedy is achieved by levying on every known syntactical device for speed. There is only one predication, competed in the first five monosyllables: 'I like to hear it.' All the rest is a series of infinitives activating the unnamed object: lap-lick, stop-step, peer-pare, crawl-chase, neigh-stop—all alliterating humorously except the last two pains, but even so the final 'stop' goes back to the first to complete the circle.

In addition to the cumulative effect of seven *ands* and four *thens*, many of the lines are run-on, most striking being the enjambment of stanzas ('step / Around a' and 'pare ' To fit its') which interlaces the first twelve lines in one breathless chase. It rushes madly over the miles, across valleys, around mountains, and downhill to home, not a depot but a stable. (The terminal of the new railroad, incidentally, had been domesticated for her by being built on the Dickinson Meadow, land formerly owned by her grandfather.)

For this is not a locomotive but a fabulous horse, described as 'prodigious,' 'supercilious,' 'complaining,' 'horrid,' and finally by the paradoxical 'docile and omnipotent.' The epithet 'iron horse,' already too hackneyed for her fastidious pen, is given a new humorous twist by the simile that brings the wild ride to an end, setting the last stanza properly apart: 'And neigh like Boanerges.' Instead of one of the horses of mythology, she chooses the figurative name 'Son of Thunder' bestowed by Jesus on two of his apostles because of their fiery zeal. In connection with launching the Amherst and Belchertown Railroad, she had heard plenty of loud-mouthed vociferous orators (the derived meaning of 'Boanerges') with much talk of opening up the hinterland and tying the towns together in prosperous trade.

To her father railroads symbolized the beginning of a new era, but in her poem there is no suggestion of the standard nineteenth-century praise of material progress. There are no passengers or freight on her train,

and no meaningful route; it simply roars around its circuit and then comes docilely home. This is her ironic tribute to modern science, which invents machines of monstrous power yet firmly controlled, here serving no purpose but her own amusement. Even Thoreau, the age's sharpest critic of economic materialism, was more romantic when he described the iron horse in *Walden*, though some of his imagery may have caught her eye. But her Son of Thunder is purely humorous. It was probably inspired as much by a prank of her brother as by her father's darling project.... Speed for its own sake, whether a horse of flesh or iron, provoked her sense of comedy."

Charles R. Anderson
Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise
(Holt 1960) 14-16

Michael Hollister (2014)