

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#130 (c.1859)

These are the days when Birds come back –
A very few – a Bird or two –
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume
The old – old sophistries of June –
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee –
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief.

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear –
And softly thro' the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf.

Oh sacrament of summer days,
Oh Last Communion in the Haze –
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake –
Thy consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine!

ANALYSIS

“The pleasant associations of Indian summer are likely to obscure the interpretation for many. In this poem the season is definitely presented as a ‘mistake,’ a ‘fraud’.... Having established the illusory nature of the season, Dickinson goes on to specify the signs of approaching winter in lines 10-12. In the same lines she anticipates the two closing stanzas by adumbrating a communion service in her phrase ‘ranks of seeds their witness bear’ and in her pun on the word ‘altered.’ Doubtless, the communion scene is not to be equated too forcibly with the scene in nature. Yet the professing child must unavoidably be thought of along with the hurrying, timid leaf...

Read out of context, the last two stanzas could hardly be defended against the charge of wordiness. Probably they are as long as they are in order to balance what has gone before. Dickinson does not merely wish to establish that Indian summer is a time of communion, although she gives to this idea the primary emphasis. But--in a slight, oblique way—she wishes the reader to observe the figure in a reverse direction: the time of communion may be as illusory as Indian summer. The ‘immortal wine’ of line 18 is not without reference to the nectar implied in line 7: ‘Oh, fraud that cannot cheat the bee, / Almost thy plausibility / Induces my belief....’

Natural history does not support the lore of the poet on either the returning birds or the uncheated bees. Staff members of the American Museum of Natural History have graciously responded to a query on these points... Bees gather nectar whenever it is available and the weather suitable for flight...birds certainly do not return when Indian summer occurs, although migration involves some random movement. We have found, however, that the return of birds in Indian summer is a misconception still fairly current, while we have been unable to find out what specious folklore Dickinson has reference to in her “bee’ line. The

metrical construction of the poem should also be mentioned. The halting quality of the first stanza with its internal rhyme and word repetitions is partly carried over into the second stanza. Not until the third and fourth stanzas is the rhyme pattern (aabccb) entirely established.”

George Arms

“Dickinson’s ‘These Are the Days When Birds Come Back’”

The Explicator II (February 1944) Item 29

“The interpretation of this poem offered by George Arms...suggests that it is a descriptive lyric about a certain time of year. The first three stanzas are said to describe the falseness of Indian summer and the last two to describe it as ‘a time of communion.’ But surely some means of reconciling falseness and sacredness is needed if the description is not to fall apart into two contradictory parts. And in fact, Mr. Arms is uneasy about the suspected ‘wordiness’ of the last two stanzas; he justifies them only on the grounds that Dickinson made them ‘as long as they are in order to balance what has gone before.’ By ‘balance’ he apparently means that the ‘time of communion’ (which he does not define) may be, like the season itself, ‘illusory.’ But, perhaps sensing that such a statement is obscure, to say the least, and that it can hardly be satisfactorily integrated with the rest of the context, Mr. Arms admits that it does not receive ‘primary emphasis’ in these last stanzas, and that it enters only ‘in a slight, oblique way.’ The fundamental question remains: What is the relationship of the first three stanzas to the last two? To attempt an answer to this question is to suggest a new interpretation of the poem—and also, I think, to point out its serious defects.

The halting syntax and the word repetitions in the first two stanzas combine easily with the semantic directives in such words as ‘backward’ and ‘old’ to suggest a mood of gentle, regretful nostalgia. Especially does the repetition of ‘old’ point away from the scene being described to the musing mind of the poet. Similarly, the diction in the next stanza does little to further the description; the scene remains remarkably vague. Perhaps this vagueness is appropriate to the mood of nostalgia, certainly such words as ‘mistake,’ ‘fraud,’ ‘cheat,’ ‘plausibility,’ and ‘belief,’ refer more to ideas of the poet than to the peculiar attributes of Indian summer. After all, June itself was clothed in ‘sophistries.’ The whole idea of the season’s falseness is, in fact, a playful and delicious fancy on the part of the poet, who—to judge from what follows—is really thinking about the illusory qualities of the pleasures of life. That the falseness is an idea of the poet’s, and not a fact of the season, is certainly indicated in the line about the bee.

In the fourth stanza the tendency toward the pathetic fallacy is stopped. The bemused mind of the poet is awakened and the temptation to revery thwarted. Nostalgia for the past is replaced by fear of the future. The playful mood turns serious. Falseness is to receive its just reward. The diction of this stanza is at once descriptive and suggestive. The approach of winter stands easily and naturally for the approach of death. But the ‘seeds’ carry the idea of rebirth or immortality. The word ‘witness’ suggests judgment. The ‘leaf’ may seem superfluous; but it does serve as an excuse for the adjective ‘timid,’ which introduces an attitude echoed in the reference to the ‘child’ in line 3 of the next stanza. (The word ‘altered’ can not be a pun, as suggested by Mr. Arms, because its religious significance forces an incongruous or inconceivable image into its descriptive meaning—which is simply, *changed subtly*.)

This fourth stanza provides some justification for the communion language of the last stanzas. The idea of sacramental sacrifice implicit in the offering up and consumption of the bread and wine of communion recalls the sacrifice on Calvary, as well as the ancient sacrificial rituals associated with the dying year. The phrase ‘last communion’ suggests the last sacrament; and the ‘child,’ ordinarily thought of in connection with a first communion, becomes a human child in respect to the divine Father whom she is going to meet. ‘Immortal,’ in the last line, closes the poem on the characteristic Dickinson note of triumph arising from sacrifice.

Such an interpretation as this may make the first stanza rather than the last seem wordy. But at least it provides a means of binding the six stanzas together in a fairly coherent progression from regretful nostalgia for the illusory joys of life to triumphant acceptance of the reader joys of immortality. And yet the tendency toward the pathetic fallacy noted in the opening stanzas is not altogether redeemed by the shift of mood in the fourth stanza. For the last two stanzas hardly succeed in fusing the symbols of the Christian sacrifice of communion with those of the dying year. As in the opening stanzas, the scene itself is forgotten.

Furthermore, the reader is required to accept the 'summer days' as a 'sacrament,' while remembering their earlier contradictory significance. To answer that the poet's mood has changed is to admit the unsoundness of the attempt to impose private moods arbitrarily on external nature. Neither mood in this poem can be understood, or felt, because both—and especially the first—are unsupported by the objective situations described in the poem. As Mr. Arms pointed out, the objective situation was, in fact, falsified by Dickinson in respect to the returning birds and the uncheated bees. The error is hardly surprising, given the poetic method."

Marshall Van Deusen
"Dickinson's 'These Are the Days When Birds Come Back'"
The Explicator XII (April 1954) Item 40

"The poem has charm because the poet communicates the fervor of her enthusiasm. She bids summer farewell by participating in the rites which here also are a communion. She uses the Common Particular meter and her rhymes are exact. She follows the eighteenth-century tradition, common in hymnals today, that gives join and wine the same vowel sound. But here her own emotional experience is the sole end in view. The fact that her knowledge of entomology happens to be inexact is beside the point: bees will gather honey whenever they find it. But the images are vague and generalized. She wishes to join in the rite as 'Emilie,' a child, and the stress of her emotion leads her to transfer her own timidity to the falling leaf."

Thomas H. Johnson
Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography
(Harvard 1955) 185-88

"The ambiguousness of the transitional season between the life and death of the year made it the inevitable locus for [Emily Dickinson's] many efforts to give final expression to this paradox. Simple response to its beauty would have produced merely another conventional autumn-piece, like her description in a schoolgirlish letter: 'We are having such lovely weather—the air is as sweet and still, now and than a gay leaf falling—the crickets sing all day long—high in a crimson tree a belated bird is singing—a thousand little painters are tingeing hill and dale.'

But recognition of the ambiguities covert in the season gave her a new way of maneuvering just such obvious components of its beauty as these, and her first successful poem on this theme came quite early. The title it has long been known by, 'Indian Summer,' was editorially supplied but it has pertinence, since the epithet 'Indian' was adopted into the American language to connote whatever in the New World looked like the real thing but was not. This illusory season is one of the glories of New England's climate, coming as it does between a brief but brilliant summer and the long snowbound winter....

Woven in with her probing of the season's ambiguous appearance is the allied query: Does it symbolize death or immortality? The structure is indicated by the balanced exclamations, 'Oh fraud,' 'Oh Sacrament.' Which it is she never says. Instead of diverting poetry to the solution of problems in philosophy or religious belief, she uses their dilemmas to shape her poems, the warring images poised in ironic tension. The first half of this poem displays the fraud, the second half celebrates the sacrament. The central lines look both ways: the illusion is almost plausible enough for belief, the sure signs of death are transfigured by language that looks forward to the Eucharist.

This structure of ambiguities is supported by the carefully controlled sound pattern throughout. The parallel phrasing of the first and fourth lines, 'These are the days,' opens the poem on a note of confidence. But this is sharply in conflict with the rhyming, which goes against the stanzaic pattern rather than with it. (This is the rhyme scheme of the most lyrical of hymn meters, *aabccb*, the so-called Common Particular; both the movement and the meaning of the poem call for a division into three double stanzas instead of the six as printed.) Instead of the expected initial couplet there is only the internal rhyme 'few-two,' and in the second couplet there is merely the assonance of 'resume-June.' The ear is further shocked by the suspended rhyme, 'mistake' answering 'look,' but picks up the buried sound 'take' and the sequence 'back-backward' to make an intricate pattern of sounds, both rhyming and half-rhyming, all of which echoes the uncertainty and the desire for certainty that lend ambiguity to the first double stanza.

It is only in the second, where the balance between belief and doubt is perfectly maintained, that the rhyme scheme is entirely regular. In the last, though the couplets rhyme perfectly, the sounds that should bind the whole in a unit, 'join-wine,' only rhyme if the old-fashioned pronunciation, still common in hymnals, is used. Absolute faith is possible only for the old-fashioned? All three divisions are linked by the rhetorical device of anaphora (repetition of identical opening words). It is used in the first to suggest confident affirmation... This becomes so overwrought in the third as almost to submerge conscious belief in the incantation of ritual ('Oh... Oh... Thy... Thy'). In the middle stanza itself there is none, but the opening words 'Oh fraud' leap across to clash with the benedictory 'Oh Sacrament' and thus establish the ambiguous poles of the poem's total structure.

She plays the same kind of changes on traditional subject matter that she had rung on conventional form. Knowing that atmosphere is a prime creator of illusion, she punctures the sentimentalism of predecessors like Longfellow by announcing that October's bright blue weather is a 'mistake.' Then she scores her point by reminding that these skies are just a resumption of the 'sophistries' of June. The hope of unending summer was just as plausibly misleading then, when life was at full tide, as it is now in Indian Summer. The birds are deceived, at least a few of the, but the bees are not. Science does not confirm her returning bird and uncheated bee, but folklore provides a sufficient basis for her poetic whims. Birds are not earth-bound, and by association with the soul they may be predisposed to believe in immortality. But even they are not sure. They merely come back to 'take a look,' as rural lore has it. On the other hand, they are one of the 'major nations' living on the surface of the earth and so are not deep in the secret of nature as 'minor nations' are, like the crickets in a companion poem. Bees are such insects, however, one of the oldest and wisest of species according to popular belief. In her poems they are always sharp-eyed realists, unsentimental and unromantic, a quality rendered here by the skeptic's words 'fraud' and 'cheat.'

With the seed and leaf we are somewhere in between. They are nonsentient 'automatic' nature, and express themselves not in knowing but in doing. They do only what they have to do, but its meaning is ambiguous, suggesting both the ancient sacrificial ritual of the dying year and the Christian sacrifice of Communion. So the seeds 'bear witness'—to the death of the particular plant but also the promise of rebirth in the immortality of the species. And though the leaf hurries down to death, the pun on 'altered'—the elements of the Eucharist as well as the air of Indian Summer—implies its transubstantiation into eternal life. All of this, enclosed by 'softly' and 'timid,' looks forward to the professing child of the last stanza.

Such is the poet's dilemma. She has been reasoning empirically, like an adult, from the evidence of nature. Following this is the sudden reversal invoked by the scriptural allusion, 'Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' Only if she can become as 'a child' will she understand the emblematic meaning. Then the sacramental view will be possible: the body and blood of this autumnal death, flaming dead and decaying stalk, will become symbols for immortality. But irony pervades the conclusion too. This Communion is 'in the Haze,' both the atmosphere of Indian Summer, the sophistry of its blue and gold skies, and the veil covering eyes that would see and believe. The 'immortal wine' is the same nectar that could not cheat the bee, a natural rather than a miraculous one, since like 'bread' it is a product of the autumn harvest. 'Child' may suggest a first communion, an initial act of faith by her or any child that wishes to 'join.' But as a mass for the dying year these are last rites.

To recapitulate: In the first stanza the surface of things in Indian Summer suggests that life is everlasting, but this is an illusion of the 'Indian giver.' In the second the inner secret, first intuited and then explicitly revealed, is that the year is really dying; but immediately the paradox is reversed and the underside of death bears witness of rebirth, of altered elements, at least to one who wants to believe. Finally, this desire for belief becomes plaintive; with all the evidence against her the poet can only say, Permit me to become a child and partake, sacramentally, of immortality! The poem itself is a kind of 'last Communion' between her critical mind and her yearning heart."

Charles R. Anderson
Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise
(Holt 1960) 145-49

“These are the days when Birds come back’ succeeds in its creation of the devotional tone; we are engaged in the dramatic transformation of the speaker’s attitude from her initial awareness of the deception of nature (in its Indian summer days) to her final capitulation when the emotional pressures of desire triumph over reason, and she humbly seeks to participate in the “Sacrament of summer days’.”

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

Michael Hollister (2014)