

1 'Had I the Art to Stun myself/with Bolts of Melody!': Emily
2 Dickinson's 'Circumference of Expression' as her 'Chiefest
3 Apprehension' of a Hindered Creativity

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7 **Abstract**

8 England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned
9 languages, in Elizabeth's time and afterwards â???" women of deeper acquirements than are
10 common now in the greater diffusion of letters; and yet where were the poetesses? The divine
11 breath ? why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How
12 strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none.
13 It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you â???" witness my reverent love of the
14 grandfathers! (1).

15

16 **Index terms—**

17 Introduction-England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned languages,
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23 The present paper seeks to position Emily Dickinson in a feminine literary tradition in an era when female
24 writers were either 'not supposed to write' or, even if they did, their voices were almost forbidden since they had to
25 allow their male counterparts to have their place in the 'literary marketplace'. On the other side of the Atlantic, in
26 England, the recognition and acknowledgement of more women poets and particularly the creation of a Romantic
27 feminine tradition with significant representatives, like Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, have given birth to
28 a literary domicile for the Victorian women poets, an intellectual abode that was not made available to earlier
29 critics. Consequentially, they positioned the women poets in relation to a male poetic tradition, or in affiliation
30 with female novelists of the nineteenth century. In order to ensure the impeccability of these judgements, critics
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46 with female novelists of the nineteenth century. In order to ensure the impeccability of these judgements, critics
47 also attempt to examine and decipher the characteristic features of such a literary tradition. Sandra Gilbert and
48 Susan Gubar apply and reconsider the Freudian model of poetic practice propounded by Harold Bloom in his
49 book, *The Anxiety of Influence*. (2) Bloom contemplates all male poets in possession of the mother, the poetic
50 'muse'. Gilbert and Gubar interpose the woman writer into this archetypal male poetic tradition and conceive
51 of her as being caught in the rupture of a two-fold creative angst, situated in a position so as to both encounter
52 the resilient and domineering male precursors and their debasing and repressive representations of women on the
53 one hand, and also to counter the insinuation that the act of writing is conspicuously and unrelentingly a male
54 intellectual industry, on the other. If we look at what Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote to his friend R. W.
55 Dixon in 1886, we can clearly comprehend the cause of doubt and apprehension of 'literary women' having to
56 confront this oppressively 'patriarchal theory of literature' and find out a locus of her own:

57 The artist's "most essential quality", he declared, is "masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and
58 especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one's thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter
59 is." In addition, he noted that "on better consideration it strikes me that the mastery I speak of is not so much
60 in the mind as a puberty in the life of that quality. The male quality is the creative gift." (3) Gilbert and Gubar
61 postulate that women authors do not experience the 'anxiety of influence' in a similar manner, as their male
62 counterparts do, only because of the fact that they have to contend with their predecessors who are 'almost
63 exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her.' What is more oppressive to the female writer
64 is her portrayal by male writers as being completely dissonant with 'her own sense of herself': Not only do
65 these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority ?, they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and
66 her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own
67 sense of her self -that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. (??)

68 It is such a demeaning and immuring portrayal of her potential that she has to battle against. Gilbert and
69 Gubar depict the struggle of the woman writer comprehensively:

70 Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of her.
71 In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. Her revisionary struggle,
72 therefore, often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called "Revision -the act of looking back, of
73 seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction ? an act of survival." Frequently,
74 moreover, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a
75 threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is
76 possible. (5).

77 As a 'Profound' partisan of this 'revisionary struggle', Dickinson in her zealous accolades on other women
78 authors, extolled their authority, which implies that writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and
79 Charlotte Bront? were assimilated into the spiral of her own artistic perception. But Vivian Pollak, at the same
80 time, puts forward the instance of Dickinson portraying Barrett Browning as the 'purveyor of illicit experience, as
81 witch and magician.' (6) But the emotion Dickinson attached with Barrett Browning is evident in Poem 312: Her
82 -"last Poems" -Poets -ended -Silver -perished -with her Tongue -Not on Record -bubbled other, So divine -(??)
83 Joanne Feit Diehl examines Dickinson's poetic thought as such a 'performance of influence' which 'leads us to a
84 provisional formulation of a paradigm that applies more generally to nineteenth-century women poets as they seek
85 independence from powerful male precursors.' (8) Hence, for Barrett Browning, Rossetti, as well as for Dickinson,
86 the predecessor evolves to become a composite masculine character and they find themselves descendants of an
87 extensive line of forefathers who emerge as their antagonists. Hence, it is true that Dickinson's creativity was
88 more often than not unequivocally encouraged by the women writers of the time whom she regarded as members
89 of an authorial sisterhood and in whose works she took great interest. She took part in their success and gained
90 resilience from them. It is worth mentioning here that Dickinson shared her works with her sister-in-law, Susan
91 Gilbert Dickinson, more than with anybody else during her lifetime. Emily cared for Susan's opinions, but did
92 not always adhere to her recommendations. In spite of her literary association with a protective sisterhood, the
93 poet expresses her consternation regarding the yearned-for, yet minatory, male figure that possesses the authority
94 either to devastate or to bestow life on the poet: I am afraid to own a Body -I am afraid to own a Soul -Profound
95 -precarious Property -Possession, not optional -Double Estate -entailed at pleasure Upon an unsuspecting Heir
96 -Duke in a moment of Deathlessness And God, for a Frontier. (??)

97 Emily Dickinson appears to have completely departed from Walt Whitman here. The subsuming strain and
98 the effusion contained in his 'I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul ?. The first I graft
99 and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue' (10) posits the greatest contrapuntal stance
100 to Dickinson's proscriptions, retrogressions and abjurations. However, Dickinson's art, in many ways, betrays
101 distinctive cultural tendencies that are quintessential and even axiomatic.

102 'Own[ing] a Body' or the poet's predicament of reification, a theme that this poem puts forward, is the pivotal
103 philosophy that marks Dickinson's poetry. A significant array of invincible themes converges in her work. These
104 include the concerns of identity that almost compulsively make her anxious. They encompass her identity as a
105 woman poet, but the probability of, and the aspiration for, its 'embodiment in a text' (??1) through language
106 appears exceptionally equivocal due to a number of associated considerations such as, 'her identity as a woman,
107 both in terms of inhabiting a woman's body and of womanhood as a figure for the body; her religious identity, in

108 a broad metaphysical context of ambivalence towards material and temporal embodiment; and finally her identity
109 as an American, in terms of definitions of selfhood as these have peculiarly taken shape within the history of the
110 United States.' (12) What is primarily noticeable in Poem 1090 is the dilemma and intransigence that mark its
111 theme. As is often the case, any Dickinson text becomes more nebulous as one endeavours to decipher it. This
112 element of textual profusion, unpredictability and heterogeneity in her poetry is efficaciously brought out in the
113 following manner: This textual obduracy is, in many ways, in itself a central Dickinsonian subject. Dickinson
114 poems require the closest textual attention. They cannot easily be cited as evidence in an argument, since closer
115 textual work almost always uncovers further readings and implications not easily resolved or subsumed into a
116 summary statement. This is the case both within and between Dickinson texts. It is one of the first tasks of
117 Dickinson criticism exactly to acknowledge and consider this textual multiplicity in Dickinson's work, but less as
118 indeterminacy or open-ended ambiguity or (only) aesthetic play than as the deployment and mutual confrontation
119 between personal and cultural forces that are deeply at stake for her. (13) .

120 Talking about such a cultural undercurrent, it is certainly difficult for the woman poet to continue with the
121 flow of her creativity unhindered, and even uninfluenced, by the powerful male writings and, more importantly,
122 those of her male literary predecessors. Within such an existing as well as a pre-existing masculine cultural
123 framework, the woman poet has to encounter all the elementary, corporeal, legitimate and living circumstances
124 as constituent elements comprising her life, death and the genesis of her artistic craftsmanship. Righteousness and
125 incorruptibility are not a component of Dickinson's poetic self. Her poems provide a discourse on the inhibited
126 occurrences in her life -the pivotal stages of time that are irretrievable. Initial experiences constrict her domain of
127 a prospective enterprise. Exploring the period of her girlhood, Dickinson recollects no haven of approbation for
128 herself. Indoctrinated to consider children as extinct humans who must acquire benevolence before they can be
129 exonerated from culpability, she bears the sense of being expelled and proscribed from the a priori plausibility of
130 such a state of bliss. She departs from the Romantics in not reminiscing about the 'visionary gleam' forgotten in
131 the course of evolution, since she has seldom been allowed to experience it. When Dickinson imagines an Elysian
132 ecstasy, anxiety betokens her consciousness. In one of her letters towards the close of her life, she wrote: 'In all
133 the circumference of Expression, those guileless words of Adam and Eve never were surpassed, "I was afraid and
134 hid Myself".' (14) For this reason, Dickinson's poems have often been correlated with William Blake's Songs of
135 Innocence and Experience, but the contrast allows for an irrepressible incongruity. Dickinson voices her thoughts
136 only about experience. Conversely, the poems which endorse an illusion of innocence are recognizably her most
137 blistering observations. Discerning the sombre paradoxes, Clark Griffith comments that the poems that adopt
138 an impersonation of innocence do so as a facade. It is through such contradictions and ironies, the ingenuous
139 certitude is impugned. (15). Sentiments reflecting anxiety constitute Dickinson's perception of human experience.
140 The trepidation that she encounters while envisaging the inception of any prospective delight, emerges from an
141 existing domain of cognition, a premonition that might be considered as the agonizing aggregate of the assurance
142 life is expected to certify. Her scepticism of nature and her seclusion from mother and God emanate from this
143 premeditated non-existent irreproachability; it hinges on an enlightened cognizance of the possibilities of trauma
144 brought about by experience. In the core of this chiefly passionate strain, death and a prompt criticism of the
145 divine law are ingrained:

146 The life doth prove the precept, who obey shall happy be, Who will not serve the sovereign, be hanged on fatal
147 tree. The perception of this reality discernibly harps on the chords of impending death:

148 The worm doth woo the mortal, death claims a living bride, Night unto day is married, morn unto eventide;
149 (16) Dickinson withstands the angst of an imminent jeopardy that constrains her to desist before acceding to
150 circumstances of conceivable happiness as well as anguish:

151 Come slowly-Eden! LipsunusedtoThee-Bashful-sipthy Jessamines-AsthefaintingBee-Reachinglatehisflower,
152 Roundherchamberhums-Countshisnectars-Enters -and is lost in Balms. (17) She feels anxious since, to her, a
153 receptive utterance -if inspiring and fascinating -is significant; else she apprehends that she might have to forfeit
154 the impulse of perseverance that is needed to create. The voice of a transiens dental being primarily stimulates
155 her and makes her conscious of her quiescence. This realization coalesces with both the spheres of her art and
156 death. But this association is seldom congruent, 'for words themselves at once "enchant" and "infect" her' (18):
157 They carry a lethal potency akin to the attraction of death, which offers a solution to life's mysteries and the
158 erotic satisfaction of sacrifice, giving one's self to an inscrutable lover. But death renders the soul silent, and
159 communication between the dead and the living proves impossible. (

160 Dickinson's anxiety arises from the dilemma between the enchantment caused in her by death when she
161 endeavours to forestall the malaise brought about by her experience of reality, and the consternation she feels
162 from the debilitating reticence it prescribes.

163 As has been noted earlier, for Dickinson, the poetic precursor is a composite male figure whom she invokes,
164 rather than obviates, in her act of creation. It is this invincible antecedent force that corroborates her conception
165 of the muse. This identification between the poetic forefather and the muse simultaneously confounds and
166 compulsively untangles her 'anxiety of influence'. The muse acquires significance and his ascendancy is enhanced
167 through this similitude. Hence, Dickinson's muse strikingly differs from that of the Romantics including
168 Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. Their muse is represented by the conventional image of an immaculate deity,
169 who is a distant identity, conspicuously distinguishable from the poetic forefathers, who were sometimes fanciful

170 forebears also. When Dickinson conceives of her muse as male, she is apprehensive of her own virile strength and
171 avoids him with extreme disquietude, on the one hand, and desires to court him, on the other:

172 We hun t ere it comes, Afraid of Joy, Then sue it to delay Volume XVIII Issue V Version I

173 2 (A)

174 And lest it fly, Beguile it more and more -May not this be Old Suitor Heaven, Like our dismay at thee? (20)
175 Dickinson here delineates a characteristic instance of dramaturgy, wherein 'it' may allude to a phase of time, a
176 paramour, or an imaginative spur.

177 An intensified anxiety overwhelms Dickinson when she acquiesces in a possible transposition in the subliminal
178 consciousness, having experienced a change from her own condition of selfhood to that of a more formidable
179 source of poetic inspiration. This psychic metamorphosis brings forth an apprehension that the docile obedience
180 that she had proscribed may return if she abases herself to the male muse. This disquietude results in Dickinson's
181 scepticism and her equivocal reactions towards the alien interloper in her poems. The poet experiences so intense
182 a strain that she is prone to forsake her poetic aspirations and the faculty of performance. However, as a
183 consequence of her encounter that is marked by patient resignation, comes the accomplishment of an exultant
184 poet that is expressed through the following verse: Language, in this case, demonstrates the force of desire and
185 dismay that informs Dickinson's perspective of self-sufficiency of the poet and the uncertainty associated with
186 poetic autonomy. She affirms her individuality without any dependence on a governing male figure, though she
187 appears to be perturbed by the possibility that she might be enfeebled as a consequence of which she would be
188 rendered too powerless to create. Her poems vacillate between these two ends and hence the discord continues to
189 remain entangled and finds articulation in her later poems: Growth of Man -like Growth of Nature -Gravitates
190 within -Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it -Bit it stir -alone -Each -its difficult Ideal Evidently, these poems seldom
191 allude to the theme of poetic creation, but the tendencies they reveal encompass the whole gamut of Dickinson's
192 life and her experiences. The métier of the poet constitutes one of her cardinal considerations not only for the
193 sole reason that she devoted her life to creating poems, but also due to the fact that she recognizes the faculty
194 of the poet as having a sublime position above the corporeal world and the artistic enterprise as having a divine
195 reverence. She asserts her prerogatives by saying: 'I reckon -when I count it all -First -Poets -Then the Sun -'.
196 (23)

197 Dickinson joins the poetic tradition of perceiving the creative task as sharing similarities with the process of
198 the birth of a child. She foregrounds the real experiences that such a course entails, though she does not associate
199 the biological reality with poetic conception. At the same time, she emphasizes the pangs of physical challenges
200 attendant upon artistic impregnation.

201 Dickinson manifestly endeavours to assume a male authority, perhaps because she perceives herself to be the
202 one who has to hold back for the male. She adopts both masculine and feminine personas so as to embolden herself
203 and to evade the perils of supine submission. How much she subscribes to a male identity understandably depends
204 on the magnitude of her anxiety. In some poems, this masculine figure, be he God or father or a precursor poet,
205 seems so inaccessible that he seems almost implausible, whereas in others, their supremacy perspicuously remains
206 inherent. Such conceptualization posits its own uncertainty, since Dickinson is anxious about a disintegrated self
207 over which she possesses limited sway. Such an association may be deleterious. It is pertinent to mention here
208 that in a letter to Louise and Frances Norcross, Dickinson designates herself as 'brother Emily' which she uses as
209 her signature. (24) In another letter to Edward Dickinson, she alludes to the counsels given to her by her mother
210 when she was 'a Boy'. (25) Her 'Chiefest Apprehension' lies in the possibility of proving 'insufficient' in meeting
211 the expectations of the stupendous task of her authorship:

212 Lest I should insufficient prove For His beloved Need -The Chiefest Apprehension Upon my thronging Mind -
213 (26) ¹ ²

¹'Had I the Art to stun myself / with Bolts of Melody!': Emily Dickinson's 'Circumference of Expression' as her 'Chiefest Apprehension' of a Hindered Creativity

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214 Another cause that precipitates Dickinson's anxiety is her compulsion to confront this male master residing
215 within, so that she may gain the necessary strength to expostulate against the angst that an encounter of two
216 concealed identities brings about. She contemplates forbidding him primarily due to the adversarial elements
217 of the forceful 'other' within her. But the attempt appears to her to be insurmountable: Of Consciousness, her
218 awful Mate The Soul cannot be rid -As easy the secreting her Behind the Eyes of God. (??7) Whenever the
219 conditions of selfhood and otherness in her conjoin to form one unified poetic self, it authorizes her to assume
220 the distinguishable supremacy that she was once empowered with. This unification of the split self enables her to
221 overwhelm the intimidating constraints that she feels within herself. Once she has gained the ability to reassure
222 herself, she repudiates such a masculine other with a peremptory remark: 'Art thou the thing I wanted? / Begone
223 -my Tooth has grown -'. (28)

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