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

The present paper seeks to position Emily Dickinson in a feminine literary tradition in an era when female writers were either 'not supposed to write' or, even if they did, their voices were almost forbidden since they had to allow their male counterparts to have their place in the 'literary marketplace'. On the other side of the Atlantic, in England, the recognition and acknowledgement of more women poets and particularly the creation of a Romantic feminine tradition with significant representatives, like Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, have given birth to a literary domicile for the Victorian women poets, an intellectual abode that was not made available to earlier critics. Conse-quentially, they positioned the women poets in relation to a male poetic tradition, or in affiliation with female novelists of the nineteenth century. In order to ensure the impeccability of these judgements, critics also attempt to examine and decipher the characteristic features of such a literary tradition.

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'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

Mousumi Guha Banerjee

I. Introduction

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

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

> The artist's "most essential quality", he declared, is "masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one's thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is." In addition, he noted that "on better consideration it strikes me that the mastery I speak of is not so much in the mind as a puberty in the life of that quality. The male quality is the creative gift." (3)

Gilbert and Gubar postulate that women authors do not experience the 'anxiety of influence' in a similar manner, as their male counterparts do, only because of the fact that they have to contend with their predecessors who are 'almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her.' What is more oppressive to the female writer is her portrayal by male writers as being completely disconsonant with 'her own sense of herself':

> Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority …, they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. (4)

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

> Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. Her revisionary struggle, therefore, often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich

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> has called "Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction … an act of survival." Frequently, moreover, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible. (5).

As a 'Profound' partisan of this 'revisionary struggle', Dickinson in her zealous accolades on other women authors, extolled their authority, which implies that writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë were assimilated into the spiral of her own artistic perception. But Vivian Pollak, at the same time, puts forward the instance of Dickinson portraying Barrett Browning as the 'purveyor of illicit experience, as witch and magician.' (6) But the emotion Dickinson attached with Barrett Browning is evident in Poem 312:

> Her – "last Poems" –
> Poets – ended –
> Silver – perished – with her Tongue –
> Not on Record – bubbled other,
> So divine – (7)

Joanne Feit Diehl examines Dickinson's poetic thought as such a 'performance of influence' which 'leads us to a provisional formulation of a paradigm that applies more generally to nineteenth-century women poets as they seek independence from powerful male precursors.' (8) Hence, for Barrett Browning, Rossetti, as well as for Dickinson, the predecessor evolves to become a composite masculine character and they find themselves descendents of an extensive line of forefathers who emerge as their antagonists. Hence, it is true that Dickinson's creativity was more often than not unequivocally encouraged by the women writers of the time whom she regarded as members of an authorial sisterhood and in whose works she took great interest. She took part in their success and gained resilience from them. It is worth mentioning here that Dickinson shared her works with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, more than with anybody else during her lifetime. Emily cared for Susan's opinions, but did not always adhere to her recommendations. In spite of her literary association with a protective sisterhood, the poet expresses her consternation regarding the yearned-for, yet minatory, male figure that possesses the authority 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 – precarious Property –
> Possession, not optional –
> Double Estate – entailed at pleasure
> Upon an unsuspecting Heir –
> Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
> And God, for a Frontier. (9)

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

'Own[ing] a Body' or the poet's predicament of reification, a theme that this poem puts forward, is the pivotal philosophy that marks Dickinson's poetry. A significant array of invincible themes converges in her work. These include the concerns of identity that almost compulsively make her anxious. They encompass her identity as a woman poet, but the probability of, and the aspiration for, its 'embodiment in a text' (11) through language appears exceptionally equivocal due to a number of associated considerations such as, 'her identity as a woman, both in terms of inhabiting a woman's body and of womanhood as a figure for the body; her religious identity, in a broad metaphysical context of ambivalence towards material and temporal embodiment; and finally her identity as an American, in terms of definitions of selfhood as these have peculiarly taken shape within the history of the United States.' (12)

What is primarily noticeable in Poem 1090 is the dilemma and intransigence that mark its theme. As is often the case, any Dickinson text becomes more nebulous as one endeavours to decipher it. This element of textual profusion, unpredictability and heterogeneity in her poetry is efficaciously brought out in the following manner:

> This textual obduracy is, in many ways, in itself a central Dickinsoni an subject. Dickinson poems require the closest textual attention. They cannot easily be cited as evidence in an argument, since closer textual work almost always uncovers further readings and implications not easily resolved or subsumed into a summary statement. This is the case both within and between Dickinson texts. It is one of the first tasks of Dickinson criticism exactly to acknowledge and consider this textual multiplicity in Dickinson's work, but less as indeterminacy or open-ended ambiguity or (only) aesthetic play than as the deployment and mutual confrontation between personal and cultural forces that are deeply at stake for her. (13).

Talking about such a cultural undercurrent, it is certainly difficult for the woman poet to continue with the flow of her creativity unhindered, and even uninfluenced, by the powerful male writings and, more importantly, those of her male literary predecessors. Within such an existing as well as a pre-existing masculine cultural framework, the woman poet has to encounter all the

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elementary, corporeal, legitimate and living circumstances as constituent elements comprising her life, death and the genesis of her artistic craftsmanship. Righteousness and incorruptibility are not a component of Dickinson's poetic self. Her poems provide a discourse on the inhibited occurrences in her life – the pivotal stages of time that are irretrievable. Initial experiences constrict her domain of a prospective enterprise. Exploring the period of her girlhood, Dickinson recollects no haven of approbation for herself. Indoctrinated to consider children as extinct humans who must acquire benevolence before they can be exonerated from culpability, she bears the sense of being expelled and proscribed from the *a priori* plausibility of such a state of bliss. She departs from the Romantics in not reminiscing about the 'visionary gleam' forgotten in the course of evolution, since she has seldom been allowed to experience it. When Dickinson imagines an Elysian ecstasy, anxiety betokens her consciousness. In one of her letters towards the close of her life, she wrote: 'In all the circumference of Expression, those guileless words of Adam and Eve never were surpassed, "I was afraid and hid Myself".' (14) For this reason, Dickinson's poems have often been correlated with William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, but the contrast allows for an irrepressible incongruity. Dickinson voices her thoughts only about experience. Conversely, the poems which endorse an illusion of innocence are recognizably her most blistering observations. Discerning the sombre paradoxes, Clark Griffith comments that the poems that adopt an impersonation of innocence do so as a facade. It is through such contradictions and ironies, the ingenuous certitude is impugned. (15).

Sentiments reflecting anxiety constitute Dickinson's perception of human experience. The trepidation that she encounters while envisaging the inception of any prospective delight, emerges from an existing domain of cognition, a premonition that might be considered as the agonizing aggregate of the assurance life is expected to certify. Her scepticism of nature and her seclusion from mother and God emanate from this premeditated non-existent irreproachability; it hinges on an enlightened cognizance of the possibilities of trauma brought about by experience. In the core of this chiefly passionate strain, death and a prompt criticism of the divine law are ingrained:

> The life doth prove the precept, who obey shall happy be,
> Who will not serve the sovreign, be hanged on fatal tree.

The perception of this reality discernibly harps on the chords of impending death:

> The worm doth woo the mortal, death claims a living bride,
> Night unto day is married, morn unto eventide; (16)

Dickinson withstands the angst of an imminent jeopardy that constrains her to desist before acceding to circumstances of conceivable happiness as well as anguish:

> Come slowly–Eden!
> LipsunusedtoThee–
> Bashful–sipthy Jessamines–
> AsthefaintingBee–
> Reachinglatehisflower,
> Roundherchamberhums–
> Countshisnectars–
> Enters – and is lost in Balms. (17)

She feels anxious since, to her, a receptive utterance – if inspiring and fascinating –is significant; else she apprehends that she might have to forfeit the impulse of perseverance that is needed to create. The voice of a transcens dental being primarily stimulates her and makes her conscious of her quiescence. This realization coalesces with both the spheres of her art and death. But this association is seldom congruent, 'for words themselves at once "enchant" and "infect" her' (18):

> They carry a lethal potency akin to the attraction of death, which offers a solution to life's mysteries and the erotic satisfaction of sacrifice, giving one's self to an inscrutable lover. But death renders the soul silent, and communication between the dead and the living proves impossible. (19)

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

As has been noted earlier, for Dickinson, the poetic precursor is a composite male figure whom she invokes, rather than obviates, in her act of creation. It is this invincible antecedent force that corroborates her conception of the muse. This identification between the poetic forefather and the muse simultaneously confounds and compulsively untangles her 'anxiety of influence'. The muse acquires significance and his ascendency is enhanced through this similitude. Hence, Dickinson's muse strikingly differs from that of the Romantics including Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. Their muse is represented by the conventional image of an immaculate deity, who is a distant identity, conspicuously distinguishable from the poetic forefathers, who were sometimes fanciful forebears also. When Dickinson conceives of her muse as male, she is apprehensive of her own virile strength and avoids him with extreme disquietude, on the one hand, and desires to court him, on the other:

> We hun t ere it comes,
> Afraid of Joy,
> Then sue it to delay

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And lest it fly,
Beguile it more and more –
May not this be
Old Suitor Heaven,
Like our dismay at thee? (20)

Dickinson here delineates a characteristic instance of dramaturgy, wherein 'it' may allude to a phase of time, a paramour, or an imaginative spur.

An intensified anxiety overwhelms Dickinson when she acquiesces in a possible transposition in the subliminal consciousness, having experienced a change from her own condition of selfhood to that of a more formidable source of poetic inspiration. This psychic metamorphosis brings forth an apprehension that the docile obedience that she had proscribed may return if she abases herself to the male muse. This disquietude results in Dickinson's scepticism and her equivocal reactions towards the alien interloper in her poems. The poet experiences so intense a strain that she is prone to forsake her poetic aspirations and the faculty of performance. However, as a consequence of her encounter that is marked by patient resignation, comes the accomplishment of an exultant poet that is expressed through the following verse:

I would not paint – a picture –
I'd rather be the One
Its bright impossibility
To dwell – delicious – on –
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare – celestial – stir –
Evokes so sweet a Torment –
Such sumptuous – Despair –
Nor would I be a Poet –
It's finer – own the Ear –
Enamored – impotent – content –
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts of Melody! (21)

Language, in this case, demonstrates the force of desire and dismay that informs Dickinson's perspective of self-sufficiency of the poet and the uncertainty associated with poetic autonomy. She affirms her individuality without any dependence on a governing male figure, though she appears to be perturbed by the possibility that she might be enfeebled as a consequence of which she would be rendered too powerless to create. Her poems vacillate between these two ends and hence the discord continues to remain entangled and finds articulation in her later poems:

Growth of Man – like Growth of Nature –
Gravitates within –
Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it –
Bit it stir – alone –
Each – its difficult Ideal
Must achieve – Itself –
Through the solitary prowess
Of a Silent Life –
Effort – is the sole condition –
Patience of Itself –
Patience of opposing forces –
And intact Belief –
Looking on – is the Department
Of its Audience –
But Transaction – is assisted
Byno Countenance – (22)

Evidently, these poems seldom allude to the theme of poetic creation, but the tendencies they reveal encompass the whole gamut of Dickinson's life and her experiences. The métier of the poet constitutes one of her cardinal considerations not only for the sole reason that she devoted her life to creating poems, but also due to the fact that she recognizes the faculty of the poet as having a sublime position above the corporeal world and the artistic enterprise as having a divine reverence. She asserts her prerogatives by saying: 'I reckon – when I count it all – First – Poets – Then the Sun –'. (23)

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

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

Lest I should insufficient prove
For His beloved Need –
The Chiefest Apprehension
Upon my thronging Mind – (26)

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Another cause that precipitates Dickinson's anxiety is her compulsion to confront this male master residing within, so that she may gain the necessary strength to expostulate against the angst that an encounter of two concealed identities brings about. She contemplates forbidding him primarily due to the adversarial elements of the forceful 'other' within her. But the attempt appears to her to be insurmountable:

> Of Consciousness, her awful Mate
> The Soul cannot be rid –
> As easy the secreting her
> Behind the Eyes of God. (27)

Whenever the conditions of selfhood and otherness in her conjoin to form one unified poetic self, it authorizes her to assume the distinguishable supremacy that she was once empowered with. This unification of the split self enables her to overwhelm the intimidating constraints that she feels within herself. Once she has gained the ability to reassure herself, she repudiates such a masculine other with a peremptory remark: 'Art thou the thing I wanted? / Begone – my Tooth has grown –'. (28)

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