

## THE INNER MOVEMENT IN EMILY DICKINSON'S DOUBLE VIEW OF LIFE

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### RESUMO

O presente ensaio revela, através da análise de poemas de Emily Dickinson, como "I never hear the word Escape", "How Happy is the little Stone" and "Much Madness is divines Sense", associações com vários outros textos de caráter mitológico, bíblico e literário.

Esse estudo contribui para reforçar a visão dialética do homem no mundo, contrastando a dualidade do processo vivencial em si, e deste com o objetivo de vida do homem.

It is both easy and difficult to say something about Emily Dickinson's poetry. It is easy because much has been said about the poet and her poetry in this century and also because one feels a special attraction towards her poems at a first reading, desiring to question and discuss them. Though apparently easy, taking into account motivation and the many references to her work, the matter of criticism becomes difficult, considering both the richness of aspects revealed in her poems and the problem of escaping the tracks other critics have taken.

Rather than an attempt either to point out what in Emily Dickinson's life is reflected in her poetry or to

show how she explored individual themes or categories such as individuality, love, death, immortality, nature, etc., this essay constitutes a view of human nature as revealed through a close reading of some of her poems.<sup>1</sup> Some features in the poems selected suggest both the dynamic condition of the human being on the one hand, and a dialectical mode of grasping reality, on the other, as in the first poem chosen for the present study.

*I never hear the word  
"escape"  
Without a quicker blood.  
A sudden expectation,  
A flying attitude!*

*I never hear of prisons  
broad  
By soldiers battered down,  
But I tug childish at my  
bars  
Only to fail again!*

(77)

The first stanza suggests an individual and personal feeling as an anticipation of liberty which is latent in the human being. The "I" we hear and the expressions "quicker blood", "sudden expectation", and "flying attitude" reveal at the same time an inner state of the human being ("blood",

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“expectation”, “attitude”) and a peculiar sense of movement (“quicker”, “sudden”, “flying”).

The second stanza is articulated so that it presents a very obvious contrast with the first one in terms of escape/prison. Moreover, it provides a significant dialectical view of man’s limitation (“tug childish”), on the one hand, and man’s aspiration (“flying attitude”), on the other. The ambiguity of “prisons broad” and “The soldiers battered down”, both in the plural forms, suggests, among other possibilities, the connotation of controlled pressure upon man as a social being. However, it is interesting to note that the word “again” at the end of the poem adds to the previous meanings the idea of a continuous and alternating process of imprisonment and liberty (“only to fail again”), since the idea of a new failure brings to our mind the idea of a new attempt. Such a suggestion evokes in us the myth of Sisyphus, he who as a form of punishment has forever to roll a rock uphill, which because of its weight always rolls back downward upon him. Camus describes Sisyphus’ work and efforts, serving to illustrate our concern and emphasize the tragic trait of human condition.

*. . . one sees the face  
screwed tight against the  
stone, the shoulder bracing  
the clay-covering mass, the  
foot wedging it, the fresh  
start with arms  
outstretched, the wholly  
human security of two*

*earth-clotted hands. At the  
very end of his long effort  
measured by skyless space  
and time without depth, the  
purpose is achieved. Then  
Sisyphus watches the stone  
rush down in a few  
moments towards that  
lower world whence he  
will have to push it up  
again towards the summit.  
He goes back to the plain.<sup>2</sup>*

According to Camus, it is at each of those “breathing spaces” when Sisyphus leaves the heights to come down the slope, that he becomes conscious and superior to his fate.<sup>3</sup> Though conscious or exactly because he is conscious of his torture, Sisyphus does not give up hope, trying again and again to reach the top of the slope.

Using a different image, Emily Dickinson presents man as a tragic being too, who though conscious of his “prison bars” holds on to the expectation that freedom may eventually be achieved.

As a controversial being, man presents many facets; and depending on the circumstances, he may be viewed in a light and natural perspective, contrasting with that of conflict, as revealed in the first poem discussed here. Having the awareness of a great poet, Emily Dickinson combines form and content to present such a light view of the human being.

*How happy is the little  
Stone  
That rambles in the Road*

*alone  
 And doesn't care about  
 Careers  
 And Exigencies never fears*  
 –  
*Whose Coat of elemental  
 Brown  
 A passing Universe put on,  
 And independent as the  
 Sun  
 Associates or glows alone,  
 Fulfilling absolute Decree  
 In casual simplicity –*  
 (1510)

In one sentence that runs in a very natural tone the poet personifies “Stone” as child whose movement transmits a sense of carelessness, freedom and simplicity which result in happiness. The dynamic state of the child is explicated by the verb “ramble” and the inner force comes from her independence in the world – “that rambles in the world alone” –. The word “alone” is used by the poet not to convey loneliness but rather to emphasize the individuality of the human being. Furthermore, such a state of ‘glorious’ independence – “And independent as the Sun/ Associates or glows alone” – grants energy and light not only to the child herself but to others as well. The poem suggests various associations, two of which I will illustrate. The first one taken from the Bible.

*Consider the lilies of the  
 field, how they grow:  
 they toil not, neither do  
 they spin:  
 And yet I say unto you,*

*that even Solomon in all  
 his glory was not  
 arrayed like one of these.  
 Therefore, if God  
 so clothe the grass of the  
 field, which today is  
 and tomorrow is cast into  
 the oven, shall He not  
 much more clothe you, O  
 ye of little faith?*  
 .....  
*Take therefore no thought  
 for the morrow: for the  
 morrow shall take thought  
 for the things of itself.  
 Sufficient unto the day is  
 the evil thereof.*

Let me consider some points in the two texts that in a contrastive way bring meanings together. In Emily Dickinson’s poem ‘nature’ and ‘man’ are fused together (stone-child) and the child “doesn’t care about Careers/ And Exigencies never fears”, whereas in the biblical reference the elements nature and man are separated from each other and revealing two different states: man’s preoccupation about his future, on the one hand, and nature’s lack of concern about this same future, on the other.

In Emily Dickinson’s words, the stone receives natural garments – “Whose Coat of elemental Brown/ A passing Universe put on” – and the same thing happens to the lilies in the passage taken from the Bible.

Whereas an attitude of confidence and trust in the future is expected from man in the Bible, notwithstanding the present evil, the vision presented by Emily Dickinson

is of complete realization – “Fulfilling absolute Decree” – despite or because of the stone’s lack of concern for “Careers” or fear of ‘pressing necessities’.

The second association comes from *The Scarlet Letter*, where Hawthorne introduces Pearl revealing some of her attributes such as little, innocent, lovely and a mutable creature.<sup>5</sup> The picture that emerges from Hawthorne’s text is in many ways similar to that of Emily Dickinson’s poem. Pearl, a “creative spirit”, in her relationship with the external world, where she is taken care of by her mother, Hester Prynne, communicates “itself to a thousand objects, as a torch kindles a flame wherever it may be applied”.<sup>6</sup> The vision of spontaneity, freedom and happiness suggested by the child, who “laughed and danced up and down, with the humorsome gesticulation of a little imp, whose next freak might be to fly up the chimney” is not, however, a constant and lasting one. Hester Prynne’s conflicts between good and evil and changeable feelings from ‘pride’ to “unalterable pain” affect the child, inciting doubt in her heart: peace is broken leading Pearl even to question her mother about her origin: “Tell me! Tell me!”<sup>8</sup>

Though one may at a first reading of Emily Dickinson’s poem only capture the image of a careless and happy child, it suggests, after a more careful study, other implications as well. The capitalization of words such as “Stone”, “Road”, “Careers”, “Exigencies”, “Coat”, “Brown”, “Universe”, “Sun” and “Decree”, in

the context of the poem, leads the reader to a threefold questioning: the first one, about the possibility or impossibility of complete happiness in this world; the second, about man, not only in his limited environment, but also, as a universal being; and the third, not only about man’s goal in life but also about the process to achieve such a goal. Then, the meanings of the poem broaden and the vision presented by its new readings suggests that happiness is provisional and that the poet has captured that moment in man’s life, when, as a child, his inner force, simplicity and faith give him strength and energy to proceed and face other times.

So far, one could envisage the duality of man in his alternating moments of ups/downs; freedom/imprisonment; simplicity/complexity; or peace/conflict as illustrated by the first poem, by its contrast with the second one or even thinking more deeply about the latter. The third poem to be discussed in this essay reveals again such a duality, but in an extreme and more painful view of the human being.

*Much Madness is divinest  
Sense –  
To a discerning Eye –  
Much Sense – the starkest  
Madness  
'tis the Majority  
In this, as All, prevail –  
Assent – and you are sane  
  
Demur – you’re  
straightway dangerous  
And handled with a Chain – (435)*

The poet, right in the beginning of her poem, presents an antithetical metaphor – “Much Madness is divinest Sense” – which soon in the third line appears in juxtaposition, “Much Sense – the starkest Madness” emphatically providing the reader (“a discerning Eye”) with elements for a very serious questioning. The poet with a great economy of words and opposite implications succeeds in suggesting the absurdity of men’s relationship with each other in society, where man’s sanity or insanity is judged in terms of submission or objection to what dominates or prevails in such a society.

The poem is richly allusive, bringing to the reader’s mind images which suggest a great variety of thematic implications. Among such images it may be pertinent to mention those of King Lear and Prometheus. In the beginning of Shakespeare’s play,<sup>9</sup> King Lear appears as an arrogant and bitter man but ‘sane’. With the development of the play, he becomes mad in consequence of his disillusionment in old age and internal and external conflicts, but reveals signs of unselfishness and love. Then, one may inquire: “When is King Lear mad, when is he sane?” The answer to such a question may elucidate the paradox created by the various antithesis which serve as the central and basic issues raised by Emily Dickinson’s poem.

Now, one may question: “What kind of association is there established between the myth of Prometheus and those lines of Emily Dickinson’s

poem?” According to the myth, in the war against Kronos, Prometheus had aided Zeus in overthrowing all the other gods. Later, Prometheus refuses to obey the orders of Zeus, by giving fire to men and teaching them all the arts and crafts. As a form of punishment, he is bound to a rocky cliff for eternity. Thus, Prometheus must suffer the consequences of his ‘crime’ for helping man, as he explains in Aeschylus’ play: “. . .this is the crime that I must expiate/Hung here in chains, nailed ‘neath the open sky”.<sup>10</sup>

Referring back to the poem one realizes that the poet is suggesting that there is an inner and bipolar force in man, which calls for a different response, depending on the direction it moves to: “Assent – and you are sane/Demur – you’re straightway dangerous”, thus called mad in the same way Prometheus was referred to by Hermes, the messenger of Zeus.

*Her. These are the  
workings of a brain  
More than a little touched;  
the vain  
Of voluble ecstasy!  
Surely he wandereth from  
the way  
His reason lost, who thus  
can pray!  
A mouthing madman  
he! . . .<sup>11</sup>*

Though called mad, Prometheus was conscious and acting out of free will, as he says: “Of my free will, my own free will I erred / and freely do I here acknowledge it”<sup>12</sup>, in the same way

as man in greatest madness of resistance may be in fact revealing the most profound sanity.

The poem might be suggesting, through the evocation of the myth, that man may, as Prometheus eventually did, escape from chain, even resisting, if not now, in a future to come, as the poet says in another poem:

.....  
*It yet remains to see  
If immortality unveil  
A third event to me.*

(1731)

The present study emphasizes the actual duality of man as suggested by the poet's double view of life: on the one hand, man's idealization of life – which is to achieve freedom, peace, happiness and harmony with the other men; and, on the other hand, man in the life process – which is of conflict, pain and pressure. When man faces his actual life in contrast to his ideal, he suffers frustration and pain; but only through an inner and constant movement of his own self, may he maintain hope and life itself.

*Growth of Man – like  
growth of Nature –  
Gravitates within –*  
.....

#### NOTES

- 1 – The quotations of Emily Dickinson's poems and extracts of poems are numbered according to JOHNSON, Thomas H. Ed. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Boston, Little Brown, 1960.

- 2 – CAMUS, Albert. "The Myth of Sisyphus". In: *The Myth of Sisyphus*. ———. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1957. p. 108.  
3 – *Ibid.* pp. 108-109.  
4 – St. Mathew VI. 28-34. NOVO TESTAMENTO. Rio, Casa Publicadora Batista. Is. d. I.  
5 – HAWTHORNE, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter and Other Tales of The Puritans*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company. 1961. pp. 88-90.  
6 – *Ibid.*, p. 93.  
7 – *Ibid.*, p. 96.  
8 – *Ibid.*, p. 97.  
9 – SHAKESPEARE, William. *King Lear*. London, Methuen, 1968.  
10 – AESCHYLUS. *Prometheus Bound*. In: HUTCHINS, Robert Maynard. Ed. *Great Books of the Western World*. v. 5. Chicago, University of Chicago, 1952. p. 41.  
11 – *Ibid.*, p. 51.  
12 – *Ibid.*, p. 42.

#### ABSTRACT

This essay constitutes a view of human nature as revealed through a close reading of some of Emily Dickinson's poems. They evoke some Greek myths that serve to illustrate ideas which contribute to reveal both the dynamic condition of the human being and his dialectical mode of grasping reality.

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