

AGAINST THE EMERSONIAN MORAL: DICKINSON'S DESINTEGRATING OBSESSION

María Eugenia Díaz

Since the very beginning of the attention toward Emily Dickinson, her critics have considered her a poet intrinsically connected with Transcendentalism, and the reasons were mainly her being a contemporary of Emerson and Thoreau. Many critics have stated the influence of the philosopher on the recluse poet: Albert J. Gelpi explains her poetry in constant reference to Emerson and Thoreau and considers that what sustained her in moments of desperation was his conviction that the main activity of her life was the cultivation of the individual conscience. Another defender of their intimate relationship was Hyatt H. Waggoner, who argued for Dickinson's acceptance of the alternative Calvinism, inaugurated by Emerson. He says that to Emerson, Thoreau and Dickinson «poetry is a form of, or a means to, illumination, and the poet is a seer or visionary first of all, and only secondarily if at all, a 'craftsman', an 'artificer'»¹.

Allen Tate on the other hand, tries to differentiate her from Emerson's links and explains that «Miss Dickinson's ideas were deeply inbedded in her character, not taken from the latest tract»². And he goes on saying that her resemblance to Emerson is slight because «... in Emily Dickinson the puritan world is no longer self-contained; it is no longer complete; her sensibility exceeds its dimensions. She has trimmed down its supernatural proportions [...] her poetry is a magnificent personal confession, blasphemous and, in its self-revelation, its honesty, almost obscene. It comes out of an intellectual life towards which it feels no moral responsibility. Cotton Mather would have burnt her for a witch»³. W. R. Sherwood follows Allen Tate and tries to show the differences between them, and even dares to say that she rejected the assumptions of Transcendentalism⁴.

¹ H. Waggoner, «The Transcendent Self» in R. H. Rupp, ed., *Critics on E. Dickinson*, University of Miami, Coral Gables, 1972, p. 106.

² Allen Tate, «New England Culture and Emily Dickinson» in Paul Ferlazzo, *Critical Essays on Emily Dickinson*, G. K. Hall & Co., Boston 1984, p. 88.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

⁴ W. R. Sherwood, *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages of the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson*, New York and London, 1968.

The discrepancies in the critical claims of Emerson's influence on Dickinson have been very strong and the history of the criticism of her poetry shows that a shift is taking place. In the last decades the Feminist's approach has enriched the studies of Emily Dickinson offering a wide range of new paths leading to the exploration of her identity as a woman, and comparing her to the major poets of her time. For example, J. F. Diehl examines her background and confirms a new set of influences and relationships with her generation of writers. She accepts the share of a Romantic trend with writers like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Emerson, but by confronting Dickinson with her contemporaries she manages to discover the hidden distinctive character of her poetry.

I consider that Dickinson's lack of intellectual training should be considered as an essential factor in her literature. Many critics look for a philosophical hint in the art of a sensitive woman, while this is something she never pursued. We have records of her readings of Emerson as they were described by Capps and we know that «Ben Newton, whom she called her 'gentle, yet grave Preceptor', gave her a copy of the 1847 edition of Emerson's *Poem*, in which he had marked those poems he considered best. This volume is among the Dickinson books at Harvard [...]. It should not be surprising that she regarded this volume highly for it was recommended by the tutor»⁵. Apart from this fact we have proof of her attentive reading of Emerson when she quotes in three occasions from his famous poem «The Humble-Bee», as well as «The Squirrel».

But this exact transcript of his words doesn't mean anything. What we have to look for is whether she transmitted something of his ideas, and here we come to her unorthodox spirit that no doubt prevented her from imitating Emerson's philosophy as Whitman did. She never fell under the danger of other nineteenth century writers as N. Hawthorne, for example.

Her main interest was more intrinsically artistic, and so, less consciously constructed, less coherent and systematic. Dickinson wrote a sort of poetry that doesn't have a unique point of view for its understanding; on the contrary her conception of the specific subject of poetry points toward something multifarious and not definitely stated, but simply sketched. This same is stated by Sukenick when he tries to disentangle Stevens and other writers from Emerson's philosophical theories: «It is true that what is usually meant by theory in this country is largely academic, alien to writers precisely because it employs modes of analytic thought reductive and diversionary for someone interested in writing poems and fictions»⁶.

Dickinson's experience has been misleadingly considered as very limited, and this has been one of the biggest mistakes of her critics, because her seclusion cannot be the proof of lack of experience; on the contrary if we rely on her poetry

⁵ J. L. Capps, *Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836-1886*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1966, p. 113-14. Apart from this reference of Capps there are also records that prove her reading some of Emerson's poems, like «Bacchus»; «Concord Hymn»; «Fable»; «The Snow Storm» and the essay *Representative Men*.

⁶ Ronald Sukenick, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1985, p. xvi.

and forget about the intense speculation about her life, we can only conclude that her experience is profound and varied and she can be considered as one of the writers who better mastered life.

The themes which have always been studied as essential in the relationship between Emerson and Dickinson have been nature, religion and the function of the poet, so I will try to examine these three subjects in her poetry.

After a close reading of *Nature*, Emerson's most famous essay, we come to the conclusion that he uses nature in a symbolic way. What he is really talking about is man's use of it as a vehicle of thought. Beauty, for example, is not ultimate, but a path that leads to the inner world of man. So we find in his conception a rational perception of nature as «inmortal beauty» that conveys a purpose. Nature generates in man the energy of will: «So through the harmonious sense of union with nature... all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing, I see all, the currents of the universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God»⁷.

Emily Dickinson, on the other hand, also grew up in a Puritan society which means that she was used to seeing in nature the reflection of God, but unlike Emerson her poems usually express her inability to understand nature. She appears vulnerable in the observation of it. Sometimes she gets near to the Emersonian perception but then backs off to an observer's position. In her famous poem, «A bird came down the Walk» the speaker contemplates a bird and describes it with sympathy. In the first stanza a worm is in danger, in the forth the speaker is, so he tries to cross the barrier between man and nature:

Like one in danger, Cautious
I offered him a Crumb
And he enrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home⁸.

There takes place an approximation, a communion between the observer and nature, the identification with the bird is very brief for the poet feels that the bird rejects such intimacy by flying away. The speaker then turns alien to nature and observes from outside. The bird increases its beauty with the development of the poem and the speaker has an opportunity to be one with nature, but in spite of its proximity the bird is an antagonist. She can't accept the fact that nature infuses a real knowledge into men.

I feel that her conception of object in life is not symbolic. In «The Poet» Emerson says that objects are symbols⁹, for him spiritual values are primary to material, ideas are his materials while writing, while for Dickinson her materials are words and direct experience of life. She is not a philosopher and her capacity

⁷ R. W. Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1903, vol. 1, p. 10.

⁸ Thomas H. Johnson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1955, vol. I, p. 261.

⁹ R. W. Emerson, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 187-221.

is first of all sensual, her senses apprehend real things, so her experience is less ideal than Emerson's.

Frequently her experience of nature is pain and grief:

To Ache is human —not polite—
The film upon the eye
Mortality's old Custom—
Just locking up —to Die.¹⁰

Again, the poet is vulnerable and pessimistic, where Whitman, for example, would be optimistic. In a long series of poems she even confronts Emerson's Transcendental views for she doesn't find out that capacity to protect:

Nature and God —I neither knew
Yet Both so well knew me
They startled, like Executors
Of My identity

Yet Neither told —that I could learn—
My Secret as secure
As Herschel's private interest
Or Mercury's affair¹¹

In this poem she confronts this foreign complicity with what she calls her own «Secret». She doesn't find or look for anything of special worth in nature, instead she believes in her inner power to «see», which refers to her conception of the poet as the possessor of a special insight, as we shall see later. She shares with Emerson the search for a symbol for the self, but her conclusion, unlike his, is that we can only live within our self centered deceptions. This is how Diehl expresses this idea:

For her, nature becomes an antagonist, a deeply equivocal mystery, certainly exquisite at times, but with an exotic power that withholds its secrets as it dazzles. No matter how well one reads or imagines, nature as text withdraws and guards its final lesson; morality departs from the natural world to depend solely upon the individual. Consequently, the self perceives nature as an adversary and seeks to go beyond it into an anti or post-naturalistic environment, pursuing questions in a self-dominated sphere that rejects the province of a communal, natural life. Finally, nature becomes not a sacred ground but a place that fails to protect¹².

This same distrust of nature Dickinson extends to religion:

I shall know why —when Time is over—
And I have ceased to wonder why
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky¹³.

¹⁰ T. H. Johnson, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 368.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 633.

¹² J. F. Diehl, *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*, Princeton U. P., NJ, 1981, p. 97.

¹³ T. H. Johnson, ed., *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 139.

She doesn't see any solution to her anguishes in life, nor does she complain. The universe seems to convey no justice, no morals, no ordered scheme, so she concludes there is no divine in life, we will have to wait after death: «Christ will explain... in the... sky».

According to Sherwood¹⁴, after 1862, E. Dickinson develops an aesthetic theory of her own and restates that art survives nature. In «Of Bronze —and Blaze» God redeems us through love while the poet prevents the natural object from the destruction of time. In these poems she coincides with Emerson when he says that many poets tried to talk about truth but couldn't, while «wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things: so that picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it is a man in alliance with truth and God»¹⁵.

The difference resides in the fact that Dickinson doesn't seek that Transcendental state of knowledge that liberates the mind. Her discrepancy is described by Sherwood as «aristocratic» and in fact it is, for she says that only the poet can «see», while Democratic Emerson and Thoreau and the English Romantics were asserting the capacity of all men to see. She considers the poet an elect soul with the gift of immortality acquainted through the act of creation. In this poem she writes of the spirit of the poet in these terms:

This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbors and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval
Experience between...¹⁶

The poet is here immortal, like Emerson states in «The Poet», but in opposition to Emerson he is the «alone» being with the capacity to «see». A similar idea is obtained from the following:

The Soul's Superior instants
Occur to Her --alone--
When friend --and Earth's occasion
Have infinite withdrawn--

Or the —Herself— ascended
To too remote a Height
For lower Recognition
Than Her Omnipotent

In the fourth stanza she says:

¹⁴ William Robert Sherwood, *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson*, Columbia U. P., New York, 1968, p. 205.

¹⁵ R. W. Emerson, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 30

¹⁶ T. H. Johnson, ed. *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 622.

Eternity's disclosure
 To favorites —a few—
 Of the Colossal substance
 Of Immortality¹⁷

Here again the word «alone» is stressed, between dashes, like a divine signal of authenticity. She feels she alone has a stronger power to understand «immortality» because she has been «favoured» with that capacity.

In connection with these matters, we cannot forget that in poetry the formal elements of expression bear a very important message into the meaning of the poem. If we pay due attention to Dickinson's use of language, we will find that she is fighting strongly to liberate herself of the nineteenth century convention. She tries to break the syntax in a similar way to the Modernists. Her opaque language configures a code of evanescent items that express new meanings through oblique language.

N. Frye¹⁸ says her language is the result of her «epigrammatic wit» which when paraphrased loses its profound dimension. In her poetry she is a revolutionary dueller with words, absence is more important than presence, and her poetry gains in transparency through a lack of grammatical links between words. This fact gives to her poems a characteristic duality which can only be found in the Modernist's play with the arbitrariness of words. This is a clue, in my opinion, to understanding Dickinson's essential difference from nineteenth century writers: her advanced theory of the power of words.

Her use of language, her confrontation of self-life is a constant movement of lack and gain, longing and possessing. She feels overwhelmed by nature, so she keeps alive the symbol of the experience, but the word has to be liberated from conventionality so it doesn't have to be «polite», because politeness kills experience, so her words are violently disquieting:

She dealt her pretty words like Blades
 How glittering they shone
 And every One unbarred a Nerve
 Or wanted with a Bone¹⁹.

I conclude that E. Dickinson is more interested in finding a new means of literary expression than in discovering truth, so her poetry is not at the same stage as Emerson's. Experience is more important to her than thought in her artistic aim and that is, in my opinion, the reason why her poetry has outlasted Emerson's, her belief and defense of the power of words.

 INDICE

¹⁷ T. H. Johnson, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 227.

¹⁸ Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1963, p. 86.

¹⁹ T. H. Johnson, ed., *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 367.