

POET ON A POEM - 1

EMILY DICKINSON by Mario Petrucci



A poet presents a short poem and describes – using living details – why and how that poem, that language, changed their approach to writing and their perspective on perception. The emphasis is on how the poem and its images impacted on that reader rather than general responses. Based on a proposal by Mario Petrucci who starts this occasional series.

I died for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?
“For beauty,” I replied.
“And I for truth, – the two are one;
We brethren are,” he said.

And so, as kinsmen met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.

This extraordinary poem not so much changed my life, as helped me to turn my internal telescope around, forever.

The narrow registers of Dickinson’s poetry and existence, those cloistered day-to-daynesses she so patiently and obsessively inhabits, seem suddenly – in her hands – at the edge of the universe. Her poems, though tiny and vulnerably finite on the page, often attain – through the act of reading – that exhilarating, through-the-telescope extent. With her, I feel as though someone is tapping me on the shoulder to politely inform me I might be using the wrong end of the instrument. “My business is circumference” she says elsewhere; and her poems (at their best) circumscribe a vast luminosity, are formed so utterly, so compactly, as to heighten the dark – the ‘not-poem’ – she sets them against.

Many of Dickinson’s poems, as here, swing open that great front

door of the first person, the Self. But, in this piece, by addressing (through the poem's quasi-anonymous narrator) an anonymous kinsman, she addresses me doubly: through Other, as well as via Self. Note that delicate transformation of Other to Self in the first line of the second stanza: by delaying the speech marks (used thereafter), the 'why I failed?' line becomes existentially complex and compelling.

I was, I admit, a touch disappointed to discover that Dickinson originally *had* those speech marks in: the effect I admire here seems to be one of those (unhappily, rare) happy accidents of the subsequent sanitisation of her forms. On the other hand, Dickinson's so-called 'erratic' or 'quirky' punctuation really held command in this poem, much more forcefully than was allowed by the early edition from which the above text is reproduced. This attribute of her work offers us yet another form of tension, challenging the apparently closed parameters and devout sense of efficiency she brings to bear on moment-by-moment existence. No poet I know can achieve greater linguistic power in so bald a space or with such ironic politesse.

Indeed, with its tight little trinity of stanzas, Dickinson's poem presents us with aligned sarcophagi more than linked rooms. Each stanza completes its thought like an act of Fate; the lack of a title is like a missing headstone. But whose is the third tomb? In the opening stanzaic grave, I can see the writer; in the second, I appreciate that oxymoron of the kindred Other. So, is that third resting place for me – you – the reader? If so, all three come together. Here we glimpse the mausoleum of multiple consciousness; but also the ultimate communion of non-consciousness. We are made intimate by our aloneness.

True: this poem slips me, unfailingly, deathwards; but, having set me before my Being from that impossible (after-death) perspective, it proceeds gently, companionably. It urges me to choose what my life will speak of. Perhaps that is why I return so often to its lullaby of dark, those diminutive word-coffins I can almost sing. Dickinson makes of death a cot; then rocks it. Hers is a telescope to make a human skull the size of a planet. She shows us that if you peer into the night sky – into a consciousness – hard enough; if you can bring the right instruments to bear; then all those apparently bland and empty spaces between the stars are fit to burst with galaxies. Through her, we see more clearly what a luminous ante-room to darkness a life is.