

TECHNICAL QUALITIES IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

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Dickinson's reputation as a poet is based not only on the contents of her poetry but also on her art and technique. No American poet attracted the attention of scholars and critics with his or her technical qualities as Dickinson did. Although, unlike Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold and T.S Eliot, she had no formal theory of poetics for writing poetry but her art and technique of writing poetry have been the subjects of discussion among many critics like James Reeves and Douglas Duncan. It was due to her fastidious nature that she did not learn the secrets of poetic art from any poet or critic. She never had the benefit of accomplished poetic guidance. She wrote to Higginson that so far as the writing of poetry is concerned, she had none to ask. This is why, there are many technical defects in her poetry but these defects are a part of her originality as a poet. She composed by instinct which told her that mechanical regularities disturb the free flow of thoughts. As a poet, she depended on inspiration and in the absence of inspiration, she failed to write good poetry. The following poem is the result of labour and, as such, it does not possess poetic excellence:

“Within my Garden, rides a Bird
Upon a single Wheel—
Whose spokes a dizzy Music make
As 'twere a travelling Mill— “(CP 242)

The following poem exhibits fullness of poetic inspiration:

“ A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel—
A Resonance of Emerald—

A Rush of Cochineal—

And every Blossom on the Bush Adjusts its tumbled Head—

The mail from Tunis, probably,

An easy Morning's Ride— “(CP 619)

There is another poem which shows the wit of the keen phrase, brevity and exact focus and has been appreciated by Ruth Miller as one of the finest poems written by Dickinson. The poem runs as follows:

“A Visitor in Marl—

Who influences Flowers—

Till they are orderly as Busts—

And Elegant— as Glass— “(CP 186)

Dickinson stated “My business is Circumference”. The word Circumference explains the nature of poetry. The word has two meanings: her immediate surrounding and environment and the word is also a symbol for all that is outside. As a poet, she could not neglect her immediate surroundings but her real interest was in things other than the surroundings and environment. This is why, her poetry is devoted to her discussion of Heaven, Hell, God, Christ, Death and Immortality. Her genius as a poet is reflected in the poems written on these subjects which consumed the best part of her poetic imagination. Dickinson instrument is her enquiring mind which explains Circumference. Her mind is devoted to explore the whole infinity of the universe lying before her. ‘Circumference’ for her also meant the divine reality. Dickinson read the Bible in her search for meaning. She found it a great source for her imagery which she found in the Psalms, the Revelation and Gospel of St. John. She was more interested in breadth and opposed to all that is small. In another poem she says:

“I should have been too glad, I see —

Too lifted— for the scant degree

Of Life's penurious Round—

My little Circuit would have shamed

This new Circumference — have blamed—

The homelier time behind.” (CP 147)

In this poem the word 'Circumference' is used for the territory where all the resurrected souls become whole again and restored to eternal life. It has also been used for all that is unknowable. It has also been used for the life after death – the infinite as opposed to the finite. Dickinson, with the passage of time, became more interested in Eternity which is the only reality to be understood by us. This type of thought disturbed the artistic side of her poetry because she was more busy in her thoughts than in the manner in which the thought must be expressed. This is why, her poetry appears to be so complex and complicated that many times the whole poem seems beyond comprehension. The word 'Circuit' in this poem means the real and the limited world of the living people. Dickinson has written a poem which gives us a hint about the poetic process in her mind: "Essential Oils- are wrung

The Attar from the Rose

Be not expressed by Suns— alone—

It is the gift of Screws—

The General Rose— decay—

But this — in Lady's Drawer

Make Summer— when the Lady lie

In Ceaseless Rosemary—" (CP 335)

Dickinson is of the view that the poetic creation is a type of perfume – making. The "Essential Oils" means the essence of life– experience. The word "wrung" reckons the force of emotional intensity which is extremely essential for poetic creation. The noun "Attar" suggests the ethereal quality of poetry. The word 'Rose' is the symbol of complete life of joy and sorrow, of beauty and of love. It signifies the varied experiences of life that constitute the material to be wrung into poetry. The "Attar" of poetry, according to the poet, is not produced by natural genius alone: it requires poetic craft too. By using the word 'alone', Dickinson denies the undue importance given to genius. Not genius alone, poetry also requires craftsmanship. The "General Rose" may decay and die but its Attar i.e. Poetry will "Make Summer" forever. It was in her own manner that Dickinson wrote about the art of poetry. It is in a larger number of poems that she talks about poetry and its various aspects. She not only defines poetry but also gives her idea of the poet and the poetic process. She gives her idea of perception and experience. She also talks about inspiration and expression of imagination and truth.

Although Dickinson did not write a treatise on poetry and its nature, her poems and letters give us sufficient idea of her concept of poetry and also of herself as a poet. She wrote to Higginson about how she reacted after she studied poetry:

“ If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know, that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?” (qtd. in Agrawal 310)

It is not yet known why Dickinson, against her temperament, considered it essential to express her views on poetry and poetics. She did not publish her poems. She also never tried to know about the art of poetry from any contemporary poet and yet, she has seriously written on the subject not only through her letters but also through her poems. The astonishing thing is that the queen of paradoxes did not care to know that she was quietly neglecting her own statements about poet and poetry. She had, probably, the readers after her death in her mind for whom she did the business. Dickinson, although she lived in the inner world of her soul, knew many things about the outer world too. As such she believed in unlimited scope of poetry. For Dickinson, poetry was the spring of everlasting joy and it was for this source of the never- ending joy that she remained engaged in the task of writing poetry till the last day of her life. She called poetry a “Blossom of Brain” and “the Flower of Soul”. According to her, it grows out of a small idea which is picked up consciously or the idea may even come spontaneously. The idea develops in the mind and then ripens in the soul:

“This is a Blossom of the Brain—
A small — italic Seed
Lodged by Design or Happening
The Spirit Fructified—” (CP 443)

If the poet loses the idea, he loses “the flower of the Lord”. To Dickinson, Poetry was something divine and she called its loss as the death of soul and the “funeral of God”:

“ When it is lost, that Day shall be
The Funeral of God,
Upon his Breast, a closing Soul
The Flower of our Lord—” (CP 413)

Dickinson perceived poetic creation as the imperceptible rising of the “Bulb” from the mould or the emergence of a “Worm” from Cocoon:

“So from the mould
Scarlet and Gold
Many a Bulb will rise—
...
So from Cocoon
Many a Worm
Leap so Highland gay
Peasants like me,
Peasants like Thee
Gaze perplexedly!” (CP 35)

Whatever be, the poetry of Dickinson is more a poetry of contents and less a poetry of technique in spite of her expressions about the art and technique. It is in this regard that James Reeves has observed: “What has been forgotten by some critics is that she never certainly gave any of her poems a final form, never polished them for the press, never made a selection for publication, never had the occasion, as most poets have, to destroy her failures. She never had the benefit of competent professional guidance and what is worse for a poet — she lacked the friendship of fellow craftsmen which would have afforded that free exchange of opinion and criticism, praise and censure, which alone affords a healthy climate of poetic growth.” (XXII)

Isolated from the world of poets and scholars, Dickinson developed her own technique as a poet. She was more interested in finding an outlet for her emotions than in communicating her experience in its intensity and complexity. She failed to choose words with an artistic understanding and systematic exactness. Lucky Gupta, an Indian scholar on Dickinson, has written: “Her thoughts about poetry and the function of the poet can be gleaned from her own poems and from occasional snatches in her letters. Her writing techniques were self-taught. She developed originally her own lines and did not follow traditional theories.” (176)

Dickinson was revolting and uncompromising while adopting her technique as a poet. She was too independent, too original to write in the traditional manner. Without caring for the readers, she wrote her poems laconically with no fixed metres. According to Chase: “She had one of the finest poetic minds of the century.” (168). A very salient feature of Dickinson’s poetic idiom is the conciseness with which she has written her poems. It has

been estimated by scholars and critics that she made all her efforts to develop a shorthand system of poetic language. Along with the development of a shorthand language came an extraordinary attachment to frugality, economy and conciseness. Her poems demonstrate economy to have been a constant watchword. Even a rat is described as being “a foe so reticent.” Things may be lovely or terrible but they have been described in terms of frugality. In this category come books, lover’s words, Nature and Death. Dickinson’s love for conciseness is clear from the following lines:

“ I fear a Man of frugal Speech —
I fear a Silent Man —
Harangur— I can not overtake —
Or Babbler — entertain —” (CP 265)

Dickinson’s concept of precision and economy can be traced by the progression of her thinking. She came to realize that scanty speech is the most effective of communication. She counted the concept of economy as a value in itself. There are hundreds of examples of the concision of phrase practised by Dickinson Dickinson. This concision of phrase practised as a poet represents her reticent nature. A very admirable example of the concision of phrase practiced by Dickinson is:

“Success is counted sweetest
By those who never succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.
Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory
As he defeated— dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!” (CP 35)

In this poem the phrases “The purple Host” and “forbidden ear” are the fine examples of the concision of phrase. It is difficult to believe that Dickinson had sufficient knowledge of prosody. She just made experiments in metres and rhymes. She has exhibited her boldness

even in the field of the employment of metres which is illustrated by the modulation done by her. Even in her employment of metres, she remains an innovator. She was as unorthodox here as in the field of religion. She has used dashes as a musical device. She has also used thousands of capital letters for the sake of emphasis. The eccentricities of this private poet who deliberately violated the rules of grammar have been accepted by the readers.

The poetic idiom of Dickinson is exemplified by a regular use of paradoxes. To call her a queen of paradoxes will not be wrong. She has used them chiefly because her mind always oscillated between two dissimilar ideas. It may be about death, about Immortality or about God, her style is paradoxical. Now she says one thing but soon after she repudiates what she said earlier. Her paradoxical mind brooded over the existence of heaven as the “uncertain certainty”. There is also a paradox in the expression of her faith and doubt in the existence of God. She shows her full faith in God in various poems but, on the contrary, she shows herself to be in doubt of the ways of God in this life. She calls God “a jealous God” and on the other hand she calls Him “Heavenly Father”. Such inconsistencies in thought show the paradoxical nature of the poet. There is absolutely no doubt that paradox is the favourite device of Dickinson which she has employed in her poetry. It was, for her, an effective instrument to present before her readers “the disharmonies of life”. Dickinson considered this world a place of uncertainties and, as such, she considered it wise to speak “inconclusively and equivocally”. Some of her paradoxical lines are as follows:

We lose— because we win— (CP 15)

Burglar! Banker – Father! (CP 27)

Success is counted sweetest By those who ne’er succeed. (CP 35)

Just lost, when I was saved! (CP 75)

A Wounded Deer leaps highest— (CP 77)

Your Riches— taught me— Poverty (CP 140)

A word is dead When it is said (CP 534)

My life closed twice before its close— (CP 702)

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some (CP 397)

The quality of Dickinson’s paradoxes is that they embody tragic ideas and, as such, express the bitterness, revolt and frustration in the mind of the poet. In many of her poems, she has given very precious pieces of advice. She has taught men not to become arrogant with a success because success today shall be a failure tomorrow. She also taught that one should not boast of one’s wealth because being rich does not mean that poverty will never come to

him. She very wisely said that one who fights is undoubtedly brave but one who fights within and bears his woes is a braver one. The lines “For each ecstatic instant, We must an anguish pay” are highly didactic. There is no doubt that joy is often followed by grief because in life, there is a cycle of pain and relief and we have to move with this truth in our mind. When Dickinson says that “Conclusion is the course of life” she speaks in an instructive language. That life one day ends and we should lead it very carefully is the instruction given in all Indian Scriptures.

When Dickinson calls Death “a gateway to Immortality”, she becomes a didactic poet. She also philosophically calls “Dust the only secret, Death the only one”. This line is also instructive as it teaches us to remember this universal truth that one who has come here shall one day depart. Hence, we should not be very much attached to life, a thing which can any time be snatched from us. There is little doubt that Dickinson used paradoxes, imagery, new metaphors, epigrams, epithets and aphorisms in her poetry chiefly to highlight the didactic tone of her poetry. She was not didactic consciously but the treasure of wisdom she had gathered through her experience and deep thinking is present in her poetry.

When Dickinson’s poems were published and read by scholars and critics, she was not accepted as a great poet. She was very much criticized for violating the rules of grammar. She was censured for playing with conjunctions, for using capital letters unnecessarily and for using dashes in a very irresponsible manner. But, after a passage of time, she came to be known as the greatest poet of America, greater than Robert Frost and Walt Whitman. This was on account of the very trait for which she was criticized. Giving his opinion on the success of Dickinson as a poet, Ruth Miller has observed: “Eventually Emily Dickinson does arrive at a resolution of her doubts and hopes, despairs and whimpers. Then she will express in many a bardic avowal her faith that the unknown will one day be known, the true but nevertheless incorporeal, the real but nevertheless immaterial, is certain and sure and may one day be perceived.”(61)

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