2010

A system of aesthetics: Emily Dickinson's Civil War poetry

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A Thesis

entitled

A System of Aesthetics:

Emily Dickinson’s Civil War Poetry

by

Amanda Christine Kaufman

as partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the Bachelor of Arts Degree

with Honors

in

English Literature

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The University of Toledo

DECEMBER 2010
Abstract

Decades of scholarly research have portrayed Emily Dickinson as living a strikingly reserved personal and social life, distributing her poetry not through publication but through handwritten correspondence. In this paper, however, I examine recent critical scholarship on Emily Dickinson’s letters to few close friends that reveal her to be a politically aware citizen. I pair this with a reading of the three poems: “Blazing in Gold, and quenching in purple” (02/29/1864), “Flowers – Well – if anybody” (03/02/1864), and “These are the days when Birds come back” (03/11/1864), published anonymously in a Union-driven newspaper entitled the Drum Beat alongside other contemporary poetry in February and March 1864. This Drum Beat publication shows that, at the crucial historical moment of the Civil War, the notoriously private and unpublished poet’s work did, in fact, appear in a public venue, and begs readers to examine the significance of the three specific poems within their original context. While scholars have published legitimate and commonly-accepted readings of these works that emphasize their poetic form and their themes of nature, religion and death, these readings have, for the most part, been consistently non war-related. This paper adds to the recent and exciting scholarship of Dickinson’s political awareness. Through close attention to the poems and their context, I argue that these poems serve as Emily Dickinson’s public response to the Civil War.
Acknowledgments

I extend my utmost gratitude to Dr. Lundquist and Dr. Gregory who invested their time and effort by offering unending support, guidance and continued belief in my abilities and me. To Dr. Connin, my undergraduate Honor’s advisor, thank you for journeying by my side throughout the ups and downs while offering insight, direction and counsel. Warm thanks to Professor Geiger, Professor Birt, O’Sensei Bowles, Hanshi, Pastor Philabaum and many special friends as they each challenged me to explore, transcend and go beyond. And to my loving family: my mother Margaret Aubry-Kaufman, my siblings Dustin Aubry, Lisa Nicodemus and Joshua Kaufman, my aunts Emily Kaufman, Leslie Barrick and Jodi Frazier, and my grandparents Drs. Seymour and Elaine Kaufman and Richard and Nancy Aubry – in the noisy confusion of my life your constant presence and sensibility gave me support and strength, lifting my spirits and enabling me to reach my aspirations.
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Fig. 1 – Photograph: “Flowers – Well – if anybody” as published in the Springfield Republican.


1 Aug. 2010.

Fig. 2 – Photograph: “Blazing in Gold, and quenching in purple” as published in the *Drum Beat.*

Introduction

Decades of scholarly research portray Emily Dickinson as living a strikingly reserved personal and social life, distributing her poetry mostly through handwritten correspondence. In this paper, however, I call upon recent critical scholarship on Emily Dickinson’s few close relationships to oppositely reveal her to be a politically-active citizen and I use this scholarship to help me interpret her three poems, “Blazing in Gold, and quenching in purple” (02/29/1864), “Flowers – Well – if anybody” (03/02/1864), and “These are the days when Birds come back” (03/11/1864). I argue that the publication of these three poems within the Brooklyn, New York newspaper Drum Beat is concrete proof of the presentation of these poems being her public response to the Civil War. I further propose an intensely thorough investigation of these three poems, which appeared in the Union-driven newspaper from late February to early March 1864. Scholars have published legitimate and commonly accepted readings of these works that emphasize their poetic form and their themes of nature, religion and death. These readings, however, have consistently been non-war related. While acknowledging such well-respected interpretations of the poems, I offer a Civil War driven explication that suggests a politically aware poet – one who is both informed and has formed an opinion on current affairs. Context is essential when reading these poems, as they were written in the midst of a war and published in a periodical whose sole purpose was to raise funds for the Union cause.
Jerome McGann’s *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* contains an astute perspective on reading poetry within its historical context that I will draw upon here. McGann argues the importance of framing a piece of work within its historical context while concurrently spending due diligence on what he deems intrinsic (formal and thematic analysis) as well as what I suggest would also fit within this category, stylistic investigation. Such attention to historical context is not obvious or inherent, but rather takes conscious concentration to realize. If we are able to accomplish this dualism in our study of a poem, McGann asserts that we will be enlightened in two undeniable aspects, realizing, first, “that poems are, by the nature of the case (or as Kant might say, ‘transcendentally’), time and place-specific; (2) that historical analysis is, therefore, a necessary and essential function of any advanced practical criticism” (122-3). A poem can, of course, traverse history, being read by people of different constitutions and of completely differing personal experiences and situations. That poems can cultivate within a poet, live among those who read it at the moment it is written, and also survive among those who read it even 146 years later – is the strength of its intrinsic value. This must be balanced with what McGann calls the *historical adventures* it is exposed to and endures. As he remarks, “Moreover, in specifying these unique features and sets of relationships, it transcends the concept of the-poem-as-verbal-object to reveal the poem as a special sort of communication event” (131). In this way, we are able to identify substance within styles, theory within themes, and evocation within events. We can feel camaraderie with the poet, whether or not we agree with their writing, or at least a glimpse at a real moment in their life experience, which they put to paper. A historical background allows us to travel back to the time when the poem was
written, not binding us to the surface universals of formal arguments or interpretations, but letting us dive into the text and explore its vivid reefs.

The Civil War lasted from 1861-1865, years in which scholars have shown produced the bulk of Dickinson’s poetry, but it is essential to gain an understanding as to Dickinson’s personal connection to the war. It had a direct effect on her family and herself, particularly apparent when reading Dickinson’s war references and commentary within letters she wrote to her few confidants, discussed in further sections.

McGann devotes a considerable section of historical discussion on Dickinson’s poem ‘Because I could not Stop for Death,’ substantiating the avant-garde nature of her poetry compared to that of her contemporaries, as he remarks, “As for the poem’s ideas, they are something altogether different from the ‘feeble poetry of moral ideals that flourished in New England in the eighties’” (123). Within the Drum Beat, Dickinson’s poetry appeared alongside countless other examples of contemporary poetry submissions, inviting us to compare Dickinson’s work with other “war time poetry.” Many of these commented directly about politics with first lines like, “Rally, for our native land!” Scores of examples of other poetry and prose within the Drum Beat are incredibly explicit, immediately identifiable to an untrained eye as pro-Union work while Dickinson’s lyrics are salient as the most unusual offerings that the paper proffers.

Dickinson was famous for writing untitled poems, widening the possibility for interpretation. The Drum Beat, however, took liberty in publishing these poems with titles: “Sunset”, “Flowers” and “October,” chronologically. Curiously, however, such titles divert us from a war reading and push a more common or traditional poetic slant on the poem. Further liberties that were taken, it is worth bearing in mind, also do not match
that of Johnson’s edition, where scholars believe the punctuation and syntax to be most true to Dickinson’s original intent. The argument that is imperative and consistent throughout a close reading of each of the three poems lies in the system of aesthetics Dickinson so carefully constructs. Beauty will be obvious in the transient nature of both subject and theme. We are challenged by Dickinson to sift through legitimate interpretations of the ineffable ecstasy of flowers, a leopard characterizing the sunset, and the tease and pleasure of a summer day in the fall while deciphering the greater meaning in relation to the state of affairs, politics and human conflict. After investigation of these three poems, a clear illustration of Dickinson’s slant route to the truths of war will materialize.
Chapter 1: The Critical Background – Dickinson as a Politically Aware Citizen

What literary critics are only recently acknowledging is Emily Dickinson’s political awareness of the Civil War, apparent through the personal feelings and opinions accounted for in her letters and close relationships. Vivian R. Pollak edited an illuminating text entitled *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*, offering various historical essays which each provide crucial insight into the poet’s life, and speaking directly to her experiences, actions and awareness of the politics and events surrounding her. Shira Wolosky, who has published much scholarship on Dickinson and the topics at hand, offers a concise account within this text of the enormous number of references to war that this poet logged in her poetry and letters:

Dickinson’s own writing career remarkably aligns with the enormous traumatic political events surrounding her. More than half of her poetic production coincides with the years of the Civil War, 1861-1865. The years immediately preceding the war, when the possibility and rhetoric of conflict ominously intensified, were also the years which Thomas Johnson identifies with ‘the rising flood of her talent,’ as well as with the beginning of her reclusive practices. Her correspondence is similarly marked by public consciousness, with at least fifteen references to the war in the seventy-five letters she wrote between 1861-1865. Some are passing mentions, some are concerned with the fate of Amherst boys who had
gone off to fight, including, notably, Frazar Stearns, over whose death Dickinson especially and personally grieved. But some letters are more general. Thus, to Louise and Frances Norcross, she wrote that ‘Since the war began’ she has an increasing sense that ‘Tis dangerous to value, for only the precious can alarm. I notice that Robert Browning had made another poem, and was astonished – till I remembered that I myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps’ (L 298). (107)

Betsy Erkkila also elaborates on the instance of Dickinson writing a poem in direct response to Frazar Stearns’ death. Stearns, not a close friend or family member but a relatively prominent local of Amherst, touched Dickinson’s heart enough to move her to express herself through verse. He was, as Erkkila observes, “killed at the battle of Newbern on March 14, 1862. The son of the president of Amherst College, Stearns was well known locally for his self-sacrificial devotion to the Union cause. Dickinson described the funeral of ‘this young crusader – too brave that he could fear to die’ in a letter to the Norcross sisters (L 2:398)” (159). It weighed on Dickinson’s mind as she wrote a later letter to Bowles (L 2:399) that addressed her brother Austin’s grief at the loss of the soldier; Austin seemingly relived it over and over again, remembering the voice of his father as he heard the news, and Dickinson incorporated the effect of this repetition of the word ‘death’ in her writing. Wolosky cites another poem, accepted widely as a memoriam of a relative’s death – Francis H. Dickinson, Amherst’s first loss from the war:

Dickinson’s elegy for Francis Dickinson, ‘When I was small, a Woman died’ (J 596 / Fr 518) imagines the mother’s reunion with her son in
‘Paradise.’ Yet, while she has sympathy for the mother and admiration for the son, the conditions of heaven remain something the poet ‘cannot decide’ and in uncertain relation to the all too certain ‘Scarlet Maryland.’

(Wolosky 112)

These portrayals of personal war experiences within both Dickinson’s poetry and personal correspondence speak volumes to her readiness and courage to publically express her thoughts and feelings regarding the war or politics surrounding it. These two poems letting the world into her experiences with deaths from the war, a current political climate casting a heavy shadow on all involved, help negate the fact that Dickinson is famous for her seclusion, making herself literally privy only to certain individuals. Wolosky points out, “In 1864 she writes the cousins again: ‘Sorry seems to me more general that it did, and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began; and if the anguish of others helped with one’s own, now would be many medicines’ (L 298)” (111). This remarkable reflection on the sorrow that Dickinson recognizes is that it is widespread, not simply a burden placed on the soldiers – but their family, neighbors, friends, strangers, the general population (including her). Indeed, here she portrays grief as creating solidarity between all those who have lost someone in the war – a view of bereavement as social rather than solitary.

Erkkila further describes Dickinson’s “Homestead” as being a “political house” (138). She was exposed to powerful prominent leaders of the time who both visited and stayed as houseguests including: governors, legislators and senators. Dickinson’s brother, Austin, and sister-in-law, Susan, welcomed Ralph Waldo Emerson and Wendell Phillips into their home, which neighbored the Dickinson homestead. Dickinson’s father and
grandfather were both highly involved in politics on many governmental levels, and Erkkila remarks that, “Dickinson indulged in a playful high-class exchange of my political acquaintances are more powerful than yours with her friend Abiah Root” (139).

A recent biography of Dickinson by Lyndall Gordon, *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family’s Feuds*, investigates the Dickinson family history and relationships, while addressing the nuances and untold realities they faced. While unquestionable importance is held on the traditional scholarship and biographies of Emily Dickinson that we are well familiar with, one can glean from this most recent biography a new appreciation of the rich relationships she maintained and her acute awareness of and opinions surrounding politics, specifically the American Civil War. Gordon observes that Dickinson lovingly dubs her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson “Domingo” (16), a term we later find within her poem titled within the *Drum Beat*, “Flowers,” holding a reference to a slave revolt. While we cannot assume a connection to Susan in this respect, we do see a correlation and repetition within Dickinson and this term. Gordon further describes a visit from Samuel Bowles, a man himself learned and steeped in politics, to the residence of Austin and Susan Dickinson. Bowles, who received Emily’s poetry via Susan, published her work in the *Springfield Republican* in August of 1858 (99). Such instances and events occur over and over again, providing a connection between Dickinson and the outside political world, yet, interestingly, Gordon’s biography does not talk of the war in question. Thanks to the survey of these several critical works, I can now offer contextually driven war readings of Emily Dickinson’s three poems.
Chapter 2: The Civil War and the Drum Beat

By the time Emily Dickinson’s poems appeared in the Drum Beat, the Civil War has been waging for three long years. It is essential to gain a general understanding of some details of the war itself in order to appropriately understand Dickinson’s poetry in relation to it, and to consider that said poetry was written by a woman of this time. In Michael Felman’s This Terrible War: The Civil War and its Aftermath, we gain a better understanding of the events of the war, especially an appreciation of the strategic roles of women. Feldman text describes the practical ways that women contributed to the war effort, including writing for newspapers and magazines that raised money and urged reform (44). It became about involvement in the war, however large or small their role the women would do what they could to help and support their troops. In such a way, they were able to cope by knowing they had a hand in its success – they were in it to win it as they say.

Dickinson’s family participated in the Battle of Ball’s Bluff where “Confederate troops literally drove a Federal force into the Potomac River, resulted in more than 900 casualties” (Feldman 97). A glimpse into the poetry of Dickinson’s contemporaries is apparent in one poetic response to this battle discussed by Feldman:

Six weeks after Ball’s Bluff, Ethel Lynn Beers published a poem in Harper’s Weekly entitled ‘The Pickett Guard’ that spoke to soldiers’ sense of loneliness and anonymity in the vast war. When the poem was set to music and retitled ‘All Quiet Along the Potomac,’ an oft-repeated
newspaper headline describing the state of affairs in northern Virginia, it quickly became a favorite among the troops on both sides of the river:

‘All quiet along the Potomac,’

Except now and then a stray picket
Is shot, as he walks on his beat to and fro,

By a rifleman hid in the thicket.

‘Tis nothing – a private or two now and then
Will not count in the news of the battle;

Not an officer lost – only one of the men,

Moaning out, all alone, the death rattle. (97)

Just over a decade prior to the poetry we are concentrating on, Harriett Beecher Stowe began to carve a path for women in literature with her novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which we now know to have withstood the test of time apparent in its ascension to the ranks of a ‘classic’. Feldman provides critical insight into Stowe’s text as a social commentary to bring awareness of current politics: “While demonstrating a degree of sympathy for the dilemma of southern slaveholders, the publication of her book in 1851-2 was the first of a series of dramatic northern challenges during the 1850s to the moral certitude and honor of the South... Stowe said that she wrote the book ‘to illustrate the cruelties of slavery,’ and she certainly succeeded” (52). This is but one example that women had a definite, if not secure, voice among men. A precedent was set with the publication of her novel, a call for women of later decades and centuries to write in response to the human experience of war and national politics.
Emily Dickinson was among the populace who likely realized when one of Meade’s Union victories had not been conclusive, causing turbulence in both sides of the war. It is clear that religion was and is an issue of conversation and opinion as, “Peace remained a subject for prayers, rather than being an inevitable event. Poet Emily Dickinson, observing the great pageant from her New England home, wrote in 1863:

I many times thought Peace had come

When Peace was far away –

As Wrecked Men – deem the sight the Land –

At Centre of the Sea –” (Feldman 242).

Though, within this poem, Dickinson shares that peace was a desired gem – one that appears genuine at first glance, but upon greater inspection yields a lack in authenticity. A large stone that drips of emeralds and rubies on a manicured hand looks real from afar, but as Dickinson poetically suggests within the poem is a sort of mirage. She understood the ephemeral nature of peace within a war. It is something like that land which sailors yearn for amidst an endless see. When they squint their eyes to the horizon it is almost imaginable, their mind and hopes so powerful that they almost believe in that land or peace which is long overdue.

The Civil War served as the backdrop and poetic context of the poetry and prose published within the Drum Beat. Although a short-lived series of publications, the paper itself was a delicately illustrated work of art in its own right. The heading depicted artwork by Bobbett-Hopper of a soldier beating a drum among six American flags flanking him, supplies, a cannonball and a cannon. Just below it states its purpose, “Published by the Brooklyn and Long Island Fair, for the Benefit of the U.S. Sanitary
Commission.” It is formatted in three column sections, allowing space for illustrations throughout; the room for text is highly condensed with small font from one edge of the column to the other, offering food for thought to the brim. Emily Dickinson’s poetry stands out among the other works that bellow with rhyming, regularity, and fulfill that which we consider popular nineteenth-century poetry. The other ordinary poetry has explicit or practical purposes – an obvious rally of readers and a call to send gifts and supplies to the soldiers.

Of the three issues where Dickinson’s poetry is published, we have access to an entire copy of the March 11, 1864 printing. “October” is tucked securely in the bottom left corner of page seven. This complete issue is representative of the other two incomplete (inaccessible in their entirety) issue dates in which Dickinson’s poems appeared. The text that is not poetry or prose consists of explicit explanations of The Great Fair, The Sanitary Commission, The Brooklyn Union, Gettysburg, and further records and accounts of war events and news. The remainder is bursting at the seams with letters from individuals, stories, definitions, and submission of poetry. A few cases are recorded of soldiers’ illness and suffering – young men of 23, 17 and 14 years old; such prose relates to Dickinson’s poetry that will be discussed and that alludes to such heroes. A satirical example of poetry within the Drum Beat is entitled, “WANTED!”, calling all the women to help the cause while teasing men who are called out as wimpy.

Feldman summarizes the state of affairs just over a year before Dickinson’s publication of the three poems in question: “Cornelia Jay, the granddaughter of former chief justice John Jay, similarly observed from New York on December 31, 1862: ‘People seem perfectly callous about the War or indeed everything relating to public
affairs” (181). Dickinson’s approach to dealing with the war in an indirect address, especially through the use of a nature theme in each of the poems, speaks to her erudite understanding of politics and handling of a body of readers who were perhaps callous to a subject she desired to adopt. Whenever we hear something one too many times it becomes less difficult for us to close our eyes to further exposure to it. By framing the topic of war in a captivating approach Dickinson engages the attention of both those interested and not, whether they are reading into the context of the poem or simply enjoying it for the sheer splendor and the thoughts it evokes.

There are important and noticeable differences between Emily Dickinson’s three pieces of work and the other poetry published in the Drum Beat. Take, for example, “RALLY!” found on the cover page of the Drum Beat:

Rally, for our native land!
Heart to heart, and hand to hand,
Freedom’s rights maintaining;
Rally till from shore to shore
Treason’s voice is heard no more,
Not a foe remaining!

Rally, for our native land!
Giving back with willing hand
All we have unto her;
Comfort, riches – what are they?
Life itself can never pay
Half the service due her!

Rally, for our native land!
In this hour of peril stand
Ever her defender!
True, as God in Heaven doth reign,
Truth and justice to maintain

*We Will Victory send Her!* W.W.C.

Patriotic language engulfs the entirety of this poem, which claims a sense of honor for the nation while simultaneously attempting to invigorate the reader, assuring them of the war efforts. We see a direct purpose, not one that is multidimensional or ambiguous in any account. While a strong poem in its own right – rhyme scheme and structure intact and true to a majority of submissions within the *Drum Beat* – there is a brazen fire within Dickinson that these other poems lack. Her shameless skill is in her delivery of verse, both aesthetically and intellectually pleasing, in a tactful and fascinating package. In the midst of this newspaper appeared three Emily Dickinson poems, which stand out in a their own beautiful way; in each, Dickinson drives home a true message in her own adept, and characteristic, slant.
Chapter 3: “Flowers – Well – if anybody”

Fig. 1 – Photograph: “Flowers – Well – if anybody” as published in the Springfield Republican.

Flowers – Well – if anybody
Can the ecstasy define –
Half a transport – half a trouble –
With which flowers humble men:
Anybody find the fountain
From which floods so contra flow –
I will give him all the Daisies
Which upon the hillside blow.

Too much pathos in their faces
For a simple breast like mine –
Butterflies from St. Domingo
Cruising round the purple lines –
Have a system of aesthetics –
Far superior to mine.

We must first attempt to paraphrase the poem entitled “Flowers” within the *Drum Beat* for an initial poetic understanding to which we can adhere to as a legitimate reading and build upon, as from further investigation we will find new and intriguing insights. This poem is but a piece within the large puzzle of the Civil War. On the surface, the title immediately draws our attention to the theme of nature encapsulating the work, a theme that highly contrasts the reference to the brutalities of the slave revolt of St. Domingo fit into the last stanza. Flowers are such delicate and fragile beauties. Their beauty is
meticulously cultivated, for the fleeting moment when their bud blooms open to a new, fresh and fragrant blossom. The violent imagery conjured by the reference to St. Domingo invites the readers to think about the ways in which a moment of aesthetic response cannot occur external to a political and global context. In this case, the context is one of violence. We come to realize that such an appreciation of aesthetics is acquired in relation and reaction to the surrounding issues of political and global significance.

Dickinson implores anyone to define for her what flowers truly are. She particularly praises their curious and definite power to humble men, causing us to consider the significance of “men” and “women” in nineteenth-century literature and war. The joy that the flowers represent is somehow a double-edge sword, whose troubling source contradicts the ecstasy that is mentioned. If anyone can identify the mystery of their meaning, Dickinson would grant them a hillside of daisies!

The first line of the second stanza gives an image of faces being the blooms of flowers, a fleeting youth within their expression that is akin to the ephemeral beauty of a flower in its peak. However, this beautiful air about the bloom is stained with an indefinable and profound melancholy that is “pathos”. This evocation of sorrow overwhelms the poet and spurs an image of butterflies from St. Domingo. A seemingly arbitrary corollary at first glance, the butterfly makes perfect sense. The inability of the poet to understand the flowers and pathos leads to a sense of envy of butterflies; such carefree creatures are spared from human pathos, which prove so troubling and impenetrable. In their world of bliss they are able to remain unaffected and in turn appreciate more, or at least simply appreciate things in a different and perhaps more positive or untarnished way. Aligning with this way of thinking, ignorance is bliss, as
they say. The description that the butterflies are “cruising” implies an effortless and controlled, automatic drive leading their existence and experiences. In admiration she ends the poem by humbling herself, almost ironically, to the butterflies. A paradigm is evident as simultaneously, while Dickinson achieves a reverence for the butterflies and their automatic blitheness, she also establishes the necessity for conflicts such as war in order to appreciate such fleeting aesthetics.

Dickinson begins this poem by presenting the idea of flowers as ecstasy, a term of extraordinarily heightened, and perhaps indefinable, pleasure intertwining this entity. We associate flowers as objects of beauty, blooming precursors to delectable fruit. Whether considering them aesthetically or strictly from the perspective of a botanist regarding their crude charge from nature, they are undoubtedly highly valued at all levels of interpretation. Of course, Dickinson might also be gesturing toward conventional nineteenth-century phrasing describing flowers as representatives of the prime of a young man’s life, and more specifically in Webster’s 1844 Dictionary, “The most active and vigorous part of an army are called the flower of the troops. Young, vigorous and brave men are called the flower of a nation,” (Entry: Flower). Whichever role in which we agree to place flowers, their existence in a state of ecstasy is never in question. The speaker sees the ecstasy of the flowers as indefinable but clearly feels overwhelmed, and as if it is too much to bear. It is the feeling that Dickinson captures here, of being overwhelmed by beauty, recognizing beauty and feeling moved to tears as in her description of pathos. It is certainly a burden to conceptualize what beauty is when inundated in the unimaginable violence that was the Civil War. In this context, under such circumstances, Dickinson metaphorically tips her hat to anyone who might have
such an appreciation. These individuals have been shaped and changed in far different ways than those who have not experienced the effects of war.

A bouquet of meanings overwhelms any one understanding of the flowers, i.e.: young men at war, coloring a complex role for them to fulfill within the verse. Dickinson summarizes the men half as vessels – employed in literal duties, and half as troubles – concerning and worrisome as they each embrace the knowingly dangerous and humbling undertaking of war. In lines 5-6, Dickinson challenges the reader to identify what I believe to be their source of bravery described here as a fountain flowing backwards. If it were effortless to serve in war or for water to flood opposite its natural course, these men would be a dime a dozen – and say, as easy to pick from as a hillside of daisies. The reference to daisies in this context speaks to an abundance of the same flora on a hillside representing trite, average people – those not inspired in the same way as flowers previously described assembling a territorial army. In addition to the daisies serving as Dickinson’s offering as reward to anyone who might satiate her quench for understanding, they also typify the flower of a funeral, conjuring images of wartime death and remembrance.

Dickinson’s last stanza shows great respect for the men at war, notably humbling herself as a woman and poet. Whether or not Dickinson herself is the speaker of this poem, the word breast in line 10 could suggestively implicate the speaker to be a woman. We can collectively claim that it is not a literal anatomical reference, but attractively operates as a metaphor with the flowers. We must pause to consider the possible gender implications within the text. Dickinson’s integration of the terms “fountain” and “flood” within the first stanza that express an overflow of feelings is commensurate with the idea
of the female breast as a source of abundance and nourishment. The idea of flowers having too much pathos in their faces plays to an allusion of the faces of the flowers being like newborns that look up towards the breast to nurse. Though, the innate mothering implied in this interpretation must further reconcile with the fact that the speaker is not inherently prepared for the duties as she qualifies in the second stanza, “…a simple breast like mine.” Nevertheless, breast transcends to embody the heart and feelings of the speaker, known widely as the seat of affections and passions – which itself cannot even handle the suffering tragedies observable in the faces of the men. The breast being the seat of emotions further links it to the heart where feelings cultivate and mature. In the poem, we see that the overwhelming beauty is too much for her heart and emotions to bear. Such an understanding of the term breast can account for the worry, concerns, and mothering nature we sense from the speaker who strives to gain and understanding and appreciation of the flowers – especially if the flowers are indeed representatives of the young men at war.

A beautiful image of butterflies interrupts the descriptions of palpable affliction these men endure. “Cruising round the purple lines –” (line 12) are butterflies, so light and carefree yet treading dangerous waters. The significance of the color purple is manifold. Historically we relate purple to a regal color of kings or a religious color of resurrection. Representing valor, Dickinson places these men as butterflies among lines of destruction or military lines of troops – the purple, bruised bodies of men at war, a lifeless hue of death, or the historical blue coats of Unions. To appreciate the particular aesthetic feeling achieved within this poem, we must understand the rareness of these
individuals and the lineage behind Dickinson’s unexpected placement within the historical context of St. Domingo through the appearance of butterflies in this place.

With the mention of St. Domingo comes images of an exotic tropical paradise, but the politics that are attached are not so picturesque, as Folsom and Price observe:

Anyone who has read much in the monthly magazines in the years preceding the Civil War will have run across frequent references to Santo Domingo and the bloody slave revolt there that ushered in the nineteenth century and that stood for over half a century as an object lesson of what could happen in North America. (“Dickinson, Slavery, and the San Domingo Moment”)

This event led many to fear, and even predict, severe racial disharmony among many issues culminating in the Civil War. To use the terminology “St. Domingo” in conversation, prose or verse would have likely incited memories of a recent and relatable uprising that was all too close to home for comfort. As Folsom and Price further remark, “San Domingo, then, is a vortex word, one of those terms that organize and abbreviate broad cultural contexts. To see how such a word is woven into Dickinson’s writings is to understand how a culturally charged diction can indicate a whole structure of meaning that permeates a poem and that may, more than a century later, have become nearly mute.” Within this historical context, Dickinson’s poem referencing butterflies of St. Domingo evokes a newfound significance.

The men whose faces are exuding with passion are akin to the slaves of St. Domingo. Scores of African Americans were fighting in the Civil War, for a freedom that must have become more realistic purely through their acts of enlisting and participating
in the war itself. A sense of freedom is visible in the characterization of a butterfly, whose wings are their proclamation of emancipation. Embracing this independence, they make a conscious choice to cruise the purple lines and be active members of a potentially perilous effort. It is this effort of heroism and courageousness, which so “contra” flows in those individuals who are graced with the burden of a clearer understanding and appreciation of aesthetic beauty – as they observe a certain and undeniable value of life after enduring war.
Chapter 4: “Blazing in gold and quenching in purple”

The Daily Drum Beat

Fig. 2 – Photograph: “Blazing in Gold, and quenching in purple” as published in the Drum Beat.


Web. 1 Aug. 2010.
Blazing in gold and quenching in purple,
Leaping like leopards to the sky,
Then at the feet of the old horizon
Laying her spotted face, to die;

Stooping as low as the kitchen window,
Touching the roof and tinting the barn,
Kissing her bonnet to the meadow, –
And the juggler of day is gone!

The natural cycle of life and death is more than evident in this short poem by Emily Dickinson. Indeed, all three of these poems deal with fleeting, transitory moments of time – time that is going, or lost, or past. This topic is unavoidable when tackling the idea of Dickinson’s poetry within a war context. What we find transitory we further discover to be fragile and, most poignantly, precious: flowers, butterflies, light, time, birds and the luring feeling and memory of summer days. Like most of Dickinson’s work, this poem is untitled. The omission of a title is important to note as I propose that Emily Dickinson did not want to directly control the reader, but by the command of her eloquence the poetry would move the reader to invent an interpretation of their own and tactfully allow the reader to discover Dickinson’s multiple intentions. Such omission allows broader readings as a title that might stifle the creativity and imagination of a reader. The Drum Beat newspaper chose to title her pieces, directly appending a label and direction that they believed to appropriately guide the verse. With the interpretations of
this poem so vast, and in an effort to establish it as a product of the Civil War, it is prudent to consider other meanings.

The title of this poem when published in the February 29, 1864 edition of the Brooklyn, New York newspaper *Drum Beat* was “Sunset,” for obvious reasons. Exploring this avenue, the first word “blazing” is eager to fulfill the prophecy. Its brilliance suggests an active, streaming light that living beings are drawn to like the sun. In accordance, its bright golden coloring highlights the *precious value* of the sun – center of our solar system, provider of light and heat, catalyst to growth. Satisfied in the purple backdrop, these regal and complimentary colors dance like, “leopards to the sky,” (line 2). A leopard not only symbolizes the colors of the sunset in motion, but also characterizes the sun through golden fur. When looking away from the sun our vision is obstructed by black spots like those of a leopard, establishing the wise inspiration behind Dickinson’s comparison. As the sun sets, there is a dramatic shift from a vivacious leopard to an aged one, “Laying her spotted face, to die;” (line 4) – an irrevocable sleep, not just a transitory rest until the next day.

The earth follows a cycle, rotating around the sun with relative certainty of continuation. The second stanza goes on to reinforce the death of the sun as ending with the “juggler of day is gone,” (line 8). The short-lived life of the wild cat settling down at days end captures the sun dwindling and becoming increasingly weaker in brilliance by the moment. This finale of being “gone” is such a deviance from the seemingly infinite revolutions around the sun, directing us to consider other, more appropriate, interpretations of this poem which dip into a pool of contextual value. References to leopards end in the first stanza and are replaced with personification in specifically
human conditions. Dickinson uses the following terms that diverge from the wild habitat of leopards and point us towards familiar worldly comforts and actions: stooping, kitchen, window, roof, barn, kissing, and bonnet. We can postulate that throughout the poem the leopard represented a mortal life and existence that only becomes most apparent to us in the last stanza.

Casting a soldier in the role of the sun or leopard satisfies the journey and finite, mortal end of the poem. From the first line, a soldier accurately meets Dickinson’s descriptions of “blazing” in gold and purple, colors representing their committed honor and valiant charge. They spring into action towards the horizon with a mission in mind; only resting when their goal is met. This action is metaphorically translatable to a soldier’s willingness and eagerness to leap to duty at a moment’s notice. A soldier put his nation in front of his own life, even if the end result is sacrificing existence for the ultimate objective of the army. We understand that their instinct for survival, however, is never aborted. The last stanza exemplifies the perseverance of such men – stooping low either in stealth or if they are suffering and can no longer walk erect, maintaining “touch” or concern for the barn and roof that are physical substitutes for that which they defend, and tipping their head in a final salute or kiss farewell as they pass on. This poem reveres, again, the character of such individuals that were stepping up during the Civil War and the beauty of those actions, the preciousness communicable here through an ephemeral sunset and the swift instincts of a magnificent creature.
Chapter 5: “These are the days when birds come back”

These are the days when birds come back,
A very few, a bird or two,
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies put on
The old, old sophistries of June, –
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh, fraud that cannot cheat the bee,
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief,

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear,
And softly through the altered air
Hurries a timed leaf!

Oh, sacrament of summer days,
Oh, last communion in the haze,
Permit a child to join,
Thy sacred emblems to partake,
Thy consecrated bread to break,
Taste thine immortal wine!

Interestingly, this poem is preceded in the Drum Beat by a rather amusing poem entitled “POPULAR SIMILIES.” These comparisons are a lively but inane form of verse, considering the nature of the publication – no doubt it suffices as a momentary attempt to escape the war-torn environment and circumstances. Evident on page seven of the publication, each line presents a quick and enjoyable novelty of comparisons:

As wet as a fish – as dry as a bone;
As bright as a bird – as crazed as a loon;
As plump as a partridge – as poor as a rat;
As strong as a horse – as weak as a cat;
As hard as a flint – as soft as a mole;
As white as a lily – as black as a coal;
As plain as a pikestaff – as rough as a bear;
As tight as a drum – as free as the air;
As heavy as lead – as light as a feather;
As steady as time – as uncertain as weather;
As hot as an oven – as cold as a frog;
As gay as a lark – as sick as a dog;
As slow as a tortoise – as swift as the wind;
As true as the Gospel – as false as mankind;
As thin as a herring – as fat as a pig;
As proud as a peacock – as blue as a grig;
As savage as a tiger – as mild as a dove;
As stiff as a poker – as limp as a glove;
As blind as a bat – as deaf as a post;
As cold as a cucumber – as warm as a toast;
As red as a cherry – as pale as a ghost.

Emily Dickinson’s poem entitled by the Drum Beat, “OCTOBER,” directly follows the simile poem, and beautifully provides an oppositely profound form of escapism from the hostilities thickening the air. This poem works toward a sort of normalcy and sanity, while markedly offering thoughtful commentary to the political situation. This is the startling difference between the two poems which both attempt a redirection of the focus of the reader: Dickinson’s poem simultaneously diverts us from a negative focus while engaging the mind, or perhaps the subconscious, in the inescapable loom of current affairs through a carefully executed comparison. In the midst of a war, Dickinson appreciates nature in a most exclusive approach; she reminisces about the comforts from before the war broke out; she yearns for cherished moments and experiences. Although she desires these diversions, we do not find out whether or not her want is fulfilled. Unlike the first two poems discussed within this paper, which employ metaphors directly correspondent towards a keen war reading, “October” broaches the topic in a roundabout manner – the slant version of truth for which she is so famous.
This poem is read as a description of “Indian summer” or the ruse of a summer day in the midst of autumn, but placed within the context of the larger picture of the Civil War suggests her distinct awareness and personal feelings cultivated in the midst of political strife. We read how the birds “take a backward look” in line two, evaluating the validity of the season they are observing. The “sophistries” are the fallacious appearances of late spring or early summer, June; the month is like an old friend who we would love to reacquaint ourselves with for just an afternoon. Spending time under blue skies and sunny days is such a beautiful invitation. Nature, however, cannot be fooled – as the bee is not “cheated” by the “fraud” of gorgeous weather, and skepticism is heightened within the few birds that pause to question whether or not they should be heading south. Similarly, Dickinson wants to believe that it could be true, she almost buys into the idea, until evidence of seeds and falling leaves ensure the reality of fall and inevitably the certainty of an imminent winter.

Despite the reality of the evidence in the form of seeds and leaves, Dickinson wishes she could believe in the summer day. The last stanza demonstrates the preciousness of summer days and how she beseeches nature that she might be permitted to enjoy this mirage of beauty. In order for her to embrace the situation, a leap of faith is requisite. She concludes the poem with vivid religious imagery, arguably incorporated throughout the entire work, to solidify the need to maintain a sense of faith in times of trouble. Just as nature is a cycle and the seasons follow a corollary, war will eventually end and move into a time of greater peace. This is not to say that war will never return, as we know it does.
Soldiers can relate to a similar uneasiness and inability to enjoy nature as described in Dickinson’s poem. While stationed on a beautiful field, a desert, or the coast, the act of war bequeaths new meaning to a once pristine environment. The memories they have must color their view of the land, literally turning a golden field into a battlefield and vice versa – the battlefields emerge uncannily like an Indian summer. A testimony to soldier’s sensitive responsiveness to the beauty of nature is heightened by their recurrent brushes with death. Only through barely escaping death, or experiencing the loss of a friend, can we appreciate the preciousness and beauty of the mundane that soldiers are capable of. It is in these moments of war, of unfathomable distress that may seem so unreal, which extraordinary feats are oft conquered. I propose that Dickinson strives to avoid the realness of war and struggle, attempting momentarily to believe in a false but beautiful idealism. We find, though, that the true situation is not something that can be avoided. Keeping faith in our beliefs, we can learn to cherish the precious moments we have and know that in time peace will return. And, perhaps, we will find comfort in our memories, however fleeting. I encourage us to revel in desire and passion if only half as much as Dickinson conspicuously did.

Karen Dandurand argues that there was an acceptance of Dickinson’s religious imagery by her contemporaries. The basis for this assumption is that the editor of the *Drum Beat* was a minister (21). Dandurand sufficiently attributes the publication of these three specific poems to the Reverend Richard Salter Storrs, Jr., an accomplished editor in his own right. Simply the inclusion of a poem with religious imagery, such as Dickinson’s poem in question entitled “October,” cannot negate that the use of the terms: sacrament, last communion, sacred emblems, the consecrated bread, and thine immortal
wine, were certainly interpreted by *some* contemporaries as sacrilegious. Though, Dickinson specifically *asks* for a communion with the earth rather than asserting a right to it. In this way, she is approaching to plead a case for something that is would customarily be forbidden.

Nonetheless, the fact that Storrs published “October” in the *Drum Beat* certainly aligns with the stance that the newspaper was attempting to take – proactive rallying for the nation and troops. This, in turn, suggests that Storrs *was* indeed going against the crowd by taking on a piece that, as Dandurand notes, many contemporaries deemed sacrilegious. We have to take into account that this was a time when any deviant use of religion other that its original purpose was frowned upon. Communion is originally conducted between you and the Creator, not you and the created, earth in this poem. His inclusion of her work shows his religious support and understanding of the patronage it demonstrates. In fact, his choice of Dickinson’s poem may have served as a suggestion for people to turn *towards* religion or towards religious feelings towards nature as something comforting during the war, rather than *against* religious sentiments by condemning the poem as a sacrilege. Since he included the poem, he was seemingly more broad-minded about the acceptance and use of religious symbols. After all, in addition to the religious context, Dickinson is talking about a transitory feeling to clasp onto, a personal memory that may bring peace in a time of strife like they were all facing.
Conclusion

Emily Dickinson is celebrated for her famous first line of a poem, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.” The system of aesthetics that she employs within these three lyric poems is purely representative of her slant truth to the experiences of war. From the perspective of a politically aware and attuned citizen, her poetry is expressive of the masses in a completely different way than contemporary poetry submissions that were published alongside hers in the 1864 issues of the Drum Beat. Many consider only the common themes of nature and death leading to an obvious and legitimate reading poetic reading. In Dickinson’s poems, however, we must heed the refinement of verse that she offers to us, considering subtle hints to the war context in which the poetry was written. Having accomplished this, we are now able to appreciate Dickinson’s message of a hunger and appreciation for beauty found as a direct result of the suffering and deaths of the Civil War. Such an understanding reminds us of the precious fleeting nature of people, time and experiences. These we may have, without being endowed with the perceptiveness of her verse, recklessly abandoned. After gaining a new and rich understanding of these three poems as Dickinson’s contribution of Civil War poetry, it would be fascinating to apply such attentiveness to her other works surrounding this time frame in an effort to realize further aspects of this poet.
Primary Works


---. “These are the days when Birds come back”. The Drum Beat: 03/11/1864.

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