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Telling the Time with Emily Dickinson

TIME CONSUMES US in both senses of the verb. The more it ravages the body, the more the mind dwells on it. It toys with us. We play with it. We're subject to it and make it our subject endlessly. We can't stop dwelling on termination. William Wordsworth refers plainly in "Mutability" to "the unimaginable touch of time." Yet poets forever, none more than Emily Dickinson, have tried to imagine just that, to translate a touch as repellent as it is seductive, as deadly as it is vivifying.

Classically, we see death juxtaposed in poems to its archenemy, life, more exactly, a passion for life, supreme vitality. John Donne is the king of this castle. But I also think less obviously of Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," which centers on our forced adaptation to the final loss by means of a lifetime of losing what we love. This cruel conditioning is summed up in a mordant and sincere refrain, "The art of losing isn't hard to master." Such mastery, however rarefied, like the mastery of poetic form on display in Bishop's villanelle, bespeaks a visceral defiance. John Keats, whose celebration of the senses intensifies in direct proportion to the approach of permanent numbness, assuages his "fears that I may cease to be" by fixating on the nightingale, conjuring winged amnesia, to "Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known." Robert Frost in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," bound by duty to travel every iron mile in his assigned journey, can barely resist the premature relief of downy snow, eternal sleep.

Still other poets have directly reminded us of their actual age when writing the poem in hand: "I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin," crows Walt Whitman at the outset of "Song of Myself." W. B. Yeats, ever vain, laments in "Among Schoolchildren," the "sixty-year-old smiling public man" the class of youngsters no doubt sees. John Milton with a precocious sense of aging begins his consummate sonnet about self-doubt with, "How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth, / Stolen on his wing my three and twentieth year."

Not only does time oppose love, but inner and outer senses of time

joust for dominance. The deeper poets have delved into this inner time, the more they have enlarged our sense of it, often discovering deep beneath the surface of flat narcissism a vast cavern, a cosmic expanse. I think of Louis MacNeice's "Stargazer." He begins the poem by identifying the exact year in his life of the sidereal sightings implicit in the title; but he also quickly inserts an ironic, MacNeiceian parenthesis about the irrelevance of such a small number: "Forty-two years ago (to me if to no one else / The number is of some interest) it was a brilliant starry night." The insertion of that little word "some" says more than a mere something. It says everything. The parenthetical blurts. It discloses sideways that the issue of age and aging is of enormous, embarrassing, indeed consuming interest to the poet. The parenthesis is obsession turned inside out to look like nonchalance. Eventually, the poet's always-simmering fear of death comes to a boil, then calms, when he divests himself of ego with this observation: "their light / Had left them (some at least) long before I was." That little but consequential word "some" appears again. Again, it appears in a parenthesis, which can look like a fence, a futile attempt to keep a few tiny stars safe from the all-effacing universe. A parallel effort at human containment becomes all the more poignant when the poem and the starlight arrive at their joint conclusion. That impersonal light will finally arrive on our planet "when there is not / Anyone left alive." The even smaller word "not" is not just the end of a line of poetry. It's pure negation.

This tension between living at full throttle and anticipating utter stasis is perhaps most visible in poets who literally tell the time, as though every single second, minute, hour is fraught, urgent. These are the temporally charged and burdened moments Shakespeare announces with "When I do count the clock that tells the time." It's the moment of mute terror Philip Larkin nonetheless articulates for all time in "Aubade": "I work all day, and get half-drunk at night / Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare." "Half-drunk" may be evasion masked as precision, but the exact time of the incident is critical: too late to go back to sleep, each cell in the body knowing that the "curtain edges will soon grow light," that another day will dawn before another doesn't.

There is no poet, however, who lives more on the edge of every single second than Emily Dickinson: "Each Second is the last" (#927). She seems determined in poem after poem to ground the soaring statement "Forever—is composed of Nows—" (#690) in a single, solid *now*. She often announces the hour at hand in the first line of the poem, as though

noting the actual time of the poem's conception. This predilection for tolling the hour at the poem's beginning is especially curious when we consider something she confessed, perhaps a bit disingenuously, to her close friend Thomas Higginson: "I never knew how to tell the time by the clock until I was 15. My father thought he had taught me but I did not understand & I was afraid to say I did not & afraid to ask anyone else lest he should know" (*Letters* #342b). Even if Dickinson was exaggerating, this written recollection throws the following lines into salient relief: "At Half past Three / A Single Bird," (#1099); "The Birds begun at Four o'clock—," (#504); "The Day came slow—till Five o'clock" (#572). Our poet seems driven to pinpoint the hour of both her nocturnal terror and release from it through poetry, like the birds singing with the prompt miracle of light.

We can hear this interdependence of paralysis and flight tolling in these opening lines: "The Clock strikes One / That just struck Two— / Some Schism in the Sum— / A Sorcerer from Genesis / Has wrecked the Pendulum—" (#1598). A rare, time-specific poem set in full daylight rather than in darkness or at dawn, this poem about mental sorcery rather than mechanical failure records a moment of schism between inner and outer time, when the former prevails. Perhaps the consummate clock poem is "A Clock stopped—/ Not the Mantel's—" (#259), where the body itself is a clock and death admits us to "Degreeless noon," the corpse a marble pendulum incapable of movement, free of tick-tock agitation. Although time is ubiquitous in poetry, like the gift of life itself, each imagination has the freedom to use it in her own way. Viewing Dickinson through the lens of her fixation on time reveals her absolute uniqueness.

Most of us can't resist rewriting the past to make the present more coherent. I like to think I can remember sitting in my office, over thirty years ago, in the English Department at Trinity College, Dublin, conducting a tutorial on Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature" while also looking out a wide window at the rain. I like to think I can remember reading aloud these words, "Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration" (10). I hear the deep silence of snow while I listen to the patter of rain. The trees in the Provost's garden below are green, a far cry from the behemoth skeletons in my New England of maples in winter, so conducive to conjuring the wraithlike ideality of the Over-Soul. Indulging in such

wistful reminiscence, however, is not finally what this memory brings back to me. It's the memory of distraction, of being completely present in the classroom and yet simultaneously trolling the past and feeling a dreamy sense of loss. Every teacher knows this chronic "Schism." It is another form of parenthetical release in otherwise controlled syntax.

So it is too that, while writing with apparent detachment about poetry and time right now, my heart has gone where my mind needs to follow. By zeroing in on Dickinson I am coming home, nearing the personal heart of these ponderings on time. My mother suffered from Alzheimer's. At times her loss of clock time looked to me exactly like "Degreeless noon," that absolute, a nontime within time, to which Dickinson returns again and again: "Noon—is the Hinge of Day" (#1060); "I had been hungry all the Years — / My Noon had Come — to dine —" (#439); "Two Butterflies went out at Noon / . . . And Both were wrecked in Noon —" (#571). At this perilous juncture, I'll turn for support to Dickinson scholar Domhnall Mitchell, a former Trinity student, who might have been in that tutorial that day. I turn to a passage from his *Measures of Possibility* that reads: "Rhythm is an essential aspect of human life, and it corresponds to something basic within and outside us: our heartbeat, the movement of the lungs, and the way we walk, as well as the change from day to night and from season to season" (264). As a large truth often magnetizes us across a wide force field, so certain words and images here begin to cluster: our gait, our breathing, how our planet moves and breathes. It's a cliché that words transport us. We could be in the desert, as we read that report from Concord by Emerson, but we are walking on the common in winter, our breath as sharp as icicles. More subtly, poetry itself in its corporeality moves, pulsates, strides, crawls, creeps and gallops, traverses seasons, is especially built for severe winters.

I did return physically to that pristine common. When I left Dublin nearly thirty years ago, I moved directly to Amherst, not just Dickinson's lifelong home but a New England town with a long, empty stretch of grass bisecting its center. The philosophical and emotional reach of Emerson's words, however, goes far deeper than shallow nostalgia for some merely physical place. No sooner are you in your so-called home than you long for your lost other one. After all, "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea —" (#143). The point is that Emerson uses his New England common as a trampoline to launch himself into the Over-Soul, to explore his sublime argument for the unseen. To be sure, I felt a pang of loss in Ireland every time I read words that viewed the

world New Englandly, lines from Dickinson like, “There’s a certain Slant of light / Winter Afternoons —” (#320) and “I dreaded that first Robin, so,” (#347). There’s often no light in Ireland other than a gray diffuseness, and when the sun appears, it’s more like a sudden blush all over the landscape’s face. Furthermore, there are no real robins in my Whitmanesque, giganticist sense of the bird, only petite, tremulous thrushes. If this is so, then why did I and my students, with our discrepant, circadian histories, find a common home in Dickinson’s words? Great poetry, so often smelling of a very particular patch, has the power to transport anyone on the globe to that earthly address. The effect of reading Dickinson, however, provides transport of another kind, to a more than terrestrial and less than celestial place. We don’t precisely levitate. It’s as though the earth itself is in a trance. While Dickinson’s renderings of such rapture are as exact as a surgeon’s incisions, therefore at the antipodes from the swoons of Yeats, the transformation he induces at “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” is similarly predicated on time: “There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow.” For Dickinson, an arresting, immediate, local image, found often no farther than her garden, is merely the occasion for the main event and not the main event itself, which with great regularity is a matter literally of time. The temporal becomes the spatial. We inhabit time, just as we might stand on the Amherst or Concord common. Poets these days internally censor blunt abstraction, the baldly metaphysical. Dickinson’s specificity about time, the way she makes it palpable and pressing, allows her to inhabit this metaphysical plane and bring her readers in their stubborn corporeality along with her in hers to it.

Consider how those two images just cited of winter light and a bird returning in cataclysmic spring develop in the poems they announce. First we read, “There’s a certain Slant of light / Winter Afternoons / That oppresses, like the Heft / of Cathedral Tunes, / Heavenly Hurt, it gives us — / We can find no scar, / But internal difference — / Where the Meanings, are —” (#320), not Ireland or New England, not literal spring or summer, but the location and time of our landmark epiphanies. The eventual focus of the second poem isn’t that sunrise-breasted harbinger of summer. It’s the burning sunset, the last sunset, the final departure, paradoxically announced, as midnight is by noon, by the robin’s annual arrival. “I thought if I could only live / Till that first Shout got by — / Not all Pianos in the Woods / Had power to mangle me —.” Mastering one’s own lightning-bolt intimations of mortality is the poem’s

blood red heart. As Cristanne Miller argues in *Reading in Time*, Dickinson's lyric is not about subjectivity but about Emerson's "'meter making argument,'" which, she specifies—warming today's cold sense of the word "argument"—as not something didactic but, in Emerson's words, as "'abandonment to the nature of things'" (29).

This earthquake in the soul that heralds a new beginning took place for me almost immediately upon my return to America in 1986. I came back bent on midlife reinvention, a redirecting of the plot. Soon, both of my parents, living as they always had an hour south of Amherst, suffered in their separate ways the very different conclusions written for each of them. My father's death was sudden. It felt like "One-imperial Thunderbolt— / That scalps your naked soul" (#477), a clear, Aristotelian end to a beginning and a middle. My mother's decline obeyed no rational, linear sense of time. The doctors agreed she was slowly dying, but the way she inhabited time defied any clear sense of conclusion. She sailed off toward some place we couldn't see, had never known. When she wasn't addled by some vestigial sensation of the way time operated on the mainland, she embodied "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea—." As she cruised "Past the Houses— / Past the Headlands," the markers on which we landlubbers depend, she exuded a certain joy, as though recovering a world she'd thought lost to her forever. For instance, she would recall in eidetic detail the rooms in her aunt's house, which she used to visit in Holyoke as a child. She'd revive the canals and expensive shops in that once grand, now eviscerated city of ghostly silk mills. Or she would stand by the lower lake at Mount Holyoke College, formerly Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, from which Emily Dickinson is the most famous dropout, and marvel at the bawdy freedom of a duck with its ass in the air, chuckling to herself for arrested minutes. The terror her going to sea struck in me, leaving without so much as a wave to plodding time, made me search for consolation, not just for myself, above all for her. Could she be experiencing her own benign, floodlit noon while studying that duck? Had time stopped for her, had nature filled her perturbed interior with Emerson's "exhilaration"?

I would walk the streets and fields and woods of Amherst trying to make sense of her condition, trying to find some peace myself with it. You may be anticipating, as I surely did in desperation, some companionship with Emily on these rambles, diaphanous by my side. But no, she, by this I mean Dickinson, not the trivialized Emily, stayed fixed as the sun in her upper room on Main Street. She remained the still center. I

walked, often trudged, around the circumference, a circle that often grew in my mind so wide it encompassed my other home, Ireland. I might find myself walking with Seamus Heaney. I might recall his landmark essay on Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Fire in the Flint," how it starts off with what has to be a bow by Heaney toward Dickinson. Speaking of Hopkins, the Irish poet remarks, "I want to approach him from the circumference of his art rather than from the center of himself" (*Preoccupations* 79). In walking, walking, walking around Amherst, tracing its circumference, Dickinson's lines dictating the rhythm of my step, my breathing, that "abandonment to the nature of things," the "meter making argument" of poems would begin to tap, tap, tap on my eardrum and drip, drip, drip into my heart, then slowly seep into my brain, the reverse of the standard, intellectual order. Heaney in "Feeling into Words" stresses the ambulatory as key to Wordsworth's mode of composition. I have also found it the best way to read Dickinson. Reading by speaking rather than looking at a book has an effect similar to the transformation of the spatial by the temporal.

Walking measures not just space but time. We walk a mile. It takes, if we're in good form, fifteen minutes. Depressed it can be twenty-five. The image that comes to my mind, when I try to concretize Dickinson's geometric conceit of center and circumference, is a clock face, its two hands, two, a dualism, bound to relativity, bound to a center and going round and round a circumference of minutes, hours, days, finally a lifetime. What is more, each line of poetry, so like the minute or the hour hand of a clock, depending on the line's metrical length, can be imagined walking, clocking up the minutes. Dickinson's poems, as we know, usually walk with a grave, regular pace, but they can, when the matter at hand demands it, skip or hesitate like a spastic clock, even appear to stumble, depending on the rhythm. Time passes and space on a page, be it material or mental, is traversed, as each line moves from beginning to end, from the end of one line to the beginning of the next, just like turning a corner on foot, then another and another, on and on to the last word of the last line, home. To walk with Dickinson's concision can bring you home so repeatedly to yourself you begin finally to feel, as they say now, centered.

Let me be clear. I didn't start reciting Dickinson to myself consciously, looking for an answer to my mother's confusion about time. As Mitchell specifies, my body, not my mind, began striding through her lines. It was as physical, I imagine, as my mother standing up in the Congregational

Church in Westfield and belting out hymns as a child. (When she converted to Catholicism in order to marry my father, it was the loss of hymns she grieved.) It was only much later that it came to me consciously how much mindlessly reciting Dickinson's lines was making me mindful of the deeper nature of time, so much farther below the surface we traverse with our sequential constructions. It's not that I deliberately sought out poems that overtly address time. It's always the rhythms that come first, a sensation of some drumbeat commanding one to march and then the words surfacing like the reluctant words for true feeling: "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed. / To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need" (#112), over and over and over again. Initially it's the meter dictating the bounce in the step—soft, hard / soft, hard / soft, hard / soft. So it goes. (The body doesn't say the word "meter"; it just obeys like a good soldier the regularity of rhythm.) As, however, the walking and the rhythm become second-nature, automatic, and you're on, perhaps, the twentieth repetition, you begin to notice things you never did before. Time offers this gift. Monotony becomes enchantment; enchantment becomes enlightenment. You had noticed an extra sense of firmness in your foot, when it came down on the second syllable of "succeed," which simultaneously locks arms with "need," as though in a dance with someone else. Let me say it again: "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed. / To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need." Initially you'd just smiled to the regularity of the beat: three, three, three, three. Though once that clinching rhyme, as distinct from the rhythm, registers, other necessitous niceties of the quatrain start to bubble up into consciousness. You notice how the rhyme relies on final, stressed syllables: "need" and "succeed," those rhyming, climactic sounds confirming the coupling, confirming the codependence of desperation and success, the apparent core of the poem to come. By contrast, we hear the unrhymed line endings as both unstressed, soft, making them recede even farther into the background: "sweetest" and "nectar." However, while the soft ending, the unstressed, second syllable, creates the sweetness in "sweetest," it also diminishes "success," with which it enjoys an internal, slant rhyme, making "success" ("success is counted sweetest") almost an incidental pleasure, a saccharine trifle.

The truly miraculous thing about rhythm is that it makes you recover words you never knew you possessed. You begin to pull the rest of the poem up clean like a beautiful, wild weed, a dandelion, straight from the

ground, smiling as you recall, “I am from the fields, you know, and while quite at home with the dandelion, make but a sorry figure in a drawing room” (*Open Me Carefully* 73). Then, you mindlessly resume walking and chant the next line: “Not one of all the purple Host.” That’s when you trip, as on an uneven brick in the sidewalk. I thought we were talking trimeter here, three beats, you protest. Then you go on pulling that root up and it returns to three, it keeps going as three, making that one line, the first to the second stanza, even more anomalous. You have to ask why. The anomaly is an understated provocation. “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!” Because of that pattern laid down in the first stanza of every other line, the rhyming lines, ending with a final stress, those few words, “the purple host,” wreak even more havoc, apart from creating a deviant fourth iamb in the line. Monosyllabic “host” appears to be stressed, but it’s also unrhymed, an unrhymed, hard ending. Suddenly that “purple Host,” those regal, entitled, militant angels, are even more triumphant. They have tripped you up. They end up, however, in a tiny and marginalized minority. We, the reader, all readers, are finally with the writer imagining the defeated, the ultimate fate of us all. We are all mortals, not angels.

The real magic of such repetition and osmotic registering of every detail is the way it changes your impression of what the poem seems to be about. As you wind to the blessedly regular ending, reprising the pattern of rhyme and rhythm in the first stanza, you begin to see how much this poem is about time. The “distant strains of triumph” would not be so distant or so triumphant if they were not perceived by “he defeated—dying—.” The annihilation of time defines for most of us the loss of an individual life. The “purple Host” still exists in time, where its paltry triumph seems to matter. Of course, such a conquest amounts to nothing compared to a final acquisition of the sense of things, what Heaney dubs in *Crediting Poetry* as Dickinson’s “crystalline inwardness” (13), Emerson’s “nature of things,” if you like, the “argument,” available only to those nearing extinction. That rhyme between “ear” and “clear” not only tells us what the defeated soldiers are hearing but what we are hearing through this poem, its ringing clarity reaching our ears through rhythm and rhyme. Finally, retroactively, the rhyme of “ear” and “clear” further marginalizes the anomalous purple Host. Their royal color fades. The aural trumps the visual. Our last, transcen-

dent sensation is of the ear not the eye: "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—" (#591).

We call it keeping time, when we keep to the beat of a song by tapping a foot or fingertips. Like stamping our feet for stubborn emphasis, the body walking embodies whatever meter prevails. Poetry for Dickinson is time made verbal. Moreover, there are almost always in Dickinson several temporal levels in a poem, several plots. At one extreme, we have the purely drum-beating, aural plot. At the other, we usually have a narrative, like the passage from life above ground to under it. In between, though, there is more often than not a narration of the temporal experience of birthing the poem itself, the rhythms, the contractions, if you like, of surviving and growing from crisis, as in "I felt a Funeral in my Brain." In the actual world, it's a great crisis when someone can no longer frame quotidian experience by time. It can be little consolation to bystanders that an impaired faculty for chronology actually may enlarge the frame, permit the freedom to wander among hitherto disparate, foreign chronologies. We can only see the loss of reality as we know it. If we invert this loss, however, and imagine a mind in such preternatural, global possession of apparently all times, we glimpse the very generator, the nuclear reactor, of Dickinson's explosive poetics.

Losing the temporal framework in which the present sits can appear, at least from the sidelines, to leave a person utterly bereft. Conversely, witnessing the workings of a mind in complete possession of all dimensions of time can feel like being present at creation itself. Many a Dickinson poem is not just an *ars poetica* but a narrative about the very construction of reality. This is what we have in her audacious final revision of the second stanza of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—," where she imagines how time looks to those who have escaped it. Elongating the stanza, essentially doubling the number of lines in the original by halving their length, she takes off on her remarkable journey. These very short lines shift the poem into another gear. Saying them is like speeding down the steep switchbacks of an alpine road. It's all about time, the duration of a poetic effect. Dickinson seems to compose with a stopwatch in her mind, calibrating every sound down to the split second. Every punctuation mark seems weighed for the time it takes. A comma takes a second. A period takes a minute. A dash is fast and slow, time in another realm. By the end of the following stanza, our sports car has taken off like a missile into all history, then softly returned to earth, to quotidian weather, with a new understanding of time.

Grand go the Years,
 In the Crescent above them—
 Worlds scoop their Arcs—
 And Firmaments—row—
 Diadems—drop—
 And Doges—surrender—
 Soundless as Dots,
 On a Disc of Snow. (#124)

Our earthly cycles of rising and falling (“Diadems—drop / And Doges—surrender—”) are minuscule compared to a cosmic circumference. It’s as though the soul underground finally banishes the mere cobwebs of stone above him and truly sees the sky. But wait, stay with me, walk with me, for one more, split second. Those crowns, those monarchs, not only rise but fall again, “Soundless as Dots, / On a Disc of Snow.” I see snowflakes tautologically falling on snow, white on white, blending into it, each flake, though, remaining individual. It’s that last, reposeful word, however, “Snow,” which both says and doesn’t say it all. Like Emerson’s snow, Dickinson’s is both resonant and still, a serenity achieved as words fall into wordlessness. It’s a clock face without numbers and hands, without relativity. It’s a human face without confused eyes and a mouth trying to speak from a realm of time that doesn’t translate into this world, this vault underground. As “Firmaments—row—,” so people can sail off into another time, another place. That final “disc of snow” can be a face finally at peace.

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Typical problems with telling the time in English. This topic is taught to very young learners, including some who haven't properly learnt the time in their own language yet. This is most likely to be a problem when trying to use the 24 hour clock to elicit other ways of saying the time. Get students to choose from a limited number of options as they listen to some times, with the other options being obviously wrong, e.g. a clock showing 07:00 and a clock showing 08:00 when they hear "Seven o'clock" or a clock showing 07:30 and a clock showing 07:25 when they hear "Half past seven".