

**EMILY DICKINSON'S VOYAGES  
BY THE SEA AND AGAINST ETERNITY**

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I.

The house of all possibilities may be the starting point for any voyage. Emily Dickinson begins her “early” voyage towards the sea, which also means contemplation of death or life, in the poem “I started Early--Took my Dog”, no. 520:

I started Early -- Took my Dog --  
And visited the Sea --  
The Mermaids in the Basement  
Came out to look at me --

And Frigates -- in the Upper Floor  
Extended Hempen Hands --  
Presuming Me to be a Mouse --  
Aground -- upon the Sands --

But no Man moved Me -- till the Tide  
Went past my simple Shoe --  
And past my Apron -- and my Belt  
And past my Bodice -- too --

And made as He would eat me up --  
As Wholly as a Dew  
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve --  
And then -- I started -- too --

And He -- He followed -- close behind --

I felt His Silver Heel  
 Upon my Ankle -- Then my Shoes  
 Would overflow with Pearl --

Until We met the Solid Town --  
 No One He seemed to know --  
 And bowing -- with a Mighty look --  
 At me -- The Sea withdrew --

The sea is one of the most complex symbols as Chevalier and Gheerbrant present it in the *Dictionary of Symbols*: “The sea is a symbol of the dynamism of life. Everything appears from the sea and gets back to it; it is a place of birth, of transformation, and rebirth. Being water in movement, the sea also symbolizes the intermediary state between the unshaped virtualities and the shaped realities... Therefore, the sea is both an image of life and death”<sup>1</sup>.

The traveller is accompanied by the dog which, by its loyalty is an equivalent for the poet's self, a self which runs the risk of dissolving into the irrational collective self of the sea. At the same time, the dog is a psychopomp animal, a guide, a guardian and even an advisor of the human being in the realm of death -- the sea. This double travel may be also an analogue of a descent into the realm of death and an ascent back to the human world. The encounter with the sea -- personified here as “He” -- may also represent an experience in the realm of life: “his implicitly sexual assault upon the persona in stanza three suggests an identity with the mastering principle, that male owner we met as a different analogical figure in «My Life had stood a Loaded Gun --»”<sup>2</sup>. There is a gradation in this voyage and assignation: after the climax (the comparison of the sea that “would eat her up” with “a Dew/ Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve”), follows another movement back to town, accompanied by the sea. “His” own withdrawal, “with a Mighty look”, suggests that “His” defeat is only temporary. Some critics suggested (see Weisbuch) that her journey to the “Solid Town” signifies her return to her previous place, in a rational, conventional society. At a biographical level, it can represent a

“deliberate conscious decision to withdraw from life to her upstairs rooms“, as Conrad Aiken remarks <sup>3</sup>. In this poem, as in many others, Emily Dickinson’s “habit of combining small and great” is present; G. T. Whicher writes about this technique: “it was ingrained to such an extent that she instinctively employed it again and again in her most serious poems”<sup>4</sup>.

The voyage towards the sea continues in other poems, too:

Exultation is the going  
Of an inland soul to sea,  
Past the houses -- past the headlands --  
Into deep Eternity --

Bred as we, among the mountains,  
Can the sailor understand  
The divine intoxication  
Of the first league out from land?  
( no. 76 )

The attribute “inland” for “soul” suggests a strictly determined space, that of the interior of a country, a place remote from sea or border, and also limited, stable, immutable. It is opposed to the vastity and mutability of the sea, the place of all changes, of life and death. The journey of the soul may also represent a journey towards death, like in the previous poem, and also towards “Eternity”. It points to the soul’s liberation from the strict limits that press, suffocate it. In the second stanza, the mountains become a symbol for the spatial limit, like the “inland” in the beginning. An antithesis is figured between “we”, who are “bred among the mountains” and the sailor. In one of her letters, the poet adopts the other point of view -- that of a sailor who discovers the inland territory: “Whether the hills will look as blue as the sailors say... will you tell me, please tell me”<sup>5</sup>. The “Exultation” is beyond the understanding of the sailor, whose experience is limited to the sea. The “Intoxication”, this state beyond self-control, may have as a result the “Exultation”. Etymologically, “exultation” comes from the Latin, “sultare”, “saltare”, “salire”, (“to leap”). So, it presupposes a leap, a jump, a transition

of the self from the inland area to the sea. In *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson*, Ruth Miller finds another interpretation to the poem:

“There is the Master letter, here in this poem, there is the same sense of exultation at the idea of redemption. In both, redemption is talked of as the result of passage by sea to a farther shore. In both, that shore is Heaven. When it comes to exact knowledge of what that Heaven will be like, there is no certainty, neither in the letter nor in any poem that attempts to say”<sup>6</sup>

If the sea annihilates here the limits of the “inland self”, pointing to its loss into “deep Eternity”, on the contrary, in a shorter poem (no.884) the sea is the preserver of border- lands: "An Everywhere of Silver/ With Ropes of Sand/ To keep it from effacing/ The Track called Land". In *I started Early -- Took my Dog --*, the voyage to the sea is followed by withdrawal into the town. If in *Exultation is the going*, this voyage to the sea is completed by an ecstatic state, in another poem, *Whether my bark went down at sea* the voyage by sea is a means of various encounters, and the isle becomes a central point:

Whether my bark went down at sea --  
 Whether she met with gales --  
 Whether to isles enchanted  
 She bent her docile sails --

By what mystic mooring  
 She is held today--  
 This is the errand of the eye  
 Out upon the Bay.

( no. 52 )

The poem seems to be a continuation of the previous one. The “bark” is that of the poet’s self, that longs for a “mystic mooring”. The travel is twice imaginary, the eye pointing to the inner trip. The island becomes the symbol of the spiritual center that the self longs for: “The island, that can only be left by sea or flying, is by excellence the symbol of a spiritual center and, more exactly, of the primordial spiritual center”<sup>7</sup>. At a psycho-analytical level, the island signifies a refuge, a place where the poet can “moor”. This

anchorage significantly points to a mystical union of the poet's self with the island, a metaphor for another realm, which may be the realm of death, too.

“The poem puzzles over the experience of death: the meaning of death the poet knows. But precisely what the voyage is like on that sea, the symbolic place where the mysterious events take place, what the mooring on that other shore, heaven, is like, remains a question the poet ponders: whether it is annihilation, whether it is struggle, whether it is effortless or passive”<sup>8</sup>.

In another famous poem (no. 249), travelling by sea and at night leads to the union of the poet's self with the much desired self of the lover:

Wild Nights -- Wild Nights !  
 Were I with Thee  
 Wild Nights should be  
 Our luxury !

Futile - the Winds --  
 To a Heart in port --  
 Done with the Compass --  
 Done with the Chart !

Rowing in Eden --  
 Ah, the Sea !  
 Might I but moor -- Tonight --  
 In Thee !

The poem constructs an imaginary territory, an Edenic island, which is both utopia and eutopia. In *Civitas Imaginalis* Sorin Antohi specifies: “The island is the emblematic figure of the utopia, the protective space of the ideal, the spiritual exception of a geography which is suffocated by corporeality, it is the insertion of the transcendental order into a world of immanence”<sup>9</sup>.

The journey takes place in a circular space, where several other spaces are juxtaposed: “the Eden”, “the sea”, (both contain or are contained

in the lover's self), "the port". Another important element is that the voyage is made at night. In Gilbert Durand's view the nocturnal water is a feminine symbol representing "death, the inevitable end, the epiphany of the curse of time" (10). "Rowing in Eden" and the "mooring" can symbolize here the approach of death. It is Durand who also signals that reflection in the water is in relation with Ophelia complex: "To be mirrored is to participate in the shadows' life". In Narcissus' myth reflection brings about death, through self-absorption.

"I" and the archaic "thee" are parts of the same divided androgyn that longs for reunion. The sea, like the night, blurs the differences. Therefore, the aim of the voyage is the recovery of the lost unity of the poet's split self. The whole discourse expresses the turmoil of the poetic mind, its travel toward and within the lover's self that acquires cosmic proportions, being regarded as a stable aim, an axis and imago mundi (11).

Allen Tate noticed that in E. Dickinson's poetry most of the words are either of Latin or Greek origin -- which represent abstract ideas -- or of Saxon origin -- which stand for the concrete perception (12). These words are to be found in this poem, where Greek and Latin words are mixed, and also a Hebrew word appears (Hebr. Eden, delight). The antithesis at the etymological level is significant: "luxury" (Lat. "luxus", abundance), is opposed to futile (Lat. "futilis", leaky, lack, poor).

The same kind of journey toward the sea-lover is to be found also in poem no. 162, *My River runs to thee*: "My River runs to thee --/ Blue Sea ! Wilt welcome me ?/ My River waits reply --/ Oh Sea -- look graciously --/ I'll fetch thee Brooks/ From spotted nooks--/ Say -- Sea -- Take Me !" Notice that in this poem, like in *The Sea said "Came" to the Brook* -- no. 1210, the traveller is no longer the poet, but other personae: a "Brook", a "River", the "Sea". They stand for the various selves of the same poet being in a continuous dialogue (13).

So far we have explored some poems in which the voyage toward the sea or by sea was the primary theme, the sea being, among other images, a symbol of death and love, and also a symbol of eternity. But the sea as a

symbolical place may coincide with Eternity, which is the subject of the following part.

## II.

“Eternity symbolizes what lacks limits in time. According to Boetius, eternity means simultaneous possession of an endless existence (*De consolatione*). Eternity represents the never-ending-time; which does not depend on any contingent limitation, it is the assertion of existence, through the denial of time” (*Dictionary of Symbols*) (1).

“Both Rilke and E.Dickinson are obsessed to create images of immortality” (2), they are obsessed with death, life after death, and the way in which the borders of this transitory life may be transcended. “That beheaded life under grass worried me like a wasp”, Emily Dickinson affirms in a letter (3). Conrad Aiken makes this specific mention in his essay, “Emily Dickinson”: “Death and the problem of life after death obsessed her. She seems to have thought of it constantly [. . .] Ultimately -- her obsession became morbid and her eagerness for details, after the death of a friend -- the hungry desire to know how she died -- became almost vulture-like.”(4)

Travelling means movement, self-transformation and metamorphosis. The living self becomes a dead one or is imagined so. The journey toward death, toward “Eternity” is the theme of the poem no. 615:

Our journey had advanced --  
 Our feet were almost come  
 To that odd Fork in Being's Road --  
 Eternity -- by Term --

Our pace took sudden awe --  
 Our feet - reluctant -- led --  
 Before -- were Cities -- but Between --  
 The Forest of the Dead --

Retreat -- was out of Hope --

Behind -- a Sealed Route --  
 Eternity's White Flag -- Before --  
 And God -- at every Gate --

The journey of life advances not only in time, but also in space. Eternity is seen as a "Fork in Being's Road"; it can stand for a double direction: before or behind. The way behind is hopeless, it is a "sealed route", before are the cities, those of another world, and in between, "The Forest of the Dead". On a micro-scale, a psycho-geography is circumscribed, where the essential moments of life and death appear. The white color of the flag is also the color of death. Heaven "and God -- at every gate" -- are here the aims and end of the travelling. One may notice that this collective "we" may include the poet, the reader(s), the lover.

A problematic poem in which the "I" and Death are the two travellers is *Because I could not stop for Death* (no. 712). The poet's self experiences a particular voyage toward a center that is a house-tomb:

Because I could not stop for Death --  
 He kindly stopped for me --  
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves --  
 And Immortality.

We slowly drove -- He knew no haste  
 And I had put away  
 My labor and my leisure too,  
 For His Civility --

Here again Death is a "He", and their couple is turned into a triangle by naming a third traveller – i. e. "Immortality". In his „Introduction" to *Selected Poetry of Emily Dickinson*, James Reeves affirms that "Emily Dickinson believed in immortality as a religious dogma and as a poetic idea" (5). The journey is extremely complex in this poem, as abstract elements are visualized, feelings and attitudes are involved, a vehicle appears, and it moves with a certain speed, in a certain direction, to a certain aim or end.



Like in the case of "I started Early -- Took my Dog" the horses are psychopomp animals that enable the transcendence toward another realm. A spiritual topography is imagined, in which life's essential moments are pointed at: "we passed school", "we passed the Fields", "we passed the Setting Sun" -- childhood, maturity, old age represent the moments of the journey of life towards death.

One may say that this is one of the "death in death poems". Death is a traveller, a way toward an end and an end in itself. Death is seen here as another sort of voyage, an after-life voyage. Like in a *mise en abyme*, life and death are two parallel mirrors that reflect the soul's journey toward death and accompanied by death. But the verse "And rather He passed Us" suggests that all this travel may be an illusion, the only one that moves is "Death". It is the journey of the self toward "Eternity", which is its halt and goal -- and it coincides with the "House" whose symbolical description suggests a tomb: "Since then -- 'tis Centuries -- and yet/ Feels shorter than the Day/ I first surmised the Horses' Heads/ Were toward Eternity --".

It is a place where movement in space and time is annulled. The past tense, which was used in all the previous stanzas, is replaced here by the present tense, with an eternal value. It is a place from where the poet's voice is heard -- a speaking tomb. Language itself becomes a *memento mori*. The actual body of the poet, the container of the self is both a tomb and a prison; like in the Platonic similitude *soma -- sema*. The poet constructs a certain poetic self and then deconstructs its image -- but the poet, who travels, whose speaking voice is heard, is, in fact, dead. The whole journey appears as a looking back to life from the perspective of death.

A possible continuation of *Because I could not stop for Death* is the poem *She Dwelleth in the Ground* (no. 671.); it is also about the place where travelling comes to an end: "She dwelleth in the Ground --/ Where Daffodils -- abide --/ Her Maker -- Her Metropolis --/ The Universe -- Her Maid --". Here the perspective is that of a male speaker: he sends his messenger "to fetch Her Grace -- and Hue --/ And Fairness -- and Renown --", all of them represent her personality, which is reshaped after death. Thus, a feminine portrait of a dead persona is evoked by a living one.

In many poems, E. Dickinson “looks at the world of death and does not renounce to decipher the meanings of the visible world” (6):

Bereaved of all, I went abroad --  
 No less bereaved was I  
 Upon a New Peninsula --  
 The Grave preceded me --

Obtained my Lodgings, ere myself --  
 And when I sought my Bed --  
 The Grave it was reposed upon  
 The Pillow for my Head --

In this poem (no. 784) another strange type of traveller accompanies the poet: the “Grave”. It is no longer the marker of the end of the journey, but it is a moving grave. At a semiotic level, “abroad and the New Peninsula” are again the realm of death where every traveller goes “bereaved”. This equivalence bed-grave appears also in *Ample make this Bed, A Coffin is a small Domain* (7). In symbolic terms, “the importance of the grave is that it is the temporal resting place between life and eternity” (8).

The tomb becomes the edge, the threshold between two realms (9). In a palimpsestic reading of this poem and *Because I could not stop for Death*, the speaking tomb, the moving tomb becomes the counterpart of the poet’s self: it is the self at the threshold of life and death. The tomb is the shadow of the poet’s self, the alter-ego that follows it everywhere. The poet is aware of this duality and wants to transcend it, to leave behind this haunting shadow. The “Peninsula” is symbolic: it is an extension of the land into the sea, which has the power of effacing the differences, of unifying the opposites: “I tried to drop it in the Crowd/ To lose it in the sea”. Both the sea and the “artificial Drowse” “steep the shapes away”, pointing at the fact that the “drowse” is not natural sleep, being death-like.

The verse “The Grave -- was finished” is paradoxical: how could the grave be finished, when it already represents an end ? However, the duality still remains. “The Spade” suggests a conflictual, violent moment which lasts

"in memory". "Memory" is thus the reservoir of all human dualities, and it is also a realm built at the boundary, at the limit of life and death, of present and past. Anton Dumitriu has a prophetic phrase in *Homo Universalis*: "By nature, any human being represents a moral duality out of which no one has escaped yet" (10).

This is why haste is needless: "Why should we hurry -- why indeed?/ When every way we fly/ We are molested equally/ By immortality." This poem (no.1646) appears as a logical demonstration with premises and a philosophical conclusion. The singular self -- traveller no longer isolated, is part of a collective identity, a chorus that repeats the same existential question. At the same time, it is a poem of negation: it is E. Dickinson's skepticism, and her refusal to accept the stable, conventional truth:

No respite from the inference  
That this which is begun,  
Though where its labors lie  
A bland uncertainty  
Besets the sight  
This mighty night.

Notes:

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I.

1 *Dictionary of Symbols* by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrandt.

2 Weisbuch, Robert, *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson*, The University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 55. Robert Weisbuch comments: "The sea is not merely death and it is not merely evil. It is an agent of pearly disintegration, it wishes to effect the persona: "a sea change/ Into something rich and strange".

3 Aiken, Conrad, "Emily Dickinson" in *Emily Dickinson. A Collection of Critical Essays*.

4 Whicher, G. T., *American Humor*.

5 *Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson*, New York, 1959.

6 Miller, Ruth, *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson*, p. 156.

7 ibidem (1).

8 ibidem (6).

9 Antohi, Sorin *Civitas Imaginalis*, p.110- 111.

10 Durand, Gilbert, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*.

11 Eliade, Mircea, *Images and Symbols*, chap. "The Construction of a Center", p. 63.

12 Tate, Allan, *Emily Dickinson*.

13 The same kind of relationship between the speaker in the poem and the sea-lover (that is the aim of the travel) appears also in another poem, "The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea" (no. 284). Another poem, "Fortitude incarnate" (no.1217) states the opposition sea-tomb, at the end: the sea "Suit me a venture/ Better than the tomb". The sea in connection with the sleep is to be found in "Water makes many Beds" (no. 1428).

II.

1 *Dictionary of Symbols*: "As a symbol, death is the perishing aspect of life. Death points at what disappeared in the inevitable evolution of things; and is in relation with the symbolism of the earth. But, at the same time, death is also the entrance in unknown worlds of heaven or hell; this shows that earth's ambivalence, like that of the earth, in a connection with the rituals of passage [ . . . ]. In the initiation, we pass through a moment of elation before the beginning of a new life".

2 Blackmur, R. P., *Emily Dickinson's Notation*.

3 *Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson*.

4 Aiken, Conrad, *Emily Dickinson*.

5 *Selected Poetry of Emily Dickinson*, edited with an Introduction by James Reeves, p. XxxxI.

6 *Emily Dickinson. Verses*, translation by Veronica Porumbacu, Preface by Dan Grigorescu, p.12.

7 The bed-grave is a place where "Judgement" is awaited; it is a remote place, away from any worldly noise, but able to contain a microcosm. It is a world well centered in itself, well circumscribed:

A Coffin is a small Domain,

Yet able to contain

A Citizen of Paradise

In its diminished Plane.

( no. 943 )

8 ibidem (1).

9 See William Jay Smith's poem "Dream": "One day in a dream as I lay at the edge of a cliff".

10 Dumitriu, Anton, *Homo Universalis*.