

## “Intimate immensity” in Emily Dickinson<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Although the Emily Dickinson myth as poet of seclusion has been widely known, she does not quite fit Pascal’s model of “just sitting quietly in one’s room.” The poet who professed to lead “a still volcano life” seems rather to confirm Bachelard’s theory about “intimate immensity.” Immensity, he says, is “the movement of motionless man.” It is something to be found within through the power of an “imagining consciousness.” When this happens, “we are elsewhere.” Joining Dickinson’s invitation – “Go traveling with us!” –, this study’s itinerary includes routes of “ecstasy” and “evanescence” in “The Capsule of the Wind / The Capsule of the Mind,” “A lava step at any time.” After such experience, one realizes that seclusion for Dickinson does not mean captivity but “dwelling in Possibility - / A fairer House than Prose” with “Chambers as the Cedars - / Impregnable of Eye,” to which there are no limits.

**Keywords:** Emily Dickinson, Gaston Bachelard, intimate immensity.

**Resumo:** Embora o mito de Emily Dickinson como poeta do isolamento seja amplamente conhecido, não se ajusta ao modelo de Pascal em “simplesmente sentar-se quieto no quarto”. A poeta que professa levar “uma vida de vulcão manso” parece antes confirmar a teoria de Bachelard sobre “imensidão íntima”. Imensidão, diz ele, é “o movimento do homem imóvel”. É algo a ser encontrado do lado de dentro através do poder de uma consciência imaginativa. Quando isso acontece, “estamos em outro lugar”. Juntando-se ao convite de Dickinson – “Saia a viajar conosco!” –, o itinerário desse estudo inclui rotas de “êxtase” e “evanescência” na “Cápsula do Vento / Cápsula da Mente”, “um passo de lava a qualquer hora”. Depois dessa experiência, entendemos que o isolamento para Dickinson não significa cativeiro mas “viver em Possibilidade - / Uma Casa mais justa que a Prosa” com “Aposentos de Cedros - / Impregnáveis de Olho” para o que não há limites.

**Palavras-chave:** Emily Dickinson, Gaston Bachelard, imensidão íntima.

Confined to the myth of a “self-caged bird,”<sup>2</sup> Emily Dickinson ironically contradicts the supposed limitations of her condition. Rather than simply bowing to the Victorian commandment that a true lady should not exhibit herself, she convincingly demonstrates that seclusion was in fact essential for the creation of her art. But would constraints of space have somehow crippled her flight? She herself responds when,

locking her room with an imaginary key, tells her niece: “Matty: here’s freedom.” This kind of freedom is what allowed her to reach what Gaston Bachelard calls “intimate immensity” (1994, pp. 183-210). “Immensity,” he says, is “within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone.” Not simply a state of passive expansion, immensity implies movement – “the movement of motionless man” – , generated by the power of an “imagining consciousness.” Thus, when we are alone in such a state of “pure being of pure imagination,” we are “elsewhere.” Inspired by Bachelard’s reflections, this study observes the trait of “intimate immensity” in Dickinson’s poetry, starting with her choice of poetry as the ideal genre to explore this potential, to then discuss the dynamics of immensity with “The Capsule of the Mind,” paradoxically closure and time-spacecraft.

The poet who affirms having been “shut in Prose - / As when a little Girl / ... in the Closet,” finds means to

dwell in Possibility -  
 A fairer House than Prose -  
 More numerous of Windows -  
 Superior - for Doors -  
  
 Of Chambers as the Cedars -  
 Impregnable of Eye -  
 And for an Everlasting Roof  
 The Gambrels of the Sky - (J657)

The first line suggests that living in poetry – “A fairer House than Prose” – is a way of not only “dwell[ing] in Possibility,” but “dueling impossibility,” the constraints of isolation imposed by the actual, physical house. Significantly what stand out in the house of poetry are openings – windows, doors, and chambers “impregnable of eye,” but above all its roof defying time and space.

It is worth noting that “Possibility” is for Dickinson especially “Night’s possibility,” be it, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest, because the “solar god” relaxes his constraints, or because, “having no Station in the day,” it is in the “visionary night-world of madness and imagination” that she meets her muse (1984, pp. 581-650). The immensity of night is thus the ideal space for the spider-artist to unwind “His Yarn of Pearl” – “Without a Light / Upon an Arc of White” (J1138) –, or functions as a huge black canvas ready to receive his “Continents of Light”:

The Spider holds a Silver Ball  
In unperceived Hands -  
And dancing softly to Himself  
His Yarn of Pearl - unwinds -

He plies from Nought to Nought -  
In insubstantial Trade -  
Supplants our Tapestries with His -  
In half the period -

An Hour to rear supreme  
His Continents of Light -  
Then dangle from the Housewife's Broom -  
His Boundaries - forgot - (J605)

Like the Giant Snail's "opalescent ribbon" in Elizabeth Bishop's poem, the "Yarn of Pearl" is the metaphorical equivalent for the poet's work – the substance extracted from the body to draw the poetic path. Bishop's poem enacts the pains of creation, relating it to the snail's difficulty to move – "I give the impression of mysterious ease," says the snail, "but it is only with the greatest effort of my will that I can rise above the smallest stones and sticks" (1983, p. 141). Dickinson however celebrates the boldness of each movement. This is shown especially in the ironical opposition between the fragility of the spider's craft connecting "Nought to Nought" with his power to "Supplant our Tapestries ... / In half the period." The resulting "Continents of Light" allegorize the extent of this feat – immensity here suggested both in the limitless web expansion, and in the immeasurable reach of light. Yet implied, the sense of immensity is also present in the daring act of ignoring limits, of "[dangling] from the Housewife's Broom - / His Boundaries - forgot."

Essentially the art of imagination, poetry is in Dickinson constantly associated with the brain – "The Capsule of the Wind / The Capsule of the Mind" (J998). As with the "house" of poetry, the brain is large enough to absorb the world:

The Brain - is wider than the Sky -  
For - put them side by side -  
The one the other will contain  
With ease - and You - beside -

The Brain is deeper than the sea -  
For - hold them - Blue to Blue -  
The one the other will absorb -  
As Sponges - Buckets - do - (J632)

"[Running] evenly - and true" in its "Groove," the brain (as imagination in poetry) is always on the verge of escaping control, flooding everything:

let a Splinter swerve -  
'Twere easier for You -

To put a Current back -  
When Floods have slit the Hills -  
And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves -  
And trodden out the Mills - (J556)

The brain's immensity, when not estimated in earthly measures, is evaluated by the extension of its imaterial power to haunt:

One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -  
One need not be a House -  
The Brain has Corridors - surpassing  
Material Place -

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting  
External Ghost  
Than its interior Confronting -  
That Cooler Host. (J670)

Defying closure, the mind becomes at times the theater for the secret dance:

I cannot dance upon my Toes -  
No Man instructed me -  
But oftentimes among my mind,  
A Glee possesseth me,

That had I Ballet Knowledge -  
Would put itself abroad  
In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe -  
Or lay a Prima, mad. (J326)

Dickinson's ballet of words actually "[puts] itself abroad" - on the page - despite her insistence on privacy. In this sense, the extension of her dance can be evaluated not only within the realm of this incredible theatre of the mind - "full as Opera" - but "abroad" considering her uncountable audiences (which she of course did not hope for).

If not the mind, it is the "soul" that has its "moments of Escape": "When bursting all the doors - / She dances like a Bomb, abroad, / And swings upon the hours..." (J512). As Adrienne Rich points out, the

word "Bomb" is "dropped, almost carelessly, as a correlative for the soul's active, liberated states" (1993, pp. 177-195), revealing under an apparent euphoria the implications of a suicidal act. In this poem and in "My life had stood - a Loaded Gun," Dickinson explores the dramatic tension between the power of the creative mind, sometimes edging, as Rich says, "states of psychic extremity," and barriers of repression. In both poems, there is consciousness of the terrible reach of this "gun" which "swings upon the hours" "Without - the power to die."

The conflict between Dickinson's "intimate immensity" and a world of infinite limitations is also revealed in subtler references. The well-known line about the "Clock" that "stopped" (J287), for example, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes, suggests a "tantalizing strategy to overcome the infirmity of human limitation." She explains that "the ratio of any number to zero is also infinite; thus infinity and zero are *equally distant* from the world of finite objects, measurable time, and bounded distances" (1988, p. 194). Another reference is Dickinson's assertion that her "Business is Circumference." In the universe of speculations about the issue, Charles Anderson is quite convincing when he explains that Dickinson's center is "the inquiring mind whose business is circumference, intent upon exploring the whole infinity of the universe that lies before her."<sup>3</sup>

In innumerable poems, this exploration consists of physical displacement, as in "Away from Home are some and I" (J821) which seems not only to dramatize the poet's experience as an "Emigrant" in "a Metropolis of Homes" - possibly the universe of her poetry - but to welcome the reader's displacement. More explicitly in another poem, Dickinson invites the reader to join her trips:

"Go traveling with us!"  
Her travels daily be  
By routes of ecstasy  
To Evening's Sea - (J1513)

And detailing her expeditions, she writes:

I cross till I am weary  
A Mountain - in my mind -  
More Mountains - then a Sea -  
More Seas - And then  
A Desert - find -

And My Horizon blocks  
With steady - drifting - Grains

Of un conjectured quantity -  
As Asiatic Rains -

Nor this - defeat my Pace - (J550)

Nor does "Mountain," "Nor Sea - / Who's Baltic - / Who's Cordillera?" (J1029) – the personification of nature suggesting not merely a desire to domesticate physical obstacles but defying them in a position of equals.

Bachelard attributes this vision of immensity to the "philosophical category of daydream." Questioning the role of memory and imagination in this process, he considers:

Far from the immensities of sea and land, merely through memory, we can recapture, by means of meditation, the resonances of this contemplation of grandeur. But is this really memory? Isn't imagination alone able to enlarge indefinitely the images of immensity? In point of fact, day-dreaming, from the very first second, is an entirely constituted state. We do not see it start, and yet it always starts the same way, that is, it flees the object nearby and right away it is far off, elsewhere, in the space of *elsewhere* (pp. 183-184).

A poem that illustrates this sudden escape begins with an apparent domestic scene – "I started Early - Took my Dog - / And visited the Sea" – and, in the next lines, plunges into the fantasy of the visit:

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 - (J520)

Curiously domestic images – the Dog, the simple Shoe, the Apron – interweave with the fantastic sea world which itself resembles the architecture of a house, with “Basement,” “Upper Floor.” The play of perspective likewise oscillates between these two kinds of universe. On the one hand, there is the human figure of the poet, on the other, her variants: “a Mouse - / Aground - upon the Sands”; “a Dew / Upon a Dandelion’s Sleeve.” The minimization dramatizing the poet’s supposed fragility reflects the male view, represented by the “Frigates” and the “Tide / Sea” personified as male. However, more determined here than the cunning mouse “in seraphic Cupboards,” the poet affirms: “But no Man moved Me.” Instead, it is the Sea that ultimately withdraws in reverence.

Reaching immensity not always requires that the poet leaves home. As the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade says, sometimes it is the “ship” that comes to the “living-room,” and “how it [turns]!” (1992, p. 156). For this kind of adventure, says Dickinson, “There is no Frigate like a Book / To take us Lands away / Nor any Coursers like a Page / Of prancing Poetry” (J1263) – poetry as both transport and performance of bold steps. The two meanings coalesce also in Dickinson’s experience with Vesuvius at home. Climbing the lava, contemplating the crater reveal the daring act of exploration, split between the risk of death and the pleasure of feat.

Feat is in fact the word that summarizes the phenomenon of “immensity” in Emily Dickinson. “All things swept sole away / This - is immensity,” she once wrote as if predicting the future of her own poetry. Perhaps this is why, as Rich says, wherever we try to “take hold of her, she proliferates.”

## Notes

1. This essay was originally presented in “The Fourth EDIS International Conference: ‘Zero at the Bone: New Climates for Dickinson Study’” (Trondheim, Norway, 2001).
2. “Self-caged birds” was an expression that Elizabeth Bishop had in mind for a poem on Dickinson and Hopkins, which unfortunately was never finished (Millier, 1993).

3. Charles Anderson, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*. Quoted in Wolff, 1988, p. 195.

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