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Brother Bird

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Presence and Place in Dickinson

In Anderson’s article, “Presence and Place in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry,” he argues that the main push behind Emily Dickinson’s writing came from the potent contrast between “transcendent life and circumstantial, daily existence—with new names and new locations in human experience” (206). Dickinson constantly sought solitude, not because she wanted peace and quiet from the people around her, but because only in solitude could she feel “brimful,” her version of saying ‘creative’ and ‘full of potential’ (206).

In a poem written to her brother Austin, Dickinson attempts to lure him away from Boston and back to Amherst. She is noted as do so in a “devious” and “deliberate” way (207). This is an early poem of hers which strongly resonates within a reader of Dickinson’s poetry because she utilizes *place* in convincing her brother to come away from a place full of “darkness” and “faded forests” to “a little forest, / Whose leaf is ever green,” ending with “Prithee, my brother, / Into *my* garden come!” (206-207). Additionally, this poem has hymn-like qualities which, while different from her usual heaven vs. earth poetry, still retain religious undertones without the apocalyptic ones.

Dickinson is then compared to the “pious” Anne Bradtreet (209). While Bradstreet’s religious poetry is very straightforward, Dickinson’s is more subtle. Additionally, “Dickinson has divided experience just as decisively as did Bradstreet […] into the mutable and the immutable, the inessential and the deeply significant” (209). Anderson argues that “the critical difference is presence. Dickinson’s unfaded forest may be ‘little,’ her garden merely ‘brighter’ rather than full of infinite day, but her landscape of promise is *here*, as close as a bee is when we can hear the hum” (209). The proximity, Anderson notes, is the presence so evident in Dickinson’s writing.

Another important aspect of Dickinson’s use of presence is that the power of her poems derive “in large measure from their ability to capture a sense of the instant, to insist on the subject’s full presence even at moments when such presence is scarcely bearable” (218). This is significant because the majority of Dickinson’s poetry had a sense of the macabre to it. It is what she is known for throughout the world. She had the courage to write about difficult subjects like death in a way that spoke the very soul of a person, even when it was painful for them to hear.

Finally, Anderson argues that Dickinson’s use of presence is ultimately a conduit for her to screw up time: “Time is left in wreckage; the impact of dawn is shattering. Presence, in its very unmediated intensity, can be destructive” (219). So while presence is used so often in Dickinson’s poetry, it is something she uses in a destructive way, a way that doesn’t adhere to common practice or accepted ministrations.

Anderson, Douglas. "Presence and Place in Emily Dickinson's Poetry." *The New England Quarterly* 57.2 (Jun., 1984): 205-24. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Dec. 2013.