Paula Bennett: On 258 ("There's a certain Slant of light")

With its exquisite use of sound, its disjunctive grammar, and mixed levels of diction, 'There's a certain Slant of light' is a formidable performance. But the reason for the poem's extraordinary popularity (it is among Dickinson's most consistently reprinted and explicated works) does not lie in technique alone. It also lies in our familiarity with the experience Dickinson describes. Not only has the poet captured the oddness of winter light (its thin, estranging quality), but she has also caught the depressed or sorrowful state of mind which this light biochemically induces. Despite the poet's use of terms like 'Seal' and 'imperial, affliction,' that key into her private mythology of self--her self-designated role as 'Queen of Calvary'--'There's a certain Slant of light' engages its readers directly.

Yet at the same time, 'There's a certain Slant of light' is, obviously, a highly subjective poem, dealing with an intensely personal state of mind. In it, the speaker's mood takes over from the light, the presumptive focus of the text, and is generalized to the entire landscape. The world becomes a partner in the poet's depression. The depression becomes the lens through which the world is seen--and, even more important, through which its 'meanings' (whatever they might be) are understood.

When Dickinson uses nature imagery in this way, she is appropriating it, as Joanne Feit Diehl says, for the aggrandizement of the mind. In such poems, the natural phenomenon 'becomes the self as the division between identity and scene dissolves.' To that extent, 'There's a certain Slant of light' may be said to be solipsistic. That is, unlike the nature poems discussed in the preceding chapter, it is explicitly a projection of the poet's inner life, a massive transference to the landscape of her inner state of being. Dickinson reveals the nature of this state through her comparisons, but its meaning is one she refuses to disclose. For all its apparent familiarity, what happens in this poem is, finally, as fragmented and inconclusive (as unknowable) as the light to which Dickinson refers--or the grammar she uses.

The evasiveness of 'There's a certain Slant of light'--its multiple ambiguities and its refusal to reach a firm conclusion--is typical of Dickinson's psychological poems and the source of much of their difficulty (as well as their fascination). Reading Dickinson's poetry, Adrienne Rich declares, one gets the sense 'of a mind engaged in a lifetime's musing on essential problems of language, identity, separation, relationship, the integrity of the self; a mind capable of describing psychological states more accurately than any poet except Shakespeare.' No poet seems closer to her readers as a result. It is as if Dickinson laid out her most private thoughts and feelings before us.

But unlike the accessibility of Dickinson's nature poetry, which is supported by the external world to which the poems refer, the accessibility of Dickinson's psychological poetry is in many ways deceiving. Not only is the relationship between the voice which speaks these poems and Dickinson herself problematic, but so, as a rule, is the relationship between the poetry's manifest content and the meaning which this content presumably encodes. Thus, on the most basic level, it is unclear whether Dickinson addresses her own feelings in 'There's a certain Slant of light,' or those she believes are people's in general, and we may query whether the poem is about light or about the depression which the light evokes. Finally, we
may ask what 'meaning' this light (or this depression) has, especially given its status as an 'imperial affliction/Sent us,' we are told, 'of the Air.' This chapter will discuss the difficulties involved in reading Dickinson's psychological poems and the ramifications these difficulties have for our understanding of the relationship between the poet's life and her work. Like other nineteenth-century women poets, Dickinson used her poetry to inscribe her 'heart's record,' but the ambiguities of her technique and the complexity and richness of her inscription make the interpretation of this record a subject of intense (and at times, perhaps, futile) critical debate.


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