

Jane Donahue Eberwein: On 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death")

Dickinson's most famous poem spoken from beyond the grave confronts precisely this problem: the assertiveness of the circuit world ["the world of matter and time and intellectual awareness . . . busyness is the circuit world's dominant characteristic, industry its major value"] against the claims of complementary vision . . . The representative of the verse here is a decidedly imaginary person—not Emily Dickinson's self-projection (which would be of one straining for escape beyond circumference and intensely alert to all details of transition) but a woman contented within the routine of circuit busyness. Her opening words echo some of Dickinson's own habitual usages but present a contradictory value system adapted to worldly achievements. This lady has been industrious—too busy to stop her work, whatever it may have been. Dickinson, too, proclaimed herself too busy in her self-descriptive July 1862 letter to Higginson and in a letter to Mrs. Holland that Johnson and Ward place conjecturally at the same time on the basis of obvious verbal echoes (L 268; 269). To Higginson she wrote: "Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that? My Business is Circumference?." To Mrs. Holland, "Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me too! I can't stop for that! My business is to love." Her businesses, then, differed from the routine employments of the circuit citizens who might be mocking her. What the poet could not stop for was circuit judgments. Her businesses, as she reported them that intensely productive summer, were love, song, and circumference—all of them leading her outside the circuit. Circumference, from the perspective of the circuit world, was death and the cessation of industry, although there might be a different life beyond it. The speaker of this poem, however, is too busy with ordinary duties to stop for Death, who naturally stops her instead. She is less like Emily Dickinson than like that whirlwind of domestic industriousness, Lavinia, whom her sister once characterized as a "standard for superhuman effort erroneously applied" (L 254).

Caught up in the circuit world of busyness, the speaker mistakes Death for a human suitor; her imagination suggests no more awesome possibility. Two persons, in fact, have come for her, Death and Immortality, though her limited perception leads her to ignore the higher-ranking chaperon. The relationship between the two figures—analogue to that between circumference and awe (P 1620)—attracts none of her notice. In fact, she pays little attention even to her principal escort, being occupied instead with peering out the carriage window at the familiar circuit world. She sees the schoolchildren playing in their circumferential ring, little realizing that she has now herself become that playfellow who will go in and close the door—thus breaking the circle (P 1098). And she sees the "Gazing Grain" indicative of the late-summer crop Death is already reaping even as she herself gazes back into the circuit, indicative also of some farmer's midlife industriousness—the sort another circuit-minded speaker pitied when death deprived him of harvest (P 529). Rather than attending to mysteries, this speaker focuses only on the familiar until a novel perspective on the sunset jolts her into awareness of her own transitional state. Rather than making friends with Immortality, she concentrates on mortality.

The consequence of her distorted values is that the speaker winds up with eternity as an inadequate substitute for either: the endless static stretch of time that young Emily had

repudiated in an 1846 letter to Abiah Root (the same letter in which she confessed her inability to imagine her own death). "Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you," she asked then, "I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity. To think that we must forever live and never cease to be. It seems as if Death which all so dread because it launches us upon an unknown world would be a relief to so endless a state of existence" (L 10). Indeed, Death does not launch the persona of this poem into another world (Immortality would have to be enlisted for that, rather than sitting ignored in the back seat of the carriage in which she and Death will eventually ride off together after abandoning the speaker). Instead Death leaves his date buried within the margin of the circuit, in a "House" that she can maintain like one of those "Alabaster Chambers" (P 216) in which numb corpses lie but which are designed and built of elegant materials still gratifying to the circuit-locked mentality. A quester for circumference would greet Death more enthusiastically, and would both value and cultivate Death's ties to Immortality. For such a quester, the destination of the journey might prove more wondrous.

From *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*. Copyright © 1985 by The University of Massachusetts Press.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Emily Dickinson [2]

Author:

Jane Donahue Eberwein [3]

Poem:

712 (Because I could not stop for Death) [4]

Source URL: <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/jane-donahue-eberwein-712-because-i-could-not-stop-death>

Links

[1] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/emily-dickinson>

[3] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/jane-donahue-eberwein>

[4] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/712-because-i-could-not-stop-death>