

The Hourglass of Consciousness: On Dickinson's Stratified View of Time

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson's poetry presents a profound and complex meditation on the nature of time, which remains an underexplored facet of her work. Moving beyond the conventional binary of linear and cyclical time, this essay argues that Dickinson develops a stratified view of time. Through close readings of key poems, including "Because I could not stop for Death," "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," and "Pain-has an Element of Blank," this study demonstrates how Dickinson's poetic language deconstructs objective temporality to foreground the constitutive role of consciousness. Dickinson progresses from acknowledging time's relativity to examining its granular, subjective perception, often metaphorized as falling grains of sand in an hourglass, thus revealing an attempt to use poetic language to arrest these fleeting moments of awareness and asserting existence against oblivion and forging a momentary sense of eternity within the finite self. This analysis not only deepens the understanding of Dickinson's poetics but also facilitates a richer interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, philosophy, and phenomenology on the problem of time.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, time, consciousness, poetics, phenomenology, metaphor, eternity, subjectivity

1. A Brief Overview of Temporal Thought in Eastern and Western Thought

The concept of time has perpetually captivated philosophers, scientists, and writers across Eastern and Western traditions. The subjectivity, objectivity, and relativity of time render it a perplexing and profound subject of inquiry—"a great secret," and one of the most cherished themes for thinkers. In Western philosophy, Heraclitus was the first to note and affirm the

perpetual flux of all things within time, asserting that “one cannot step twice into the same river”, thereby establishing the ontological foundation of time and change in Western thought (Kahn, 1979, p.53). In daily life, people habitually accept a linear concept of time—a unidirectional progression from past through present to future. However, Aristotle posited that time is the number of change between before and after, and it is human consciousness of time that perceives the existence of the self and the movement and change of all things, thus giving rise to the concept of time: “.....for when the state of our minds does not change at all, or we have not noticed its changing, we do not think that time has elapsed,...”(Aristotle, 1969, p.218b21-219a). That is, motion is the objective basis of time, and consciousness is the condition for its manifestation.

Augustine further argued that time itself is “felt and measured by soul” (Augustine, 1998, Chapt. XI). Discussions of time in physics and natural science are even more provocative, generally suggesting time is merely a marker for positioning, not an entity. Stephen Hawking, proposing “imaginary time” developed from relativity theory, equated the time dimension mathematically with spatial dimensions, eliminating the uniqueness of the traditional time concept (Hawking, 1998, Chapt.10). He claimed that for ordinary people, time is a psychological phenomenon, perceiving the direction of all motion—passing. This view seems to echo the Buddhist perspective on time: “temporality becomes a mere illusion.” (Kalupahana, 1974, p.182)

Ancient Chinese philosophers’ contemplations on time appear to follow a similar trajectory, with discussions from various dimensions pointing towards time’s subjectivity, revealing a cross-cultural commonality in temporal conceptions. Guanzi proposed a theory of

spatiotemporal isomorphism, metaphorically describing “Zhou” (time) as a pouch enclosing heaven and earth: “Zhouhe contains heaven and earth... enveloping and connecting them into one bundle.” (Guan, 2015, p.64) Confucius lamented by the river: “Look at how it flows on like this, never stopping day or night!”, using the river to metaphorize time’s unidirectional flow (Confucius, 2008, p.92). Zhuangzi stated: “Human life between heaven and earth is like a white colt glimpsed through a crack in the wall—suddenly, and that is all.” Using the image of the “white colt glimpsed through a crack,” he illustrates the brevity of life-time, revealing time’s subjective perception (Wang, 2009, p.360)

From a poetic standpoint, the study of the theme of time involves not merely analyzing technique or content, but decoding humanity’s ultimate effort to use language to resist nothingness and reconstruct the meaning of existence through aesthetics. Shakespeare questioned how substance could resist time, concluding that only poetry and art could eternalize beauty—“My love in my verse shall ever live young.” (Burrow, 2002, p.419) T.S. Eliot, in his poetry, subverted the linear view of time—past and future converge in the present: “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past.” (Moses, 2005, p.139) He believed the poet must reconstruct traditional temporal order, “composes a simultaneous order”, reaching a still point beyond time through faith or artistic creation (Moses, 2005, p.133). This raises a question: how can poetic language transcend the linear and cyclical time experienced in daily life, even surpass conscious time, to explore the tension between individual existence and eternity? On this point, the legendary 19th-century American poet Emily Dickinson stands as a master of temporal thought. Her poetic reflections on time are unique, yet scholarly discussion of her temporal views seems

limited. Past scholarship has largely focused on themes of death, religious symbolism, and gender identity in Dickinson's poetry. Although a few studies mentioned her sensitivity to and writing about time, they often remained within the binary opposition of "linear vs. cyclical," lacking in-depth analysis of how she constructs a "stratified view of time" in her verse.

This essay employs the theoretical framework of a "stratified view of time" to reveal how Dickinson, in her poetry, transcends traditional temporal concepts, using language and metaphors to construct a temporal view ranging from linearity and cyclicity to subjectivity, and further to the consciousness-oriented view of time. This research aims to expand the interpretative dimensions of Dickinson's poetics and foster interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, philosophy, and phenomenology.

2. Dickinson's Transcendence of Linearity, Cyclicity, and Relativity in Time

Emily Dickinson came from a privileged background, free from worldly worries. She chose to retreat from marriage and society, living a reclusive life. This unique lifestyle allowed her to escape most mundane trivialities. Consequently, her poetry serves as evidence of humanity's innate tendency to reflect on life's dilemmas through linguistic art while simultaneously transcending various boundaries, even eternity. In her, one sees that the exploration and imagination of individual existence are a kind of genetic imprint, a naturally surging instinct within the human body—curiosity and profound awe towards the unknowable.

As a poet, Dickinson processed and contemplated the concept of time through her masterful use of metaphor. Her broad intellectual vision and high intellect endowed her with the ability to examine time from different dimensions and strata. On the surface, her poetry often seems to adhere to common-sense notions of time, namely the coexistence of linearity

and cyclicity, and the eternal change based thereon. For instance, in “Because I could not stop for Death,” a lifetime is compressed into a “carriage day trip”: School (childhood) → Fields of Gazing Grain (adulthood) → Setting Sun (old age) → Grave (death). Linearity and cyclicity coexist, rendered through spatial scenes.

In this poem, time is not only personified but also imbued with unidirectionality and uncontrollability through various scene descriptions.

At the poem’s beginning, Death is personified as a gentleman stopping his carriage for the poet. The poet’s emphasis on “could not stop” hints at time’s linearity. “Because I could not stop for Death – /He kindly stopped for me – ”.

However, after passing through the three scenes— “School,” “Fields of Gazing Grain,” and “Setting Sun” (metaphors for life’s three stages: childhood, adulthood, and old age)—the poet points towards time’s relativity: “Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and ye’/Feels shorter than the Day”. Through this contrast(centuries/day), the poet expresses a profound understanding of time’s relativity: in the face of eternity, the length of time becomes irrelevant. (Emily, 1960, p.350)

In reality, this subjective psychological perception of time’s unidirectionality and relativity was not Dickison’s primary focus. The subjectivity of time constituted her second level of concern. She perceived that the self-awareness of the subject drives the pursuit of existential security. The incessant movement of surrounding things can generate fear and anxiety, thus reinforcing the use of consciousness fragments to perceive and control this uncontrollable motion. In her 1862 poem “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” she fragments linear time with sensory shards from the moment of death (sound of flies, mourners), using

intertwined flashbacks and flash-forwards to highlight the fragmented nature of time as perceived by the subject:

Fragment 1: “And Mourners to and fro / Kept treading—treading —”

Fragment 2: “And when they all were seated, / A Service, like a Drum— / Kept beating -- beating—”

Fragment 3: “And then I heard them lift a Box / And creak across my Soul”

At the poem’s conclusion, she summarizes: “And Being, but an Ear.” (Emily, 1960, p.129) The passage of time is perceived as auditory fragments, not a linear outpouring. Even at life’s final moment, the subject asserts a sense of control over time through perceiving and becoming conscious of surrounding changes. Anderson argues that Dickinson’s poetry views time as a “trap”, she compresses linear time into an instant through implosive imagery (like a stopped clock, a sealed coffin), thereby questioning the “continuous-forward” mode of 19th-century progress narratives (Anderson, 1959, p.402). In this poem, Dickinson deconstructs the traditional linear concept of time using several fragmented “temporal consciousnesses,” further emphasizing subjectivity, rightly earning her title as a “pioneer of Modernism.”

The cyclical concept of time stems from the subject’s imagination and hope for eternal life continuation, triggered by the regular motion of their resident planet. Both linear and cyclical time are based on the subject’s psychological perception of the incessant change of all things, but the latter adds a dimension of imagination and the courage to affirm one’s own existence. As in the poem “I could not prove the Years had feet,”, time is personified, existing in constant dynamic process, seemingly a unidirectional flow:

I could not prove the Years had feet—

Yet confident they run

Am I, from symptoms that are past

And Series that are done— (Emily, 1960, p.274)

Although time flows unidirectionally, the end of each stage heralds the beginning of the next, forming a cycle. This cyclicity reflects not only time's dynamism but also humanity's subjective experience of time and evolving self-awareness.

I find my feet have further Goals—

I smile upon the Aims

That felt so ample—Yesterday—

Today's---have vaster claims— (Emily, 1960, p.274)

Dickinson does not seem to fully endorse the cyclical concept of time. She painfully yet clearly realizes that each individual's perception of time determines their concept of it, and once consciousness perishes, the eternity and immortality hoped for through time relativity may also vanish. However, as a poetess with intense self-awareness, the affirmation of self-existence and consciousness drives her to find a way to create a safe zone for "consciousness of consciousness," escaping the endless torment of "absence of uncertainty". For instance, in the following poem written in 1863, Dickinson juxtaposes individual existence with past/future and eternity/immortality, seeking to transcend time's cruel linearity and break free from its cage-like cycle, achieving a moment of intellectual freedom: "Behind Me - dips Eternity - / Before Me - Immortality - / Myself - the Term between - " (Emily, 1960, p.353)

The metaphor "Term" implies the self's existence has a beginning and end, thus acknowledging the finitude of individual existence; "dips" suggests the individual

consciousness involuntarily and frequently becomes aware (use of present tense) of time's linearity and passage. Because the past is recognized as unchangeable, it is categorized by consciousness as Eternity; the future becomes Immortality due to the subject's eventual demise. This poem seems to praise the daunting annihilation of the individual—time-bound individual existence placed alongside Eternity and Immortality—while simultaneously hinting that consciousness, dependent on the body, forges Eternity, ultimately achieving Immortality. Though brief, the network of connotations ignited by the metaphors can be described as “vast.” For every individual who values self-existence and consciousness, the inevitable end is disappearance into the relentless flow of time — a thought that cannot but evoke trepidation. However, in this poem, Dickinson issues a declaration: While eternity and time may be constructs of consciousness and imagination, it is precisely human consciousness and its capacity for language that allow concepts such as time and timelessness to be conceived and fully comprehended. Johnson emphasizes that Dickinson splits “Eternity” into “Nows,” thereby cancelling the cumulative effect of linear time. Thus, each short poem is a “signifiers of the absence of time” (Smith, 2013, pp.260). When the poet questions the “term” of her own existence, and in each “Now”, when the reader reads the poem, a space of “stasis” is imposed on time, with an evident result: both poet and reader enter, in that instant, something akin to the “nunc stans” (abiding now) proclaimed by Augustine—a timeless “ever-present now” without past or future, akin to the “no time” before God's creation (Augustine, 1998, Chapt. XI).

Through the analysis of these poems, it becomes evident that the view of time expressed in Dickinson's poetry tends to transcend linearity and cyclicity to achieve a grasp of relativity.

However, she does not stop at a simplistic lament of temporal relativity; instead, she adds the weight of human consciousness, carving out an eternal territory for herself and for human intellect.

3. Dickinson's "Concrete" Practice and "Quasi-Abstract" Imagination of Time

In his three-volume work *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur, by integrating phenomenology, hermeneutics, and narrative theory, constructed an original philosophical system concerning the relationship between temporality and narrativity. Two views of time are irreconcilable—physical time ignores subjective experience, and psychological time lacks an objective reference. Ricoeur states: "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative;" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.3). Narrative is not merely a tool for expressing time but a practice for reshaping temporal experience.

Narrativity in poetry is characterized as "gappiness", "depends crucially on segmentation, on spacing, in its production of meaning." (McHale, 2009, p.14). It is "gappiness" that offers Dickinson's poetry a unique reshaping of temporal experience. She not only affirms that human consciousness shapes our view of time but describes the "concrete" experience and "quasi-abstract" experience of temporal consciousness in "gappiness". This allows time—a "transcendental schema", difficult to define uniformly, invisible and intangible—to be perceived concretely and experienced in the imagination. In the following poem, the "conscious now" is equated with time, flowing granularly like each grain of sand in an hourglass. Each moment of consciousness (a "term") goes unnoticed before falling, is attended to as it falls, and is forgotten after falling. The terror of this moment lies in this: if consciousness equates to existence, then existence could be deemed indestructible, given the countless

conscious “nows” we experience in reality. But consciousness is essentially like grains of sand in a funnel, passing ghostly, grain by grain, moment by moment, and with them, our existence is gradually carried away.

We do not know the time we lose—

The awful moment is

And takes its fundamental place

Among the certainties—

A firm appearance still inflates

The card—the chance—the friend —

The spectre of solidities

Whose substances are sand --(Emily, 1960, p.499)

It is clear that after fully realizing the subjectivity of time, Dickinson did not abandon her continued exploration of the concept. She focused on and magnified each present moment of (temporal) consciousness through poetic technique, hoping to affirm her existence through surrounding people and things in each conscious instant, while revering the “fall and demise” of the conscious grain. Perhaps she hoped even more that the grains of consciousness could be transformed by poetic language into pearls or diamonds—though ultimately swept into the torrent of time, each one dazzling and brilliant—using language to prove that consciousness and existence were once present, and using language to declare that human existence (even if fleeting) is worthy of being remembered as glorious.

If exploring the qualities of time only through perceptible means, Dickinson seems unsatisfied, as this mode might fail to illuminate an intermediate zone—the tension between

consciousness's desire to control time and time's uncontrollability. She ingeniously adopted a "quasi-abstract" metaphorical strategy, using comprehensible yet non-concrete vehicles to metaphorize time's impact on consciousness. In the following poem, "Pain—has an Element of Blank," temporal consciousness is rendered "quasi-abstractly" as the blank within pain. Through the image of "Pain Blank," it explores the void in temporal perception:

Pain -- has an Element of Blank—

It cannot recollect

When it began, or if there were

A time when it was not — (Emily, 1960, pp.323-324)

Before the intense emotional impact (pain) on human feeling, the passage of time seems non-existent—no beginning, no future, no evidence of ever having been present. Within this blank void of temporal consciousness, the infinite is contained, so even if memory is unclear, the subject can still perceive the meaning of their own existence.

It has no Future — but itself —

Its Infinite realms contain

Its Past — as a great Land —

Remembered, if at all — (Emily, 1960, pp.323-324)

Although pain fragments consciousness, the poem suggests the existence of a higher or independent self, capable of comparing past and present selves. This suggests that consciousness retains a certain transcendence even within pain, surpassing the perceived passage of time, and even the imperceptible time.

In summary, Dickinson's analysis of time's nature starts from its transience and cyclicity. Upon recognizing its relativity, she emphasizes that human consciousness can lead oneself towards a higher existence, transcending time's flow and cycle, entering the realm of the infinite and eternal. Consciousness, like grains of sand, constantly emerges and vanishes, potentially retreating into a form of "blankness" in the process. It is through each conscious "present" that humanity apprehends the presence of a "higher self", thereby countering the sense of nothingness brought by the subjectively perceived passage of time. The interpretative hierarchy of the concept and meaning of time in Dickinson's poetry can be described as follows: Linearity and Cyclicity in Time→Relativity in Time→Temporal Subjectivity (instant moments and blankness of consciousness).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Emily Dickinson's poetry offers a radical and sophisticated philosophical inquiry into the nature of time, moving beyond the conventional frameworks of linear progression and cyclicity that dominated 19th-century thought. Through her masterful use of metaphor and compressed, evocative language, she constructs a stratified view of time that progressively deepens from an acknowledgment of time's external linearity, cyclicity, and relativity to a profound investigation of its internal, conscious constitution.

This analysis has demonstrated that Dickinson's primary innovation lies in her relentless focus on consciousness as the very medium of time. She dismantles the objective, external "trap" of time by compressing it into subjective, perceptual fragments—the beating drum of a funeral, the fleeting scenes of a carriage ride, the grain of sand and the blank element of pain. In doing so, she reveals time not as a river that carries us, but as an experience generated

and measured by the perceiving self. The central metaphor of the hourglass, with its granular, falling moments of awareness, perfectly encapsulates her view: each conscious “now” is a discrete grain of existence, both terrifyingly ephemeral and potently real.

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