

ON EMILY DICKINSON'S "A LITTLE MADNESS IN THE SPRING"

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XXXVIII. "A LITTLE madness in the Spring" [1]

A LITTLE madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King,
But God be with the Clown
Who ponders this tremendous scene –
This whole experiment of green,
As if it were his own!

A ARTE ALEGRE
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It seems that often when an author from New England, or from another cold place, writes about the spring, they usually do not mean the season alone. More often when we read "spring" we understand the author is referring to what has come before – a long and hard winter – in a silent contrast that makes the spring seem even more impressive and joyful. This difference becomes more apparent when we read poems about the winter: does a reader think about the autumn when reading a poem about the snow in Vermont? Does a reader think about the spring when reading memoirs about summers on Cape Cod? The spring in literature, nevertheless, looks out at us with the winter as its frame or backdrop. Discussions of the spring in this context always

seem to capture the sudden impulse toward life as an ungainly rushing forward from the thaw. It is against this introduction that we grasp the madness to be found in Dickinson's spring.

Beyond the initial shock of madness, the first two lines can be read as a chiasmus: the spring that is wholesome, and the king who is a little mad. This idea plays well with how we traditionally imagine monarchs and seasons. The wholesomeness suggests the flurry of change that comes with the spring – that is, the new plants and flowers that grow, and the animals that come to life with the warming temperatures. This disruption to a routine of cold and stillness may inspire all walks of life to do things that seem odd compared to what those creatures normally do or should do. The poem pulls in a character in the second line, the king, who we imagine should rule with precision and courtliness. The seasonal upheaval to a consistent state of things affects almost everything in the poem, even the king. For this reason, a few poorly chosen actions and proclamations, in the name of spring, can be forgiven. The king responds to nature in kind.

In the context of the unfolding of the spring, the poem presents two figures: the king and the clown. This dichotomy assumes a tragic hierarchy of the haves and have-nots, or the dignified and undignified. Both enjoy the spring: one by making a fool of himself (by the one who normally is not foolish) and the other by contemplation (by the one who normally is simple).

The transition in the poem, between the king and the clown, is made immediately apparent when Dickinson says whose side God is on. The poem does not look theological at the start; but we soon find that the poem is a view of nature that fits into a larger mold that is of the world and God. Thus God, it follows, does not save the king from his madness. Madness plays out as a natural reaction and as weakness. It seems that we cannot be saved from weakness, but maybe it can be avoided. This is where the character of the clown becomes crucial in order to draw a conclusion out of the king-clown dichotomy.

The gravity of Dickinson's theological remark on God taking sides invites us to ask: who is this clown? First and

foremost, it is a type of person and we have to come to terms with it: one is a clown because that is our profession; one is a clown because that is how others see us; one is a clown because that is how we see ourselves. Part of the theology in all of this seems to rest on the humility it takes to admit one or more of these statements to be true. Let us highlight, nevertheless, that there is a bright side to the clown-type argument; the favorable aspect is the child-like attitude that comes along with being a clown – that is, the state that comes from being a delight for children and others, and the state that comes from continually allowing oneself to be surprised by art and nature in the way that a child may be surprised by a balloon as it is shaped into a dachshund.

The clown in the poem looks out on the “scene,” on spring and on life, on “this whole experiment of green.” We argue that the experience of awe before a color is what is truly wholesome, as opposed to the madness of the king. The poem imagines God looking out on the experiment of life in the same way that the clown looks out on the spring landscape. They are similar in this gaze, if only because they feel similar sentiments. The clown looks out and imagines the world *as if* it were his. God looks out and sees creation. The simplicity of the clown’s experience reveals humility in the sense that he is not thinking that everything is *for* him, but he shows an appreciation for what is before him and his relation to it. This is also apparent in an early draft, where Dickinson’s final two lines are changed:

This sudden legacy of Green
as if it were his own – [2]

The exchange of the word “experiment” for “legacy” imagines the world and the spring as a present; it is something to be enjoyed and appreciated and is essentially borrowed from the life and work of someone else. By also removing the exclamation point in the final line, and replacing it with a dash, the final line leaves an additional hint of disbelief and wonder. When we imagine the world as God’s experiment, as God’s *legacy*, the final line expresses the role of the individual in the world and the individual who is incapable of truly owning anything.

On the surface, the conclusion of the poem may look like a representation of the beatitudes – “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth;” “Blessed are the pure in heart.”^[3] The theological weight of the final lines hinges on the clown who ponders this tremendous scene because the scene is the entire world: the king, the clown, and the green. The clown, as he sits thinking, sees himself and the world as being in the world as one thing. The line “as if it were his own” is not really about possessing a thing. For the clown to see the scene as if it were his own suggests that he sees himself integrated within it, within the world as a whole. The scene of green is his own inasmuch as his arm is his own. The momentum toward this sense of Monism is present in the mind of the clown who, in virtue of his profession, only works to serve.

The madness of spring, as it emerges from the solemnity of winter, seems to invite this kind of reflection. The poem captures those sentiments frequently inspired by the spring, in a similar way that an impressive landscape may cause one to think: I am the king of this land; or, more humbly, what if this mountain were mine? The “king problem” necessarily raises questions about what it is to be the king of oneself, the king of one’s home, and the king of the place after Eden. The weakness of the king argument comes forward in the poem by showing the control, or lack of control, the king has over his desires, his ambition, and his physical surroundings. Through the clown, we see that the truly dignified way to view the world and oneself is as one thing under God (as formed by God). The start of the poem illustrates a negative view, where “wholesomeness” is nature: madness is what is to be expected of nature and it invites in those claims about a world without God. The formulation “legacy of green” holds within it the aspect of creation as nature, but this aspect becomes hidden by science when it is called an “experiment.” To maintain a belief in this kind of legacy may bring us closer to goodness in the sense that we might not see nature as nature – as season after season – but as something bestowed upon us in the way that grass may grow for cattle, and the sea is open to ships and the leviathan.

[1] Dickinson, Emily. “XXXVIII. ‘A little madness in the spring.’” In *The Single Hound: Poems of a Lifetime*, 40. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1914.

[2] Dickinson, Emily. "A little madness in the Spring." Poem, ca. 1875. The Morgan Library & Museum (courtesy of Amherst College Archives & Special Collections). Digital content for exhibition "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" *The Life and Poetry of Emily Dickinson*, January 20-May 28, 2017. <https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/emily-dickinson/12>

[3] Matthew 5:5, Matthew 5:8 (AV).