
A BRIEF NOTE ON TWO POEMS

By

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Love is that later thing than death,
More previous than life,
Confirms it at its entrance and
Usurps it of itself;

Tastes death, the first to prove the sting,
The second, to its friend,
Disarms the little interval,
Deposits him with God.

Then hovers, an inferior guard,
Lest this beloved charge
Need, once in an eternity,
A lesser than the large.(1)

Emily Dickinson

love is more thicker than forget
more thinner than recall
more seldom than a wave is wet
more frequent than to fail

1. *American Verse*, ed. Oscar Williams, 1959, p. 164. In *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, Boston 1950, P. 146, there is another short poem which deals with a similar theme Love is : anterior to life. "This volume omits the above poem.

it is most mad and moonly
and less it shall unbecome
than all the sea which only
is deeper than the sea

love is less always than to win
less never than alive
less bigger than the least begin
less littler than forgive

it is most sane and sunly
and more it cannot die
than all the sky which only
is higher than the sky (2)

e.e. Cummings

Of Emily Dickinson's ambiguous poem "Love is that later thing than death", E.E. Cummings seems to have made an even more enigmatic version which can easily be read as a sequel to the first, were it not for the difference in mood. Read after Emily Dickinson's three stanzas, his four convey an odd humorous twist. Was he making fun of her seriousness? It is very possible that his intentionally melodramatic and contrasting lines

it is most mad and moonly
and
it is most sane and sunly

2. E.E. Cummings, *Selected Poems* (1923—1958), *The Penguin Poets*, 1967, p. 48.

are meant to turn the whole poem into a parody of the earlier one. This impression is especially enhanced by Cummings's use of the same metrical and stanzaic pattern present in Emily Dickinson's poem. He even seems to add a fourth stanza in much the same spirit which T.S. Eliot revealed when imitating Shakespeare in *The Waste Land*. (1). Cummings seems to be saying, "If you, Miss Dickinson, can write three stanzas, I can write four." Even while picking up her use of comparatives he exaggerates these into a kind of grammatical burlesque—if one may so name it—startling because of the deliberately outrageous flaunting of errors like "more thicker", "less bigger", and worst of all, "less littler".

The intangible essence of love so solemnly confirmed by Emily Dickinson, is driven home through the sheer daring of the later poet in coining words—note "unbe", "moonly" and "sunly" for instance—and the improbability of ideas whose impact is even more forceful because of the truth in them.

Love is ...

more seldom than a wave is wet

or a gain it is

less bigger than the least begin

just as in the second stanza love can no more "unbe"

all the sea which only

is deeper than the sea _

There was perhaps, an echo of Burns's song "My love is like a red red rose" in Cummings is mind when these last lines came to him :

And I will love thee still my Dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.