

Spring Again: Emily Dickinson and Osip Mandelstam

Spring has come very, very slowly to northern New England. The lilacs have not yet bloomed: in most years, they are done by now. Flowering crabapples, too: very late, just bursting into color, when most years they would be done.

There are compensations. Forsythia usually flowers for two days before its blaze of yellow is contaminated and overcome by the emergent green leaves. This year, the forsythia has massed in brilliant yellow color for two weeks now.

Thus, while in most years a poem about spring is relevant to the season for perhaps a week or two, this year spring poems come to mind again and again. Despite writing about early spring in considering Robert Frost's "[Nothing Gold Can Stay](#)," I still am urged to write about spring. It is such a miraculous time! I also wrote about [spring poems](#) by Emily Dickinson and William Wordsworth.

I will begin with a dinner party. A woman I know prepared to read a spring poem, and prefaced it by saying, "There are so few good spring poems. Most of them are sentimental and predicable."

Little did she know. Little. Actually, less than little. Nothing.

Spring prods us into awareness, which results, often, in poets noting how much is happening, not just around them but to them, and putting it into words. Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" was about evanescence, yet at the same time it was about a beauty we can see, even if it is utterly transient.

It was, emphatically, a spring poem. A week later one of the recipients of these poems, a wonderfully attentive attorney named Bob Rachlin, responded to my having sent out Richard Wilbur's "[Love Calls Us to the Things of This World](#)" by telling me of – oh, heck, I can use that horrible word, 'sharing' – his favorite Wilbur poem. It is at the end of this essay, a spring poem called "Seed Leaves." In it, a seed's first growth emerges from the soil. As yet inchoate, undefined. Its two first leaves, the cotyledon, present in embryo in the seed, unfurl. And then, rooted and needful of identity, the next two leaves, identifying the nascent plant as itself, emerge.

That's it, the whole poem. First, growth; then more growth; then the individuated plant, or self. Spring, for Wilbur, is a remarkable time of beginnings, a time of first emergence and the realization that what comes forth will be itself. You can read this remarkable poem for yourself at the end of this essay.

Then a week later my wife went into the bathroom in a restaurant in Montpelier, Vermont, coming back to our table to tell me that the walls were covered with wonderful green-leafy wallpaper and there were framed copies of two poems on the wall. Both about spring. (Who writes essays about bathrooms? Yet that is what I am presently doing. Little did you know you would be in the presence of bathroom 'art.')

Later I visited that restroom myself, mostly for the reasons we go to bathrooms, yet nonetheless curious about the poems. One was about spring, by Wilbur: it was fine, but not as compelling as the poem Bob Rachlin sent me. The other was by A. R. Ammons, who I have written about [previously](#). It was short, about spring, and not unlike the Frost poem.

Like Frost, Ammons sees spring as ephemeral and yet beautiful. Unlike Frost, he understands that if we climb to the higher places on a small mountain we can encounter the spring that has ended down below. Height, more exposure to the harshness of storms: trees bud and leaf later above than lower down in the hills, and in the valleys. In Ammons' poem, what is gold can stay. Sort of. Though the mountain eventually replies to the optimistic poet, understanding "it's not that way/ with all things, some/ that go are gone." You can read that poem, too, at the end of this essay. Simple words, short lines: it tells us of the possibility that all is not transient, before suggesting that, yes, well, a lot of what we see and love is transient.

But I am going to discuss two spring poems that really, really, demand our attention. The first is by Emily Dickinson. I have written about her [before](#), about a seasonal poem (of late summer) that also reveals to us, as Frost did, that all is transient, even beauty itself. And maybe particularly beauty itself.

But this poem is not about transience in the world, though it is about spring. It is a poem of terror. Yes, terror. (Some of you may recall that T. S. Eliot began his masterful and yet overly literary and off-putting poem *The Waste Land* with this famous line, "April is the cruelest month." Why? Dickinson knows even better than Eliot.)

Emily Dickinson
I dreaded that first Robin so

I dreaded that first Robin, so,
But He is mastered, now,
I'm some accustomed to Him grown,
He hurts a little, though —

I thought If I could only live
Till that first Shout got by —
Not all Pianos in the Woods
Had power to mangle me —

I dared not meet the Daffodils —
For fear their Yellow Gown
Would pierce me with a fashion
So foreign to my own —

I wished the Grass would hurry —
So — when 'twas time to see —
He'd be too tall, the tallest one
Could stretch — to look at me —

I could not bear the Bees should come,
I wished they'd stay away
In those dim countries where they go,
What word had they, for me?

They're here, though; not a creature failed —
No Blossom stayed away
In gentle deference to me —
The Queen of Calvary —

Each one salutes me, as he goes,
And I, my childish Plumes,
Lift, in bereaved acknowledgment
Of their unthinking Drums —

Because Emily Dickinson spent the entirety of her life living in the same family house in small-town Amherst, Massachusetts, and because she had little social interaction with the people of that town, many readers patronize her. A good poet, they think, but one who never really lived what we know to be life.

Whatever life is. Well, as this poem I think reveals, Dickinson was acutely aware of herself and her world. Maybe never has a human consciousness as

acutely recorded what it means to have or be a human consciousness. So let's look at this remarkable poem.

It opens with a stunning stanza.

I dreaded that first Robin, so,
But He is mastered, now,
I'm some accustomed to Him grown,
He hurts a little, though —

Who dreads a robin? You know those birds, harbingers of spring (though human intervention and climate change has led some of these birds to over-winter even in freezing Burlington, Vermont), red, cheery (we call them familiarly, 'robin red breasts'), modest in size. "Dread?" Only a poet of extraordinary sensitivity, not just to birds but to herself, could find a robin the occasion of dread. Or maybe, as many readers might assume, she is just nuts.

The speaker of this poem dreads the first robin of spring. The other three lines of the stanza tell of the effort to dominate that dread, to control the appearance of the bird. But the mastery is incomplete, insufficient. I think the last two lines are composed with painful irony: the dread is not mastered, since the speaker is not 'accustomed' but "*some* accustomed," and the hurt though it has receded still remains, "a little." Dread, mastered – but not quite.

And that is just the robin, only one index of the spring which approaches. Bird songs proliferate in spring, and the woods themselves seem alive:

I thought If I could only live
Till that first Shout got by —
Not all Pianos in the Woods
Had power to mangle me

I am always astonished by this stanza. The first two lines speak of trying to live through the first onset of spring's signals. And then a metaphor that I think anticipates surrealism, and is more powerful than the surrealists would ever succeed in becoming (I am thinking of the poets, mostly French; of the dramatists; of the artists such as Miro and de Chirico and the meretricious Dali. Maybe only two, who like Dickinson combined the strange with the ordinary, Douanier Rousseau and Rene Magritte, could pull it off as she does in these lines.) "Not all the Pianos in the Woods/Had power to mangle me." Whew. If she can survive the first sounds of spring, not even the bizarre grouping of 'Pianos in the Woods' (where pianos most certainly do not exist) could "mangle" her. (A mangle is a

device to press water out of clothes: it presses and presses and presses, with enormous pressure; the verb means to mutilate, and comes from the old French for ‘to maim.’)

From robins to being mangled. And that is just two stanzas!

A note on those stanzas. One of the astonishing things about Dickinson was that, although she read Shakespeare and Keats and Elizabeth Barret Browning, she used as poetic ‘models’ what she heard in church. So she wrote not sonnets or blank verse or complex forms, but quatrains in church meter – common meter – ballad meter. Eight syllables to line one, six to line two, eight to line three, six to line four. (In this poem, there is modest variation – sometimes lines expected to be eight syllables are only seven). Hymns rhyme ABCB, although sometimes ABAB. This poem rhymes ABCB, although as you can see some of the rhymes are slant (or half) rhymes, where the aural connection is clear but not exact. Late in the poem ‘away’ and ‘me’ take on new configurations, from slant rhymes to, well, a slant rhyme punctuating a full rhyme.

All of this stuff about rhymes and syllables is to say that Dickinson worked in a very narrow form and did wonders with it. To avoid a soporific sing-songy-ness, she varies the rhymes. But she understood, even better than Robert Frost, how important imposed form was. Frost, you may recall, said that writing free verse was like playing tennis with the net down. For Dickinson, the net is always up, and the boundary lines and service boxes always fully inscribed.

I dared not meet the Daffodils —
For fear their Yellow Gown
Would pierce me with a fashion
So foreign to my own —

The next stanza repeats what we encountered in the first stanza, where the first robin occasioned dread. Here the daffodils – those cheery flowers of spring – have the capacity to “pierce” her. “Pierce,” as Christ was pierced by spears? What is going on? Well, to answer that we want to look at the final line of the stanza. That line follows upon those yellow gowns, the metaphorical way the poet described the yellow perianth (petals) and the central cup. Like a ball gown, in striking yellow. Cheery, I suppose: certainly Wordsworth, in one of the most beloved poems in English (and deeply beloved by me) feels what most people feel: “my heart with pleasure fills/ And dances with the daffodils.”

But for Dickinson? “Their Yellow Gown” is a “fashion/ So foreign to my own.” Here we are at the heart of the poem. If you can understand this stanza, a

large part of the poem will stand revealed. There is a profound alienation between Dickinson and the natural world. That is why the robin strikes her with dread. That is why the vernal sounds seem so unassimilable to ordinary experience, pianos in the woods which mangle her. Dread? Mangle? Pierce? It is because all is foreign to her.

Why is it all foreign? That is why we need to keep on reading the poem. First, though, the next two stanzas show over again how foreign the natural world is.

I wished the Grass would hurry —
So — when 'twas time to see —
He'd be too tall, the tallest one
Could stretch — to look at me —

I could not bear the Bees should come,
I wished they'd stay away
In those dim countries where they go,
What word had they, for me?

As the grass grows, as the first moments of spring pass, maybe she can pass into invisibility, no longer watched, no longer the alien being in the natural world. No longer as she says in another almost surrealist line, this from a letter to a critic who wrote to her, “the only kangaroo among the beauty.” There is no possibility of communication between her and the returning bees, who come from a world she can barely comprehend (“dim countries”) to repopulate the emergent spring world of flowers and growing plants. Those bees, the entire natural world has no “word” for her.

They're here, though; not a creature failed —
No Blossom stayed away
In gentle deference to me —
The Queen of Calvary —

The poem moves toward its conclusion. Everything comes back, robins, birds and forest green, daffodils, growing grass, bees. How sad, how tragic, and actually how dreadful, that “not a creature failed.” All are returned, none stays away. The spring world marches toward renewal and rebirth. It was not even kind enough – it did not ‘stay away’ “in general deference to me” – to let her continue with her wintry self. Her self of death, of overseeing the vast scene of suffering and endings that a “Queen of Calvary” once oversaw. Mary looking on the crucifixion of Christ on the hill of Calvary. Oh, the natural world with its recurrent

return, its flowering into new life, is “foreign” to her. She, and the natural world, exist in separate but overlapping spheres.

Each one salutes me, as he goes,
And I, my childish Plumes,
Lift, in bereaved acknowledgment
Of their unthinking Drums —

The final stanza is beyond tragedy. The world moves along, renewing itself in spring, returning to life. As it moves it *is* gentle, though not deferential. It salutes her, having arrived, before moving on towards full life and summer. But not her, not the speaker in the poem. She is bereaved, having lost life and any possibility of renewal. She acknowledges their movement – the robin, the birds, the grass, the daffodils, the bees – into spring by doffing her hat. Her hat? Those “Plumes,” which she raises as (caught in unending innocence that she renders as “childish”). She accepts both her own loss (and bereavement) and their march through the seasons to the “drums” which do not think of her. Yes, they “salute” her, but they march forward nonetheless, “unthinking” of what the return of spring means for the “Queen of Calvary.”

The world is renewed and the poet is not, aware only of loss and suffering and her disjunction with and alienation from the natural world.

I wonder if what she felt is something that was on the poet Osip Mandelstam’s mind when he wrote the poem we shall consider next. Mandelstam was a part of a great era of Russian poetry, the contemporary of Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, Vladimir Mayakovsky. Most of them regarded Mandelstam as the finest poet of their time.

He lived a difficult life, often destitute, sometimes near madness, suicidal. He wrote a brief satiric poem about Stalin and, no surprise, earned the autocrat’s enmity. Instead of being sent to Siberia, he was ‘rusticated’ to a city far from Moscow, Voronezh. There, knowing his life would soon end – he lived there for two years before returning briefly to Moscow. Then he was quickly sent to Siberia, dying of either typhus or starvation in a transportation camp. While in internal exile he wrote a series of astonishing poems, the *Voronezh Notebooks*.

A confession: I have had immense difficulty in reading Mandelstam. I just didn’t ‘get’ his poems. Too lapidary, polished. Too symbolic, allusive. I kept trying, yet no amount of reading helped. (I, likewise, had kept trying Baudelaire and Rilke: both eventually leapt, in my head, into clarity.)

Then I read a remarkable imitation of one of his late poems by Christian Wiman. Imitation? Not all translators feel they have to stick to the words, even exact images, of a poem: they go after a spirit they feel is in the poem. Lately, at the urging of a friend, I have been reading Samuel Johnson. His greatest poem, “The Vanity of Human Wishes,” is an imitation of Juvenal. It is really Johnson’s poem: Juvenal was the stimulus which pushed him into writing it. Thus with Mandelstam’s poem and Wiman’s brilliant imitation. (It will turn out, as I reveal below, that Wiman sent me back to earlier translations of Mandelstam, and I found them to be, finally, more satisfying than his extraordinary imitation.)

Here is what Wiman wrote:

And I Was Alive (trans. Christian Wiman)

And I was alive in the blizzard of the blossoming pear,
Myself I stood in the storm of the bird–cherry tree.
It was all leaflife and starshower, unerring, self–shattering power,

And it was all aimed at me.
What is this dire delight flowering fleeing always earth?
What is being? What is truth?

Blossoms rupture and rapture the air,
All hover and hammer,
Time intensified and time intolerable, sweetness raveling rot.
It is now. It is not.

Sparkling, spectacular, pyrotechnic. (Mandelstam was none of these! Though the brilliant interwoven sound patterns, these were typical of Mandelstam.) We can see this as a spring poem, a poem of the time when pear and cherry trees blossom. A powerful time.

We can see, in the second stanza, that the poet takes spring personally, as Dickinson did. All is beauty, and beauty is always transient. The second stanza ends with a remarkable line, “What is being? What is truth?”

Brilliantly, Wiman’s succeeding line puns and rhymes: “rupture” and “rapture.” Then additional alliterative rhyme picks up the concurrent lightness and brute force, also elegantly: “Hover and hammer.” The poet is very aware of time – “time intensified” – and, like Dickinson, cannot stand being in this inexorable march of time. The sweetness, Wiman tells us (and here he is following Mandelstam) is also rotten/rotting, since the sweetness of the moment will be gone

as time proceeds; he too, like Dickinson, exists in “bereaved acknowledgment” of the moment and its incipient passing. That passing is summarized intensely, although not in any terms which appear in Mandelstam’s poem, by the final line: “It is now. It is not.”

Here is an earlier translation of the Mandelstam poem. Not as pyrotechnic, but then Mandelstam as a poet was not pyrotechnic: cool, clear, capable of stunning imagery and figures of speech, but always giving a sense that all was under control, even the chaos that his verse allows into the poems. I like this translation better, although I hasten to add that Christopher Wiman’s version has enabled me to re-approach the poem and see its full power.

Mandelstam (trans. Clarence Brown and W. W. Merwin)

Pear blossom and cherry blossom aim at me.
Their strength is crumbling but they never miss.

Stars in clusters of blossoms, leaves with stars —
what twin power is there? On what branch does truth blossom?

It fires into the air with flower or strength.
Its air-white full blossom-bludgeons put it to death.

And the twin scent’s sweetness is unwelcoming.
It contends, it reaches out, it is mingled, it is sudden.

Overall, in large, the poem is not all that difficult. Individual lines, not so much: there is a lot in this poem that throws me. Let’s try it both ways.

First, overall, the poem as a whole. The poem addresses the full-on coming of spring, which is treated as an assault on the poet’s consciousness. Trees blossom (this is the condition of the crabapples and lilacs in Burlington as I write) and these blossoms seem aimed at the poet. They are flowers, fragile, and yet they batter him with—what? – newness, beauty, a wonder that life can be so fecund.

Is this the truth of existence, he wonders, before returning to the flowers as an artillery assault, destroying both the calm of the environment, and himself. This floral battery is the exact opposite of what Thomas Grey encountered when, at the start of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” he entered the darkened graveyard, when he wrote about how the end of day “leaves the world to darkness

and to me.” In Mandelstam’s poem, there is no calm. Both the air and the poet are destroyed.

Mandelstam, like Dickinson, dreads the spring. It reaches out to him and contends with whatever wants peace, comfort, surcease from pain. The flowers are so, well, abrupt. He had been so peaceful. (Something similar happens to Sylvia Plath, lying in a hospital bed after a suicide attempt, lying peacefully until someone brings her a bouquet of tulips:

I didn’t want any flowers, I only wanted

To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty. “Tulips”)

Spring throws him into disarray; more, it wounds him deeply. For Mandelstam, when spring comes and the flowers bloom, the world starts again, the world is full of beauty. This new spring world is *unwelcome*.

That much about the poem seems clear, at least to me. But going through the poem line by line I get, well, confused and disoriented. Not at first, but as the poem goes on. Let’s try, anyway.

Pear blossom and cherry blossom aim at me.
Their strength is crumbling but they never miss.

A number of translations, similar to Wiman’s, have the cherry as “wild cherry blossoms.” I am not sure this makes a difference. But it is clear from that first line that there is a direct relation between the appearance of the blossoms and the poet. The military metaphor is clear, for the flowers are an ‘assault’ on him. Even though the period of their blossoming is brief, even though their strength crumbles as the flowers reach and pass their peak. Still, even though the flowers begin to fade, he has been assailed: “they never miss.”

Stars in clusters of blossoms, leaves with stars —
what twin power is there? On what branch does truth blossom?

I’m lost in this second stanza. The lines seem to be about doubleness, and doubleness will recur later in the poem. What does Mandelstam intend? I think, having consulted a whole bunch of translations – this is one of the hurdles one must surmount when one does not read the poem as it was written, in this case in Russian – that first line of the stanza refers to the flowers, each individually, looking like stars, their petals flowing outward from the central pistil and its exuberantly and prominently surrounding stamens. And, the second manifestation,

the flowers among the leaves look like miniature galaxies, conglomerations of stars (as we know them to be) appearing from a distance as a single star.

Individually and in concert, the “twin power” has a truth to impart. Not of single flowers or constellations of flowers, but of flowering itself. Flowering is truth. Is that perception of truth coming to him, the poet, from the flowering branches he beholds? I think so, though the poet phrases this as a question.

It fires into the air with flower or strength.
Its air-white full blossom-bludgeons put it to death.

So truth, as the blossoms do themselves, “fires into the air.” Again, the military metaphor, a corporeal violence which is repeated in the next line with “bludgeons.” We, along with the poet, encounter both the flower which “fires,” and the strength of the blossoming and renewed world.

Blossoming would seem to most of us a sign of new life. For Mandelstam, going beyond even Dickinson, blossoming is a sign of death. Not just an augury, which would be a kind of foretelling, but an actual death. What does he intend? That the blossoms will die, shortly? Yes. That the truth self-immolates, that to know is to know of the end of things? Yes. That the air itself is destroyed by these spring blossoms? Maybe, we think, and then we encounter precisely that in the final stanza.

And the twin scent’s sweetness is unwelcoming.
It contends, it reaches out, it is mingled, it is sudden.

For the poet finds the “twin scent” – here I think “twin” refers to the cherry flower and the pear, but also to the scents of individual flowers and the odor of the constellations (the bunched blossoms, the flowering tree as a whole) – as “unwelcoming.” Stunning, although not as much when we remember that Dickinson found the first cheery robin the occasion of ‘dread.’ Those scents, that odor, “reaches out” to the poet. It “contends” with all that he thinks, as he ponders the force of life and renewal and his own foreknowledge of death. Life and death, going onward and ending, flowering and destruction (we cannot help but recall the earlier metaphors of military force), sweetness unwelcome: yes, there is a lot “mingled” here.

And “sudden.” There, in front of the poet, are the flowers of spring. The trees, seemingly dead all winter, reveal to us both beauty and growth. We love to think of spring as rebirth, but this poem denies us. Spring is unwelcome,

destructive, revelatory of truth: that everything is temporal, even spring. That the very temporality of spring means that it too will end, that it puts itself “to death.”

The poem is, to me, moving because it recognizes and, in a way, celebrates spring and its beauty, while it simultaneously recognizes that spring assaults us – and not in good ways. As Eliot wrote, “April is the cruellest month, breeding/
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire...”

Mandelstam’s poem is radically strange. It recognizes and celebrates the flowers of spring but it also acknowledges that spring, and flowering, and life itself, is quickly gone.

Mandelstam so accurately charts his inner responses to spring, and to blossoming, that he sees himself and the world as mixed, “mingled.” Love and death, beauty and the end of beauty, are all upon him, suddenly. His poetic evocation of spring has the feel of the complexity we ourselves feel in this blossoming time. The world blossoms and, as with Dickinson, we are gravely, mortally, wounded.

Richard Wilbur
Seed Leaves

I

Here something stubborn comes,
Dislodging the earth crumbs
And making crusty rubble.
It comes up bending double
And looks like a green staple.
It could be seedling maple,
Or artichoke, or bean;
That remains to be seen.

II

Forced to make choice of ends,
The stalk in time unbends,
Shakes off the seedcase, heaves
Aloft, and spreads two leaves
Which still display no sure
And special signature.
Toothless and fat, they keep
The oval form of sleep.

III

This plant would like to grow
And yet be embryo;
Increase, and yet escape
The doom of taking shape;
Be vaguely vast, and climb
To the tip end of time
With all of space to fill,
Like boundless Yggdrasil
That has the stars for fruit.
But something at the root
More urgent than that urge
Bids two true leaves emerge,
And now the plant, resigned
To being self-defined
Before it can commerce
With the great universe,
Takes aim at all the sky
And starts to ramify.

A.R. Ammons **Eyesight**

It was May before my
attention came
to spring and

my word I said
to the southern slopes

I've

missed it, it
came and went before
I got right to see:

don't worry, said the mountain,
try the later northern slopes
or if

you can climb, climb
into spring: but
said the mountain

it's not that way
with all things, some
that go are gone

Osip Mandelstam (Another translation, this by Andrew Davis)

The pear—and the cherry—took aim at me,
Hit me—with their fragile power—perfectly.

Flowers with stars, stars with flowers—
What's this double force? Where's truth's inflorescence?

With a flower, a fist, they struck the air,
An air done in by pure white flowers, entire and evanescent.

Insufferable sweetness of that double scent :
It struggles, spreads—is mingled –rent . . .