11 The Edginess of Miss Emily Dickinson (May 2019)

I first came across Emily Dickinson in the bowdlerised versions of her poems, for which Thomas Wentworth Higginson, amongst others, was largely responsible. At the time, probably in the late nineteen-sixties, they seemed to me comfortably quaint – homey, little-house-on-the-prairies-ish.

A narrow fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides;
You may have met him,--did you not,
His notice sudden is.

The grass divides as with a comb,
A spotted shaft is seen;
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre,
A floor too cool for corn.
Yet when a child, and barefoot,
I more than once, at morn,

Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash
Unbraiding in the sun,--
When, stooping to secure it,
It wrinkled, and was gone.

Several of nature's people
I know, and they know me;
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality;

But never met this fellow,
Attended or alone,
Without a tighter breathing,
And zero at the bone.

I liked the poem, especially the “zero at the bone” at the end, but she was not on any ‘syllabus’ or included in any recognised ‘Leavisite’ literary ‘canon’ that I *had* to study, so it was not for many years before I came across her again, this time in the original versions based on her actual manuscript. For a start, in the poem quoted above, the punctuation and capitalisation had been changed, or ‘smoothed out’, to suit the taste of her day. But the original poem (No. 986 in my 1975 Faber Collected Poems edited by Thomas H. Johnson – Dickinson never gave them titles) reads as follows:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides -
You may have met him? - did you not
His notice sudden is -

The Grass divides as with a Comb -
A spotted shaft is seen -
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on -

He likes a Boggy Acre -
A Floor too cool for Corn -
But when a Boy, and Barefoot -
I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone -

Several of Nature’s People
I know, and they know me -
I feel for them a transport
Of Cordiality -

But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone
Without a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone -

I find this - with its Emphatic Capitals and breathless dashes that pause untidily but carry you onwards - far more interesting. Particularly noticeable is that Dickinson, or the persona, imagines herself a "Boy" (the Huckleberry Finn type, surely?) shoeless, enjoying the sensuous freedom and danger of wandering around during the hottest time of day – rather than "morn" which is far more twee and brought in to rhyme more easily with "corn". The original also has no stanza break in the third section, which increases the breathlessness and urgency of the occasion.

What we tend to overlook, also, is the matter-of-fact way that Dickinson imagines herself bending down to "secure" this negative-sounding "Whip lash" (let's pass over any phallic implications for the moment) on more than one occasion, and (enjoying almost) the sensation, so beautifully captured in the capitalised original, of "Zero at the Bone". I remember seeing a snake in the south of France on a walk, some ten metres ahead of us, and experiencing exactly that very same visceral, instinctive reaction to peril. It must be hard-wired into our human unconscious – an immediate sense of danger. Yet, Emily Dickinson seems to be revelling in just *that* imagined or remembered sensation.

She was a very odd mixture of contradictions – becoming steadily more reclusive after having been witty and high-spirited as a girl. Yet, when Higginson visited her in 1870, after she had written to him asking for critical guidance, he did not find someone timid or withdrawn. On the contrary, he wrote of their conversation that it had "the very wantonness of overstatement" and said, "I was never with anyone who drained my nerve power so much." Although she writes almost obsessively about her fantasies of dying and death, she could not conceal her ecstatic relish for life. "My business is to love… my Business is to sing," and "I find ecstasy in living… the mere sense of living is joy enough."

It's these contradictions and this mysterious "edginess" in her poems that I want to explore a little here.

The following poem is one of her most famous and, reading it in its bowdlerised version I still felt its power to arrest our attention.

THE CHARIOT

Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,
For his civility.

We passed the school where children played,
Their lessons scarcely done;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.

Since then 'tis centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity.

Comparing it with the original, however, we can see the absolute *crassness* of the 'polite' editing of the poem to suit conventional taste. For a start, let's take the title the editors gave it: "The Chariot". The vehicle in question is clearly a horse-drawn hearse of the sort so well-drawn in the French "Lucky Luke" *bandes dessinées,* or cartoon books. It's an old-fashioned carriage adapted to take a coffin. "The Chariot" suggests battles and war, a far cry from the calm "Civility" that pervades this poem both in tone and content.

Not just the title undermines the poem, but the changes and omissions also gravely (!) distort it. In terms of context, I have constantly to draw modern pupils' attention to the 'Emma Bovary' edginess, for the 1860s, of an unmarried woman (Emma Bovary was at least married) being *alone* in a carriage (not an open-topped chariot) with a man (even a *gentleman*) in a state of… well, *déshabille*! It is an impossibly *sexy* situation that is being imagined here. What would Amherst in the 1860s have made of it?

Let us look at what the poet really wrote: (No. 712)

Because I could not stop for Death —
He kindly stopped for me —
The Carriage held but just Ourselves —
And Immortality.

We slowly drove — He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility —

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess — in the Ring —
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain —
We passed the Setting Sun —

Or rather — He passed Us —
The Dews drew quivering and Chill —
For only Gossamer, my Gown —
My Tippet — only Tulle —

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground —
The Roof was scarcely visible —
The Cornice — in the Ground —

Since then — 'tis Centuries — and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity —

First of all, there is a wry play of words in the opening that suggests a certain connivance, or jokey intimacy. We can be too busy to stop for lunch, but the second "stop" is stopping to pick somebody up – this is almost a hitch-hiking fantasy! Death, however, is portrayed unusually, not as the Grim Reaper, but as a Gentleman, first and foremost (the word "Civility" is important). Nevertheless, he is 'picking up' a young woman on her own, unchaperoned, in the evening with darkness falling. This would surely have been seen as playing with fire for Dickinson's period - X-rated stuff!

The odd couple then seem to pass by the 'stages' of life, so we are given a school. But here is the first significant alteration: the children are *not* playing, with "lessons done"; instead, in the original, they are "striving" (struggling, competing, fighting even) in "the Ring" (with its suggestions of a boxing-ring). This is no idealised view of childhood.

Next, a whole stanza is omitted: the description of her clothing, at once intimate and suggestively vulnerable (but the irony, of course, is that rather than her *nightiwear*, these are in fact her funeral garments). Clearly nineteenth century sensibilities would have been shocked (and aroused) by this stark description, so it *had* to be cut.

Then, there is the silliness also of changing the repetition of "Ground" for "mound", which might *sound* prettier but actually makes no sense. We are *supposed* to be puzzled by the appearance of a "Cornice", which is usually high up, being set "in the Ground" – so that we only gradually realise that the building facing her is… her grave. The repetition of "Ground" in other words is entirely deliberate.

She is, in fact, hitching a lift, calmly but *dangerously*, (and sexily) to her own burial place – her home for "Eternity". And the personification of Death, who carries her off (literally!), is not so much sinister as companionable, potentially even *desirable* (?).

Dickinson's poetry is, in fact, rarely far removed from the erotic, and thoughts about death are often linked to erotically charged fantasies. Take "I died for Beauty" (449):

I died for Beauty - but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth was lain
In an adjoining Room –

He questioned softly "Why I failed"?
"For Beauty", I replied.
"And I - for Truth,—Themselves are One -
We Brethren, are", He said -

And so, as Kinsmen met a Night,
We talked between the Rooms,
Until the Moss had reached our lips,
And covered up - our names -

Just looking on the internet for this poem, I was surprised to be offered only a bowdlerised version, thus:

I DIED for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?
"For beauty," I replied.
"And I for truth,—the two are one;
We brethren are," he said.

And so, as kinsmen met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.

(I had no idea that bowdlerised versions have remained standard fare even *now*.)

The punctuation and capitalisation of the original give us dashes, rather than full-stops (note the ending) and allow for the "He" perhaps to be equated in some way with Christ. Interestingly the potentially erotic situation of lying at night near a man is reduced by the persona re-imagining her gender quite ambiguously in "We Brethren are" and "as kinsmen".

Emily Dickinson is nothing if not solipsistic; she, herself, (or her persona) is the leading star of all her poetry, a lot of which focuses on fantasies of death and dying. Sometimes she likes to picture herself as a Christ-like figure, martyrised for …for what? In the poem above she claims it is "for beauty" (the poem sounds very Keatsian with "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" written on the Grecian funeral urn in "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). Nowhere does this preoccupation with martyrdom show itself with more force than in this next poem about the coming of spring. Defeating all our expectations that spring might be a time to be happy in, to rejoice at new life and new beginnings, Dickinson claims here to feel it as an agonising ordeal, akin to being led out to be crucified. Here is how she 'stage-manages' her journey to her 'execution' in this very strange poem (348):

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—

The "Queen of Calvary"! She is staging her own execution to the sound of "Drums"; it's an extraordinary fantasy.

Notice the gendering of the poem – it is easy to miss, but everything, grass, flowers, animals is gendered as "he", while *she* is the "Queen of Calvary" and, just as in "Because I could not stop for Death" where she imagines the "gazing Grain" (gazing no doubt at *her*), here she is almost revelling in her ordeal, playing to the gallery before Nature that is ready to "pierce me with a fashion So foreign to my own". She is also enjoying the little ironic play on words with "my childish Plumes", as if she were part vulnerable bird, part writer with her quill.

But what incredible force her words carry; spring and the music of birdsong have "power to *mangle*" her.

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

This poem, when I first read it almost took my breath away. Now, I find myself wondering about the mental state of somebody who can fantasise in such a self-dramatising fashion. Whether she dies "for beauty" or not, she is certainly feeding off fantasies that are inwardly intense and all utterly self-centred.

If you want a *really* edgy poem, conflating many of these ambiguities and contradictions, try out "My Life had stood" (754) – a personal favourite of mine.

My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
In Corners - till a Day
The Owner passed - identified -
And carried Me away -

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods -
And now We hunt the Doe -
And every time I speak for Him
The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow -
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through -

And when at Night - Our good Day done -
I guard My Master's Head -
'Tis better than the Eider Duck's
Deep Pillow - to have shared -

To foe of His - I'm deadly foe -
None stir the second time -
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -
Or an emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He - may longer live
He longer must - than I -
For I have but the power to kill,
Without - the power to die -

Guns are a peculiarly masculine subject of fantasy. Here, Dickinson is (what a powerful image!) standing around ("in Corners" is interesting) as a *loaded gun* – she is the rifle (with whatever Freudian symbolism you wish to read into that image). Throwing any claims to feminism out of the window, Dickinson casts herself as an object and wants to be possessed as *such* by a "Master". There is a lot of erotic power in the idea of her discharging her bullets for him as she and her Master "roam" in his "Sovereign Woods" hunting "the Doe".

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow -
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through –

She imagines herself metaphorically *erupting* with pleasure! And she is fully prepared to kill for her master – the NRA could do with this sort of attitude in combating the lily-livered attempts these days at gun restriction.

As in "Because I could not stop for Death", it is important again to insist on just how daring and risqué her fantasy is, of guarding her Master at night and quite literally sharing his bed, particularly for a well brought-up, east coast, church-going, Amherst girl:

And when at Night - Our good Day done -
I guard My Master's Head -
'Tis better than the Eider Duck's
Deep Pillow - to have shared -

The ending is a bit obscure. What she seems to be saying, chillingly, is that as an *object*, she has the power to kill and will last longer than her Master (positive…?), but she herself cannot "die" as she is not 'alive' (negative), - whereas her Master, who *is* alive, will not last as long as her (negative), but he will at least be able to die (positive), because he is *actually* alive, unlike the persona/rifle, condemned to remain an object forever.

Talk about *reification*!

Here is one more 'edgy' favourite of mine – I love it because it is so no-holds-barred *passionate*.

(249)

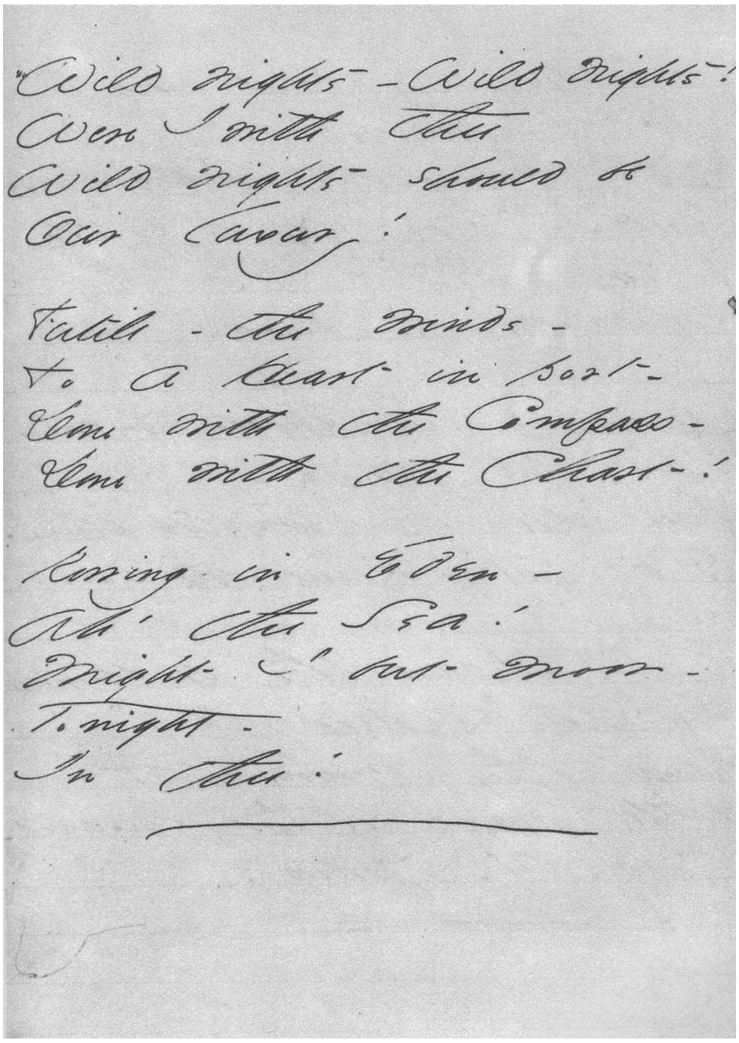
Wild nights - Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -
Ah - the Sea!
Might I but moor - tonight -
In thee!

Yet again, these powerful images are quite ambiguous. She is figuratively mooring "in port" and so is untroubled by the winds ("Futile – the winds – To a Heart in port - ") and yet "Wild nights" are seen as a "luxury" – something utterly desirable. She wants the calm of a haven, mooring up, suggestively, "in" her lover, but yet she is attracted to the wildness of the storm. Like all of us, she is drawn to "wild", elemental, unrestrained passion, perhaps, while *also* seeking the serenity and protection of love as a sanctuary.

It is this edginess and ambivalence, catching us off our guard and sliding away from absolute clarity, from polished perfection, that I prize in her poetry. I notice, also, that in the handwritten, manuscript version, the word "Tonght" is capitalised and falls on a new line, which, whether deliberate, or else the result of her page being narrow and the line ending short, has the effect of adding further emphasis (and a richness of anticipation?) to the word "Tonight". Even Emily Dickinson's handwriting seems to lean forward in a state of frenzied longing.



Wild nights - Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our Luxury!

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -
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Rowing in Eden -
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor -
Tonight -
In thee!

One of Emily Dickinson's last poems, which *seems* on the face of it so short and so abruptly simple, is not so easy to fathom and always has my pupils raising eyebrows of incomprehension: (1765)

That Love is all there is,
Is all we know of Love;
It is enough, the freight should be
Proportioned to the groove.

The first two lines are so glaringly simple they seem to be on a par with the Beatles' "Love is all you need". French pupils are, however, thrown particularly by the words "freight" and "groove". No, it's nothing to do with "groovy" which they *have* often heard of (though they never associate "groovy" with the grooves of a vinyl record – why should they?), but more to do with railroads and grooves along which trucks and waggons might transport goods. There are always surprises in Dickinson's poetry and here, the surprise is that "Love" – which we all think of as so positive, is in this poem seen as a total burden, whose weight must be evenly distributed, otherwise it would be too much to bear for the poor waggon on a goods train.

The poem is, however, more open to ambiguity than it might appear, particularly with that little comma after "enough". Does "It" refer - 1) to the proposition about "Love" - or 2) to the idea of "Love" itself? As it stands, the poem even seems to suggest - 3) that 'it is enough *knowing* that weight should be evenly distributed'. My question here, therefore, is: 'What is "enough" *doing* in the poem (and does it matter)?'

Answers on a postcard, please.

I've wondered about depression, which has been a recurring theme in these musings, and certainly there is darkness around, but I don't feel her poetry explores depression so much as dangerous excitement. She has cut loose from conventionality and in her poetry, at least, she seems to be thrillingly following her fantasies – unchecked except by her hymn-like ballad stanzas. Ballads are simple – for children's nursery rhymes, popular story-telling (like "Robin Hood") or hymns. Perhaps we should think of hers as subverted "hymns".

I'm finishing (at last!) with the classic recipe, which I spotted when it came out in the Washington Post back in 1995, for Emily Dickinson's Black Molasses Cake. She was rated a good baker and I read somewhere, at the time but I don't know where now, that during her reclusive years, aloof upstairs (and, of course, dressed in white like some Miss Haversham in Great Expectations), that she nevertheless liked to let down plates on lengths of string from her bedroom window, laden with slices of this cake for the local Amherst children (barefoot Boys?) waiting beneath in the garden. Just looking at the sheer size of the cake below lends good support for this idea.

Ambiguous to the end, Emily Dickinson was clearly someone determined to have her cake *and* eat it. (I had to get that in!)

NOV 29, 1995 THE WASHINGTON POST

This mega-cake recipe -- sized for gift giving -- is a modern adaptation of one created by Emily Dickinson; the 19th century poet learned to cook with her mother's guidance, it is said, and came to be quite good at it. The fruits used here are natural and the brandy syrup gives the fruitcake a moist, mellow kick.

The brandy can be a Cognac-type by itself, or a combination of flavors, including amaretto or hazelnut liqueur. Your taste buds can guide you here.

This makes about 20 cups of batter. An average loaf pan holds between 4 and 5 cups of batter, so this recipe will make about four large loaf cakes, or five or six 9-inch rounds. Or, in a 12-by-2-inch round pan, perhaps two. Or, one large 13-by-18-by-2 1/2-inch pan. You get the idea, though: You can bake it in any size and shape.

For serving, decorating with fresh greens and flowers around the cake adds a festive touch.

Make Ahead: It's best to make the brandy syrup a day in advance; you may have some left over, which can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to several weeks. The fruit *needs to macerate for at least 1 hour, and preferably overnight. The cakes need an hour, and preferably a day or two, for the syrup to soak in. The soaked, wrapped cakes can be refrigerated for up to several weeks. You can freeze the baked, unsoaked cakes in advance; defrost for at least 1 hour before applying the brandy syrup.*

SERVINGS: 60 ***(!!)****

Yield: (makes 4 large loaf cakes or 5 or 6 nine-inch rounds)

!!! *

- **(my exclamation marks)**

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE SYRUP

- *3 cups sugar*
- *2 cups water*
- *1 cup brandy, or more as needed*

FOR THE FRUIT

- *1 3/4 pounds raisins*
- *8 ounces dried currants*
- *8 ounces dried apricots, cut into pieces the size of raisins*
- *8 ounces pitted dried prunes, cut into pieces the size of raisins*
- *2 ounces dried pears, cut into pieces the size of raisins*
- *4 ounces pitted dates, cut into pieces the size of raisins*
- *1/2 cup brandy*

FOR THE CAKE

- *3 1/4 cups unbleached flour*
- *4 1/2 teaspoons baking powder*
- *1 1/2 teaspoons baking soda*
- *1 1/2 teaspoons salt*
- *1 1/4 teaspoons ground cinnamon*

- *1 1/4 teaspoons ground cloves*
- *1 1/4 teaspoons ground mace*
- *1 1/2 teaspoons freshly grated nutmeg*
- *1/4 teaspoon ground cardamom*
- *1/4 teaspoon ground ginger*
- *48 tablespoons (6 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature*
- *3 cups sugar*
- *13 large eggs, at room temperature*
- *1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla*
- *3/4 cup molasses*

DIRECTIONS

For the syrup: Combine the sugar and water in a 2-quart saucepan over medium-high heat; cook, stirring, until the sugar dissolves. Let cool, then transfer to a lidded container. Stir in the cup of brandy, or more (to your taste). Cover and refrigerate.

For the fruit: Toss together the raisins, currants, apricots, prunes, pears and dates with 1/2 cup brandy in a large bowl, until evenly moistened. Let stand for at least 1 hour, and preferably overnight.

For the cake: Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease the pans with cooking oil spray, then line them with parchment paper.

Sift together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, cloves, mace, nutmeg, cardamom and ginger in a mixing bowl.

Beat the butter in the very large bowl (5-quart) of a stand mixer on medium speed, until creamy. Gradually add the sugar, beating until the mixture is light in color and texture. Add the eggs 3 at a time (adding 4 in the last addition), beating well each time, and stopping to scrape down the bowl, as needed. On medium speed, add the vanilla extract and pour in the molasses. The batter may look curdled, but that's okay.

Transfer to a very large mixing bowl. Gradually add the flour mixture, stirring with a wooden spoon just until no trace of dry ingredients remains.

Drain the macerating fruit, reserving its liquid. Fold the fruit into the batter, taking care not to over-mix. If the batter becomes to stiff to stir, feel free to use your clean hands as mixing tools.

Divide among batter the pans, filling each one about two-thirds full. Smooth the tops. Bake until the top of the cakes are firm to the touch at the center. (Nine-inch rounds will take 30 to 35 minutes; check doneness often). The cakes will be very dark on top and slightly sunken. Let the cake cool in the pans.

Use a skewer to poke holes in the cake at 1-inch intervals. Add the reserved macerating liquid to your brandy syrup. Begin brushing or pouring the brandy syrup evenly over each cake, allowing a few minutes' soaking-in time before applying more. If the cakes seem moist enough, it might not be necessary to use all the syrup.

Wrap the cakes (in their pans) well in plastic wrap, or slide each one into its own large zip-top bag. Let stand for at least 1 hour in a cool place, and preferably up to a day or two before serving.

When ready to serve, run a round-edged knife around the edges of the cakes to loosen them from the sides of the pans. Invert onto a serving platter and discard the parchment paper before slicing.

Never let it be said that studying poetry does not have its uses!

May 2019