Life in Continuous Present: Sharing an Old Story with a New Audience

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In 1858, twenty-year-old Emily Elizabeth Hawley of Medina, Michigan began to keep a diary. Through a move to Iowa in 1861 and marriage to James Gillespie a year later, the birth of two children, hard work and marital disappointment, she kept writing—until just two weeks before her death in 1888.

In 2013, I discovered her diary online.

Emily's diary seemed the perfect illustration of Mikhail Bahktin's theory that "every [written] word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word it anticipates."[1] Her diary became the focus of my MA research, motivated by the idea that some diaries met the definition of autobiography[2] because they were constructed in the same way an author writes—through a series of drafts and revisions focused through the lens of an envisioned audience.

Two years and a trip to Iowa later, I had turned my research into a novel—*Life in Continuous Present*, which revolves around a fictional discovery of this same diary—weaving the theories and research methods I employed in its study with fiction performing as a method of its own.

Liz Benton, the novel's protagonist, is a writer of historical fiction. A widow with two grown daughters, she hasn't been able to write since the death of her husband two years earlier. She travels to Iowa to sell her late uncle's farm—after

[1] Mikhail Bahktin, et al, *Speech Genres and other Essays*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 102.

[2] In spite of the fact that diary writing is characterized as writing *devoid* of audience, diaries—like every other type of writing—are influenced by audience, even when the audience is unnamed. Based on Smith and Watson's (*Reading Autobiography,* 2010, 63-102) characterization of autobiographical acts, I claimed that Gillespie's rhetorical sense of audience, seen in the writing of her diary, made her diary as much autobiography as those that were intentionally written as such.

promising her agent that she's going there to start a new book. While cleaning out the farmhouse attic, Liz finds the diary of a 19th century woman who lived in that very house, and begins to read. Drawn into the woman's life story, Liz slowly begins to write again, first by writing responses in her journal, then weaving together threads of story she finds within the diary. Finally, Liz allows her skills as a storyteller free-reign and creates a fanciful present-tense dialogue between the diarist and herself—where each woman takes a turn telling her story. As a result, Liz comes to recognize the root of her writing problem is a fear of beginning a new life without her husband.

Through this exchange, Liz realizes that she cannot wait to 'get over' her fear. She must choose to act in spite of it—a choice that ultimately leads her to write a book inspired by the diary.

The parts of the novel included here are drawn from a conversation that Liz writes as a way to "talk" with Emily. This section forms the heart of the story and best embodies the notion of audience awareness which influences even diary writing.

Life in Continuous Present:

Emily's Story

"It was a very long time ago when I lived in this house, and the world was a different place from the one you inhabit. In that long ago day, girls were raised to believe they had an almost sacred duty to marry and raise a family. To desire anything else was unthinkable—considered by some a rebellion against God and man. Wives alone was held responsible for the contentment and spiritual condition of her family, to the point that if her husband abandoned or abused her or her children, she was somehow at fault.

"Although I wanted more from my life, in the end I did as I was told I must.

"It was with this belief in duty and destiny I married James. If harsh words came between us, I desired only that I might become a better wife to him, that

we might never dispute or disagree. Time and again, after arguments or misunderstandings, I recorded in my diary '*my prayer that I may never speak an unkind word to him that God has seen fit to give me*,' noting '*how foolish to cry, for James is too kind to have his feelings hurt by my silliness of crying*.' As I had been taught, I acknowledged his discontent somehow grew from my error.

"Yet time passed, and I began to recognize there was more happening with James than simply my failure to uphold the trust of "true womanhood" that my society required of me. No matter how I prayed or held my tongue, his unpleasantness grew. I worked hard every day, earning extra money to send our children to school so they could gain a good education—but James resented it. He wanted them to stay home and work. He would refuse to speak to us, or disappear without a word for days on end. He began to have violent spells where he would grow so angry he would abuse our animals—and even our son Henry and me. He threatened to take his own life on more than one occasion. I knew not what to do for him."

Taking a deep breath after such a long speech, Emily begins to pace the length of the porch, gathering her courage to continue.

"I grew nervous and fearful, afraid to be left alone with him. I wondered many times if there was anything I could do, should do. But I did nothing, told no one. I couldn't bear that any of my neighbors might think ill of me, still believing his behavior must somehow be my responsibility.

"One night I admitted it to my diary, penning words which still trouble me:

The heart sometimes is broken by trouble and its possessor dies a martyr. I tried so hard to live through it without it being known by the outside world, suffered untold sorrow by hearing his abusive language, yet I did not dare to displease him. I have written many things in my journal, but the worst is a secret to be buried when I shall cease to be. God alone knows I have prayed every day that I might have wisdom, that I might know the right way, and do right in all my words and doings. I can say with all my heart my conscience is clear.

"I poured my heart out on those pages, but even there I could not speak the whole truth of my life. I had drawn an image of myself and my family, and I could not speak against it. I played the part I was given before the audience of my society, and my fears of their displeasure kept me standing on that stage."

Turning to face her, Emily prepares to end her discourse—hoping Lizzie is willing to listen.

"Fear can lead us to do terrible things, Lizzie—or sometimes, to do nothing at all. In that long ago day, I had only two choices. If I left James, I would be spurned by my neighbors for abandoning my husband. I would have no home, no money. I would be alone, save for my children—who would also suffer for my choice. I could not take the risk. So for a long time I stayed and accepted my lot. Near the end, when my worries had already destroyed my health, I did move into town, leaving James alone on the farm. But it was too little, too late.

"In the end, fear stole away my very life."

Emily's words seem to hang in the air, expanding to fill the spaces between them until they echoed through the whole of the world.

Taking Lizzie's hands in her own, Emily offers one last plea.

"Please don't let your fears do the same to you."

Lizzie's Story

The two women sit quietly, watching the stars sweep across the face of the sky. There is much left to say, yet it does not seem a time for words—at least not yet. Alone in her thoughts, Lizzie considers her fears. As Emily recounts the story of her life and her marriage, Lizzie is speechless before the hardships she had faced, but she also realizes every story has at least two sides. What was it Emily had said earlier? That the stories she told were her version of "life as I see it."

After all, the only stories we can tell are our own.

The eastern horizon begins to lighten; little can be heard but the faint whisper of the chairs rocking gently on the porch. The spray of meteors has

disappeared, and the comet is fading as well. All that remains is the brilliance of Venus—known by the Babylonians as the bright queen of the heavens. Observing its continued glow, Lizzie recalls myths she discovered long ago, research she'd done for a book about Irish astronomer Annie Scott Dill Mauder, who in 1906 became the first woman elected to the Royal Astronomical Society. Lizzie's first novel, *Her Eye on the Heavens*, lies tucked away in a drawer—unpublished still—yet she'd learned so much about astronomy in the process of its creation. Somehow that made the time it took to write it feel like less of a waste.

Turning to Emily, Lizzie's voice intrudes on the stillness. "Do you see that bright star over there?" She points toward the lightening horizon. "Right above the tree? It's actually not a star at all. That's Venus, the planet nearest our own in both distance and size. Next to the moon, it is one of the brightest objects in the night sky. It's so reflective that nearly three quarters of the sunlight which falls on it is mirrored back into space. When we look at it, it is the sun's rays we see."

Sensing that Lizzie is following a train of thought, not simply reciting her research, Emily responds to keep her talking. "It is beautiful," she says. "I saw it many mornings, hanging low in the sky as I pumped water before breakfast."

Still gazing at the dazzling point in the sky, Lizzie continues. "Did you know the astronomical symbol for Venus is the same as that for female? A circle with a small cross beneath it? It represents a hand mirror of the Roman goddess. I never knew that. Venus was recognized even by ancient Rome for its reflective properties."

Lizzie pauses a moment, considering the sky. "I guess women were seen like that, too. But as reflectors of what? Man's glory? The world around them? A mirror holds no light of its own... it merely reproduces whatever is shone on it."

As the edge of the sky grows ever lighter, and Venus begins to fade, a rosy glow washes over the smattering of clouds now rising with the sun. The dawn is nearly upon them. Although the night has been virtually soundless, the

bustle of day begins. A breeze rustles the cornfields. Birds trill in the trees. The distant horn of a train can be heard. Along the horizon, a tiny sliver of gold breaks just at the edge of the distant tree line. At last the light of Venus flickers out.

Both women understand their time together is almost at an end. But Lizzie isn't finished yet. She's just beginning to understand Emily's purpose. What Emily's story means—to her.

Speaking more quickly now, Lizzie is anxious to find her way to her answer.

"You saw yourself as a mirror for James. It was the only work your society gave you to do. Allowing him to see himself in you, and to expose an image of the person he—and they—thought you should be. But a mirror holds more than just a reflection. It is also a way to know yourself. The glass can become a portal of self-discovery."

With more conviction in her voice than has been there in a long time, Lizzie stands and steps to the edge of the porch, still watching the spot where Venus has vanished from sight.

"I don't want to see myself as merely a reflection anymore. Not of Jack. Not of anyone. I don't want to be afraid of seeing myself for who I am."

Emily stands as well, breathing in the genesis of the day.

"It will be fully light soon," she says. "It is almost time for me to go. But before I do, there is one more thing I must say."

She turns back to face Lizzie, her eyes searching. "You have nothing to be afraid of, Lizzie. You can write—if you choose—any story you wish to tell. You can travel where you will. Go to New York, learn to paint, take a train. Whatever you desire, you can do."

Emily walks toward the front door. But before she enters, her hand now resting on the doorknob, she looks back over her shoulder at Lizzie.

"I did not have the freedom to make those choices...but you do. Don't be afraid to make them."

With one last smile in her direction, Emily nods her farewell, opens the door and disappears inside.

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Once upon a time, two women met on an Iowa farm and shared the stories of their lives across time and space. Through the telling, they grew to understand each other—but more importantly, they came to comprehend themselves.

It was through those tales that one of them—the only one who still could—learned to face her fears, and become the person she had always longed to be. The stories helped to heal her heart, give her courage, and renew her faith—in herself, in her dreams, and in her future.

Lizzie recognized she could write again—it was time. A story had presented itself, yes, but it was hers to choose. The future ahead—as far as it is possible for anyone—was hers to create. The composition of her life was in her hands.

She needed only to address a new audience.

With Jack's death, she had lost not merely her purpose in writing, but the one person for whom she had always written. To continue to write without him—or so she had thought—would have been to deny his importance. To create something in which he would play no part. It would be turning her back on the past.

Yet, she now understood things differently. Her best audience had always been herself.

She was the only one who truly mattered.

Works Cited

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