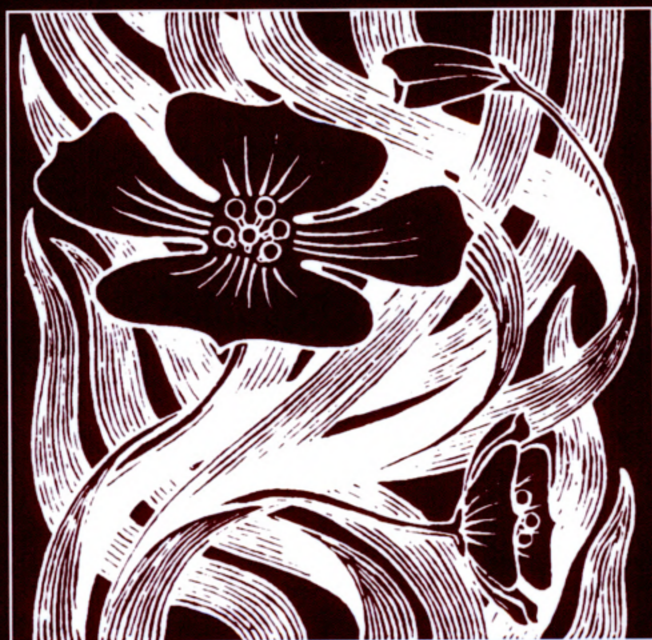
Emily Dickinson

A POET'S GRAMMAR



CRISTANNE MILLER

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Emily Dickinson

A POET'S GRAMMAR

Cristanne Miller

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The poems and letters in this text will be referred to by number (the letter numbers preceded by L) and quoted from Thomas H. Johnson's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955) and *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958). Information taken from Richard B. Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974) will be cited in the text as *Life* (with volume and page number).

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ONE

Letters to the World

> Could mortal lip divine
> The undeveloped Freight
> Of a delivered syllable
> 'Twould crumble with the weight. (1409)

LANGUAGE is poetry, Emily Dickinson said, when it "makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me," when "I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off" (L 342a). According to this definition, poetry reveals itself in the immediate, unambiguous response of a reader to a text. Defining poetry from the perspective of an impressionistic reader is a curious move for any poet, but it is particularly curious for a poet whose own cryptically elusive poems baffle even sophisticated readers. The language of Dickinson's poetry is elliptically compressed, disjunctive, at times ungrammatical; its reference is unclear; its metaphors are so densely compacted that literal components of meaning fade. Yet Dickinson believes that a "syllable" has meaning when it is "delivered"; a word "just / Begins to live" "When it is said" (1212), when it is "made Flesh" (1651) in an act of communication. For the syllables and words of her poems to live, they must speak. One of the primary difficulties for the modern reader of Dickinson's poetry is to understand this tension between the poet's partially articulated desire to speak to an audience, to move her reader, and her largely unarticulated decision to write the riddling, elliptical poetry she does. This tension, however, is at the root of the peculiar urgency in Dickinson's poems. Dickinson writes as she does because of a combination of factors: her belief in the extraordinary power of language, her responses to the language she reads in mid-nineteenth-century America, and her sense of herself as woman and poet.[1] These are the contexts in which I discuss the language of Dickinson's poetry.

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To balance the varying types of information recovered in examining the details of Dickinson's language use, her ideas, and her life in nineteenth-century Amherst, one must employ various methodological strategies. Looking for meaning in a poem's language alone, the reader finds extraordinary multiplicity. The poet's metaphors and extended analogies, her peculiar brevity, lack of normal punctuation, irregular manipulation of grammar, syntax, and word combination all invite multiple, nonreferential interpretations of what she means. Tempering this multiplicity with a historical understanding of the poet's life and the language theories and practice available to her focuses the possibilities of meaning. Taking the further step of reading Dickinson's individual poems as parts of the larger puzzle of her whole creative work more clearly establishes a poem's bounds. This book follows the act of interpretation from unrestricted play with language to play within the overlapping and clarifying spheres of interpretive linguistic, structural, historical, and biographical analysis. I attempt to create a range for the understanding of Dickinson's language strategies and poems that is both focused and multidimensional.

As an example of what I mean by focused and multidimensional, let me read through a poem I shall return to frequently in the course of the book:

> Essential Oils – are wrung –
> The Attar from the Rose
> Be not expressed by Suns – alone –
> It is the gift of Screws –
>
> The General Rose – decay –
> But this – in Lady's Drawer
> Make Summer – When the Lady lie
> In Ceaseless Rosemary – (675)

This poem is, first, about making perfume. A simple reading would be the following: Attar (essence of roses) is expressed by "Screws," that is, a process involving screws, not by natural growth in the sun. The natural or general rose decays, while the rose of perfume outlasts even its maker (or wearer). The connotations of "Essential" and "expressed," however, suggest other readings: the articulate expression of "Essential Oil" (essence of any kind—poetry? love?) requires the transformation of experience into consciousness, or language. The pun in

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express makes it difficult to separate pain ("Screws" of experience) from articulate realization (verbal expression); pain and consciousness may be one. The rose or life that lives only in the sun, unexpressed, does not put forth essence.

In my reading, as in most critical readings of the poem, Dickinson here develops the idea that essence, or poetry, comes only with "Screws."[2] The pain endured in this refining expression compensates its maker by conferring a kind of immortality on her. In the last stanza, essence—whether perfume, a purer soul, or poetry—will outlast its maker, even if it is hidden away from the world. It is like a sachet that scents the underclothes of a "Lady's Drawer" and provides the lingering, underlying scent of her life. The Lady may die, but her expressed essence continues to create, be fertile, "Make Summer." That essence, in turn, can give Attar or underlying scent, meaning, to other lives.

Here Dickinson plays off her century's widespread conception of woman as the ministering angel in the house and of poet as sensitive, suffering soul. The woman's conscious offering of herself to the needs of others, to the "Screws" of omnipresent demand, reduces her selfish or earthly concerns to the point where she becomes pure, essential spirit, the Romantic soul. As the poem also implies, and as one sees in most nineteenth-century fiction, attaining such purity coincides with the woman's death. Just as petals must be crushed to produce essence, the woman's (or poet's) life is crushed through self-sacrifice or suffering to produce her pure soul; and, like a sachet, even in death that soul beautifies or scents all it touches. This poem further implies, however, that the poet (or woman) chooses the conscious suffering of "Screws" over the easy life of "Suns" for the sake of the product (be it poem or healthy family) and of her indirect immortality, even if that immortality is never known beyond the confines of her "Drawer." Because of this choice, the Attar of her life—both as pure soul and as expressed essence—acts ceaselessly in the private sphere of her home, or wherever her self and products are cherished.

By presenting poetic creation metaphorically as the expressing of essence and suggesting a connection between this process and a woman's life or death, Dickinson strikingly anticipates twentieth-century feminist metaphors for female creativity. Using current feminist constructions, Dickinson's "Lady" can be seen as both spiritual and biological producer of essence, and (re)production as an essentially female art and act (although identifying sexuality with "Screws" more closely

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syntactically and metaphorically as her poems—for example, as in an 1868 note (L 324) to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson:

> Going is less, Sister, long gone from you, yet We who take all with us, leave not much behind – Busy missing you – I have not tasted Spring – Should there be other Aprils, We will perhaps dine –
>
> Emily –

or in an 1879 note to a neighbor, Mrs. Henry Hills, written on the death of her infant son: "'Come unto me.' Beloved Commandment. The Darling obeyed" (L 595). The extent of Dickinson's unconventional manipulation of language reveals itself more clearly in the broader context of her ordinary communications with family and friends than in her poems alone.

Not surprisingly for one who was preoccupied with language, Emily was the letter writer of the Dickinson family, taking over her mother's function of keeping her brother Austin informed about the doings at home and passing on her parents' and sister's messages.[5] To Austin, in an early letter, she writes, "At my old stand again Dear Austin, and happy as a queen to know that while I speak those whom I love are listening" (L 45). In this role she commands the attention of her family on both sides: she gives the messages of one and receives at least briefly and at a distance the undivided attention of the other. The power of the letter lies partly in making her central to people she loves, at least "while" she is speaking. Letter writing presumes communication with an audience, and Dickinson is "happy as a queen" while her audience is secure.

The attraction of letters for the poet also lies in the particular kind of communication that writing entails. From her early youth, Dickinson thought of language's power in connection primarily with its written form. Joseph Lyman remembers her early as saying, "We used to think, J . . . when I was an unsifted girl and you so scholarly that words were cheap and weak. Now I dont know of anything so mighty. There are [those] to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting princelike among their peers on the page. Sometimes I write one, and look at his outlines till he glows as no sapphire."[6] One Dickinson speaker dealt "words like Blades . . . / And every One unbared a Nerve / Or wantoned with a Bone" (479), but the written word outlives its dealer:

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A Word dropped careless on a Page
May stimulate an eye
When folded in perpetual seam
The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds
We may inhale Despair
At distances of Centuries
From the Malaria – (1261)

In letters, she comments "a Pen has so many inflections and a Voice but one" (L 470); "We bruise each other less in talking than in writing, for then a quiet accent helps words themselves too hard" (L 332). On reading that George Eliot had died, she writes: "The look of the words as they lay in the print I never shall forget. Not their face in the casket could have had the eternity to me" (L 710). The distance between pen and voice makes the language seem more powerful because it becomes more absolute:

> A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. Indebted in our talk to attitude and accent, there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone – (L 330)

> What is it that instructs a hand lightly created, to impel shapes to eyes at a distance, which for them have the whole area of life or of death? Yet not a pencil in the street but has this awful power, though nobody arrests it. An earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because "unloaded," but that touched "goes off"? (L 656)

Dickinson's "Letter" here is obviously epistolary, but she may also be punning on the alphabetical letter, suggesting there is a "spectral power," a "life-warrant" in any written word. "What a Hazard a Letter is!" she writes late in her life (L 1007).

In her poems, too, Dickinson writes of the letter as a powerful form. Prayers to or thoughts of an absent "Lord" (God or "Master") are letters to him, she writes in "You love the Lord – you cannot see –" (487). In a late fragment, the bliss of exchanging letters raises the human state above the divine: "A Letter is a joy of Earth – / It is denied the Gods – " (1639). In "The Way I read a Letter's – this –" (636),

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she makes reading a letter the most intimate form of communication possible: it requires locked doors, absolute solitude, and as great a distance as possible from others to "Peruse how infinite I am / To no one that You – know –." The speaker of this poem apparently longs to hear from a secret lover (she sighs for "lack of Heaven – but not / The Heaven God bestow –"), but the poem's opening indefinite article—"a Letter"—indicates that all letters require this attention and produce a similar ecstasy, or perhaps even that love letters are the prototype for all letters.[7] In her earliest poem about a letter, the sentimental "In Ebon Box, when years have flown" (169), the speaker's unfinished sentence and closing exclamation imply it is ridiculous to suppose that even old letters are "none of our" continuing, daily "affair!" Because their message is secret (it cannot be overheard); because they partake in the power of all written language; and because they demand the undivided attention of their reader, letters provide a kind of communication somewhere between that of holy prayer and secular seduction.

Dickinson wrote copious letters throughout her life. The conjunction between this written correspondence and her life of *belles lettres* or "letters" is as deep as the homonym itself. In a poem written probably in 1862, one of her most productive years, Dickinson even characterizes her poet/speaker as a letter writer.

> This is my letter to the World
> That never wrote to Me –
> The simple News that Nature told
> With tender Majesty
>
> Her Message is committed
> To Hands I cannot see –
> For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen –
> Judge tenderly – of Me (441)

This poem modestly represents the poet as a neighborly correspondent. She passes on Nature's "Message" or "simple News" in a friendly letter, and we are to judge her "tenderly" for the sake of the original speaker, Nature, not for her gifted translation of nature's truths. The writer disappears behind the supposed transparency of her message. In the fiction of the poem she does not create, she gossips.

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The poet's artlessness is patently a pose here. Few of Dickinson's poems bear any resemblance to "simple News," and she is always, albeit indirectly, a part of the subject of her poems. Nonetheless, the metaphor of poet as letter writer aptly characterizes Dickinson's art, first because of the stylistic similarities of her poems and letters, and second because several of her poems were literally "letter[s] to the World," either mailed alone without other comment or included in more conventional letters. The element of controlled intimacy, and through it controlled power, that written communication provides is a key to Dickinson's method in her poems as it is to her reliance on letters for exchange with her friends.

All epistolary correspondence assumes some kind of separation or distance, whether unavoidable or willed. In the great age of letter writing, Samuel Richardson writes that "the converse of the pen . . . makes distance, presence" and then goes "presence" one further; a letter "brings back to sweet remembrance all the delights of presence; which makes even presence but body, while absence becomes the soul."[8] For Dickinson this is exactly what happens. Distance creates the possibility of real or full presence; absence "becomes" the soul both in flattering it, allowing it to appear at its best, and in giving it the safety and control to appear, to speak without inhibition. Even when her correspondents were within easy visiting range, Dickinson's primary "converse" remained that of the pen.

Despite the claim of her poem on letter writing, "the World" wrote to Dickinson with great regularity and with continued invitations to be more a part of it than she desired to be. For much of her life, Dickinson did not want to see people. Mabel Loomis Todd, who spent hours at the Dickinson house with Austin and Lavinia, and whose affair with Austin had Emily's tacit approval, saw the poet for the first time after her death; yet the two women had spent hours in the same house and exchanged friendly messages for four years.[9] Visitors report coming to see their friend and then speaking to her only from another room or the opposite end of a staircase. Yet the poet carried on a prolific correspondence. According to Sewall, "it is clear that we have only a fraction, and probably a small one" of Dickinson's letters. That small fraction includes ninety-three known correspondents, several of whom she wrote to often and for years (*Life* II, 750–751). Apart from her letters to friends at a distance, Dickinson sent frequent notes to neighbors and almost daily notes across the lawn to Sue or her children, especially after she stopped visiting "The Evergreens,"

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as Austin and Sue's house was called. These letters and notes provide a perfect analogue for the confiding but noninformative voice of Dickinson's poems. In the poems as in life, she is oracularly chatty, a neighbor who invites you in and then speaks to you elliptically from behind her closed door.

Generally, both letters and language help the poet overcome the barriers of separation between herself and her loved ones while yet serving to protect her from immediate or direct intimacy with them. Dickinson wants too much from people and can imagine that she gets what she wants from relationships with them only if she keeps real contact at a minimum. Through letters the poet can control relationships, meeting her correspondents only in an "imaginative" or "aesthetic union," that is, a union that can only with difficulty (or by death) be taken from her because she has constructed it herself through and in language.[10] Even more than letters, poetry allows Dickinson both to express the urgent intimacy she feels and to establish the distance that allows her to maintain control of her actions, if not of her feelings. Dickinson seems intuitively to understand the psychological paradox that encourages least inhibited awareness and expression of feeling when there is least risk her feeling will be acted upon. If she maintains distance between herself and those she loves, she can allow herself to desire them and to express those desires openly. By combining the separation of written communication with the ambiguity of address and metaphor inevitable in verse, Dickinson frees herself for her most profound self-expression.

In practical terms, letters and poems appear to be complementary forms of the same kind of communication for the poet. In some letters Dickinson changes from prose to verse in mid-sentence, as if both were the same medium. For example, she writes to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (L 280):

> I found you were gone, by accident, as I find Systems are, or Seasons . . . Carlo [the poet's dog] – still remained – and I told him –
>
> Best Gains – must have the Losses' Test –
> To constitute them – Gains –
>
> My Shaggy Ally assented –

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Niece." or "Dick – Jim –" to her nephew Ned (L 291 and L 604), everyone knows she is spoofing. At the other end of the spectrum, when a 31-year-old woman who has already written at least 400 poems speaks with a child's overwhelmingly modest hesitation and signs herself "Your Scholar" (L 268, July 1862) in writing to Higginson, who knows her only through her telegraphic letters and through poems she says are not about herself, he is likely to take the pose seriously—which he and generations of readers in fact did. Just as one cannot assume the detail of Dickinson's poetry is autobiographical, one cannot trust that she will represent herself fully or accurately in a letter. Austin remarks about her letters to Higginson, "Emily definitely posed in those letters" (*Life* II, 538), and a family friend comments about the published letters, "she did attitudinize for her own pleasure."[12] Dickinson tells even her closest epistolary friends remarkably little about the events of her life. Death and illness are the only personal events she alludes to with any regularity, and even these are most often elliptically cast.

Dickinson's practice of mailing the same poem in more than one letter is related to her practice of posing. This serves as a warning to her twentieth-century readers that poems mailed in letters may be deceptively personal; they were not conceived solely in the light of a single friendship. In the context of any one mailing, a poem seems to be occasional, referring to particular events and the private relationship between writer and reader. Certainly, some couplets sent with gifts from her garden or kitchen to neighbors were occasional in origin and were used only once (for example, the lines quoted earlier in the letter to Higginson). The poems themselves, however, are a different matter. For example, in a letter probably sent to Samuel Bowles, Dickinson begins with the highly personal: "Dear friend If you doubted my Snow – for a moment – you never will – again – I know . . ." and includes the anguishing poem "Through the strait pass of suffering – / The Martyrs – even – trod" (792). The poet made a fair copy of this poem for herself before she mailed it to Bowles, however, and she mailed another copy of the same poem to Sue.[13] The multiple copies suggest that the poet's primary intent in writing the poem was not to present herself as a martyr to Bowles or to point toward any single occasion, whatever the impetus for sending him the poem might have been. In the letter to Sue, the poem would seem to have a different reference and perhaps significance. The poem expresses a truth that Dickinson values and finds useful. Like any

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poem, it allows her to share her emotional present without revealing its event and detail.

My favorite example of Dickinson's double mailing occurs with a poem (494) found in two clean copies after her death. Both were written on embossed stationery, signed "Emily –," and folded as if they had been put in envelopes. One of the copies begins:

> Going to Him! Happy letter!
> Tell Him –
> Tell Him the page I did'nt write –
> Tell Him – I only said the Syntax –
> And left the Verb and the pronoun out –
> Tell Him just how the fingers hurried –
> Then – how they waded – slow – slow –
> And then you wished you had eyes in your pages –
> So you could see what moved them so –

And ends coyly:

> Tell Him – just how she sealed you – Cautious!
> But – if He ask where you are hid
> Until tomorrow – Happy letter!
> Gesture Coquette – and shake your Head!

The other copy begins "Going – to – Her! / Happy – Letter!" and substitutes "Her" for "Him" throughout.[14] For the poet, the poem exists beyond any personal use she may put it to. It is more general in address and broader in theme than a single mailing or context would signify.

That Dickinson knows the "you" of letters (and mailed poems) may be deceptively personal we see in her caustic response to a letter that Mrs. Holland mailed jointly to her and her sister Lavinia: "A mutual plum is not a plum. I was too respectful to take the pulp and do not like a stone. Send no union letters" (L 321). As reader, Dickinson is unwilling to accept any but the explicitly singular, personal address. A letter's "you" should not be expandable: "A mutual plum is not a plum"; its message, like the plum's fruit, should be only for oneself. As poet, however, Dickinson knows that a poem's audience will always expand and contract; its "you" can be simultaneously as personal as

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Sue next door and as unspecified as the unknown future audience, or as abstract as that same pronoun used in a sentence like "You take three eggs . . ." In her poems, Dickinson would have it both ways: she addresses multiple audiences with the intimacy of speaking privately to a close friend. For the recipient of a poem, it would be difficult if not impossible to detect the fraud.

Dickinson's use of her poems in letters suggests one way in which she may have intended them to be read: they are private messages universalized by a double release from private circumstance. As noted in "This is my letter," their audience is unlimited; the addressee is "the World," although she would speak to its members one by one under the ambiguity of the pronoun "you." Second, the speaker in the poems is more a dramatic than a personal "I." To Higginson, the poet writes of her poems: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person" (L 268). Although we must read this disclaimer skeptically, it carries some truth. Dickinson uses the experience of her life and world to create what Weisbuch has aptly called a "sceneless" poetry. The poems stem from her life, but they do not point to it; there is no direct reference to a particular act of the poet or even necessarily to her real voice in the statement or voice of a poem. Dickinson's "I" is always a character stemming from her experience, and in that way it reveals her character, but no "I" is simply the poet. Nonetheless, patterns of posing reflect the disguised self: Dickinson's varied poses and strategies of indirection are as illuminating of her psychology as a more straightforward account of her life would be. Although the poet's language is not transparent, we do see her in it.

Dickinson is ingeniously redundant in providing explanations for her manipulation of distance and intimacy through her manipulation of language. As seen earlier, she desires the analogous features of controlled distance and ambiguously revealing language both because all communication threatens "life-warrant or death-warrant" and because such concentrated distillation is necessary for "Essential" expression. Protection of the reader from the poet's truth and of herself from her reader's response, however, also figures largely as an explanation for her choices of language. In letters and poems, Dickinson implies that she must speak as she does out of regard for her audience (including herself). Language is so powerful that it cannot be used in undiluted form. Moreover, its shot cannot be precisely controlled. In

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her most famous poem on the subject, Dickinson substitutes "Truth" for "language" as the substance of power, but the effect is identical and the remedy for the danger implies that truth and language are the same.

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
> As Lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind – (1129)

By the logic of this poem, indirection or "slant" in language protects the hearer, and the speaker's or poet's role becomes implicitly maternal. The thoughtful user of language protects her readers/children from frightening truth by talking around it, "easing" the "Lightning" she will "tell." This maternal image of the poet, like the poet as letter writer, presents a strong contrast to the more common nineteenth-century portrait of the poet as a wielder of lightning, like Zeus, Jove, or Thor, whose bolts announce his omnipotence and divinity. Dickinson tells everything slant. Her method of telling does not diminish the impact of her truth, just as "kind" explanations do not diminish lightning's power, but it—like the mother—can prevent readers from seeing the full danger her "Truth" puts them in.

Dickinson also maintained physical and psychological distance from friends and family partly because she required it for her own emotional equilibrium. Even given her tendency to pose and to write in hyperbole, Dickinson's responses to relatively ordinary events show her to be unusually sensitive. For example, about 1878, after nearly twenty years of living next door to her sister-in-law, she writes the following note, perhaps after Sue has returned from a trip: "I must wait a few Days before seeing you – You are too momentous. But remember it is idolatry, not indifference" (L 581). Twenty-five years earlier, when apparently in love with Sue, Dickinson writes:[15] ". . . in thinking of those I love, my reason is all gone from me, and I do fear sometimes that I must make a hospital for the hopelessly insane, and chain me up there such times, so I wont injure you" (L 77). Dickinson avoids

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seeing friends because they mean too much to her, not because they mean too little. In an affectionate letter to Elizabeth Holland, she writes: "Pardon my sanity, Mrs. Holland, in a world *in*sane, and love me if you will, for I had rather *be* loved than to be called a king in earth, or a lord in Heaven" (L 185). If Dickinson cared less about these relationships or needed her friends less, she might be able to allow them closer access to her.

Slanted truth and disjunctive language, like the pretense that she is conveyor of nature's "News," protect the writer from having to bear full responsibility for her messages. Complex and elliptical language is not immediately understood. Readers of Dickinson's poems and letters may doubt all they read in her cryptic ambiguity, and thus not blame the poet for saying what they do not want to hear from her. She is protected from sounding as radical or rebellious as she often is because understanding those aspects of her writing requires some complicity from her reader; since readers must work at understanding her texts, they must therefore to some extent be capable of recognizing a possibility of meaning before they can find it. The differences between late nineteenth century and modern readings of several poems show how extremely reader receptivity may affect the interpretation of a poem. Only after a reader becomes sensitive to, for example, gendered possibilities of meaning are those elements of Dickinson's poems recognized.[16] The opacity and multiplicity of the language likewise prevent—or allow—readers who do not recognize gender as an element of perception to overlook entirely that aspect of her poems while feeling confident about their reading. The poems' linguistic and metaphorical complexity allows Dickinson's readers to see her truths only as they are capable of admitting them.

Because, somewhat paradoxically, distorted language or communication at a distance increases Dickinson's willingness to speak, writing provides an avenue for more intimate and passionate expression than she feels comfortable with face to face. This is a truth all letter writers know. Even more than talking in the dark, writing letters allows private feelings to be articulated in a language half art, half hyperbole, with the assurance that these feelings will be heard and the safety of not being watched while they are spoken. In person, the poet could scarcely have said: "Thank you for having been" (to Mrs. Holland, 1873; L 399); or "I should be wild with joy to see my little lovers. The writing them is not so sweet as their two faces that seem

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TWO

A Grammar

> Reading a poem . . . is often like learning a language. When we learn a language we develop the capacity to have intuitions about its structure. A grammar is a special kind of statement about these intuitions.
>
> James Peter Thorne, "Stylistics and Generative Grammars"

In creating this grammar, I have assumed that the language of poetry differs from other language primarily in its greater use of structural and formal elements to convey meaning. In most ordinary uses, language transmits a message. In poetry, meaning may lie as much in the interaction of semantic content and form as in a message that can be isolated from the poem. The more a poem calls attention to its formal elements by various foregrounding techniques, the more the reader is likely to learn about its meaning from them. If we assume as a norm language that calls no attention to its formal properties by deviating from the conventions of standard communication (that is, an utterance intended solely to communicate a message), then Dickinson's poetry is richly deviant. That there may in fact be no such norm makes Dickinson's poetry no less rich. Because Dickinson's poems contain several constructions that are unusual even in comparison with traditional poetic uses of language, reading them is largely a process of deciphering the connections between what their language says and what it may mean.

In this grammar I describe the striking continuous and occasional features of Dickinson's language use in order to explore how structure and syntax affect meaning in her poems. Because its intent is ultimately interpretive, the grammar does not confine itself to linguistic and structural analysis of the poems; however, the interpretive elements of my analysis are not meant to suggest that mine are the only possible interpretations. The grammar is not a stylistic dictionary; one cannot reductively plug in the suggestive effect of a type of

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language use every time an instance of that use occurs. All units of meaning are subject to the semantic and structural environment of their (con)text. Neither does it resemble grammars of ordinary language: it generates no rules for poetic usage and provides no comprehensive system of linguistic classification for the poet's actual language use. The grammar does analyze tendencies of meaning, following readings of particular poems. In its broadest element, the grammar seeks to reveal the values and assumptions that underlie Dickinson's manipulations of language. Whether these same language features would have similar or identical effects and reflect similar values in another poet's work would have to be the subject of a separate inquiry. My sense is that the features of language use that characterize Dickinson's poetry characterize various poets' language in differing degrees, and thus that my grammar may be useful in explaining the effects of other poets' uses of similar language patterns.

At times the grammar will simply point to extensive work that has been done elsewhere.[1] At other times the grammar departs from strict analysis of poetry and language to provide notes on historical or contemporary uses of language that may have influenced Dickinson's use. I do not discuss Dickinson's vocabulary, even such wonderfully Dickinsonian words as "Circumference" and—her name for herself—"Daisy." Nor do I analyze patterns of metaphorical usage; this subject has provided the basis for volumes of criticism already.[2]

The organizational principle of the grammar is twofold: it introduces categories of language use first on the basis of their importance to Dickinson's poetry generally, and second following the order dictated by a prolonged analysis of the language in the five sample poems, particularly "Essential Oils – are wrung." On a first reading of this poem, or any poem by Dickinson, two qualities of language stand out: it is highly compressed and highly disjunctive. Since compression is the single most characteristic element of Dickinson's poetry, I begin the grammar with a discussion of its patterns and effects.

TEXTS OF THE POEMS

Essential Oils – are wrung –
The Attar from the Rose
Be not expressed by Suns – alone –
It is the gift of Screws –

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The General Rose – decay –
But this – in Lady's Drawer
Make Summer – When the Lady lie
In Ceaseless Rosemary – (675)

8. Ceaseless Rosemary –] Spiceless Sepulchre.

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys
Before they drop full Music on –
He stuns you by degrees –
Prepares your brittle Nature
For the Ethereal Blow
By fainter Hammers – further heard –
Then nearer – Then so slow
Your Breath has time to straighten –
Your Brain – to bubble Cool –
Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt –
That scalps your naked Soul –

When Winds take Forests in their Paws –
The Universe – is still – (315)

5. Nature] substance 12. scalps] peels
9. time] chance 13. take] hold
14. Universe – is] Firmaments – are

This was a Poet – It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings –
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door –
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it – before –

Of Pictures, the Discloser –
The Poet – it is He –
Entitles Us – by Contrast –
To ceaseless Poverty –

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Of Portion – so unconscious –
The Robbing – could not harm –
Himself – to Him – a Fortune –
Exterior – to Time – (448)

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 Sovreign 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 it's 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 – (754)

5. in] the – 18. stir] harm
16. Deep] low 23. power] art

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To pile like Thunder to it's close
Then crumble grand away
While Everything created hid
This – would be Poetry –

Or Love – the two coeval come –
We both and neither prove –
Experience either and consume –
For None see God and live – (1247)

COMPRESSION

More a quality of language than a particular use of it, compression denominates whatever creates density or compactness of meaning in language. It may stem from ellipsis of function words, dense use of metaphor, highly associative vocabulary, abstract vocabulary in complex syntax, or any other language use that reduces the ratio of what is stated to what is implied. Samuel Levin claims that a greater use of compression is one of the three major features differentiating poetic from ordinary language (the other two being poetry's greater uses of unity and novelty).[3] Using Dickinson's verse as his test model, Levin argues that the deletion of part (or parts) of a sentence is frequently nonrecoverable in poetry; the omitted part cannot be recalled from the deep structure of the sentence. In contrast, ordinary speech permits only recoverable deletions. Compression stemming from nonrecoverable deletion—or compression that creates gaps in meaning—particularly distinguishes the language of poetry from that of prose.

To gain the full effect of Dickinson's compression, one must place her poetry in the context of the poetry she was most familiar with and that was most popular in America in her time. Among her American contemporaries, Emerson was relatively concise. In "The Snowstorm," a poem Dickinson borrowed from, he writes:

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,
Arrives the snow, and, driving o'er the fields,
Seems nowhere to alight: the whited air
Hides hills and woods, the river, and the heaven,
And veils the farm-house at the garden's end.

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Third, and partly as a continuation of its implicit grandeur, compression may suggest untold profundity. As in the sibyls' oracles, cryptic revelation seems to hold great meaning.

Compression takes relatively simple form in the primary sample poem, "Essential Oils – are wrung." Here, in the space of six lines, short sentences move the reader from the general "Essential Oils" to the particular, immortal "this" without clarifying reference but also without apparently breaking the continuity of the poem's subject. Note the change in subject that occurs at the beginning of almost every line:

> Essential Oils – are wrung –
> The Attar from the Rose
> Be not expressed by Suns – alone –
> It is the gift of Screws –
>
> The General Rose – decay –
> But this – in Lady's Drawer . . .

First, "Oils" become "The Attar." Such increasing specificity promises that the following lines will explicate the initial aphorism. Instead, however, the poem moves back to abstraction with the aphorism and "It" of line 4. By the convention in English that a pronoun points back to its nearest possible antecedent, "It" refers to "The Attar"; but here the pronoun's prominent place in the line and the preceding dash make it appear broader in reference than "The Attar" suffices to explain. Similarly, "this" in line 6 stands by conventional procedure for "this [Rose]." Yet that reading, too, is insufficient to account for the effect of the open pronoun—as indicated by readings of the poem that find poems and hopes of immortality as well as perfume (the synecdochic Rose) in the "Lady's Drawer." The poem makes its reader perform the interpretive work of connecting individual statements to create a coherent, complex understanding of the poet's theory of the creation of poetry; it provides the bones of minimal thought which we must flesh into personal statement and idea by creating the connective, explanatory links for ourselves.

To summarize, compression allows for protective ambiguity, conveys a sense of the speaker's withheld power, and implies a profundity beyond the obvious import of its message. In "Embarrassment of one another / And God" (662), the poet states: "Aloud / Is nothing that is chief." The "chief" elements of Dickinson's thought often lie in the

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spaces of unspoken meaning between the words she does say. Whether she intends to disguise her own power, to speak subversively, to express structurally her personal ethic of renunciation, to follow a tradition of poetry that speaks with archetypal, not personal, intimacy,[8] or any combination of these, Dickinson's extreme compression largely accounts for the multiplicity of meaning in her poems, and for their provocative, riddling quality.

Recoverable Deletion

Although its pervasiveness and, therefore, its effect are unusual, much of the compression of Dickinson's poetry is grammatical, or recoverable, under the rules of ordinary language use. Such deletion resembles ellipsis in meter: the poet may elide syllables because doing so enables the use of certain metrical effects (most often, maintaining the appropriate pattern and number of syllables in a line) without sacrificing clarity or meaning. Dickinson often deletes an auxiliary verb, a repeated subject or verb, or an implied pronoun to maintain the rhythm of a line, intensify its meaning, or avoid redundancy, without confusing the poem's statement. For example, in the cryptic last stanza of "My Life had stood" (754), much of the omitted language is easily recoverable with a little rearranging of the syntax:

> Though I may live longer than He [may live]
> He must [live] longer than I [live]
> For I have but the power to kill,
> Without [having] the power to die

The difficulty of this stanza stems from its paradox and its inverted syntax, not from compression. Ellipsis of words contributes to the poetic effect of compression by the frequency of its occurrence, not by its novelty.

Nonrecoverable Deletion

Like recoverable deletion, nonrecoverable deletion may serve primarily to increase the density of a poem. It may also affect a poem's meaning more directly, by creating a syntactic or logical ambiguity. In "This was a Poet" (448), for example, there are several ways to recover the

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