

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF EMILY DICKINSON

(1830-1886)

“Her genius was, it remains to say, as erratic as it was brilliant. Her disregard for accepted forms or for regularities was incorrigible. Grammar, rhyme, meter--anything went by the board if it stood in the way of thought or freedom of utterance. Sometimes this arrogance was justified; sometimes not. She did not care in the least for variety of effect--of her six hundred-odd poems practically all are in octosyllabic quatrains or couplets, sometimes with rhyme, sometimes with assonance, sometimes with neither. Everywhere, when one first comes to these poems, one seems to see nothing but a colorless dry monotony. How deceptive a monotony, concealing what reserves of depth and splendor; what subtleties of mood and tone! Once adjust oneself to the spinsterly angularity of the mode, its lack of eloquence or rhetorical speed, its naive and often prosaic directness, one discovers felicities of thought and phrase on every page. The magic is terse and sure.... The lapses and tyrannies become a positive charm--one even suspects they were deliberate. They satisfied her--therefore they satisfy us. This marks, of course, our complete surrender to her highly individual gift, and to the singular sharp beauty, present everywhere, of her personality. The two things cannot be separated; and together, one must suppose, they suffice to put her among the finest poets in the language.”

Conrad Aiken
“Emily Dickinson”
Dial LXXVI (April 1924) 301-08

“She never lost a slight air of struggle; this appeared persistently in her sudden flights to new verbal and tonal keys, in her careless assonances which still seemed half intentional, in the sudden muting of her rhymes.... Her poems concentrate upon a swift turn of inner drama... Her language is bold, humorously and defiantly experimental...yet often she achieved only a hasty anarchy in meaning and expression, and created hardly more than a roughly carven shell.... She seemed to emerge afresh as from a chrysalis in each lyric or even in each brief stanza; and the air was one which had been evident before in the sequence of American expression. Emerson had it...in everything he wrote. Whitman had it, and was aware of the quality: it was that of improvisation. Her poetry has an abounding fresh intensity, a touch of conquering zeal, a true entrance into new provinces of verbal music; but incompleteness touches her lyricism. Often--indeed most often--her poems are only poetic flashes, notes, fragments of poetry rather than a final poetry.”

Constance Rourke
American Humor
(Doubleday/Anchor 1931) 209-12

“Her meter, at its worst--that is, most of the time--is a kind of stiff sing-song; her diction, at its worst, is a kind of poetic nursery jargon; and there is a remarkable continuity of manner...between her worst and her best poems.... ‘*I like to see it lap the miles...*’ The poem is abominable; and the quality of silly playfulness which renders it abominable is diffused more or less perceptibly throughout most of her work, and this diffusion is facilitated by the limited range of her metrical schemes.... The difficulty is this: that even in her most nearly perfect poems, even in those poems in which the defects do not intrude momentarily in a crudely obvious form, one is likely to feel a fine trace of her countrified eccentricity; there is nearly always a margin of ambiguity in our final estimate of even her most extraordinary work...yet she is a poetic genius of the highest order....

Of all great poets, she is the most lacking in taste; there are innumerable beautiful lines and passages wasted in the desert of her crudities; her defects, more than those of any other great poet that I have read, are constantly on the brink, or pushing beyond the brink, of her best poems. This stylistic character is the natural product of the New England which produced the barren little meeting houses; of the New England founded by the harsh and intrepid pioneers, who in order to attain salvation trampled brutally through a world which they were too proud and too impatient to understand. In this respect, she differs from Melville,

whose taste was rich and cultivated. But except by Melville, she is surpassed by no writer that this country has produced; she is one of the greatest lyric poets of all time.”

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 283-84, 298-99

“She liked the common hymn-metres, and the metres of nursery-jingles, which had been deeply ingrained in her mind as a child, and she seemed to take a rebellious joy in violating all their rules, fulfilling the traditional patterns while she also broke them. She was always experimenting with her rhymes and her rhythms, sometimes adding extra syllables to break up their monotony, sometimes deliberately twisting a rhyme, as Emerson did, for the sake of harshness, to escape the mellifluous effect of conventional poems. Many of her pieces were like parodies of hymns, whose gentle glow in her mind had become heat-lightning. For Emily Dickinson's light was quick. It was sudden, sharp and evanescent; and this light was the dry light that is closest to fire.... The turns of fancy that marked these poems were sharp and unpredictable, and yet they were singularly natural,--nothing was forced.

Miss Dickinson lived in a world of paradox, while her eye was microscopic, her imagination dwelt with mysteries and grandeurs... To juxtapose the great and the small, in unexpected ways, had been one of her prime amusements as the wit of her circle... These poems were fairylike in their shimmer and lightness, they moved like bees upon a raft of air; and yet one felt behind them an energy of mind and spirit that only the rarest poets ever possessed... Where others merely glowed, she was incandescent.”

Van Wyck Brooks
New England: Summer 1865-1915
(Dutton 1940) 316-19, 326, 328

“Emily Dickinson’s poems, because they have such tension, are much more authentically in the metaphysical tradition than Emerson’s are. Not, however, that many of his values were not hers also--especially where they concerned the integrity of the mind and the sufficiency of inner resources. Moreover, her ideals of language, indeed her very tricks of phrase, seem [at times] indistinguishable from those of his... She does not have any of his range as a social critic, but her best poems display an excruciated awareness of the matching of good against evil, which was foreign to Emerson’s temperament. Their compressed form resulted from her need to resolve conflicts, and her conceits, unlike many of his, do not dissipate in every direction, since they are subordinated to a central issue.”

F. O. Matthiessen
American Renaissance
(Oxford 1941) 115, 434

“Her mind was charged with paradox, as though her vision, like the eyes of birds, was focused in opposite directions on the two worlds of material and immaterial values. She could express feelings of deepest poignancy in terms of wit. Like Emerson, her preference for the intrinsic and the essential led her often to a gnomic concision of phrase, but her artistry in the modulation of simple meters and the delicate management of imperfect rhymes was greater than his. Her daringly precise metaphors made her seem to Amy Lowell a precursor of the Imagist school.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Like Donne, she *perceives abstraction and thinks sensation*.... Neither the feeling nor the style of Miss Dickinson belongs to the seventeenth century; yet between her and Donne there are remarkable ties. Their religious ideas, their abstractions, are momentarily toppling from the rational plane to the level of perception.... Miss Dickinson’s poetry often runs into quasi-homiletic forms, but it is never didactic. Her very ignorance, her lack of formal intellectual training, preserved her from the risk that imperiled Hawthorne. She cannot reason at all. She can only *see*....

The two elements of her style, considered as point of view, are immortality, or the idea of permanence, and the physical process of death or decay. Her diction has two corresponding features: words of Latin or

Greek origin and, sharply opposed to these, the concrete Saxon element. It is this verbal conflict that gives to her verse its high tension; it is not a device deliberately seized upon, but a feeling for language that sensed out the two fundamental components of English and their metaphysical relation: the Latin for ideas and the Saxon for perceptions--the peculiar virtue of English as a poetic language."

Allen Tate
On the Limits of Poetry
(Swallow 1948)

"Beginning in the 1920's many critics have praised her, along with Whitman, for pioneering in modern poetry. The uses Miss Dickinson made of imperfect rhyme or eye-rhyme, the liberties she took with grammar and rhythm, and, in particular, her habit of packing her lines with cryptic meanings have endeared her to present-day readers. Too, her vivid imagination and her playful spirit made her as fond of poetic conceits as John Donne, idol of the moderns, had been in the seventeenth-century. The resemblance to Donne was almost certainly not the result of imitation: like the best modern poets, Miss Dickinson evolved a way of her own with words.... Emerson...she knew in person and as an author, and [there are] stylistic resemblances between the verse of the Transcendentalist leader and that of Miss Dickinson."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States II, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 177-78

"One notices how many of her poems seem less concerned with a total conception than with expressing a series of staccato inspirations occurring to her in the form of individual words.... Emily Dickinson herself gives us ample warrant for studying her poems a word at a time. Her constant practice of compiling a thesaurus of word choices for a single line, while constituting grave editorial difficulty, is at least an indication that each word was a veritable dynamo of implication and associations.... Her poems indicate that she regarded words as organic--separate little entities with a being, growth, and immortality of their own.... Connotations and symbolic extensions of meaning become inseparable from the word, so that its pronouncement will forever stimulate an entire 'circumference' of meaning."

Donald E. Thackrey
Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry
(U Nebraska 1954)

"Although writers of free verse acknowledge a debt to Emily Dickinson, she wrote in fact almost nothing which today would be called *vers libre*, that is, cadenced verse, as distinguished from that which is metrical or rhymed. Her first attempt to do so in 1862, 'Victory comes late,' seems to have been her last, for it evidently convinced her that such a form was not the medium which best transmitted her mood and ideas... To her contemporaries, and to most critics at the time her poems were first published, her seemingly unpatterned verses appeared to be the work of an original but undisciplined artist. Actually she was creating a new medium of expression.

Basically all her poems employ meters derived from English hymnology. They are usually iambic or trochaic, but occasionally dactylic. They were the metric forms familiar to her from childhood as the measures in which Watt's hymns were composed.... Her great contribution to English prosody was that she perceived how to gain new effects by exploring the possibilities within traditional metric patterns. She then took the final step toward that flexibility within patterns which she sought. She began merging in one poem the various meters themselves so that the forms, which intrinsically carry their own retardment or acceleration, could be made to supply the continuum for the mood and ideas of the language. Thus iambs shift to trochees, trochees to dactyls, and on occasion all three are merged.

At the same time she put into practice her evident belief that verse which limits itself to exact rhyme is denied the possible enrichment that other kinds can bring. Her pioneering is here too in the new order erected on old foundations. She felt no more bound to one kind of rhyme than she did to one meter. She should have realized that she was charting a lonely voyage, and in some degree she did, but her independent nature gave her self-assurance. Her way of poetry was to prove far lonelier than she expected, for it denied her in her own lifetime all public recognition. The metric innovations might have been

tolerated, but in her day no critic of English verse would have been willing to accept her rhymes. Milton had proved that English verse could be great with no rhyme at all. No one in 1860, reader or critic, was ready to let it be supple and varied.”

Thomas H. Johnson
Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography
(Cambridge 1955)

“Her poetry is full of startling figures of speech, familiar words in unfamiliar uses, learned expressions (Noah Webster’s *Dictionary* was one of her favorite books), sudden shifts of tone, metrical irregularities, deliberately imperfect rhymes, and grammatical difficulties. She was quite literally ahead of her time, and she has exerted a considerable influence on American poets of the present century, who have been attracted by her technical restraint, her bold imagery, her experimentation with words and concern for ideas, her cryptic brevity, and her revolt against sentimentality and poetic diction.”

Lillian H. Hornstein, G. D. Percy, Sterling A. Brown, Leon Edel, Horst Frenz, William L. Halstead,
Robert B. Heilman, Calvin S. Brown, William M. Gibson, S. F. Johnson, Napoleon J. Tremblay
The Reader’s Companion to World Literature
(New American Library Mentor/Dryden Press 1956)

“The Dickinson practice was to punctuate by dashes, as if the reader would know what the dashes meant--both grammatically and dramatically--by giving the verses voice. Within her practice, and to her own ear, she was no doubt consistent. To find out what that consistency was, and to articulate it for other readers and other voices, requires more of a system than ever bothered her.... The Dickinson practice cannot be systematized; there is not enough *there*; but with enough intimacy with the poems we can see what sort of system might have emerged...in English poetry it seldom presents itself with such multiplicity of irritation--so much freedom in rearrangement--with such spontaneity left to the reader.... Consider how Emily Dickinson’s poems, all short, have none of the self-modulating advantages of length or any of the certainties of complex overt structure. One exaggerates, but it sometimes seems as if in her work a cat came at us speaking English, our own language, but without the pressure of all the other structures we are accustomed to attend.... The willfulness of her syntax led to irregularities rather than to new orders... One thinks in her of enthusiastic transcendence and of lyric solipsism.”

R. P. Blackmur
“Emily Dickinson’s Notation”
The Kenyon Review 18 (Spring 1956)

“Her style was simple yet passionate, and marked by economy and concentration. Like the later generation she discovered that the sharp, intense image is the poet’s best instrument. She anticipated the modern enlargement of melody by assonance, dissonance, and ‘off-rhyme’; she discovered, as our contemporaries did, the utility of the ellipsis of thought and the verbal ambiguity. Her ideas were witty, rebellious, and original, yet she confined her materials to the world of her small village, her domestic circle, her garden, and a few good books. She possessed the most acute awareness of sensory experience and psychological actualities, and she expressed radical discoveries in these areas with frankness and force.”

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature, 3rd edition I
(Norton 1956-67) 177-78

“Emily could not rationalize in the masculine way. We are not aware of intellectual deficiency in her poems, as we are aware of poetic deficiency in Elizabeth Barrett’s. The latter, educated in a strenuously male discipline, tried to reason like a man. Emily reasoned, or argued, in riddles and paradoxes.... Her wit has been compared to the metaphysical style of Donne; it may also be compared with the gnomic style of Blake. It occurs in her letters and was, according to witnesses, a feature of her conversation.... Emily’s arrival at the truth in this sibylline fashion is not so much irrational as super-rational. She is interested, not so much in a truth for its own sake--she was not a philosopher or a moralist--as in a direct vision of the truth. One might rationalize the vision or intuition after it had occurred, but that was not her business as a

poet. In seeking to understand her poems, which are often highly cryptic, we require intuition rather than reason....

As for the irregularity of Emily's rhymes and rhythms, it is difficult to find any consistent explanation, or any principle in which they can be said to occur deliberately. Emily composed by instinct--which is not to say automatically. She used the basic rhythms of the hymns she had heard from childhood, adapting them to the need of the moment. Her instinct told her that mechanical regularity makes for monotony. Her rhythms, considered as personal variations on a rigid pattern, are to be justified, or found wanting, according to the shapes and sounds of particular poems. To my ear her rhythmic sense is seldom absolutely deficient, often inspired. There is more variety than the formal appearance of the poems would suggest, and a study of the rhythmic variations in any half-dozen of her best poems would reveal considerable subtlety.

Attempts have been made to show that her use of assonance instead of full rhyme is always deliberate artistry. It would be truer to say that, on the whole though not invariably, full rhyme accompanies her moods of confidence, and assonance her moods of uncertainty. But the exceptions are significant. All we can say is that she felt no particular compulsion to find exact rhymes, and that probably assonance also helped her to get away from the mechanical jingle of hymn-forms.... We have to do with a poet of almost total originality, and it is very rarely that originality and formal perfection go together. There is about all original poets--Skelton, Donne, Blake, Hardy, Hopkins--a certain home-made roughness of form which, according to temperament, some will regard as a blessing, and some as a blemish. Ben Jonson regarded Donne's metrical irregularity as a blemish and on the whole posterity has disagreed with Jonson."

James Reeves
Introduction
Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson
(Macmillan 1959)

"Her lyrical notation is so precise, so fine and moves so closely in union with her mind, that she is continually striking out aphorisms, as is usual in mystical writing from Plotinus to Blake. And as her life goes on, everything becomes whittled down, evanescent. Her handwriting becomes a kind of fluid print; her poems become notations; all seems to be on the point of disappearing. And suddenly all disappears. 'She was a visionary,' says Richard Chase, 'to whom truth came with exclusive finality [and] like her Puritan forbears she was severe, downright, uncompromising, visionary, factual, sardonic'."

Louise Bogan
"A Mystical Poet"
Emily Dickinson: Three Views (Amherst 1960)
Richard Wilbur, Louise Bogan, Archibald MacLeish

"As a woman she was well aware that deprivation in life might be one of the pressures that produced art.... But as a poet she knew that words were the only medium of her art, like colors to the painter and notes to the composer.... From the *Bible* she learned among other things, the mode of juxtaposing elemental concrete things with equally fundamental ideas and feelings--grass, stone, heart, majesty, despair. But this method of achieving universality is given novelty by reducing the *Bible's* expansive narrative to startlingly compact lyrics.... Her debt to Shakespeare was just as pervasive and even less visible. Poetic language in mid-nineteenth-century America had been reduced to a relatively flat and nerveless state, but he furnished her with clues for its resurrection....

Dickinson is actually cited as a forerunner of modern poetic usage, but the other devices were part of her practice as well. Substitution of simple concrete terms for the abstract ones actually intended was her strategy for achieving vivid immediacy, and the opposite for giving transcendent value to the homely. Juxtaposition of words out of different connotative spheres she employed for ironic contrast, as with the legal and the amorous, and abrupt changes from one level of discourse to another for rhetorical shock, as from the serious to the comic, from eloquence to bald statement. Close kin to these are her rearrangements of word order to secure emphasis and surprise, deliberately rather than through ineptness, often merely by exaggerating a familiar colloquial usage... No child of the region ever exploited the laconic temperament so

successfully in poetry. In striking contrast with the practice of her contemporaries is the brevity of her own forms, which she celebrated in an aphorism: 'Capacity to Terminate / Is a Specific Grace --' This gift she developed into a highly elliptical style, pruning away all excess in her passion to get down to the clean bones of language....

The prerequisite for mastery, as in all Dickinson's best poetry, was to abandon the cumulative and logical for the tight symbolic structure that was her forte. Closely connected with this was the narrowing of her concern to one emotion at a time....Her best poetry is not concerned with the causes but with the qualities of pain, an emphasis that removes it effectively from the category of the sentimental.... Her own approach at times seems almost clinical, but this is simply the mode she adopted to gain the proper distance between her personal emotions and her art. It separates her sharply from the subjective lyricism of an older tradition and reveals her kinship with the twentieth century. The qualities she sought to fix with greatest precision are its intensity, its duration, and the change it brings about. In several minor poems she used time as a measure of degree in defining the extremity of pain that was her real concern....

It is true that in her later years she indulged her penchant for aphorism in a number of verses that tend to run off into sheer intellectualism, even as some of her earliest efforts had been pure expressions of personal sentiment. Her best poems, however, present their themes in the full context of intellect and feeling, concerned not with exploiting either as such but with rendering the experiences that fuse them both.... 'Like Donne, she perceives abstraction and thinks sensation'.... She was probably the only Anglo-American poet of her century who achieved a fusion of sensibility and thought, attaining 'a mastery over experience by facing its utmost implications'."

Charles R. Anderson
"Words," *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*
(Holt 1960)

"At some point Emily Dickinson sent her whole Calvinist vocabulary into exile, telling it not to come back until it would subserve her own sense of things.... She inherited a great and overbearing vocabulary which, had she used it submissively, would have forced her to express an established theology and psychology. But she would not let that vocabulary write her poems for her. There lies the real difference between a poet like Emily Dickinson and a fine versifier like Isaac Watts. To be sure, Emily Dickinson also wrote in the metres of hymnody, and paraphrased the *Bible*, and made her poems turn on great words like Immortality and Salvation and Election. But in her poems those great words are not merely being themselves; they have been adopted, for expressive purposes; they have been taken personally, and therefore redefined... Far-off words like 'Brazil' or 'Circassian' appear continually in her poems as symbols of things distanced by loss or renunciation, yet infinitely prized and yearned for."

Richard Wilbur
"Sumptuous Destitution"
Emily Dickinson: Three Views
(Amherst 1960)

"The purity and integrity of her best work makes it, in all its uniqueness, the fullest and most direct expression of that egocentrism basic to the mid-nineteenth-century American style.... Emily Dickinson's situation, temperament, and genius made that style peculiarly and directly her own. As a poet she was strong enough to need nothing else.... Above all, it is *her* world, framed by variations on the hymn stanza and seeming-casual rhymes, held together by a variety of subtle internal echoings and parallels, modulated (as the Johnson text now lets us see) by an improvised kind of punctuation (mostly dashes)--all of which lets us sense a quality of vital annotation, as though the moment had to be put down now, the only time it would ever exist for her whose moment it was. She is the Puritan diarist who no longer has to believe that her acutely sensed private experiences are valuable and explicable only as types of something larger than they--something given from above, from outside herself. Which is to say, she is the extreme American Protestant self..."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 174-5, 179-84, 186

“Her use of words as sounds is simple--as simple as the hymnbook from which she borrowed it. Her organization of words as meanings, though sometimes a little difficult, a little too colloquial or not quite colloquial enough, appears to be decipherable in the usual way of prose. Her images are so familiar as to be barely visible or so strangely abstracted as to be almost transparent. And her reader, her first-time reader, often ends, not with a handful of poems, but with a handful of aphorisms such as: good comes from evil, having is taught by having not, suffering enriches. It is only by a second reading--or by another reader--that the aphorisms can be turned back into poems and discovered to mean something very different. And this rereading involves, of course, a reconsideration of those means to meaning--an opening of eyes and ears....

Few poets, Blake among them, have used words as sounds in as primitive a way while using the same words as meanings in a way so far from primitive. And not even Blake pushed his organization of words as meanings as far toward the unsavable as Emily sometimes did in these simple-sounding little tunes.... No, I know no poems in which the double structure of words as sounds and words as meanings--that curious relationship of the logically unrelated--will be found, on right reading, to be more *comprehensive* than it is in the poems of Emily Dickinson. But the same thing is not true of the coupling of Emily's images, either in metaphor or out of it. Here it takes more than a second reading or even a third to demonstrate that there are images at work at all.... The difficulty, I think, has a double cause.

First, the ‘objects’ of Emily's images are often not objects at all but abstractions used as though they were objects--abstractions presented for the eye to see and the ear to hear and the hand to touch. Second, the objects, when they are objects, are often ‘transparent’ in the manner of the visible member of that coupling we call as symbol.... [Her] more characteristic image lets the light through either by pushing the natural object back until it seems to become an abstraction, or by drawing the abstraction forward until it has the look or feel of an object...or by doing both together in a coupling of the two. And it is here, of course, that the difficulty resolves itself. For the moment it becomes apparent that Emily is using objects and abstractions in this inverted and inverting fashion, it becomes apparent that images *are* in constant play and that their coupling is a coupling back and forth, not only between incongruities, but between worlds--the visible and the invisible....

Not only has the poem a *voice* (not all poems do) but it has a particular voice—Emily's voice. And it is by reason of that particularity that these universalizations of Emily's are changed to ‘things’... The poet of the private world is not observer only but *actor* in the scene that he observes. And the voice that speaks in his poems is the voice of himself as actor--as sufferer of those sufferings, delighter in those delights--as well as his voice as poet.... Anyone who will read Emily's poems straight through in their chronological order in Thomas H. Johnson's magnificent Harvard edition will feel, I think, as I do, that without her extraordinary mastery of tone her achievement would have been impossible.... But what then is this tone?... For one thing, and most obviously, it is a wholly spontaneous tone. There is no sense that a subject has been chosen--that a theme is about to be developed....

Few poets and they among the most valued--Donne comes again to mind--have written more *dramatically* than Emily Dickinson, more in the live locutions of dramatic speech, words born living on the tongue, written as though spoken. Few have committed themselves as actors more livingly to the scene. It is almost impossible to begin one of her successful poems without finishing it. The punctuation may bewilder you. The density of the thing said may defeat your understanding. But you will read on nevertheless because you will not be able to stop reading.”

Archibald MacLeish
“The Private World: Poems of Emily Dickinson”
Poetry and Experience
(Houghton 1961)

“The poems are uniformly short, consisting usually of four-line stanzas with very weak rhymes, but no factual description can convey their power. Her diction is taken from the homespun traditions of New England and its Calvinist backgrounds and, probably because of her lack of professional acquaintances, it retains its rude, tough shape. It has been said, with too much frequency, that the ‘awkwardness of her poetry became a metaphor of life itself.’ Nevertheless, the fact is that the power and flashes of illumination, the curious exactness of her best poems indicate a poetic genius of first rank...

Her poetry deals in a terse, aphoristic style with that central problem of romantic art: the relationship between the natural and the spiritual orders of being--in terms of her verse, between the concrete New England world and the divine prototype. This tension is manifest in most of her poems and relates her directly to that tradition of American letters, stated by Emerson and simultaneously revealed by Dickinson and Walt Whitman, which finds current voice in Robert Frost. The modernity of Miss Dickinson's expression is seen in her love of word and image. On the surface such poets seem to be simply realists examining the world, lovers of nature's objects, though not naturalists; but finally the meaning of their poetry is in the spiritual truth it reveals through the natural fact."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"When she describes a hummingbird as 'A route of evanescence': 'Her conscientious Voice will soar unmoved / Above ostensible Vicissitude,' she is using what medieval poets called 'aureate diction,' big soft bumbling abstract words that absorb images into categories and ideas. She does not--like, for example, D. H. Lawrence--try to get inside the bird's skin and identify herself with it; she identifies the bird with the human consciousness in herself. Many of her poems start out by making some kind of definition of an abstract noun....

She has for the most part no punctuation, except a point represented in the Johnson edition by a dash, which, as the editor points out, is really a rhythmical beat, and is of little use in unraveling the syntax. She also shows a curious preference for an indirect subjunctive form of expression that appears in such phrases as 'Beauty be not caused,' and she has what seems a most unreasonable dislike of adding the *s* to the third person singular of verbs. The effect of such sidelong grammar is twofold: it increases the sense of epigrammatic wit, and it makes her poetry sound oracular, as though the explicit statements of which her poetry is so largely made up were coming to us shrouded in mystery. As she says, 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -- / Success in Circuit lies.' The result is not invariably success: sometimes we may agree with enthusiasm...at other times we can only say... 'I don't see at what you're driving, mystic lady'...

Her beat punctuation and offbeat syntax go with an abrupt and colloquial diction. The tang of her local speech comes out in such spellings as 'February' and 'bouquet,' in such locutions as 'it don't' and 'it is him,' and in such words as 'heft' for 'weight'.... When she meets an inadequacy in the English language she simply walks through it, as a child might do.... A similar teasing of the conventional reader's ear comes out in her slanting rhymes, which often have the effect of disappointing or letting down one's sense of an expected sound. At the same time even a conventional reader can see that her commonplace stanza forms could hardly achieve any variety of nuance without some irregularities. This is particularly true of the sinewy rhythm that syncopates against her rigid hymnbook meters and keeps them so far out of reach of monotony or doggerel....

In sophisticated poetry close attention is paid to the sounds of words: vowels and consonants are carefully balanced for assonance and variety, and we feel, when such poetry is successful, that we have the inevitably right words in their inevitably right order. In popular poetry there is a clearly marked rhythm and the words chosen to fill it up give approximately the intended meaning, but there is no sense of any *mot juste* or uniquely appropriate word. In the ballad, for example, we may have a great number of verbal variants of the same poem. Here again Emily Dickinson's practice is the popular, not the sophisticated one. For a great many of her poems she has provided alternative words, phrases, even whole lines, as though the rhythm, like a figured bass in music, allowed the editor or reader to establish his own text....

What we find in Emily Dickinson's poetry, then, is a diffused vitality in rhythm and the free play of a lively and exhilarating mind, crackling with wit and sharp perception. These were clearly the qualities that she herself knew were there and especially prized.... As a poet, she is popular in the sense of being able, like Burns or Kipling or the early Wordsworth, to introduce poetry to readers who have had no previous experience of it. She has on the other hand, a withdrawn energy that makes her almost esoteric, certainly often difficult. In any case she seems, after her early valentines, to have reached her mature style almost in a single bound.... Emily Dickinson is an impressionist in the sense that she tends to organize her visual experience by color rather than outline, and purple, the color of mourning and of triumph [and of

aristocracy and royalty, as in Hawthorne], is the central symbol for her of the junction between life and death.”

Northrop Frye, ed.
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 7-15

“The music of the poet’s lines parallels the handling of her imagery in exquisite modulations of a basic simplicity. Thomas H. Johnson has examined most fully how she used the meter of her church hymnal, most frequently following the common meter of eight and six syllables, but often setting up patterns of long meter (8,8,8,8), short meter (6,6,8,6), common particular meter (8,8,6,8,8,6), and so on. Yet just as she made her individual interpretations and denials of the doctrines of her church, so she did not hesitate to bend the hymn meters to her own idiom. From hymnology and from Emerson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning she again received the hint for practicing inexact rhyme; but until the twentieth century no poet as fully exploited the effects of inexact rhyme as she did. To use ‘After great pain a formal feeling comes’ again as a point of reference, of the six rhymes only three are conceivably exact, the three others (comes, Tombs; round, Ought; Lead, outlived) showing the oblique quality that enhances her poetry.

A third aspect of the poet’s distinction is her rhetorical ability to set in a phrase--sometimes abstract, sometimes metaphorical--her mood and belief. Poem after poem opens with lines that catch the memory... Yet few of her lines, wherever they are in her poems, stand alone. As she linked image with image, sound with sound, and image with sound, so she enriched abstract statements by the whole pattern of the poem.”

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.
Twelve American Writers
(Macmillan 1962) 611-12

“Then there is her ubiquitous and eccentric form of punctuation--the dash. The Harvard edition was the first to attempt a typographical approximation of the curious Dickinson pointing, and it has been a matter of concern to almost all post-1955 commentators. The attempt was necessarily an approximation, for the manuscripts show how varied her use of the dash was--long, short, high, low, slanting up, slanting down. There was sufficient uniformity in the manuscripts, nevertheless, to warrant the attempt. After recovering from the initial shock, many students of her work agree that it was justified and there should be no retreat. Mr. Warren’s suggestion that in future editions all punctuation except periods be omitted would, if adopted, do violence to what now seems to be a clear and indisputable fact of the Dickinson idiom.

Rightly or wrongly, this is the way she envisaged her poems. She could not have used the dashes so often, throughout so much of her career, unless she meant them. Had she published her poems and listened to her editors, she would most probably have modified her procedure, at least to some extent; but this is what we have from her hand, and there seems less point in changing it than in leaving it as she wrote it. The technique is true to her idiom, to the way she thought--tentatively, a little breathlessly. It is also true to her amateurism, a constant reminder that she was not a publishing poet and that she indulged her amateur’s idiosyncrasy to the full.”

Richard B. Sewall, ed.
Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays
(Prentice-Hall, Twentieth Century Views 1963) 3-4, 7-8

“For the sake of such conciseness, monosyllabic and disyllabic words predominate, frequently those of the homespun New England life, of which she was so inseparable a part; broom and bonnet; rut, stile, and overcoat. One fancies a cause and effect between her ever more emphatic solitude, with its consequent silences, and her laconic diction in verse; nothing, *nothing* could be communicated save the kernel of the thought--no rind, no glossy surface. Therefore, like other American writers deprived of the smoothing, standardized influence of the ‘circle’ or of the stings of critical friends, she preserved the stiff, rude edges of her thought; she developed a technique indisputably her own, however much it has puzzled other writers, such as Higginson, or even the determined semi-scientific modern student of poetry.

She omitted conjunctions; used half- and quarter-rhymes; played with the subjunctive mood or with legal phrases; dispensed with agreements of nouns and verbs; cut and clipped her sentences. Thus she was often cryptic—'half-idiotic,' says one impatient, obtuse critic--and she was always on the wing.... Such fleetness she attained by her intense, rapid methods of composition; she strove to capture the telegraphic thought. Moreover, in her half-rhymes, her irregularities of speech and rhythm, her spasmodic quality, she mirrored the incongruities and frustrations of human experience; the awkwardness in her poetry became a metaphor of life itself....

She does little sums of spiritual arithmetic... She is more than a pretty aphorist; she is an interpreter of universal experience.... Emily Dickinson's experimentation, in debt to Emerson, and in love with the image, the word, and learning, anticipates the metaphysical strain in the verse of today. Taken together, their originality heralded afar off new themes, new forms; their verse (and Whitman's) formed the pronaos [the open vestibule of a classical Greek temple] of modern poetry."

Stanley T. Williams
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1963) 910-13, 916

"The excessive and seemingly meaningless dashes in the printed text [is] a matter which had disturbed several Dickinson admirers upon the publication of the Harvard edition, where the dashes as such first appear. All previous editors had 'regularized' the punctuation of the original manuscripts, but Johnson, feeling that the dashes, though 'capricious,' seemed to be some 'visual representation of a musical beat,' transcribed them as an integral part of the verse. And so it is that ever since, and for all that we can now appreciate fully such Dickinson trademarks as her colloquial idiom, her severe paring of her line (even at the expense of 'correct' syntax), her preference for the subjunctive, her intentional misspellings (for the right sound: 'Febuary' for 'February'), even her inconsistent capitalization and line arrangement (as indicating her 'mood of the moment'), still many of us have not yet been able to accept completely what seems to be a matter of sheer laziness, a matter not at all commensurate with this poet's perfectionist spirit—a wilful, sometimes almost perverse scattering of dashes throughout the lines of her verse....

A careful study of the 'punctuation' in the original manuscripts will show, first, a conspicuous absence of semicolons and colons, but a frequent appearance of periods, question marks, and exclamation points; and second, a preponderance of three 'irregular' marks: a horizontal dash (--) ('irregular' because it is obviously not intended as the grammatical break or turn of thought), which may be as short as a period, or standard length, or 'extra-long'; an 'angular' slant (/), which Johnson transcribes as a comma, but which does not have the usual curve to it, and as a comma is often grammatically senseless; and a 'reverse' slant (\), which is the exact reverse of the 'comma' as transcribed by Johnson. These three marks will appear above, at, or below the writing line (as least in the fair copies, where such relative positions are discernible). Occasionally, but rarely, a 'dividing vertical' (I) appears in the middle of a line, and a half-moon mark at a line's end. All the 'punctuation,' then, except for obvious 'chicken scratches,' may be reduced to the three conventional marks of the period, question mark, and exclamation point, and five 'irregular' marks...

A look into almost any popular mid-nineteenth-century rhetorical reader will show these 'irregular' marks as rhetorical or elocutionary symbols meant to direct oral reading of poetry or prose. McGuffey's *Fifth Reader* (1853), Alexander M. Bell's *Principles of Elocution* (1878), and Noah Porter's *Rhetorical Reader* (1837), the last a standard text used at Amherst Academy during Dickinson's attendance there, all show the first four marks as inflectional notations and the last as simply another way of marking the caesural pause (ordinarily indicated by double vertical lines)... Dickinson's 'eccentric' punctuation...is simply meant to direct the reading of her verse.... Her direct experience with literary expressions as a school girl must have impressed upon her the importance of poetry's oral quality.... Public exhibitions of the student's readings were well attended and enthusiastically received by the townspeople... In her second letter to Higginson, enclosing four of her poems, 'rhetorically' punctuated, Dickinson prefaces them by asking her preceptor if she may 'recite now'....

Since the horizontal dash is an elocutionary symbol that may denote pause and emphasis as well as monotone reading, the varying lengths of this dash would seem to indicate corresponding lengths of pause

and/or degrees of emphasis in Dickinson's line. Just so, the varying positions in relation to the writing line of the inflectional marks would seem to direct corresponding changes in voice pitch (as well as inflection and pause), since 'modulation,' or the changing of the voice through its three basic pitches—'low,' 'middle,' and 'high'—is a fundamental principle of elocution. In her apparent concern to let her 'punctuation' function as broadly as possible (in line with the rest of her 'poetic economy'), Dickinson uses the period, the question mark, and the exclamation point both for their rhetorical as well as their grammatical value. And it might be conjectured here that Dickinson's sometimes irregular and inconsistent line arrangement and capitalization could simply be another means of indicating pause (as at least a slight pause is always called for at a line's end) or emphasis...

Briefly then, Dickinson's 'punctuation' may be interpreted as follows: her extensive and predominant use of the horizontal dash (--), in its varying lengths, is meant to indicate emphatic monotone reading with pauses corresponding to the length of the dash. The 'angular slant' (/) is seldom, if ever, the grammatical comma; it is rather the rhetorical symbol for rising inflection as the 'reverse slant' (\) is the symbol for falling inflection. The circumflex indicates a combination of the two inflections (though Dickinson seldom uses this mark). The 'dividing vertical' (again, seldom appearing) indicates a caesural pause. The varying positions of the inflectional marks in relation to the writing line...indicate corresponding changes in vocal pitch (higher, same, lower). 'Conventional' punctuation—question marks, exclamation points, periods—automatically directs inflection along natural speech patterns. All notations and all ends of lines call for at least a slight reading pause. No punctuation indicates that the meaning of the line itself directs the reading. Dickinson seems to consider the comma, semicolon and colon superfluous.

Two poems ["I died for Beauty" and "I heard a Fly buzz"]...give at least a fair introduction to Dickinson's rhetorical punctuation. The first poem, which is carefully wrought on lined paper in the original, shows how the rhetorical marks of inflection vary in length (note the monotone dashes in the last line) and in their position in relation to the writing line to indicate appropriate pause and change in vocal pitch as well as inflection. The second poem shows especially well, I think, how the 'punctuation' can intensify and heighten the whole tone of the poem as a preponderance of monotone dashes directs a solemn delivery exactly controlled, even to the length of each pause."

Edith Perry Stamm
"Emily Dickinson: Poetry and Punctuation"
The Saturday Review XLVI
(30 March 1963) 26-27, 74

"The distinctive qualities of her art: its bold disregard of conventional shapeliness, the surprise of its novel verbal strategies, its seizure of the significant image, its disconcerting integrity in psychological disclosures, its firm control of powerful emotion. Like filings in a magnetic field, those early poems which assert her genius define the emotional contours of the central theme of aspiration...."

In her finest poems the emotional experience reaches an intensity that necessarily reveals at the same time the stylistic control which prevents those feelings from lapsing into intemperance. Her success in confining the centrifugal pressures of emotions within an aesthetic framework represents perhaps her highest achievement as an artist. That achievement of control which would not stifle the intensity she intended to express undoubtedly posed her most challenging problem.... The principal method by which she resolved this problem of control is her absolute distillation of expression, which provides not only a formal control but so closely circumscribes emotions that they cannot trail off into self-indulgence. This ability of extreme condensation attests also to her powers of psychological insight, for with the greatest economy of terms she could reach directly to the core of a particular feeling. This habit of elliptical expression, however, sometimes fragments her compositions....

In the years from 1850 to 1862 she succeeded in refining genuine and effective expressions of feeling from a clutter of commonplace ideas and syntaxes. Perhaps the principal reason for her early success is that she addressed herself again and again to a single theme. The repeated application not only deepened her psychological insight, but allowed her opportunities to pursue a variety of attitudes and to refine her expression. That refinement is evidenced in a wide range of elements, but most obviously perhaps in her imagery and in her prosodic variations on the hymn patterns that provided her metrical base. The

development of irony she was able to maintain effectively through the speaker's vigorously secular attitude and through meaningful manipulations of sound correspondences.

But ultimately the totality of her art in the early years is greater than the sum of the individual elements that go into its makeup. Her expressive skills combined to effect a concision, a specific gravity, as it were, not often encountered in English poetry. Her elliptical expression is all the more remarkable for embodying the complexity which it does. That complexity and the intensity of the feeling with which she informs her best works from this period are, in turn, the more remarkable for being under firm control."

David Porter
"The Early Achievement"
The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry
(Harvard 1966)

"She not only bridged the gap between Edward Taylor and Emerson, she bridged the one between Emerson and Frost--and even, more rarely but distinctly enough--between Emerson and Eliot and Stevens. All this came as her special sensibility responded to her limited experience, and responded chiefly in terms of the *Bible*, Shakespeare, and Emerson. She would have been poorer without Shakespeare, but the *Bible* and Emerson, their conflict and their coherence, were what chiefly shaped her ideas, her language, her sensibility, and even her choice of verse forms.

The 'common meter' which is the basis for almost all her work she adopted from the hymns she was hearing in 'meeting' every Sunday. That the meter and stanzaic form of most of the older hymns was the same as that of the traditional folk ballads and the commonest nursery rhymes was a positive advantage from the Emersonian point of view that was hers by the time she reached poetic maturity.... It was no accident that she turned to the form preferred by writers of hymns and ballads and nursery rhymes--a form debased in our time to being used in advertising jingles--and used it as freely as she felt the occasion demanded. It was a children's form--and she thought of herself increasingly, after she was twenty, as a little girl--or sometimes as a little boy, a little tippler, or even a little gnome. It had the great advantage of not being a 'literary' form--though Wigglesworth had used it, and Bryant occasionally, and Emerson often. It suggested to her not literature but life--her own, for in it the most important things had been said."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 181-89, 192, 200-08, 212-14, 219, 221

"Whereas Whitman and Dickinson turned their backs on the ornate variety of Victorian verse forms and created individual prosodies, Melville set himself to school with traditional metrics... The verses of the retiring Emily Dickinson show more appetite for the grits and quiddities [essentials] of human psychology than do Whitman's paeans."

John Updike
Hugging the Shore
(Random House/Vintage 1984) 100, 115

"Dickinson's sporadic rhymes, flexible metric, and irregular syntax--what John Hollander calls her 'hymnody of the attic'--are features she shares with the poets who succeeded her. The similarity did not go unnoticed. As early as 1914, Harriet Monroe called Dickinson 'an unconscious and uncatalogued Imagiste.' Amy Lowell concurred. Although Dickinson's work was 'considered only as bizarre and not at all important by her contemporaries,' Lowell pronounced hers the 'modern' voice crying out in the literary 'desert' of mid-nineteenth-century American verse....

What must be considered is the vision that gave rise in Dickinson to such linguistic discontinuity, the disruption of the conceptual structures necessary to give order to her world, which her language records. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, in *The Voice of the Poet*, reviews her many oddities: incomplete sentences, ellipses of personal pronouns, relative pronouns, copulas, articles, verbs, as well as inverted or dispersed word order, ambiguous parts of speech, and strained parallel constructions.... Her sentence structures, when they disrupt sequence, do not necessarily signify the timelessness of eternal wholeness. The contrary

is more usual. They reflect, instead, a lost sense of wholeness and consequently a sense of being lost in an extended instant which excludes, rather than includes, all past and future....

Dickinson...repeatedly reaches out toward an encompassing inclusiveness, only to withdraw from the attempt as she realizes the container will not in fact contain. Similarly, she often posits opposites, but rarely synthesizes them in the way of dialectic, so that they remain opposed.... That Dickinson's versification is firmly based in Isaac Watts's *Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs* has been well demonstrated by Thomas Johnson. Dickinson's metric, accordingly, falls into the common meter of alternating eight- and six-syllable lines; the long meter of eight syllables to the line; the short meter of two lines of six syllables followed by one of eight and one of six; and variations upon them traditional to hymnody."

Shira Wolosky
"A Syntax of Contention"
Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War
(Yale 1984)

"Of all poets writing in English in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I judge Emily Dickinson to present us with the most authentic cognitive difficulties."

Harold Bloom, ed.
Emily Dickinson: Modern Critical Views
(Chelsea 1985) 1

"Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are America's nineteenth-century poetic geniuses; separately, they resisted the Anglophilia that had hobbled American verse in genteel forms. Whitman invented American free verse unrhymed and unmeasured; Dickinson invented a free form of England's most common poem, the hymn. Except for a very few experiments, Dickinson wrote in hymn meters all her life, shaping her single form till it responded effortlessly to her intensity of perception and expression....

Dickinson's early poetry, when it is weak, displays hysteria, self-absorption, and a coy whimsicality. To watch her develop as a poet is to see the whimsicality relax, the hysteria become disciplined by intellectual analysis, and the self-absorption strengthen itself into meditation on the human lot. Her irony turns on herself as well as on the universe; her love of paradox deepens... Dickinson's bold calligraphy and her composition by phrase--each marked off by a dash with space before and after--puts emphasis on each stamp or impress of the mind in its analysis of experience. Slant rhymes and an oblique form of expression ensure the oddness of surface in Dickinson's poems; the resonant forms of her language stand for her conviction of the baffling eccentricity of life and thought.

Though her poetry reflects her reading of many English poets (Shakespeare, Keats, Mrs. Browning) and of Emerson, she is the least imitative of American poets, turning the discursive certainties of writers and philosophers alike into her own preferred thematic form, the riddle. Enigma is her genre; and pain her topic; her anatomy of psychic skepticism remains one of the great documents of American nineteenth-century attitudes. The best measure of her success in verse is the way in which her poems make themselves remembered. Without any effort on our part to memorize them, we find we cannot forget her lines. Her fame has continued to grow. Her poems, once rewritten by others for public acceptability, are now known in their full power and self-assertion."

Martha Banta
The Harper American Literature II
(Harper & Row 1987) 186-88

"By aligning herself with several of the most progressive religious stylists of the day, Emily Dickinson was launching a silent but major rebellion against the doctrinal tradition valued by her father... Wadsworth's style was adventurous...with a tendency to the startling and paradoxical. Emily Dickinson once praised his 'inscrutable roguery' and seemed to copy his impish style in many poems..."

One of the most common errors of critics has been to focus closely on a handful of poems that seem to have gender-specific meaning. The fact is that Dickinson's poetry is most characteristic of her era's best women's writing in its extraordinary flexibility of tone, its refusal to rest comfortably in individual gender

roles, its magnificent assertion of creativity through the fabrication of dense imagery, its gaps and indirections and its gender-specific quest for a gender-free reality.... If the women authors of the literature of misery sought to establish an artistic middle ground between the effete Conventional and the openly feminist, so Emily Dickinson explicitly rejected both the 'Dimitry Convictions' of traditionalists and the public methods of the women's rights advocates.... Dickinson's irregular prosody, with its ubiquitous dashes and caesura, shows rhythm and structure being shattered by the pressure of vehement emotion brought under severe restraint, a stylistic feature common in the literature of misery."

David S. Reynolds
Beneath the American Renaissance
(Harvard 1989) 24, 32, 35-37, 339, 412, 414-17, 420, 423, 437

"Like Walt Whitman, another rejecter of custom and received wisdom, Dickinson experimented radically with poetic style. Unlike Whitman, she condensed; where he was discursive and celebratory, she was taut, terse, suggestive, oblique.... She rearranged word order, ignored rules of punctuation, evaded rhyme schemes even while suggesting them, and in general tried to ventilate and open up language to the point where it approximated her own sense of the layered complexity of matter, spirit, and consciousness."

Peggy McIntosh & Ellen Louise Hart
The Heath Anthology of American Literature I
(D. C. Heath 1990) 2843-44

"Dickinson uses the dash to fragment language and to cause unrelated words to rush together; she qualifies conventional language with her own different strains; and she confounds editorial attempts to reduce her dashed off jottings to a 'final' version. Not only does she draw lines through her own drafts but also through the linguistic conventions of her society, and her challenges to God are euphemistic imprecations against conventional religion. Even the allusion to the Morse alphabet is not entirely irrelevant: through her unconventional use of punctuation, particularly the dash, Dickinson creates a poetry whose interpretation becomes a process of decoding the way each fragment signals meaning.

Dickinson's transition from a dominant use of the exclamation mark to a preference for the dash accompanied her shift from ejaculatory poems, which seem outcries aimed with considerable dramatic effect at God or others, to poems where the energies exist more in the relationships between words and between the poet and her words. In this intensely prolific period, Dickinson's excessive use of dashes has been interpreted variously as the result of great stress and intense emotion, as the indication of a mental breakdown, and as a mere idiosyncratic female habit. Though these speculations are all subject to debate, it is clear that in the early 1860s Dickinson conducted her most intense exploration of language and used punctuation to disrupt conventional linguistic relations, whether in an attempt to express inexpressible psychological states or purely to vivify language."

Kamilla Denman
"Emily Dickinson's Volcanic Punctuation"
The Emily Dickinson Journal (1993)

"She leaves out helping verbs and connecting words; she drops endings from verbs and nouns. It is not always clear what her pronouns refer to; sometimes a pronoun refers to a word which does not appear in the poem. At her best, she achieves breathtaking effects by compressing language. Her disregard for the rules of grammar and sentence structure are one reason twentieth century critics find her so appealing; her use of language anticipates the way modern poets use language. The downside of her language is that the compression may be so drastic that the poem is incomprehensible; it becomes a riddle or an intellectual puzzle....

Dickinson consistently uses the meters of English hymns. This is undoubtedly one reason why modern composers like Samuel Barber and Aaron Copland have set her poems to music and why the dancer Martha Graham choreographed them as a ballet.... She uses the dash to emphasize, to indicate a missing word or words, or to replace a comma or period. She changes the function or part of speech of a word; adjectives and verbs may be used as nouns; for example, 'We talk in *careless* -- and in loss'; *careless* is an adjective used as a noun. She frequently uses *be* instead of *is* or *are*. She tends to capitalize nouns, for no apparent

reason.... She does use rhyme, but she uses forms of rhyme that were not generally accepted till late in the nineteenth century and are used by modern poets... Dickinson uses *identical rhyme* (sane, insane) sparingly. She also uses *eye rhyme* (though, through), *vowel rhymes* (see, buy), *imperfect rhymes* (time, thin), and *suspended rhyme* (thing, along)."

Lilia Melani
Brooklyn College
academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english (2010)

Her revolutionary style is so unique it can be recognized at a glance: brevity, extreme compression, frequent unconventional capitalization and abundant use of dashes that fragment sentences and isolate words and phrases, increasing their connotations and multiplying implications. She "Distills amazing sense / From ordinary Meanings" (#448)—"distills," intending to intoxicate and even to induce a vicarious ecstasy. Her dashes contribute to a breathless tone, cerebral drama and great intensity. By gnomic compression she produced the rare gems reprinted in anthologies. At the same time, it must be acknowledged, in many of her 1,775 poems meanings are so indefinite, cryptic and generalized they dissipate into vagueness, sometimes even disintegrating the poems. Most common readers of her entire collection would be bewildered by many--perhaps most--of her poems, while to literature teachers they are an inexhaustible source of challenges to explication and of opportunities for projection.

When she capitalizes abstractions and concrete nouns, they become personifications and symbols--such as Death and the Door--turning poems into little allegories that link to others in the collection. "Tis this expands the least event / And swells the scantest deed" (#1665). Her archetypal symbolism is a powerful shorthand: "Within my Garden, rides a Bird / Upon a single Wheel" (#500): the Garden is the heart, the bird embodies the Sky and transcendent consciousness, and the Wheel is round and whole and rolling through Eternity, her monadic symbol of the divine Cosmos moved and directed by the forces of God--comparable in meaning to the Tibetan prayer wheel. Often she makes it impossible to determine the antecedents of pronouns so as to increase the possible implications. For example, "He" may refer to a loved one, to Christ, to God, to her own masculine side, etc. As we consider possibilities, the poem enlarges: "So infinite our intercourse / So intimate, indeed" (#1721).

Many of her poems render extreme states of consciousness with exquisite precision and sensitivity, such as "There's a certain Slant of light" (#258) and "After great pain, a formal feeling comes" (#341). Her poems are extremely diverse as expressions of sensibility, including wit, riddle, humor and precise renderings of animals infused with her feelings about them, expressions of her at-one-ment with Nature--even "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (#986). Her greatest poem according to consensus, "Because I could not stop for Death" (#712), implies an afterlife. However, Postmodern readers have identified in particular with her poems expressing religious doubt and an existential confrontation with nothingness, including "I heard a Fly buzz when I died" (#465)--actually proof of the afterlife since the speaker is dead--and "The Tunnel is not lighted" (#1652). Her thinking in absolutes and ambiguities is similar to Melville.

TRANSCENDENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

See also "Model of Metaphors."

1. QUEST INTO THE WILDERNESS (psychological individuation toward wholeness or search for salvation): "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea, / Past the houses -- past the headlands -- / Into deep Eternity" (#76). Her archetypal symbolism here is identical to that in *Moby-Dick*. "Wild nights -- Wild nights!" (#249) may have been inspired by *Wuthering Heights*. She expresses a Jungian concept of individuation in "Each Life Converges to some Centre -- / Expressed -- or still -- / Exists in every Human Nature / A Goal" (#680). She is Emersonian in her lines "Growth of Man -- like Growth of Nature -- / Gravitates within... / Each -- its difficult Ideal / Must achieve -- Itself" (#750). As Thoreau exhorts us to do in the climax of *Walden*, Dickinson too proclaims "...Explore thyself! / Therein thyself shalt find / The 'Undiscovered Continent'" (#832). And finally, like Melville, she was on a spiritual quest all her life: "Not knowing when the Dawn will come, / I open every Door" (#1619).

2. SENSE OF NEED TO SAVE ONE'S SOUL, PSYCHE OR SELF, rather than rely on a "Papa above!" (#61); "So instead of going to Heaven, at last -- / I'm going, all along" (#324). However, the virginal Dickinson here feels no need to save herself. The opposite of Hawthorne in this respect, there is almost no recognition of evil in her poems, except perhaps for Death in the existential ones, because most of them express a pure transcendence. Though at times her head has doubts, she feels immortal, she feels absolutely deserving of immortality and she anticipates a Heaven in an afterlife while also experiencing earth (mainly her garden) as a heaven in this life. "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (#280) dramatizes the death of a nonbeliever as a plunge into levels of Hell as in Dante.

3. CHRIST-EVOKING FIGURE AS EXEMPLAR: "Christ will explain each separate anguish / In the fair schoolroom of the sky" (#193); "If Jesus was sincere -- / I need no further Argue" (#432); "As well as Jesus?" (#456); "Oh Jesus -- in the Air -- / I know not which thy chamber is -- / I'm knocking everywhere" (#502); "I argue thee / That love is life -- / And life hath Immortality -- / This -- dost thou doubt -- Sweet -- / Then have I / Nothing to show / But Calvary" (#549). At the end of "My Faith is larger than the Hills" (#766) she chides herself for limiting her faith in Christ.

4. SPIRITUAL GUIDES: Christ the exemplar; various male tutors, ministers and love interests; and all the animals in her poems are guides, especially the butterfly: "Butterflies from St. Domingo / Cruising round the purple line -- / Have a system of aesthetics -- / Far superior to mine" (#137); "God is a distant -- stately Lover -- / Woos, as He states us -- by His Son --" (#357); "The Butterfly upon the Sky, / Is just as high as you and I, / And higher, I believe" (#1521).

5. SOLITUDE & SOUL-RELIANCE: "The Soul selects her own Society -- / Then -- shuts the Door -- / To her divine Majority -- / Present no more --" (#303); "The Soul that hath a Guest / Doth seldom go abroad -- / Diviner Crowd at Home -- / Obliterates the need" (#674); "Through the solitary prowess / Of a Silent Life" (#750); "...that profounder site / That polar privacy / A soul admitted to itself -- / Finite Infinity" (#1695).

6. CONFRONTATION WITH ULTIMATE TRUTH, OFTEN IN THE FORM OF A WILD ANIMAL: Her existential confrontations with Death and Nothingness as "ultimate truth" express occasional religious doubt: "Looking at Death, is Dying" (#281); "I suppose it will interrupt me some / Till I get accustomed -- but then the Tomb / Like other new things -- shows largest -- then -- / And smaller, by Habit" (#426); "The tunnel is not lighted / Existence with a wall / Is better we consider / Than not exist at all" (#1652). "I heard a Fly buzz when I died" (#465) dramatizes doubt but affirms an afterlife with a voice from beyond the grave, as does "Because I could not stop for Death -- / He kindly stopped for me" (#712).

Dickinson's faith is revived not by a "confrontation," but by empathy, by spiritual identification with Nature--becoming the animals she observes, just as Ishmael by the end of *Moby-Dick* has become a whale-man. A very large majority of the animals in her poetry can fly, evoking transcendence in the Sky. Johnson cites 22 poems about birds, as well as poems about specific varieties: Blue Bird, Blue Jay, Bobolink, Crow, Hummingbird, Lark, Oriole, Owl, Robin (10 poems), Woodpecker and Wren. There are also 19 poems about bees, one or two each about Bat, Beetle, Cricket, Firefly and Fly. She includes Insects, Rat, Snake (3 poems) and Spider (5 poems). The most significant animal, the Butterfly is the subject of 11 poems.

7. SPIRITUAL DEATH & REBIRTH IN SUBMISSION TO HIGHER POWER: "To fight aloud, is very brave -- / But *gallanter*, I know / Who charge within the bosom / The Cavalry of Woe" (#126); "I should have had the Joy / Without the Fear -- to justify -- / The Palm -- without the Calvary" (#213); "Step martial -- at my Crucifixion" (#295); "We -- who have the Souls -- / Die oftener -- Not so vitally" (#314); "Each bound the Other's Crucifix...through Calvaries of Love" (#322); "In gentle deference to me -- / The Queen of Calvary" (#348); "'Twas just this time, last year, I died" (#445); "I died for Beauty" (#449); "There's Triumph in the Room / When that Old Emperor -- Death -- / By Faith -- be overcome" (#455); "One Calvary.../ As many be / As persons" (#553); "A piercing Comfort it affords / In passing Calvary" (#561).

In Christian tradition the butterfly symbolizes the soul because of its transformation (spiritual death and rebirth), beauty, form, and elevation into the Sky, like Hawthorne's butterfly in "The Artist of the

Beautiful.” As Dickinson says, “The Butterfly upon the Sky, / ...Is just as high as you and I, / And higher, I believe” (#1521); “My Cocoon tightens... / I’m feeling for the Air” (#1099); “Then Sunrise kissed my Chrysalis” (#598); “From Cocoon forth a Butterfly / As Lady from her Door” (#354).

8. ATONEMENT WITH NATURE AND/OR GOD: “Since I am of the Druid” (#44); “I -- a Sparrow -- build there / Sweet of twigs and twine / My perennial nest” (#84); “The bee is not afraid of me. / I know the Butterfly. / The pretty people in the Woods / Receive me cordially” (#111); “Oh Sacrament of summer days” (#130); “With a Bobolink for a Chorister -- / And an Orchard, for a Dome” (#324); “The Branches on my Hand / Are full of Morning Glory” (#470); “A Solemn thing within the Soul / To feel itself get ripe” (#483); “An Abbey -- a Cocoon” (#517); “Several of Nature’s People / I know, and they know me -- / I feel for them a transport / Of cordiality” (#986); “...Earth is Heaven” (#1408); “The foliage of the mind / A Tabernacle is for Birds / Of no corporeal kind” (#1634).

Her atonement is total as she accepts all animals, even appealing to “Papa above” on behalf of the Rat (#61). Contrary to the symbolism in the *Bible* and to the traditional iconology of Christianity expressed in Hawthorne, Dickinson recognizes the dangers of the Snake (#1740) yet is cordial to it as one of “Nature’s People” (#986). And she admires the Spider (#605 & #1138) “as an Artist” (#1275).

9. RECONCILIATION OF OPPOSITES THAT INTEGRATES HEAD AND HEART, PURITAN & PASTORAL VALUES IN SYNTHESIS: “I climb the ‘Hill of Science,’ / I view the landscape o’er; / Such transcendental prospect, / I ne’er beheld before!” (#3); “I went to Heaven – ‘Twas a small Town” (#374); “Forever -- is composed of Nows – ‘Tis not a different time” (#624); “Renunciation is a piercing Virtue” (#745); “The heart is the Capitol of the Mind” (#1354); “Betrothed to Righteousness might be / An Ecstasy discreet” (#1641); “On my volcano grows the Grass” (#1677); “Vesuvius at Home” (#1705) .

10. CIRCULAR, CYCLICAL & SPIRAL IMAGERY: “Slow tramp the Centuries, / And the Cycles wheel!” (#160); “My little Circuit would have shamed / This new Circumference” (#313); “I turned my Being round and round” (#351); “The fine...unvarying Axis / That regulates the Wheel” (#451); “Within my Garden, rides a Bird / Upon a single Wheel” (#500); “When Cogs -- stop -- that’s Circumference -- / The Ultimate -- of Wheels” (#633); “Each Life converges to some Centre” (#680); “The Depth upon my Soul was notched - - / As Floods -- on Whites of Wheels” (#788); “And now, among Circumference -- / Her steady Boat be seen” (#798); “A Route of Evanescence / With a revolving Wheel” (#1463); “Circumference thou Bride of Awe” (#1620); “He carries a circumference / In which I have no part” (#1663).

11. INNER LIGHT: “The Poets light but Lamps -- / Themselves -- go out” (#883); “‘Tis Compound Vision -- / Light -- enabling Light” (#906); “But Light a newer Wilderness / My Wilderness has made” (#1233); “What Soul survive? / By her exacting light” (#1414); “Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light” (#1564). Dickinson did not experience the inner light of mystics such as Taylor, Woolman and Whitman. If she had, she would not have worried so much about Immortality. Her transcendentalism has a stronger intellectual component than that of the mystical Whitman, who was predominantly pastoral. Jonathan Edwards is the rare case of a mystic with an inner light who was also a great intellectual and scientist.

12. NUMINOUS EVOCATION OF SPIRIT: “A Grant of the Divine -- / That Certain as it Comes -- / Withdraws -- and leaves the dazzled Soul” (#393); “Then Sunrise kissed my Chrysalis” (#598); “The gleam of an heroic Act / Such strange illumination / The Possible’s slow fuse is lit / By the Imagination” (#1687). Many of her poems are numinous to the extent the reader is able to experience them in her transcendental mode. That usually starts with the intellect puzzling out meanings and then progresses by rereading until the poem sinks into the subconscious and reading it engages the whole psyche. Paradoxically, rereadings of Dickinson’s poems increase their spontaneity.

13. MYSTERY, INTENSITY, ECSTASY: “A something in a summer’s noon -- / A depth -- an Azure -- a perfume -- / Transcending ecstasy” (#122); “A transport one cannot contain / May yet a transport be -- / Though God forbid it lift the lid -- / Unto its Ecstasy!” (#184); “Inebriate of Air -- am I -- / And Debauchee of Dew” (#214); “An Unconcern so sovereign / To Universe, or me -- / Infects my simple spirit / With taints of Majesty” (#290); A perfect -- paralyzing Bliss” (#756); “Her travels daily be / By routes of

ecstasy" (#1513); "Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy" (#1640); "A single Dram of Heaven!" (#1725).

14. TRANSCENDENCE OF TIME & SPACE: "I walked -- as wings -- my body bore -- / The feet -- I former used -- / Unnecessary -- now to me -- / As boots -- would be -- to Birds" (430); "Time feels so vast that were it not / For an Eternity -- / I fear me this Circumference / Engross my Finity" (#802); "I'm feeling for the Air -- / A dim capacity for Wings / Demeans the Dress I wear" (#1099); "Exhilaration is the Breeze / That lifts us from the Ground / And leaves us in another place" (#1118); "Perceiving thee is evidence / That we are of the sky" (#1643); "No friend have I that so persists / As this Eternity" (#1584).

15. SENSE OF PARADOX: "Is Bliss then, such Abyss" (#340); "Captivity is Consciousness -- / So's Liberty" (#384); "A Death blow is a Life blow to Some" (#816); "Experience is the Angled Road / Preferred against the Mind / By -- Paradox" (#910); "What Exultation in the Woe" (#1642).

16. INEFFABILITY: "But who am I, / To tell the pretty secret / Of the Butterfly" (#173); "Nature is what we know -- / Yet have no art to say" (#668); "We blush, that Heaven if we achieve -- / Event ineffable -- / We shall have shunned until ashamed / To own the Miracle" (#1258).

17. HOLISTIC PERCEPTION: "For each ecstatic instant / We must an anguish pay / In keen and quivering ratio / To the ecstasy" (#125); "For Beauty,' I replied -- / 'And I -- for Truth -- Themselves are One'" (#449); "The Negro never knew / I -- wooed it -- too -- / To gain, or be undone -- / Alike to Him -- One" (#452); "Called to my Full -- The Crescent dropped -- / Existence's whole Arc, filled up" (#508); "Circumference be full" (#515); "You left Boundaries of Pain -- / Capacious as the Sea -- / Between Eternity and Time -- / Your Consciousness -- and Me" (#644); "I could not care -- to gain / A lesser than the Whole" (#655); "For two divided, briefly, / A cycle, it may be, / Till everlasting life unite / In strong society" (#1743).

18. HARMONIOUS VISION OF LIFE UNIQUE IN ITS TOTALITY, UNIVERSAL IN ITS ARCHETYPAL COMPONENTS: "No wedlock -- granted Me -- / I live with Him / I hear His Voice -- / I stand alive -- Today -- / To witness to the Certainty / Of Immortality" (#463); "Nature is Heaven...Nature is Harmony -- / Nature is what we know" (#668).

Michael Hollister (2014)