

*The Language of Emily
Dickinson*

Edited by

Nicole Panizza

Coventry University

and

Trisha Kannan

Independent Scholar

Series in Literary Studies



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I would also like to thank Dr. Robyn Bell, whose course on Dickinson's fascicles during my time as an undergraduate in the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara changed my life. Prior to Dr. Bell's class, I had an image in my head of Dickinson as a hoarder of poems; her texts were so difficult because they were akin to conversations Dickinson was having with herself. I did not know about the fascicles, nor did I know that she circulated hundreds of poems with her letters. I had never conceived of attending graduate school until that class, and then I could not imagine doing anything else. At the time, Dr. Bell knew much more about academia than I did, and she expressed concern that graduate school would "ruin" Dickinson for me, which very nearly was the case. But the people at EDIS revived and sustained me, particularly Eleanor Heginbotham, Alexandra Socarides, Martha Nell Smith, and Emily Seelbinder. Marianne Noble and Dan Manheim spent considerable time offering feedback on an early version of my Fascicle 30 essay, and I am eternally grateful. As Martha Ackmann writes in *These Fevered Days: Ten Pivotal Moments in the Making of Emily Dickinson*, "There is no doubt she is a towering poetic voice. But there's something else about her too. Emily Dickinson reminds us what it's like to be alive" (xxiii). The goal of this collection is to clarify Dickinson's language, yet her allure goes beyond writing memorable, captivating, powerful poems; there is something indescribable and indecipherable about her work that calls to us and keeps us coming back for more.

Introduction

This collection brings together renowned and independent scholars who are captivated by the ways in which Emily Dickinson used words. The authors revel in the difficulty of her language, in its component parts, its visceral effects, its sounds and flavors. The essays delve into a variety of subjects centered around how Dickinson manipulated language, providing fresh insight and new ways of thinking about a poet who has been at the center of the American literary canon for more than a century. One need not be a Dickinson expert to appreciate this collection, however. The writers translate Dickinson's difficulty into language that is accessible and informative for advanced scholars and general readers alike.

Cynthia L. Hallen, associate professor of linguistics at Brigham Young University and creator of the invaluable *Emily Dickinson Lexicon*, opens the collection with her essay "Dickinson's Breath of Life." An in-depth exploration of Dickinson's language features, this chapter seeks to explain how Dickinson's linguistic choices created such powerful poems. Hallen analyzes the role of direct quotation, lexical collocates, nouns, person names, kennings, and metonymy in Dickinson's work. The result is a better understanding of how Dickinson achieved her goal of creating living verses that breathe vital light and love into all who read them.

Nicole Panizza, distinguished pianist and assistant professor of music at Coventry University, explores Dickinson's relationship to music in "'Syllables of Velvet, Sentences of Plush': Emily Dickinson as Polyglot." Exploring Dickinson's musical background and deciphering the pivotal place of music in Dickinson's artistic process as only a musician could, Panizza argues that Dickinson is a polyglot, a person with knowledge of and the ability to move between multiple languages. Dickinson was not an "industry professional," of course, but she was an accomplished pianist with a deep affinity for the sounds, sensations, and understanding that only music could bring. Panizza also provides a fascinating look at the intersections between Dickinson and jazz, detailing how contemporary musicians find inspiration in Dickinson's work.

Holly Norton, author of the poetry collection *Letting Go* and professor of English at the University of Northwestern Ohio, explores the connections between nineteenth-century poetry and twentieth-century rap lyrics in "The Notorious E.E.D.: Rap in the Poems of Emily Dickinson." Norton focuses on the work of the Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac to show thematic similarities to Dickinson regarding death, the afterlife, and the power of poetry. Norton recognizes the disparities in the lives of Dickinson and rappers such as the

Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac, but her articulation of the ways in which their poetic ideas intersect provides an enlightening new way of thinking about the poetry of Emily Dickinson and the transcendent power of language.

Trisha Kannan, writer, editor, and independent scholar, contributes to the growing body of fascicle scholarship in “‘Some seek in Art –’: Language and Literary Influence in Fascicle 30.” By closely analyzing the poems Dickinson placed in Fascicle 30, Kannan locates specific correlations to the work of John Keats that have remained unexamined. In particular, Kannan explores how the fascicle contains “echoes,” to borrow Elizabeth Petrino’s apt term, of several of Keats’s poems, including “Nature and the Poets,” “Fancy,” “Fairy Song,” “Bards of Passion and of Mirth,” “Ode to a Nightingale,” and “To Autumn.” Observing these echoes reveals thematic strains that Dickinson shared with Keats about the power of art, poetic inspiration, and the joyful and painful events of human life.

Following the approach of Dickinson editors and scholarship of the past few decades, this collection renders Dickinson’s manuscripts into print without too much editorial intrusion, which means Dickinson’s misspellings and grammatical errors have been left as they are without the addition of *sic*. The editors believe Dickinson does not need to be “fixed” and that her poetry simply wouldn’t be the same if she had not decided that “upon” should be spelled “opon.”

Chapter 1

Dickinson's Breath of Life

Cynthia L. Hallen

Brigham Young University

Abstract

Emily Dickinson lived in the noon of a philological renaissance that inspired several nineteenth-century scholars and authors to think of human language as an organic manifestation of human life. Her awareness of the life of language is apparent in the first letter she sent to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, in which she asked: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" (L260, 15 April 1862). This essay documents how the poet's verses are alive lexically and semantically. Scholars have explored Dickinson's style, grammar, biblical allusions, classical strategies, cognitive patterns, elliptical constructions, and rhetorical figures. This essay considers additional language features that enable Dickinson's words to breathe distinctly, including collocations, etymologies, merisms, kennings, pairs, proper nouns, quoted material, word frequencies, and webplays between Dickinson's diction and Noah Webster's dictionary.

Key words: philology, language features, webplay

Emily Dickinson lived in the noon of a philological renaissance that inspired several nineteenth-century scholars to think of human language as a vital and living manifestation of Nature. In an 1851 essay on the distinction of words, English philologist Richard C. Trench wrote that words have "a body and a soul." Scholars like Trench believed that human language developed in an "organic" way and that the tree of language was a natural outgrowth of word roots (Gura 117–118). The organic image of language as a living tree growing up from life-giving word roots influenced New England literary authors and poets (Gura 138–141), including Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. Thoreau wrote that a written word "is the work of art nearest to life itself" that may not "only be read but actually breathed from all human lips" (355). Whitman wrote that the etymology of words is "the history of Nature . . . and of the organic Universe;" he believed that words become vitalized "in the mind that enters on their study" (572). In one of her verses, Dickinson asserted

that a word “begins to live” when it is spoken (Fr278),¹ and in another poem she wrote that “a Vital Word / Came all the way from Life to me” (Fr996).

Emily Dickinson’s awareness of the vitality of language is apparent throughout her poems and letters. In the first letter she sent to scholar Thomas W. Higginson, she asked, “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” (L260, 15 April 1862). She continued that if Higginson were to reply that her words “breathed,” her gratitude would be “quick,” an adjective that Noah Webster defined as “living” in the etymological sense and “speedy” in the derivative sense.² For Dickinson, words were vibrant and immediate; they had “an existence, a power, an autonomy of their own” (Sewall 77). More than 150 years later, scholars such as Erika Scheurer attest to the immediacy of language in Dickinson’s poetry. Her poems are still alive with words that breathe “distinctly” because of the “Cohesive” language choices in her “loved Philology” (Fr1715).

Dickinson would have learned about the importance of living language as a student in the Classical track at Amherst Academy. In his rhetoric textbook, Samuel Newman explained that a good writing style depends on the quality of “vivacity” and declared that a “happy choice of words” is the key to achieving liveliness in language (164). Newman elaborated on effective word choice, stating that vivacity implies that “thoughts are exhibited with distinctness before the mind of the reader” (164). Writers may achieve vivacity by using “specific” words and phrases that “convey a more full and distinct meaning to the mind” than that which is conveyed by generic terms (164). He went on to identify several more strategies for achieving vivacity: language figures, unusual word orders, elliptical omissions, special sentence structures, verb tense changes, and direct quotations in narration (165–178).

Whether intentionally or instinctively, Dickinson employed many of Newman’s vivacious language strategies in her poetry. For example, she incorporated direct quotation of published materials into the fabric of her verse, and she used seven kinds of quotations for various functions: to punctuate dialogue, to show emphasis, to highlight figurative usage, to foreground humor, to identify literary allusions, to mark names, and to quote herself. Dickinson used single or double quotation marks in 223 out of 1,789 poems; the usage is most frequent in her earlier poems from 1850–1862. The most frequent function of quotation marks was for direct quotation of literary works, many of which are Biblical allusions. The second-highest category of quotation usage was for dialogue, and the third-highest was for emphasizing a

¹ See also L379.

² *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* (EDL), <http://edl.byu.edu/webster/term/1301652>.

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