

Dickinson's Prosodic Music: Subtlety and Exuberance

La música prosódica de Dickinson: sutileza y exuberancia

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Abstract: This essay explores Dickinson's prosodic music by evidencing its expressions of subtlety and exuberance. The essay unfolds in four steps. The first step finds the poet's prosodic music in distinctive word arrangements with these three features: interlaced phonic echoes, the rhythms of short-lined verse where rhyme marks stanzas, and the motions of intonation. The second step instances Dickinson's prosodic subtlety in one of her envelope poems, "A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring" (Fr1545B). The third step identifies Dickinson's prosodic exuberance in two of her bee poems, "There is a flower that Bees prefer" (Fr642) and "I suppose the time will come" (Fr1389). In this step, we discern a hermeneutic key to Dickinson's lyric art: when a sound in the world catches her ear, the poet's prosodic music intensifies to reflect her enchantment. The essay's last step applies the hermeneutic key to a superlative sound in Dickinson's poetry, that of the wind in "Of all the Sounds despatched abroad" (Fr334).

Keywords: Dickinson; prosody; sound; textual scholarship; hermeneutics.

Summary: Introduction. Prosodic Subtlety. Prosodic Exuberance. Superlative Sound. Conclusion.

Resumen: Este trabajo analiza la música prosódica de Dickinson y pone de relieve la sutileza y la exuberancia de sus expresiones poéticas. El trabajo se articula en cuatro partes. La primera parte sitúa la música prosódica de Dickinson en las secuencias léxicas que la caracterizan con estos tres rasgos: ecos fonémicos entrelazados, el verso de arte menor y la línea melódica de la entonación. La segunda parte muestra la sutileza prosódica que se da en uno de los poemas redactados en el interior de un sobre: "A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring" (Fr1545B). La tercera parte destaca la exuberancia prosódica que aparece en dos de los poemas que evocan el sonido de las abejas: "There is a flower that Bees prefer" (Fr642) y "I suppose the time will come" (Fr1389). En esta parte, se pone al descubierto una clave hermenéutica en la poesía de Dickinson: cuando un sonido le llama la atención, su música prosódica se intensifica para reflejar su propio deleite personal. La última parte del trabajo aplica la clave hermenéutica al análisis de un sonido supremo en la obra de Dickinson: el del viento en "Of all the Sounds despatched abroad" (Fr334).

Palabras clave: Dickinson; prosodia; sonido; crítica textual; hermenéutica.

Sumario: Introducción. La sutileza prosódica. La exuberancia prosódica. El sonido supremo. Conclusión.

For Virginia Wilson Simons (1925–2021).
Amor matris et filii.

INTRODUCTION

In about the second half of 1863, Emily Dickinson dashed off, as if in a moment's thought, an aphoristic lyric in a single quatrain:

What I can do – I will –
Though it be little as a Daffodil –
That I cannot – must be
Unknown to possibility –
(Fr641)¹

The delight of this aphoristic lyric is that it consoles those who strive to do more than they are able to do. Even if what we can do is as “little as a Daffodil,” that will be enough. Accepting this, we resolve to do what we can. Nothing else is known “to possibility.”

The delight of the lyric's notional claims is enhanced by its prosodic music. Dickinson sets in the single quatrain two polymetric couplets, marked at their start by the parallel syntax and the polarity of “What I can do” and “That I cannot.” The first couplet rhymes “do – I will” with “Daffodil,” a comic mosaic rhyme, and unites an iambic trimeter with an iambic pentameter, testing the limits of short-lined verse. The second couplet rhymes “be” with “possibility,” marking the limits of being, and ties an iambic trimeter to an iambic tetrameter, in standard short-lined verse. The syllables of “possibility,” outdoing in splendor the prior monosyllables, three disyllables, and the trisyllabic “Daffodil,” fall easily into the sway of the line and draw the lyric to a close.

The present essay explores Dickinson's prosodic music in its subtlety and exuberance. I take Dickinson's prosody to entail the phonemes of

¹ The following abbreviations are used to refer to the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson: Fr (R. W. Franklin's edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (1998); citation is by poem number) and L (Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward's edition of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1958); citation is by letter number).

rhyme and other echoes, the syllables of rhythm and meter, and the phrases of intonation, tied to a speaker's thought and often deep emotion. Given these elements of prosody, Dickinson's prosodic music arises in distinctive word arrangements that show three features: interlaced phonic echoes, the rhythms of predominantly short-lined verse where rhyme marks stanzas, and the motions of intonation, set within (end-stopped) or falling across (enjambéd) verse lines. To adduce the poet's prosodic subtlety, I read one of her envelope-poems, "A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring" (Fr1545B). To evidence prosodic exuberance, I read two of her bee poems, "There is a flower that Bees prefer" (Fr642) and "I suppose the time will come" (Fr1389). In these poems, we discern a hermeneutic key to Dickinson's lyric art. When a sound in the world catches her ear, the poet's prosodic music intensifies to reflect her enchantment. The essay's last step applies the hermeneutic key to a superlative sound in Dickinson's poetry, that of the wind in "Of all the Sounds despatched abroad" (Fr334).

1. PROSODIC SUBTLETY

In about 1882, and in one of what Marta Werner calls "Dickinson's Envelope-Poems," composed on the inside of a cut-open envelope bearing the name of the poet's sister Lavinia, Dickinson wrote "A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring" (Fr1545B).² As we examine the digital image of Dickinson's manuscript, the open envelope looks like an arrow pointing to the right, the arrow's tip marked by the stain of the glue on the envelope's flap, with neat script in pencil moving in the same direction.³ The cumulative effect of viewing the manuscript is one of dual forward motion. The large motion of the arrow frames the small motion of the script. We do not readily suspect that an underlying prosodic design may guide the words inscribed on the paper.

In *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (1998), R. W. Franklin sets the autograph manuscript in a single polymetric octave:

² See Werner's essay "Itineraries of Escape: Emily Dickinson's Envelope-Poems". For another study of Dickinson's use of envelopes as writing surfaces, see Mitchell's *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts* (192–215).

³ See the image of the autograph of "A pang is more conspicuous in spring" (Amherst College Archives & Special Collections, Box 2, Folder 31, Amherst MS 109) in the *Emily Dickinson Collection*, Amherst College Digital Collections, file no. 3765.

A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring
 In contrast with the things that sing
 Not Birds entirely – but Minds –
 And Winds – Minute Effulgencies
 When what they sung for is undone
 Who cares about a Blue Bird's Tune –
 Why, Resurrection had to wait
 Till they had moved a stone –
 (Fr1545B)

In the layout of the poem here, there is a transcriptional ambiguity in line four. Dickinson seems to write “Minute Effulgencies And Winds –,” rather than “And Winds – Minute Effulgencies.” The first of these two readings gives an eye rhyme of “Minds” with “Winds” that follows the opening couplet rhyme of “Spring” with “sing.” Thomas H. Johnson, Dickinson’s first variorum editor, chose the first of the two readings. In *Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them* (2016), Cristanne Miller, Dickinson’s most recent editor, agrees with Franklin in choosing the second reading, and helpfully notes the crux: “For lines 3 and 4, ED wrote ‘Effulgen-cies’ on two rows of print, with ‘cies’ following the words ‘And Winds –,’ as though she first wrote ‘but Minds / And Winds’ and interlined ‘Minute Effulgencies’” (786n148). Franklin and Miller seem to focus on the capitalization of “And.” In Dickinson’s habits of inscription, “And” would only be capitalized in verse-initial position. Johnson solves this problem by silently emending “And” to “and.”

The prosodic subtlety of “A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring” only begins with this crux, which opens the Pandora’s box of Dickinson’s transcription in print. I do not want to inflame the already bitter debate over the transmission of Dickinson’s verse. The questions that editing Dickinson raises tend to have more than one answer, and these answers vary depending on the manuscript studied. In “Ghosts of Meter,” Christina Pugh is perhaps most insightful when she articulates “Dickinson’s poetics of metrical undecidability” (14). I believe Domhnall Mitchell’s *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson’s Manuscripts* (2005) is the most convincing study of Dickinson’s habits of inscription. Mitchell focuses on a range of envelope writings, among them “Through what transports of Patience” (Fr1265; c.1872), and finds that “the poem contains a variety of material, metrical, and aural codes that together point to a design which may or may not correspond to the layout of the original” (205). The

metrical and aural codes in Dickinson's habits of inscription explain Franklin's layout of "A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring" in a single polymetric octave.

What, then, of the prosodic subtlety in Franklin's layout of the poem? "A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring" thematizes a pain that stands out amid the songs of springtime. The pain is announced by the opening iambic pentameter verse, resonant with interlaced phonic echoes: "A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring." Other phonic echoes arise in "Minds – / And Winds," "sung . . . undone," and "a Ble Bird's Tune."⁴ In polymetric reduction, the octave's verse lines move subtly from the opening pentameter to iambic tetrameter, only to end with a closing iambic trimeter, "Till they had moved a stone." Rhyme becomes more subtle as the octave ends. The initial "Spring" / "sing" couplet sets off the alternate, slant rhyme of "Tune" with "stone." In its pun on *tombstone*, a sign of permanence, the closing rhyme suggests the permanence of song. And the poem's intonational phrases subtly infuse its meanings. The verse "Who cares about a Blue Bird's Tune" disrupts, in its interrogative syntax, the declarative intonation of the lines before. Just after the question, the speaker's ponderative "Why," which stands in the octave just below "When" and "Who," is a single tone unit, and the speaker after seems to reason that if faith in Resurrection had to wait until an angel moved a stone, then belief in the bluebird's lasting song would depend on less.⁵

If the envelope-poem "A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring" exhibits prosodic subtlety, it also evidences prosodic exuberance. What are we to make, for example, of the lexically recondite, luxuriant syllables in "Minute Effulgencies"? These six syllables fall easily into the sway of the iambic verse, and the phrase refers to minor flashes of splendid resonance. The flashes owe to "the things that sing," these "things" anticipate "When what they sung for is undone," and they include the poet, among those "Not birds entirely – but Minds – / And Winds." In other envelope-poems, there are similar moments of exuberance, as in "Glass was the Street – in Tinsel Peril" (Fr1518; c.1880), where "Tinsel Peril" alone—a figure for the danger after an ice storm in Amherst—has a falling, disyllabic ring, and where the sounds of children sledding lead to an evocation of sound

⁴ I bring out the interlaced phonic echoes in Dickinson's prosodic music here and below by italicizing and underlining the letters that stand for the phonemes heard in proximity.

⁵ The speaker alludes to Matt. 28.2, where "the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door" of the sepulchre where Jesus lay buried.

vanishing: “*Shot the lithe Sleds like Shod vibrations / Emphacized and gone.*” We also find in the envelope-poems a rare, for Dickinson, heroic couplet: “In this short Life that only lasts an hour / How much – how little is within our power” (Fr1292; c.1873). To adduce such prosodic exuberance elsewhere, in a diachrony that goes from the early 1860s to the early 1880s, I read below two of the many Dickinson poems that refer to the sound of bees.

2. PROSODIC EXUBERANCE

Dickinson’s bee poems are legion, numbering at least ninety-seven. Among these, the sound of bees stands out in twenty-three and is figured variously as “A Witchcraft” (Fr217A; c.1861), “A dateless – Melody” (Fr302; c.1862), “a Dower of Buzz” (Fr909; c.1865), “a Chant” (Fr979; c.1865), and in this latter poem, “a Tune” to rhyme with “Noon!” Together with the late envelope-poems, the two bee poems discussed here, written over the course of thirteen years, span two of the poet’s compositional phases and show, in their distinctive word arrangements, her prosodic exuberance.

About 1863, in the compositional phase when Dickinson carefully made fair copies of her poems on lightly ruled stationery that she later sewed into booklets, and just after she inscribed the aphoristic lyric with which we began, “What I can do – I will,” the poet wrote “There is a flower that Bees prefer” (Fr642).⁶ The flower the bees prefer is never named, but it is “the Purple Democrat” that blooms before June, lasts through the summer until the autumn frost, and in other human attributes, is modest, brave, and female. In *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1890), the poet’s first editors, Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, titled the poem “PURPLE CLOVER” (85), and in *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*, Judith Farr sees it as “Dickinson’s encomium to the clover” (131).⁷ With the same rhyme of “Tune” with “Noon!” (Fr979) that we have just noted, and bringing to mind the “Blue Bird’s Tune” that we have also seen above, the penultimate stanza of “There is a flower that Bees prefer” rhymes the plenitude of “Noon” with a bee’s “Tune” for the female clover:

⁶ For digital images of the Dickinson autographs, see the *Emily Dickinson Archive*, file nos. 12175391–93. The images of “There is a flower that Bees prefer” are incomplete but do include the stanza on which I focus.

⁷ Dickinson’s first editors and Farr draw on the fact that the poet often expressly relates bees with clover, namely in Fr17, 92, 244, 304, 979, 983, 1297, 1358, 1562, 1650, 1779.

Her Public – be the Noon –
 Her Providence – the Sun –
 Her Progress – by the Bee – proclaimed –
 In sovreign – Swerveless Tune –
 (Fr642)

This short meter stanza instances Dickinson's prosodic exuberance. The stanza enacts its own "sovreign – Swerveless Tune," a song so supreme it rules the stanza's sounds, and never straying from the iambic 6686 design, keeps them moving in a rising rhythmic groove. The distinctive word arrangement and interlaced phonic echoes in "sovreign – Swerveless Tune" at once name the sound of the bee, praise the female clover, and figure the poet's own prosodic music. The stanza's verse design, moreover, is clearly marked at both ends of its verse lines. At their beginnings, the anaphora "Her Public," "Her Providence," "Her Progress" foregrounds the short meter design, while other phonic echoes bind "Public," "Providence," and "Progress" to the enhanced "proclaimed." At their ends, rhyme aurally marks the verse lines and multiplies the poem's larger *abxb* scheme. The envelope rhyme of "Noon" with "Tune" encloses two other rhymes that stem from it: the slant, couplet rhyme of "Noon" with "Sun," and the slant, alternate rhyme of "Sun" with "Tune." These rhymes all converge in the noun "Tune," an unassuming sign of music. Intonational phrases, staying within the borders of the verse lines, give declarative certainty to the speaker's praise of the clover, to the bee's tune, and to the poet's own prosodic music.

Thirteen years later in about 1876, and in the very different compositional phase when Dickinson "largely stopped making fair copies" (Miller, *Reading in Time* 180) of her poems, wrote in a less careful hand on all sorts of found or preserved paper (as in the envelope-poems we have discussed), and did not even keep copies of many poems that she sent to others, Dickinson wrote "I suppose the time will come" (Fr1389), another poem to evoke the sound of bees.⁸ As R. W. Franklin notes in his description of the autograph manuscript, Dickinson drafted the poem "in pencil on [the back of] an old invitation [she had received] from George

⁸ "We have 119 of Dickinson's poems written after 1865," Miller notes, "only because she mailed them to people who kept them, not because she preserved copies herself" (*Reading in Time* 8).

Gould to a ‘Candy Pulling!!,’ sent about 1 February 1850” (1214).⁹ The sound of the bee in the poem is delightful when the speaker imagines a moment in the spring to come when “the Bee be booming”:

I suppose the time will come
Aid it in the coming
When the Bird will crowd the Tree
And the Bee be booming –

I suppose the time will come
Hinder it a little
When the Corn in Silk will dress
And in Chintz the Apple

I believe the Day will be
When the Jay will giggle
At his new white House the Earth
That, too, halt a little –

(Fr1389)

This common measure poem also instances Dickinson’s prosodic exuberance. A lyric on the motion of the New England seasons, the poem figures spring with “the Bird” and “the Bee,” summer with “the Corn in Silk,” autumn with “the Apple,” and winter with the snow on the “new white House the Earth.” The speaker’s place and moment in the cycle of the seasons may be Amherst in late autumn. This would explain the refrain and incremental repetition that tie the notionally *less* certain “I suppose the time will come” (the first verse line in stanzas one and two) to the notionally *more* certain “I believe the Day will be” (the first verse line in stanza three).

The delightful aural hyperbole of “the *Bee be booming*”—where we might expect a hum, we hear a boom—is only the most arresting of the poem’s interlaced phonic echoes, which arise as well in “*Tree . . . Bee be,*” “*Hinder . . . little . . . Silk . . . Chintz,*” and the internal rhyme of “Day” with “Jay.” Apropos “the Bee be booming,” there are no other occurrences

⁹ For digital images of both the autograph and the invitation (Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Box 3, Folder 77, Amherst MS 240), see “George Gould letter to Emily Dickinson,” *Emily Dickinson Collection*, Amherst College Digital Collections, file no. 12708.

of *boom* in Dickinson's poetry, although there is a hyperbolic *bomb* when a bee "emits a Thunder – / A Bomb – to justify" (Fr622; c.1863). In a striking onomatopoeia, "the Bee be booming" gives a hermeneutic key to Dickinson's lyric art: when a sound catches the poet's ear, as in the poems we have discussed above ("Not Birds entirely – but Minds – / And Winds – Minute Effulgencies," "a Blue Bird's Tune," "Sleds like Shod vibrations," a bee's "sovereign – Swerveless Tune"), her prosodic music intensifies to reflect her enchantment. This hermeneutic key is significant to interpreting Dickinson, for as Pugh finds, "it is impossible to overstate the role that sonic values play in the genesis and instantiations of her poems" ("Criterion for Tune" 66).

"I suppose the time will come" also reveals with architectural clarity that as a poet Dickinson thought in short-lined, rhymed stanzas. The stanza gave her formal stability, an extant prosodic template in which to risk and to articulate her distinctive word arrangements. As Cristianne Miller observes, "stanzas gave force and shape to [the poet's] thought through their anticipated rhythmic and syntactic closure—even when altered, or forestalled by enjambment" (*Reading in Time* 74), hence letting Dickinson "take on profound or risky meditations as enabled by meters and stanzas that allow formal without philosophical or logical conclusion" (186). The stanza also provided what Debra Fried calls an "Echo Chamber," a prosodic space, built on phonological principles, in which the elements of speech inscribed in Dickinson's verse—the phoneme, the syllable, and the phrases of intonation—resound. To evidence her argument that "Stanzas serve as muse, blueprint that gets the poem built" (62), Fried reads Dickinson's "Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre" (Fr778; c.1863), finding that "the whole poem is a meditation on the mobile mutualities of a created world, the stanza being another instance of these qualities" (60).

In "I suppose the time will come," the refrain and incremental repetition that we have noted—the twin "I suppose the time will come" turns into "I believe the Day will be"—foreground the poem's 7676, catalectic stanzas, which lack offbeats at the ends of their odd verse lines. Several other crisscrossing patterns also highlight the trochaic common measure design. The parallel, opposed imperatives "Aid it in the coming" and "Hinder it a little," for instance, stand in the same position in stanzas one and two, as do, in the verse lines just after, the anaphoric "When the Bird will crowd the Tree" and "When the Corn in Silk will dress." Stanza three plays with the expectations that these two patterns raise by moving forward its anaphoric, "When the Jay will giggle," and by setting its

imperative, “That too, halt a little,” at the poem’s end. This shift of the last imperative aligns the poem’s midpoint and end in the phrase “a little,” and thus neatly divides the poem in two, as the slant rhymes show: “coming” with “booming,” “*little*” with “Apple,” “giggle” with “*little*.” This division reflects the poem’s dual thought—it is half belief, and half desire. In the intonation cued by sentence type, the speaker’s three imperatives voice this desire and offset the declaratives of her belief in the motion of the seasons. The first imperative, “Aid it in the coming,” points to the speaker’s love of spring and wish that it arrive. At the poem’s midpoint, the second imperative, “Hinder it a little,” reveals her love of summer and desire that it stay. At the poem’s end, the last imperative, “That too, halt a little,” records the speaker’s love even of winter, “When the Jay will giggle.”

Dickinson’s prosodic music is exemplary in the two bee poems above, and it is a distinguishing feature of her lyric art. Consider the poem, written between the two above and also evoking the sound of a bee, that opens, “Of *Silken Speech* and *Specious Shoe* / A *Traitor* is the *Bee*” (Fr1078B; c.1865). Rising in 86 iambic common measure, these verse lines bear a distinctive word arrangement enhanced by interlaced phonic echoes. The issue of what is distinctive to Dickinson’s poetry is crucial to an understanding of her lyric art. In “Dickinson and the Ballad,” Cristianne Miller ends by saying that the poet’s “greatness emerges from her pleasure in her era’s popular and common forms as much as from the distinctiveness of her ear and imagination” (53). Earlier in the same essay, Miller finds Dickinson’s verse distinctive in its adoption of the ballad’s “colloquial voice to present the perspectives of irreverent, ironic, highly educated, and skeptical as well as naïve and implicitly rural or untutored speakers” (33). And “Dickinson’s verse is distinctive from that of her peers . . . in its concision, and in the frequency and extremity of its manipulations of irregular form” (46).

Miller pursues these conclusions in *Reading in Time*, where she brings the distinctiveness of Dickinson’s verse consistently into focus, as when identifying “continuous characteristics, like Dickinson’s compressed syntax, disruptive use of dashes, wide-ranging registers of diction, and use of radically disorienting metonymy and metaphor” (6). Other distinguishing features are “epistemological and syntactic openness, experimentation with metrical norms, inclusion of variant words on fair copies, and revision over the course of several years” (10), along with speakers who often “represent both their own reflections and poetry itself as the products of intense curiosity, experience, playful or crafty thinking,

and of luck, not of genius or extraordinary creativity" (86). And in its lyric forms, "Dickinson's poetry marks the culminating peak of experiment with stanzaic and metrical structures in short-lined verse popular during this period" (1), for "no other poet has manipulated its forms in more strikingly various ways, with greater sensitivity to the possibilities of short-lined expressivity, or perhaps with greater patterned irregularity" (80).

In view of these conclusions, it is important not to oversimplify Dickinson's prosody. I believe, however, that across these varying lyric forms there is a unifying style, a distinctive setting of interlaced echoes in filigrees of phonemic music, and that the poet's desire for these echoes guides her word selection. Consider, for instance, in one thread of its occurrence, the prosodic music in collocations with the adjective *cool*: "While cool – concernless No – // Nods from the Gilded pointers – / Nods from the Seconds slim" (Fr259; c.1861); "But, most, like Chaos – Stopless – cool – / Without a Chance, or spar" (Fr355; c.1862); "Your Breath – has chance to straighten – / Your Brain – to bubble cool" (Fr477B; c.1862); "Icicles upon my soul / Prickled Blue and cool" (Fr493; c.1862); "Vitality is Carved and cool – / My nerve in marble lies" (Fr1088). Or alternatively, witness these other cardinal examples of Dickinson's prosodic music, over more than two decades: "When night – descending – dumb – and dark" (Fr199; c.1861); "And so of Wo, bleak dreaded – come" (Fr341; c. 1862); "'Twas Noon – without the News of Night" (Fr703; c.1863); "But Certainties of Sun – / Midsummer – in the Mind" (Fr757; c.1863); "And so I bear it big about / My Burial – before" (Fr1061; c.1865); "A Wind that woke a lone Delight" (Fr1216B; c.1871); "August the Dust of that Domain" (Fr1385; c.1875); "Shame is the shawl of Pink / In which we wrap the Soul" (Fr1437; c.1877); "Afflictive is the Adjective / But affluent the doom" (Fr1541; c.1880); "The Moon upon her fluent Route / Defiant of a Road" (Fr1574; c.1882).

In the interlaced phonic echoes, rhythms in short-lined, rhymed verse, and motions of intonation that are the features of Dickinson's prosodic music, these sequences bear distinctive arrangements of words. Given the prosodic subtlety and the exuberance that we have adduced above, and in view of the hermeneutic key that we have discerned, whereby a sound in the world catches the poet's ear, and her prosodic music intensifies to reflect her enchantment, we move in this essay's last step to a superlative sound in Dickinson's poetry, the sound of the wind, one of the "Minute

Effulgencies” of “the things that sing / Not birds entirely – but Minds – / And Winds.”

3. SUPERLATIVE SOUND

Like her bee poems, Dickinson’s wind poems are legion, numbering at least one hundred and forty-four. Most of these refer to hearing, four include the singular noun *Ear*, and two poems in this last set foreground the sound of the wind especially. In “Like Flowers, that heard the news of Dews” (Fr361; c.1862), “Wind’s bright signal to the Ear” reveals “The Heaven – unexpected come.” Here we note a striking semiotic sharpness. In “The Trees like Tassels – hit – and swung” (Fr523; c.1863), the wind is one of the several sounds “Enamoring the Ear.” Here we note aural love.

About early 1862, Dickinson wrote her most sustained instance of a speaker hearing the wind, “Of all the Sounds despatched abroad” (Fr334). A year later, the poet sent a fair copy of the poem, with seven variant substantives and signed “Emily,” to her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson.¹⁰ This is the text adopted here. The superlative sound of the wind in the poem intensifies Dickinson’s prosodic music, especially when her speaker hears the wind as Orphic, in its music and inspiration, and as theophanic, in its revelation of the divine:

Of all the Sounds despatched abroad
There’s not a Charge to me
Like that old measure in the Boughs –
That Phraseless Melody –
The Wind does – working like a Hand –
Whose fingers comb the Sky –
Then quiver down, with tufts of tune –
Permitted Gods – and me –

Inheritance it is to us
Beyond the Art to Earn –
Beyond the trait to take away
By Robber – since the Gain
Is gotten not of fingers –

¹⁰ For the Dickinson autograph (“Of all the Sounds despatched abroad,” Houghton Library, Harvard U, MS Am 1118.3 301), see the *Emily Dickinson Archive*, file no. 12174442.

And inner than the Bone
 Hid golden, for the Whole of days –
 And even in the Urn –
 I cannot vouch the merry Dust
 Do not arise and play,
 In some odd Pattern of it's own –
 Some quainter Holiday –
 When Winds go round and round in Bands –
 And thrum opon the Door –
 And Birds take places – overhead –
 To bear them Orchestra –

I crave Him Grace of Summer Boughs –
 If such an Outcast be –
 Who never heard that Fleshless Chant –
 Rise solemn on the Tree –
 As if some Caravan of Sound –
 Off Deserts in the Sky –
 Had parted Rank –
 Then knit and swept
 In Seamless Company –

(Fr334C)

Composed in highly regular iambic common measure, the poem singles out the wind, as it rustles in the “Summer Boughs” of trees, as the superlative sound in the world, the one that most gives a surge of energy, or “a Charge to me.” The sound of the wind is thrice foregrounded at the poem’s start. We note the mosaic rhyme of “Charge to me” with “Melody,” as if the speaker were to say at the outset, “*This* is melody to me.” We see the syntactic postponement to line five of the clarifying relative clause “The Wind does”: we have to wait that long to find the sound identified. And we hear a verse-medial pause after “The Wind does,” ending an intonational phrase. Over the course of the whole poem, the sound of the wind is also underscored by the lexical chiasmus—*Sounds, Wind, Winds, Sound*—that relates “Of all the Sounds” and “The Wind does” to “When Winds go round and round” and “some Caravan of Sound.”

How does “Of all the Sounds despatched abroad” evidence the hermeneutic key that we have discerned? In a filigree of phonemic music, the poem’s most resonant interlaced echoes arise in “the Gain / Is gotten not of fingers – / And inner than the Bone / Hid golden, for the Whole of

days.” This phrasing highlights the Orphic character of the wind, the wind as music and inspiration. The speaker’s “Gain” when hearing the wind is an “Inheritance” that is “Beyond the Art to Earn,” and she feels “a Charge,” or surge of energy, to write the poem, and thus to turn the wind’s “Phraseless Melody” and “Fleshless Chant” into her own phrased, prosodic music. The inheritance and inspiration, proper to the poet’s vocation, are soulfully “*inner than the Bone / Hid golden.*” The Orphic character of the wind accounts for the poem’s entire lexis of music, which includes as well “that old measure in the Boughs,” “tufts of tune,” “thrum upon the Door,” and the birds that sing in “Orchestra.”

Where are there other expressions of Dickinson’s prosodic subtlety and exuberance? Several phrases point to hearing the wind as theophanic, in its revelation of the divine. Interlaced echoes, for instance, enhance the soothing and the quivering that the speaker, in the company of the Gods, feels: “*fingers comb the Sky – / Then quiver down, with tufts of tune – / Permitted Gods – and me.*” The speaker conceives a possible joy in the afterlife, when “the merry Dust,” before “in the Urn,” now may leap to life, “When Winds go round and round in Bands – / And thrum upon the Door.” In syntax, the crossing of the dead to life subtly crosses two implied quatrains: “*And even in the Urn – // I cannot vouch the merry Dust / Do not arise and play, / In some odd Pattern of it’s own – / Some quainter Holiday.*” And the speaker feels the desire in “*I crave Him Grace of Summer Boughs*” that no one be denied the “Grace” of hearing the wind’s plainsong “Chant.” These expressions all accord with the role of the wind in Scripture. In the Book of Ezekiel, the four winds breathe life into the dead in the valley of dry bones (37.4–6, 9–10). In the Second Book of the Kings, the prophet Elijah “went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2.11).¹¹ In the First Book of the Kings, “a great and strong wind” (19.11) serves as a typological precedent for Acts of the Apostles, where at the feast of Pentecost, “a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind” (2.2) announces the arrival of the Holy Spirit and consecrates it as the Third Person in the Trinity.

The poem’s closing image of separation and seamless interweaving may allude in Exodus to the flight from Egypt: “*As if some Caravan of Sound – / Off Deserts in the Sky – / Had parted Rank – / Then knit and*

¹¹ Elijah is named in two Dickinson poems, the first of which opens, “Like Rain it sounded till it curved / And then I knew ’twas Wind” (Fr1245; c.1872). The poem is another theophanic instance of Dickinson hearing the wind.

swept / In Seamless Company.”¹² There is a prosodic subtlety here as well. Two poetic lines that are dimeters—“Had parted Rank – / Then knit and swept”—together form a metrical line that fits the poem's 8686 iambic common measure. A prior image of harmony appears when “Winds . . . in Bands . . . thrum upon the Door – / And Birds take places – overhead – / To bear them Orchestra.” This is the amassing harmony of Dickinson's lyric art, and in her prosodic music, these are “Minute Effulgencies” of “the things that sing / Not birds entirely – but Minds – / And Winds.”

CONCLUSION

This essay began with an aphoristic lyric that points to the limits of “possibility.” Given her endless curiosity, Dickinson was intrigued by this word. She elsewhere writes, for example, of “Night's possibility!” (Fr161; c.1860), of “The possibility – to pass / Without a moment's Bell – / Into Conjecture's presence” (Fr243; c.1861), of “Time's possibility” (Fr350; c.1862), and of “the dimensions / Of Possibility” (Fr1267; 1872). We conclude with a stanza that also explores the meaning of the word:

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –
(Fr466)

“Possibility” for Dickinson is the domain of poetry, rather than of prose. “More numerous of Windows,” it is a place of light. Given its “Superior . . . Doors,” it is a place that lets others in. And possibility is a place made resonant by the poet's prosodic music, here in iambic common measure that rhymes “Prose” with “Doors.”

It is important, in conclusion, to note that while Dickinson's prosodic music is distinctive, and even peculiar, it is not out of place in its historical moment. In *The Figure of the Singer*, Daniel Karlin explicates “the trope of poetry as song” in several nineteenth-century poets and finds that even

¹² Exodus 14.21–22 reads: “And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.”

“Dickinson’s idiosyncrasy” does not always escape the “tyranny of the commonplace” (xii, xvi, 41). The filigrees of phonemic music in Dickinson’s lyric art, though, are unlike the verse of other contemporary poets, and they are Orphic in their music and inspiration.

Reflecting on Dickinson’s assertion, “My Business is Circumference” (L268), a claim parallel to the poet’s “My business is to *sing*” (L269), Richard B. Sewall lists a series of epithets to summarize her endeavor as a poet: “She set out to be Expositor, Interpreter, Analyst, Orpheus—all in one” (700). By including Orpheus last in the series, Sewall may have in mind Dickinson’s late poem “The Bible is an antique Volume” (Fr1577C; c.1882), which refers to “Orpheu’s Sermon.” The poem shows the futile impetus to instruction, when there is no beauty or music in the language. The Bible, the speaker says, “Written by faded Men / At the suggestion of Holy Spectres,” for whom “Eden [is] – the ancient Homestead” and “Sin – a distinguished Precipice / Others must resist,” would, if a talented lyric poet were called in, all be different, and belief would abound: “Had but the Tale a warbling Teller – / All the Boys would come – / Orpheu’s Sermon captivated – / It did not condemn.”

Dickinson’s prosodic music is a *sine qua non* of her lyric art. With it, “To hear an Oriole sing” (Fr402; c.1862) is a “divine” thing, and “A Wind that rose though not a leaf” (Fr1216; c.1871) is “A Wind that woke a lone Delight.” Without the prosodic music, little else happens for long.

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