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Settings of Emily Dickinson: An Analysis and Discussion
Natural Implications of Linguistics and Prosody Prove the
Music of Dickinsonian Poetry

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To understand the extent to which music and language reflect each other is to recognize the aspects of each that coincide in similarity, pattern, and tendency. One may eventually derive musical concepts from language, and language from music, after scholarly analyzation, discussion, and application of one's own researched conjectures. Such is my case involving the prosody of Emily Dickinson, in which I study the linguistic concepts and patterns of her works that ultimately reflect musical settings. I note natural rhythms, structures, and the acknowledgement of those who influenced her in my work to prove there exists music in language; at the least regarding this thesis, the outcome of which specifically links musical aspects with Emily Dickinson, her life and her work, and in no means concludes this case relatable or relevant to all poetics or prosody. I discuss, then, that although Dickinson utilized aspects of specific language to convey emotion or message, and reflects touches of the influence of her contemporaries within her work, those aspects may be analyzed and applied in ways that convey music, through her natural linguistic rhythm, metric structures, grammatical decisions, tones, and inspirations; her prosody achieves uncanny

parallels between two art forms that are acknowledged and discussed within scholarly academia, and, further, within this thesis.

To begin, one may analyze the specifics, the tendencies, patterns, structures, and grammatical details of Dickinson's poetry to more greatly understand Dickinson's expression. According to scholar Ross, Dickinson is "a self-taught prosodist," (70) as her metrics are remarkably uniform for a woman of her educational level. Therefore, Dickinson is a subject within a majority of academia useful for engaging in "formatting" and "punctuation."¹ However, noting Victorian educational influences, one may note that metrics, as well as utilizing Common Meter, were part of basic education during Dickinson's time. Poets such as Wordsworth were noted using Common Meter, and, no doubt, those influences impacted Dickinson's prosody. Stemming back to styles of Locke, and even antiquity, metrics and grammar were strong stylistic influences of Dickinson's prosody, and her writing reflects a deep appreciation of the history of composing poetry. Further, Ross states that Dickinson, in her fusion of Victorian influences

¹ Ross insists, however, that Dickinsonian style is one more profound than those concerning foundational writing; she claims that many scholars "trope" Dickinson into grammatical studies.

and personal stylisms and expressions, creates an “expressive metric, based on such a fusion, that takes the rhythms of colloquial English for a model.” Ross notes that “early models” that have influenced Dickinson merely remain “a source” of reference to “general stanzaic patterns, but Dickinson does not write in syllabics... Dickinson does not represent that fusion as ‘true to nature’ or to the representivity of natural language. She [created] a uniquely expressive metric” (73). To recognize Dickinsonian style, then, is to understand the spectrum of influences and choices that were imprinted upon her writing. Scholar Small supports the notion that Dickinson displays prosody through a myriad of stylistic choices and historically recognized methods. Small regards that physical sound, that “phonetic texture,” is a driving force in Dickinsonian poetry and supports her “auditory imagination.”² Small contends, similar to the research of Ross, that Dickinson’s rhythmic and rhyming techniques stemmed from 19th century tradition and influences, and were, at the same time, unconventional artistic statements; Dickinson expressed herself mainly through the ways in which she “composed” her poems. These include

² Small contends that sound is a major factor of creation, but does not claim it is all.

patterns of rhyme and grammar that adhered to 19th century educational levels and personal, Dickinsonian flairs that portray persona and environment. To use the word “compose,” consequently, is to acknowledge the musical tendencies of Dickinson’s prosody. Rhythm and sound, within her poetry, are aspects that characterize Dickinson, and are also major concepts that characterize music. Further, poems such as “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” and “The World is not Conclusion” speak directly about the nature of music within poetry, and, in the case of Dickinson, are interchangeable. As with music, there is no poetry without intention. The intentions, one may understand, of Dickinson’s poetry, is to sing through language, through prosody, and with expression.

To note, then, Dickinsonian prosody, is to know influencers of Dickinson—that is, to acknowledge Emily Dickinson’s contemporaries who had imprinted upon her style, and, overall, her work. Through the analytical lens that scholar Peter Dickinson writes, one may analyze the letters, the actual correspondence, between Emily Dickinson and those she associated with; within letters between contemporary Mr. Higginson, Dickinson addressed these with “Friend,” and signed

them “Your Scholar,” or “Your Gnome.” Such personal addressment concludes Dickinson and Higginson very close. The letters sent between the two consisted of Dickinson writing with care, in which she asks Higginson his personal and educated opinions of her poems. She would include excerpts of her poetry, and, at times, full poems, in her letters to Mr. Higginson in the hopes that he includes insight upon them within his response correspondence. To preface, Higginson published an 1862 *Atlantic Monthly* article, inquiring rising poets to send him work for critique and acknowledgment. Emily Dickinson sent in hers, and hoped that Higginson was not “too deeply occupied to say if [her] verse is alive[.]” Higginson was taken by her poetry, as he noted that her “handwriting so peculiar,” and that “of punctuation there was little; she used chiefly dashes.” In an 1891 *Atlantic Monthly* reflection article, he states:

“The most curious thing about the letter was the total absence of signature. It proved, however, that she had written her name on a card, and put it under the shelter of a smaller envelope inclosed in the larger; and even this name was written—as if the shy writer wished to

recede as far as possible from view—in pencil, not in ink. The name was Emily Dickinson. Inclosed with the letter were four poems, two of which have been already printed, — “Safe in their alabaster chambers” and “I’ll tell you how the sun rose,” together with the two that here follow. The first comprises in its eight lines a truth so searching that it seems a condensed summary of the whole experience of a long life: —

We play at paste
Till qualified for pearl;
Then drop the paste
And deem ourself a fool.

The shapes, though, were similar
And our new hands
Learned gem-tactics,

Practicing sands.

Then came one which I have always classed among the most exquisite of her productions, with a singular felicity of phrase and an aerial lift that bears the ear upward with the bee it traces: —

The nearest dream recedes unrealized.

The heaven we chase,

Like the June bee

Before the schoolboy,

Invites the race,

Stoops to an easy clover,

Dips—evades—teases—deploys—

Then to the royal clouds

Lifts his light pinnace,

Heedless of the boy

Staring, bewildered, at the mocking sky.

Homesick for steadfast honey, —

Ah! the bee flies not

Which brews that rare variety.

The impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius was as distinct on my mind at the first reading of these four poems as it is now, after thirty years of further knowledge; and with it came the problem never yet solved, what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism. The bee himself did not evade the schoolboy more than she evaded me; and even at this day I still stand somewhat bewildered, like the boy.”

Higginson makes clear his blatant awe of Dickinson’s stylisms; he expresses evasion of understanding, which fully captures his sentiment of her poetry.

Dickinsonian prosody is one that Higginson himself, who had personal

correspondence with Dickinson, cannot comprehend fully regarding the stylistic, linguistic choices that Dickinson made, from her decisions in grammar and punctuation to the topics she wrote of life and nature. Higginson does express, however, that Dickinson's "distinct" choices in utilizing, mostly, only dashes, signify her freer mind, that her expressive nature should not be limited to the staunching rules of proper, 19th century punctuation and the traditions of education that it stems from. These conjectures made by Higginson of Dickinson's mind reflect those concepts explored within music; some compositions are made without the limitations of bar lines and time signatures. In this case, a defying of artistic tradition gives way to fuller expressions. Higginson states in his reflection article that Dickinson's "defiance of form" was what had "marked her" as a great poet. In manners of music, composer Erik Satie, for example, exemplifies this defiance; Satie wrote "Sylvie" in 1886, a song with no time signature or bar lines. These decisions were to indicate a wider, internal space of understanding within the song, and, in turn, intend it to be performed with a pensive and open nostalgia. Further, scholar Peter Dickinson deems Emily Dickinson's letter correspondence her

creative outlet and her poetic inspiration. He analyzes the letters that were found three years after Dickinson's death as inspiration for composers to accurately reflect her sentiments of the time. As Dickinson did not keep conventional public contact, most of her tangible persona is exemplified through her correspondence with those close to her. One may safely assess, then, that an accurate portrayal of her person may not only be found through the poems she wrote, but significantly through the ways in which she communicated.

To reflect Dickinson's poetry with music, then, is to recognize that Dickinsonian setting composers utilized her prosody to create. Composer Aaron Copland displays the linguistic patterns and stylisms of Dickinson's poetry; his settings and song cycles exemplify the cyclical nature of life and nature that Dickinson writes of, and reflects Dickinson's punctuation in his style of notation. Firstly, scholar Baker recognizes Copland's "tremendous thematic range." She discusses:

"Many of Copland's compositions, such as Piano Variations, are considered to be intellectual and rarified, while others, such as Appalachian Spring and Fanfare for the Common Man are accessible

to the point that they rank among Americans' best loved music.

Copland takes on western themes in *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*, uses

Latin American themes in *Danzón Cubano*, and responds to the

European tradition in such works as *Hommage à Fauré*. Jazz rhythms

and Shaker melodies at times inform the work of this artist, who also

wrote Hollywood movie scores as well as the theme for the CBS

Playhouse... Choreographers were inspired by his compositions, and,

for his part, Copland was inspired by other art forms. Reflecting on

his own work, Copland acknowledges, 'I have always had an aversion

to repeating myself'" (159).

In parallel, Baker places Dickinson in immediate juxtaposition:

"Likewise, the art of Emily Dickinson is not easily categorized.

Indeed, this poet is recognized for addressing the reader from behind

any number of masks. In various poems, she assumes the voice of the

coquette, the spinster, the young boy, the heretic and the devout

regenerate, the dying and the dead. Emily Dickinson herself understood that she had a ‘vice for voices’” (19).

Baker makes clear that Dickinson exists in art as a transformer; Dickinson’s poetry lives on through a variety of lenses, which is the precise sentiment that Copland composes upon. To fully comprehend this concept, that Dickinson is not a singular, personal self in her work, that she is a myriad of people in life and nature, is to recognize the compositional and stylistic choices that Copland makes in immediate reflection. Further, Copland’s *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* signifies the dissonances and harmonies of Dickinsonian personalities that exist in tandem within poetry; Copland composes in a manner that acknowledges cyclical aspects in the topics of life, death, and nature that Dickinson writes of through the deep spectrum of “voices” that must be recognized. To compose without these variety of voices is to ignore Dickinson’s expressive intentions.

Moreover, Scholar Cherlin recognizes the necessity of variety and layers within art for expressive completion, and notes linguistic choices Dickinson makes that deem this true. Cherlin discusses:

“Language provides rhythmic contexts [and] perception... [but] most well-made poems play on multiple layering of rhythm. Emily Dickinson is especially sensitive and powerful in this domain. Multiple readings of her strong poems are necessary, for it is the conflict among readings that embodies the poet’s density of meaning... The best readings are those mysterious enough to evoke the conflict of polyrhythms” (56).

Cherlin’s conjectures include the notion that punctuation, grammar, and even spelling, alter linguistic rhythms drastically; a successful poet, then, utilizes intention within punctuation and such to greater highlight rhythmic layering. Cherlin concludes, further, that the creation of complex rhythmic layering is the foundation of expressive poetry, and, so, the characterization of Dickinsonian style. In immediate parallel, one may analyze Copland’s arrangement and setting of Dickinson’s “The World Feels Dusty” as case study for the intentional changes of punctuation, text, and spelling to intensify poetic concepts, such as rhythmic layering, within music. Dickinson’s original poem is as such:

“The World—feels Dusty

When We stop to Die—

We want the Dew—then—

Honors—taste dry—

Flags—vex a Dying face—

But the least Fan

Stirred by a friend's Hand

Cools—like the Rain—

Mine be the Ministry

When thy Thirst comes—

Dews of Thessaly, to fetch—

And Hybla Balms—”

For comparison, Copland’s textual arrangement:

“The world feels dusty

When we stop to die;
We want the dew then,
Honors taste dry.

Flags vex a dying face,
But the least fan
Stirred by a friend's hand
Cools like the Rain.

Mine be the ministry
When thy thirst comes,
Dews of thyself to fetch
And holy balms.”

The Dickinsonian dash, suggests pause, and possibly a “disconnect” (58).

However, the cyclical patterns of life and nature that Dickinson so often discusses in her poetry never suggest complete closure. Hence, her punctuation, her dashes,

avoid ends. Cherlin conjectures that “different readings of the dash suggest different poetic rhythms, different subtleties of shading, accent and dynamic.”

Cherlin continues, to fully capture the expressive complexities and ambivalences that are enunciated through linguistic, rhythmic layering:

Dickinson is a master of enjambment. Enjambment... always involves ambiguity through polysemantic and polyrhythmic conflict. Here are two antithetical readings of the first two lines. "The world feels dusty. When we stop to die, we want the dew then." This tells me that the world is always a dusty place, and that when we stop, that is to die, we say 'enough of this dustiness.' In contrast, "The world feels dusty when we stop to die. We want the dew then," tells me that death, or the process of approaching death, is parching... Dickinson has expressed that powerful ambivalence through a conflict of rhythms” (59).

In parallel, aspects of Dickinson’s poem that are lost or diffused in Copland’s version are intentional. For example, the representation of enjambment within

Copland's arrangement and setting may be viewed in final stanzaic words such as "dry," "rain," and "balms," in which they receive the longest duration, and are followed by notable silences. Further, Copland's textual changes reflect the unique rhythm found in Dickinson's original work; in the hopes of immortalizing her intentions, Copland alters words such as "Thessaly" to "thysself," and "Hybla" to "holy," to better keep Dickinson's prosody accurate within his music. The altering of syllabic count preserves rhythmic layering. Although interpretations are varied, one may conclude that, possibly, there is a parallelism between Dickinsonian poetry and its inspired music.

Composer Copland also strives to reflect topics discussed in Dickinson's poetry in the metaphysical nature and structure of his cycle, *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*.³ To start, one must admit there is a relationship between form and content; philosopher Brooks of *The Well-Wrought Urn* argues that the form or structure of a piece provides layers of meaning to that piece and is the foundation of that piece. This concept is observed in Copland's song cycle, in that the form of

³ Dorr and Soll discuss cyclical tendencies in their "Implications."

his twelve settings is commentary on the sequence and inevitability of life, death, and nature, topics that are deeply analyzed in Dickinson's poetry. Conclusively, all concepts of Copland's twelve settings represent cyclical organization. The succession of the twelve poems reflects order, represents a discussion, a "series of contemplations." Within "cyclical implications," Copland begins with two poems about "nature," in accordance with Dickinson's ideas concerning the evolution of life, with "nature" as the "germinating force." The following songs display the continuity of life, "beginning in nature and continuing after death," and end with "The Chariot," a riddle which ponders the association of the above listed poetic subjects. To reflect Dickinson's prosody in music, then, is to fully comprehend what she discusses in her poetry.

The action of setting music to poetry long experienced practice before Dickinsonian composing. Composers such as Thomas Arne, for example, set music to Shakespeare's poetry. In light of combining aspects of poetry with those of music, one may join opinions or conjectures of each form of art, or deem them inevitably relevant. This thesis does not condone or prove that action, but does

acknowledge its rare occasion in the case of Emily Dickinson's poetry and its musical settings.

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