Emily Dickinson and the Vitality of Words: An Exercise in Philology

Margaret H. Freeman, Myrifield Institute for Cognition and the Arts

A word is dead, when it is said,

Some say -

I say it just begins to live

That day[1]

Emily Dickinson

In a famous letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1862, Dickinson asks, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive? The mind is so near itself, it cannot see distinctly, and I have none to ask. Should you think it breathes, I would be grateful" (L260).[2] What is interesting about this opening of her letter is the idea that verse can be alive, that it can breathe. There is also a question of seeing: the mind so near itself that it cannot see distinctly. Great poetry, it seems to me, captures that quality of illumination: words brought to life as we read and write. This essay on the poetry of Emily Dickinson is an exercise in philology, the love of, or the study of, words – from the Greek *philos*, "loving," plus *logos*,

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1. A Tr66, F278*A*.2/J1212. References to Dickinson's poems are identified by numbers in the Franklin (1998; F) or Johnson (1955; J) editions. Letters attached to the Franklin numbers refer to the particular version of the poem discussed. Manuscript references are identified by location: A for Amherst College Archives; H for the Houghton at Harvard University. Citations in this essay are from the manuscript versions and maintain, as far as possible, original line breaks and capitalization. Digital images of the original manuscripts may be found online at https://acdc.amherst.edu/browse/#!collection:ed and http://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/dickinson/.

2. Dickinson's letters (L) are identified by number in the Johnson (1965) edition of the letters.

"word." I explore two ways in which Dickinson brings her language to life: recourse to the history of

words (etymology), and making words work through stylistic manipulations of language.

Three of Dickinson's poems explicitly mention philology: through example, use, and the essential

nature of words. The following poem gives an example of philology (A 505 F1277*A*/J1342):

> "Was not" - was
>
> all the statement -
>
> The unpretension
>
> stuns -
>
> Perhaps - the Com-
>
> prehension -
>
> They knew/wore no
>
> Lexicons -
>
>
> But lest our
>
> speculation
>
> In inanition die
>
> "Because God took
>
> him -" tell us -
>
> That was Philology -

The quotes in her poem come from Genesis chapter 5 verse 24: "And Enoch walked with God: and he

was not; for God took him."[3] Dickinson separates the biblical saying between the two stanzas. The actual

saying itself, she says, is simply contained in the phrase *was not*. Its unpretensiousness, its simplicity that

we find hard to comprehend, lies in the fact that those who heard the phrase understood directly from

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3. All biblical references in this article are from the King James *Bible*, the version Dickinson's family

owned and read.

their own scriptural experience that to see God is to die: "And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live" (*Exodus* 33.20). If Enoch walked with God he had died; they needed "no Lexicons" to tell them so.

The term *lexicon* comes from the Greek *legein*, "to speak," *dictionary* from Latin *dicere*, "to say." Most of the words we know and use we have never looked up in a dictionary. We acquired our first words through hearing spoken language. We develop their meanings from the context we learned them in. Most word meaning networks we accumulate, not from dictionary knowledge, but from an encyclopedic acquisition of experience. As a result, the shades of meaning we give to words are more influenced by our own contextual hearing and reading experience than they are from a dictionary. Dickinson's vocabulary did not depend only on recourse to her Webster's 1844 dictionary. It developed, like ours, primarily from her experience growing up, the cultural meanings of words in the nineteenth century that were being used around her, and her reading. By modern standards, she read an enormous amount. To fully appreciate the way Dickinson uses words in her poetry, we need to understand the potential meanings they might have in the context of her own experience and thoughts. The advantage of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is that, unlike other dictionaries, it includes historical meanings of words from the very first time they are found in writing. And because the *OED* includes literary references, some of Dickinson's word associations resonate with them; Shakespeare, for example, is the most quoted writer in the *OED*. In this philological exercise, therefore, I will have frequent recourse to the *OED*.

Unlike those who need no lexicons to understand the statement "Was not," we need more than what is given in that phrase. Dickinson's second stanza moves to our own response in attempting to comprehend it. The word *inanition* comes from the Latin *inanire*, "to make empty, to make void." Inanition is a kind of exhaustion from lack of nourishment, but it also can mean lack of mental or spiritual vitality and enthusiasm. To prevent inanition in our speculation, it is necessary to "mention" the reason: "because God took him."[4] If we no longer know our scripture, then we need to be told how and why Enoch "was

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4. In another manuscript (A 95-10/11), the variant *mention* is given for *tell us*.

not," just as we need to resort to dictionaries to understand words we have not otherwise experienced. Dickinson draws on this simple lesson to show the importance of philology: the study and love of the etymological and historical essence of words is needed for words to come alive, to be vital if they are not to die.

When we resort to a dictionary, we find for the words we look up further meanings we have not acquired through experiential knowledge. Not only do such searches enrich the layers of meaning a word might still have, as with the word *inanition*, they can also reveal the semantic evolution of words whose original meanings have been lost. For example, Michael Cabot Haley (1988) notes that the word *scruple* from its Latin origins referred to "a small, sharp stone":

> Despite the fact that *scruple's* quaint history has dropped out of common knowledge, once we are reminded of it, we take conscious pleasure (or displeasure) in finding the worrisome little pebble still there, for a moral scruple is not a major cornerstone of our ethical foundation; it is simply a small pebble of conscience that we seldom think about until it turns up under foot to pang us if we tread on it. The metaphorizing of *scruple* is an instance of a kind of poetry buried deep in the nature of ordinary language and semeosis.

> Even dead metaphor fertilizes semantic growth—of language, of poetry, of thought. (40)

Although Haley speaks of dead metaphor, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) have shown that metaphorical thinking is basic to "the way we think" (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). From a cognitive perspective, metaphor's role in poetry exists on a higher level than the conventional metaphoring Lakoff and Johnson explore. Poetic metaphor brings to life potential meanings "buried deep" in word history.

Even a seemingly simple word like the verb *take*, occupying seventeen pages in the *OED,* can reverberate in the hands of a poet like Dickinson. Originally having the meaning to grasp, grip, seize, take hold of, the "telling" of God's taking of Enoch as an example of philology becomes in the following poem the idea of searching for words, for the right word, or the word that the poet wants to use, in metaphorical terms of a word being a candidate for a position (A 341 F1243/J1126):

Shall I take thee, the

> Poet said
>
> To the propounded word?
>
> Be stationed with the
>
> Candidates
>
> Till I have finer/further/vainer
>
> tried -
>
>
> The Poet searched
>
> Philology
>
> And was/just/when about to ring
>
> For the suspended
>
> Candidate
>
> There came/Advanced unsummoned
>
> in -
>
>
> That portion of the Vision
>
> The Word applied to
>
> fill
>
> Not unto nomination
>
> The Cherubim reveal -

The metaphor of a word seeking a position in a poem is not simply that of a person seeking employment.

The words *nomination* and *Candidate* conjure up the realms of politics and religion. *Nomination* is also

related to the linguistic term nominalization, with its root meaning of "naming": to turn a verb or an

adverb or an action into a noun. The "Word" becomes an active agent rather than a nominated candidate

as it seeks to become the most appropriate word for the poet to use. There is an echo of Dickinson's

comment in her letter to Higginson of the mind being "so near itself that it cannot see distinctly" in the

reference to the word applying to fill "that portion of the Vision." The word *vision* suggests not simply

physical but spiritual seeing, a concept reinforced by the introduction of *Cherubim* in the last line. For

Dickinson, such word plays in searching philology raise the level of discourse into the animating spirit of

creativity.

In the following poem we have the whole idea of coming to life—the vivacity, the vitality, of the word

made flesh. Like the first philology poem, Dickinson also quotes from the bible, this time with the play on

partook as a taking (H ST14c-d F1715/J1651):[5]

> A Word made Flesh is seldom
>
> And tremblingly partook
>
> Nor then perhaps reported
>
> But have I not mistook
>
> Each one of us has tasted
>
> With ecstasies of stealth
>
> The very food debated
>
> To our specific strength -
>
>
> A Word that breathes distinctly
>
> Has not the power to die
>
> Cohesive as the Spirit
>
> It may expire if He -
>
> "Made Flesh and dwelt among us"
>
> Could condescension be
>
> Like this consent of Language
>
> This loved Philology.

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5. The original manuscript for this poem is lost. It was transcribed by Susan Dickinson.

The quotation is from the beginning of St. John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John is referring to the very first chapter of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said Let there be light: and there was light." The power of the spoken word to create light and therefore life is paramount.

The opening of St. John's gospel continues:

> The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in darkness; and the darkness overcame it not. […] And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

In the Genesis passage, we have the beginning, the creation of something. We have the earth without form, empty and dark. The five elements to the process of God creating—spirit, movement, seeing, speaking, and light—participate in making, giving form to earth. They are, I suggest, the same elements that occur in giving form to poetry. The word *poetry* itself is from the Greek word *poiesis*, "to make." St. John invokes the Genesis chapter in order to equate God's speaking with the *Logos*, the divine word that brings everything into being, and the *Logos* with Christ.

Dickinson plays with the etymologies of words that link the biblical passages with words in the poem in a semantic network of linked meanings. First of all is *spirit*. The word comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which means breath, and spirare, "to breathe," reflecting both noun and verb. To "animate" means to give life to, from the Latin *animus*, meaning both "mind" and "soul." So, to animate is to breathe into, to instill with life. Then there is the Latin word for life, *vita*, the source of our words *vital* and *vitality*. In Latin, the *vitalis* is the animating principal, the "life-force" of being and existence. The word *genesis* comes from the Greek word meaning origin, creation, formed from the root *gen-* o*f gignesthai*, to come into being, to

be born. *Logos*, as mentioned, is the Greek for word, and reason. It is as if Dickinson were anticipating the cognitive revolution with its recognition of the embodied mind (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Words are embodied; they are made flesh (Freeman 2002b). When they become so, when they "breathe distinctly," they are "full of grace and truth." I think this is what Dickinson knew above all other things in her "loved Philology."

Words are not "dead when they are said" as Dickinson knew: they are constantly changing across time and space. Their vitality lies in the thoughts they stimulate. The following poem expresses Dickinson's understanding of this truth (A 91-13/14 F930/J883):

1. The Poets light but
2. Lamps -
3. Themselves - go out -
4. The Wicks they
5. Stimulate
6. If vital Light

7. Inhere as do the
8. Suns -
9. Each Age a Lens
10. Disseminating their
11. Circumference -

Meanings may change as each age applies its own lens, but Dickinson is saying something more in this poem. Its syntactic structure consist of three lines at the beginning and three lines at the end that frame the five lines in between: "The Poets light but / Lamps - / Themselves - go out - /…/ Each Age a Lens / Disseminating their / Circumference." Lines 1-3 and lines 9-11 comprise together a coherent thought expressed metaphorically: Although poets die, future ages will keep their poetry alive. The five lines in the middle also divide into two parts that form a complete sentence: "The Wicks they / Stimulate /…/

Inhere as do the / Suns," interrupted by the conditional clause "If vital Light." It is no accident that this line, "If vital Light," occurs in the exact center of the middle section and the exact center of the poem. It serves as central point, the "eye" of the poem (to quote a Chinese saying).

The analogy "as do the suns" suggests active agency on the part of the suns in making light inhere. This transitive meaning of the verb *inhere* is very rare. The word inhere, from Latin *in-* "in" plus *haerere* "to stick, remain fixed," suggests the permanence of creation. Such permanence of poetic creation is thus constrained by the conditional: "If the wicks poets stimulate [in lighting lamps] are vital, then light inheres in them as suns inhere light." The poem reverberates around the words *if vital light*. The first meaning of *vital* in the *OED* is as follows: "Consisting in, constituted by, that immaterial force or principle which is present in living beings or organisms and by which they are animated and their functions maintained." As we saw in the Genesis creation story, light is life. For Dickinson, words are vital when poets succeed in giving them life: "A word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die / Cohesive as the Spirit / It may expire if He [does]-" (F1715/J1651). The spirit is the life-force that animates a poem into being, that makes it breathe.

One reason why Dickinson's poems present such a challenge to her readers is the way she uses words that seem to hover at the edge of our understanding. As readers, we construct meaning from various triggers that are presented: discourse context, the structure of a given expression, and our own experiential knowledge, derived from both the codes and canons of language. Norman Holland distinguishes between *codes*, "the rules governing letters of the alphabet, numbers, grammar, recognizing a given word as that word, in general, rules that are absolutely fixed for all the people in a given culture," and *canons*, which "express politics or values or beliefs, a person's 'philosophy' in the loose sense, a mental 'set'" or "the intellectual climate of an era" (Holland 1988: 101, 104). He further distinguishes *background canons* which "reflect heritage, education, and life experiences" from *viewpoint canons*, which "reflect opinions and beliefs" and are thus easier to change.

When meeting an Emily Dickinson poem, a reader is faced with a plethora of puzzles. Only by responding directly to one's experience of those puzzles can one come to a full understanding. That does

not mean that a sensitive reader does not intuitively grasp the truth of the experience the poem is offering. When we intuitively grasp the gist of a poem, we can (if we are so inclined) work toward understanding why we have that intuition. We notice what the poem is doing and then we arrive at an understanding that both reflects any preliminary vague intuition we might have had and explains why we had it. We can do this best if we pursue Dickinson through the way she makes her words work. [6]

Readers' insights can differ, and in the following analyses I don't want to prejudge what others read by presenting an intuition of my own. The following poem with its many variants encourages us to engage actively in responding to its words (A 97 F1469/J1443):[7]

1   A [+] chilly Peace infests

2   the Grass

3   The Sun respectful

4   lies -

5   Not any Trance

6   of industry

7   [+] These shadows

8   scrutinize -

9   Whose Allies go

10 no more [+] astray

11 For [+] service or

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6. I am grateful to the members of the Emily Dickinson Reading Circle for their contributions to the analyses of the following poems.

7 . Dickinson customarily marked words in her poems with crosses to indicate possible alternatives, or variants, to her first choices. I have marked the crosses and given the variants following Franklin's (1998) method in his variorum edition in transcribing the manuscript.

12 for Glee -

13 ⁺ But all mankind

14 ⁺ deliver here

15 From whatsoever Sea -

Variants

 1 chilly] lonesome - · warning -

 7 These] The

10 astray] abroad -

11 service] Honor - · welcome

13 But] though

14 deliver here] cruise softly here · row [softly here] · sail [softly here] · do

        anchor [here] –

First, I note certain places in the poem where I expect one word, but get another. The first appears in

line 1: I expect "infects" and get "infests." The *OED* tells me that this is a characteristic mistake people

often make between the two words. "Infest" in contemporary usage carries the idea of bugs invading a

house, and indeed the *OED* has the meaning in verb 2 "to trouble (a country or a place) with hostile

attacks; to visit persistently or in large numbers to destroy or plunder." But recourse to the dictionary

leads me to other possibilities. Dickinson's Latin and German studies, however meager they may have

been (and we don't really have a good sense of that), gave her an orientation to etymology; and her

readings, which, unlike ours of the twenty-first century, were extensive both in ancient and contemporary

authors, may have enriched her network of meanings for a particular word. So that when I read in the

OED that "infest" etymologically carries with it the notion of "to fasten, to fix in something," that

reverberates for me with Dickinson's image of peace "infesting the grass." Then, I see that an obsolete

substantive (noun) usage of *infest* refers to funeral offerings or expiations. Suddenly, what intuitions I had

about this poem—why the peace is "chilly/lonesome/warning"—are deepened and enriched.

Another place I expect one word and get another is in line 5. I expect "trace" and get "Trance." I know what "trance" means for me: a state of suspended consciousness, a dreamlike state. But I go to the *OED*. I discover it is etymologically related to the word *transit*, a "passage through," and suddenly I have the introduction of movement, which "trace" doesn't automatically give me. Both as a substantive and a verb, *trance* can mean to move about actively, to skip / a skip, to dance / a dance, the idea of rapidity. I note that in Dickinson's poem, such implied movement is negated: "Not any trance." Then I realize (and this is making words work), that *trance* in its modern sense also involves movement: an entering into a state, not just being in the state itself. Then, as in the word *infest*, I go even deeper: *trance* as a substantive also once meant the suspension of consciousness, the "passage from life to death." *Could Dickinson have known that?* I think again of her lexicon, her loved philology, the extent of her reading. My preliminary intuitions about this poem (which I have deliberately not shared) seem now to surface willy-nilly, in spite of myself. Or is it that I have recognized these connections because of those intuitions?

Next I look at the structure of the two stanzas. I see immediately a contrast on several levels: the first stanza is land-bound, the second ventures out to sea. The poem is deictically grounded; that is, words like *come, here, this* point to where the speaker is situated, as opposed to their counterparts, *go, there, that*. There is a clear distinction between the "here" of the land and the "there" of the sea, reinforced by Dickinson's choice of "These"(not "Those") shadows in the first stanza. Its subject-agents are abstract or natural: "Peace infests," "Sun respectful lies," "shadows scrutinize." I notice that though "Peace" ostensibly is agent operating on the "grass," grass is actually its topic. From a cognitive viewpoint, "peace infests the grass" is related to the adjective-noun phrase "peaceful grass." So you have grass, sun, and shadows—all aspects of the natural world. In contrast, the ostensible subjects of the second stanza are "Allies" and "all mankind," both referencing human agents, and possibly other living beings.[8]

I notice too a parallelism between the two stanzas, with "Not any" in line 5 and "no more" in line 10. These negatives introduce the concept of contrast, between what is and what isn't. So when I arrive at the

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8. Dickinson referred to her dog, Carlo, as "my shaggy ally" (L280).

"But" in line 13, I am prepared for a contradiction. The variant has "though." *But* implies contradiction, a

statement of "instead." *Though* implies a concessive, naming an exception to a preceding statement. This

brings us to a critical puzzle in this poem: What is the antecedent of "Whose" in line 9? A syntactic

analysis of the previous lines reveals an ambiguity, one typical of Dickinson. Since English is an

uninflected language except in its pronoun system (that is, it does not indicate noun case), the simple

unambiguous order of an English sentence is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO).[9] But Dickinson typically goes

against such rigid SVO conformity in English syntax. She often preposes the object to the beginning of

the phrase, as in "The Wicks they stimulate" in "the Poets light but / Lamps -" poem. But in a case where

the context does not readily resolve the issue one raises the question, is it an OSV or an SOV structure?

When the participants are animate and inanimate, we intuitively prefer the animate as subject. That is,

given the sentence, "Harry drank the coffee" (SVO), either order, "The coffee Harry drank" (OSV) or

"Harry the coffee drank" (SOV) will result in an unambiguous reading. But when the action of the verb

can be attributed to either of the noun phrases, then ambiguity arises. In lines 5-8, doubly reinforced by

the fact that whatever action is being described is negated, is it the case that (no) trance of industry is

scrutinizing the shadows, or the shadows that are scrutinizing (no) trance of industry? Either way, the

question of the antecedent for "Whose Allies" in line 9 remains. Is it trance, industry, or shadows?

In the transitive use of the word *deliver*, the construction of the second stanza seems straightforward.

The allies (whoever they are) no longer are going out there but delivering mankind here. With "though,"

the emphasis switches to a focus on movement: the allies are no longer moving, in going out there,

though they are moving, in delivering mankind here. I'm not very happy. It comes back once more to the

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9. A classic example, used invariably in English Linguistics 101 classes, is the distinction

between Latin and English in the sentence: "Romeo loves Juliet." In English, if you reverse the

order of the nouns—"Juliet loves Romeo"—you have changed the meaning of the sentence. Not

so in an inflected language like Latin, where the nouns "Romeo" and "Juliet" carry the markings

of subject or object case, regardless of their position in the sentence.

unresolved questions of a possible referent for "allies" and the antecedent for "Whose." If one accepts the idea that the allies belong to trance or the shadows, then a certain gothic quality invades the poem, such as the ghosts of the dead straying abroad to ensnare mankind. If the allies are the allies of industry, then I expect some product of trade (silks from China, coffee from the plantations), but instead I get what results from performing the work: service, honor, welcome, glee. I note that "all" in line 13 falls on a stress position in the iambic line. Could it be that the allies of industry represent just some portion of mankind that engage in these activities, but that *all* mankind end up in the same place? Now light glimmers. I go back to my preference for "all mankind" as agent-subject. Is it possible that the allies are in fact part of all mankind?

The question is further complicated, not clarified, by the verb in the conjunctive *but* clause with all its variants. The variants for "deliver" are all intransitive, which makes their agent-subjects "all mankind." But "deliver" is different. In its transitive form, with Dickinson's habit of preposing objects, it would seem that "all mankind" is what is being delivered by "Allies," unless "all mankind" is indeed the agent-subject, and what is delivered is the "service" (with its variants, Honor/welcome) or "Glee." But I find this a stretch, so again I go to the *OED*, wondering if there is some intransitive use of the verb *deliver*. I find an intransitive use that is possible but not likely, referring to speech or singing, both having a self-reflexive quality (the utterance of words or notes). Self-reflexive use is common, though in the examples cited always accompanying its pronoun ("I deliver myself into thy hands"). And then I find the following usage of *deliver* in pottery and foundries, both intransitive and reflexive: "to free itself from the mould; to leave the mould easily." The earliest reference is 1782 (Wedgwood, *Phil. Trans*. LXXII. 310): "To make the clay deliver easily, it will be necessary to oil the mould." *Could Dickinson have known that?* My intuitive sense that *deliver* can be construed as a middle verb form is here encouraged, especially with the semantic networks of meanings associated with material clay and material body.[10] Although the variants

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10 . The middle voice construction is Greek in origin:

for "deliver" clarify the sense of movement toward—cruise / row / sail / anchor—(and I especially like "anchor" with its additional idea of coming to rest), in the end I prefer the word Dickinson originally chose. The ambiguity heals: either "but" or "though" work, with both their contrastive and concessive meanings, and *deliver* in this construing a middle voice verb. This is indeed the height of the poetic capability of making words work.

Where does that leave us? The poem's regular iambic cadence creates no tension, no surprise. Rather a sense of inevitability and calm invades. The deictic grounding of the poem is "here" not "there," and "here" denotes the land, the natural, peaceful world of grass and sun and shadows to which we come in death, as opposed to going abroad, engaged in human work on the sea of life, a metaphor hovering behind that second stanza with all its variants. Although I expected the variant "abroad" (etymologically meaning "away from the road," i.e. across the sea), I get "astray." The word *astray* carries with it a range of meanings, all denoting the sense of movement away from the right path, a movement into error. I think again about those images of industry, men's purposes in life: service, honor, welcome, glee. All come to the same place, the "chilly Peace" of the grave. And then other early Dickinson poems linking grass to grave come to mind: "the color of the grave is green" (F424/J411); "they perished in the seamless grass" (F545/J409); "an island in dishonored grass" (F319/J290). I note that the noonday sun casts no shadow;

The voice of a verb indicates the role that its grammatical subject plays in relation to the action or state of being expressed by the verb. The middle voice is used mainly to imply that the subject benefits or suffers directly from the action expressed by the verb. It is often the case, though not always, that the subject also represents the cause of that action.

In most languages a single argument cannot represent two different semantic roles such as AGENT and PATIENT. In Ancient Greek, however, the middle voice makes this possible. (http://www.greek-language.com/grammar/20.html) There is evidence for the existence of a middle voice in English (Bybee 1985: 20-21).

the "respectful" sun only leaves shadows when it is low on the horizon. The movement into a suspension

of consciousness indicated by the word "trance" reinforces the idea that these are evening shadows,

invoking the metaphor that structures the phrase "the evening of life." And yet Dickinson once more

surprises. Though one would expect the conventional DEATH IS DEPARTURE cognitive metaphor, we get

instead DEATH IS ARRIVING HOME / TO HARBOR, *here*, where arriving is right and proper, as opposed

to the going away/astray, *there*.[11]

   The following poem shows complexities of a different kind. It exists in two forms, together

with an additional fragment. The earliest manuscript is a draft with alternatives that was set down

on the inside of an envelope addressed to ED and postmarked from Philadelphia (A 514

[F1506*A*/J1473]). Franklin (1998: 1318) notes: "On a fragment of wrapping paper there is a

portion of what appears to have been an intermediate draft, perhaps of more of the poem than the

two lines remaining after the top and bottom had been removed (A 515)." A fair copy of the

poem is extant on a leaf from a student account book (A 516 F1506*C*/J1473):

1	We talked with
2	each other about
3	each other
4	Though neither of
5	us spoke -
6	We were listening
7	to the Seconds
8	Races
9	And the hoofs of
10	the Clock -

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11. In conceptual metaphor theory, small caps are used to denote a cognitive, not a linguistic metaphor

(Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

11   Pausing in front

12   of our Palsied

13   Faces

14   Time compassion

15   took -

16   Arks of Reprieve

17   he offered to us -

18   Ararats -

19   we took -

The poem opens with the apparently paradoxical claim of talking without speaking. While Dickinson is often hard to understand, we nevertheless feel a sense of intimacy, a feeling that "she belongs to me alone" (Freeman 1996). The length of a particular discourse simulates the psychological distance between participants: the more distant the participants, the longer the discourse; the more intimate the participants, the shorter the discourse (Haiman 1985). The feeling of intimacy arises from shortened discourse, indeed to the point of not needing speech at all when a couple are in perfect accord with each others' thoughts and feelings. I note that though the poem may appear to be "about" communication, in fact it opens with another unexpected word choice: not "we talked *to* each other" but "we talked *with* each other," an indication of shared experience. Neither, I suggest, *need* to speak because of their intimacy, but neither *do* speak because they are aware of the too rapid passing of time. So instead of silence arising from intimacy, in this poem it arises from the rapidity of time passing. Both participants are recognizing the aging process in the other as time passes, recorded in the metaphor of the clock's ticking of the seconds as a horse race.

That racing of time is reflected iconographically in the poem.[12] Phonetically, we hear the tick-tock of a clock repeated through the six occurrences of the monosyllabic [k] words: "talked-spoke"; "Clock-took"; "Arks-took." Their placement throughout the poem is also iconographic. Note that there is only one "tick-tock" in *talked-spoke* before the "Seconds / Races" in lines 7-8, a tick-tock that is lengthened by the distance between the words across the first five lines, whereas there are two after the racing of the seconds in *clock-took* and *Arks-took*, a speeding up by number, and a speeding up by the placement of the third "tick-tock" coming immediately after the second. The length between the words *clock* and *took* in the second tick-tock captures time pausing between the otherwise quick alternation of the passing seconds.

The race against time is the tension of the participants in this poem who are constrained by a time limit on their meeting, a tension that translates as passion for this intimate and aging couple. Dickinson chose the variant "Time compassion / took" for "Time's decision / shook" from the earlier manuscript that reinforces the tick-tock phonetics. I now notice the two additional [k] words in "Seconds Races" (lines 7-8) and "Time compassion" (line 14), so that *seconds* becomes the tick of *compassion*'s tock, and the placement of the tick-tocks is even further speeded up. Are the *seconds* racing linked to time taking *compassion*, by pausing between the tock and the tick because of the participants' palsied faces?

Palsy, the *OED* informs me, is a disease of the nervous system that creates a certain paralysis, and "palsied" thus ranges in usage over being paralyzed, and thus is used figuratively to mean "deprived of muscular energy or power of action; rendered impotent." The word *pause* similarly refers to action stopping. The play between *pausing* and *palsied* resonates with the idea of a momentary lack of motion, and conjures up the human construction of time's space between tick and tock. A pendulum clock does not in fact go "tick-tock," but has a regular succession of the same sound. It is the human mind that divides the even succession into alternating two's. Frank Kermode (1967: 45) discusses the space

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12 . Iconography is defined as an intentional (not arbitrary) relation between the elements of the art medium and the images or ideas expressed through them.

between the tock and the tick, a temporal space too easily overlooked in the repetitive mantra of "tick-tock": "The clock's 'tick-tock' I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organisation which humanises time by giving it a form; and the interval between 'tock' and 'tick' represents purely successive, disorganised time of the sort we need to humanise." Such humanizing occurs as the couple's hear the pausing of time between *tock* and *tick* as taking compassion on them in their own race against time.

Handwriting analysis places the poem some time after the death of Judge Otis P. Lord's wife on December 10 (Dickinson's birthday) in 1877, and the possible onset of a romantic relationship between Lord and Dickinson.[13] Deaths are coming thick and fast at this time: her own father in 1874, Thomas Wentworth Higginson's wife in September of 1877, Samuel Bowles dying the next month after Mrs. Lord in 1878, followed by George Eliot in 1880, President Garfield and Dr. Holland in 1881, Charles Wadsworth, Emerson, and Dickinson's own mother in 1882, little Gilbert and Judge Lord himself in 1883. No wonder passion is intensified in this race against time.

The last tick-tock – *arks/took* – reveals the passion. The reference to "Arks" and "Ararats" is again a biblical reference, this time to the story in Genesis of Noah's ark surviving the Flood. The covenant God made with Noah after the flood came to stand for the arks of the covenant in Hebrew biblical tradition. Offered as a reprieve by time, this couple seized the opportunity, whether of salvation from time or "taking" advantage of what time is theirs, in "taking" Ararat, where the ark finally lands as earth's permanence is restored, just as the poem itself preserves the couple's story in time. In this poem, the word *take* takes on even further possible meanings.

My analyses of the foregoing poems have focused on the life of words through their etymology and the ways in which they work to make Dickinson's poetry breathe, to animate it with the life-blood of creativity. What I have been doing is, finally, the subject of the following poem (A 87-3/4 F905/J861).

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13. Franklin mentions that the envelope on which the earlier version was written is postmarked from Philadelphia, though he doesn't say if the postmark carries a date.

The poem again contains a biblical reference, this time to the disciple Thomas who wanted to see for himself before he would believe that Christ was resurrected from the dead (John 20: 24-29):

24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

25 The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. […]

29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed *are* they that have not seen, and *yet* have believed.

1   Split the Lark - and

2   you'll find the Music -

3   Bulb after Bulb, in

4   Silver rolled -

5   Scantily dealt to the

6   Summer Morning

7   Saved for your Ear, when

8   Lutes be old -

9   Loose the Flood -

10 you shall find it patent -

11 Gush after Gush,

12 reserved for you -

13 Scarlet Experiment!

14 Sceptic Thomas!

15 Now, do you doubt

16 that your Bird was

17 true?

The skylark is known for its liquid, warbling song. The silvery liquidity of the bird's song during flight has been a frequent theme of poetry. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's To a Skylark," images of liquidity are paramount: the bird's tune is described in terms of "Drops so bright to see / As from thy presence showers a rain of melody." The notes that "flow in such a crystal stream" inspire the poet to create similar harmonies that "From my lips would flow." Shakespeare, too, identifies poetic creativity with the lark's song in sonnet 29: "Haply I think on thee,—and then my state / Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate." The music of Dickinson's lark spills out uncontrollably, "in / Silver rolled," metaphorically reflected in Dickinson's chemical knowledge of the silver globules (bulbs) of mercury that run uncontrollably all over the place and are hard, even impossible, to pin down. Mercury, also known as quicksilver, was named after the Roman god Mercury, the "silver-heeled," known for his speed and mobility. He is believed to have created the lyre and was the god of oratory and eloquence, language and writing. The lyre itself became a symbol of lyric poetry. Dickinson's poem is a paean to her belief in the power of poetry to continue to speak to us "when / Lutes be old -."

Often identified as an anti-scientific analysis poem, I note that until more modern technological procedures were invented for scientific exploration, the only way scientists could record and document the existence and nature of the world's flora and fauna was through death and taxidermy.[14] As in previous examples of word choice in Dickinson's poems, I expect "potent" in line 10 but get "patent": a lying open to view, a spreading wide, and also the idea of a discovery patented. "Split the Lark" becomes "Loose the Flood" as the image of music rolling out becomes the flowing of the life force of blood. The ending of the poem is self-evident, with the explicit reference to the Doubting Thomas of St. John's Gospel. Thomas's need to feel for himself Christ's wounds in order for him to know that Christ is alive reflects the relation between the words made flesh and the spirit that keeps them alive, that makes them

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14. Consider, for example, the invention of a method by two Russian scientists in 1968 for perceiving the inside of a living cell in the electron microscope without having to kill it to fix it in formaldehyde, or the advent of computer simulations which render vivisection almost—and hopefully—completely obsolete.

"true." Dickinson's ends her poem with just the one word *true* on its final line, an emphasis that

reinforces the power of poetry to speak truth. The indivisibility of body and spirit, word and its vitality,

are reflected in the first part of a late Dickinson poem (A 726 F1627*B*/J1576):

> The Spirit lasts \
> but in what
> mode -
> Below, the Body
> speaks,
> But as the
> Spirit furnishes -
> Apart, it never
> talks -
> The Music in
> the Violin
> Does not emerge
> alone
> But Arm in Arm
> with Touch, yet
> Touch
> Alone - is not
> a Tune -
> The Spirit lurks
> within the Flesh
> Like Tides within
> the Sea
> That make the
> Water live, estranged
> What would the
> Either be?

Poetry is thus made up of words: words playing off each other, words working with and against each

other, words refracting their many potential meanings. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, the

traditional notions of "denotative" and "connotative" meanings no longer make sense. Meanings do not

reside in the word, either denotatively or connotatively. They are encyclopedic, created from the dynamic interactions that take place among writer, text, and reader. That is why a poem can mean so many things to so many people. Words have networks of potential meanings, so that a word in a poem reverberates with and against its other possible elaborations and extensions, depending on the context of the utterance in which the word is placed (this motivated by the intentions of the writer), and the experiential background the reader brings to the text.

Words made flesh are infused with the animating life-force of the spirit throughout Dickinson's poetry. We do not have Higginson's first letter to Dickinson in reply to her question if her verse were alive, if it breathed. One would hope, as suggested in Dickinson's second letter to him, in which she noted that he asked for other poems, that he assured her that it did, in spite of "the surgery" (L261). In her first letter, she asked Higginson to tell her "what is true." Her own poetry reveals she had no need to ask: her words made flesh are indeed "full of grace and truth."

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