

Emily Dickinson in Translation:

A Study of the Latin Residuum in Dickinson's Grammar

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One and One – are One –
Two – be finished using –
Well enough for schools –
But for Minor Choosing –

Life – just – Or Death –
Or the Everlasting –
More – would be too vast
For the Soul's Comprising –

Often when a poem is read aloud, the audience wishes nothing but to see the poem on paper—to visualize the punctuation and the lineation, ultimately to disambiguate the reader's vocal interpretation of the poem. When a poem of Emily Dickinson, like the one prefacing this essay, is read aloud, things are lost—and often the listener finds him or herself one of those lost beings. In fact, we can say that Emily Dickinson's poetry is difficult, and the difficulty is only compounded on the printed page. Dickinson's use of the dash in place of all conventional punctuation, her use of ellipsis, circuitous syntax, and other unconventional grammatical devices create an intimidating aura of interpretative difficulty. For example, poem #769 above exemplifies the voice of Emily Dickinson as a poet, as a linguist, as a user of language. The reader or listener immediately encounters syntax and punctuation that problematize the

activity of interpretation and raise the following questions: Does the phrase “be finished using” refer to “two” as an answer for the arithmetic problem of $1+1$? What exactly is “well enough for schools?” Is the word “minor” an adjective describing the word “choosing” or its direct object? Fundamentally, these and other such questions arise from the grammar of Dickinson’s poems: their unconventional syntax, their extended use of ellipsis, their lack of adherence to the usual rules of agreement, and their punctuation. These grammatical anomalies, which arise from filtering her poetry through an English-based grammatical paradigm or model, are arguably the greatest interpretative problem in Dickinson’s poetry, and as such, the source of all the various critical readings and interpretations of it. However, when her poetry is read and understood in the light of a grammatical model that comprehends the habits of both English and Latin verse, these so-called anomalies are resolved. Nevertheless, to achieve this outcome, Dickinson’s reader or listener must engage in the act of translation; he or she must hold in suspension all the usual tools of English grammar and draw upon the circuitous resonance of Latin grammar to piece together the riddles that are Emily Dickinson’s poems. If the reader follows this approach, he or she participates receptively in Dickinson’s poetics of “Circuit” and will gradually stumble upon the “Truth’s superb surprise.” The critical importance of this approach to Dickinson’s grammar becomes apparent when the history of Dickinson criticism is well examined. When Dickinson’s readers re-examine the language of her poetry within a classical context, a new aspect of her identity as a major American poet is revealed, an aspect that has largely been ignored or overlooked for the past century by her critics. Dickinson’s genius as a poet does not lie solely in her prefiguring the concerns and methods of twentieth

century poets, but rather in her ability to rekindle a living language from the ashes of a dead one, and, in so doing, be the voice of the coming century.

An intentional ambiguity, very much like that of the early twentieth century poets, characterizes Dickinson's poetic voice; this ambiguity is created by her hyperbolic use of ellipsis, circuitous syntax, and unconventional punctuation. The dislocated word order of her syntax is the most noticeable, but least problematic of Dickinson's grammatical aberrations. Normal syntax in English follows the basic paradigm of subject-verb-object, with subordinating clauses or phrases following immediately the word they modify. In Dickinson's poetry we constantly see this syntactical norm shifted and redefined. For instance, in her poem "Wild Nights—Wild Nights," the first two lines of the second stanza employ dislocated syntax: "Futile—the Winds— / To a Heart in port—" (249.5-6). Furthermore, Dickinson also often separates phrasal verbs, which are verbal compounds, and relocates the preposition anterior to its verb, such as: "When that which is—and that which was— / Apart—intrinsic—stand" (664.5-6). Likewise, Dickinson frequently places subordinate clauses and phrases and adjectives at a far remove from their grammatical antecedents; indeed, often the subordinated words actually precede the words they modify. The fact that English grammar rarely employs inflections as signifiers of meaning results in the importance of word order, which compensates for the paucity of inflections.

The previous example from "Wild Nights—Wild Nights" is also an instance of ellipsis: the verb, "are," which would help the reader reorient the word order, is omitted from the sentence. Dickinson's hyper-extended use of ellipsis is much more problematic and pervasive in her poetry. There are two primary types of ellipsis, which Cristianne Miller in her book, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*, terms "recoverable" and "non-recoverable" deletion. The first

type is that which is a habit of expression. It is the type we use every day in our speech and writing; recoverable ellipsis is an omission of words that are implied by the grammatical function of the other expressed, un-omitted words in the clause or sentence. Non-recoverable ellipse, however, is the omission of words that are themselves the usual signifiers of grammatical function in a clause or sentence.

The final element of Dickinson's poetry that creates ambiguity and the ensuing interpretative difficulties is punctuation. In this field, Emily Dickinson is arguably the avant-garde of the modern poet. Her employment of the dash in the place of every other mark of punctuation was unprecedented and only later replicated in the twentieth century. A simple look through a book of Emily Dickinson's poetry manifests how pervasive is her use of the dash, the paucity of the comma, and the almost complete absence of the period. Dickinson makes the dash serve almost all of her punctual purposes: it serves as a marker for the beginnings and ends of relative clauses, appositives, interjections, and as a highlight for ellipsis. Dickinson's punctuation only heightens the effects of her other unconventional grammatical tactics and further complicates the interpretative problems that her grammar introduces into her poetry.

Latin and the habits of its grammar, particularly within the realm of verse, is a lexicon that helps the reader unpack and narrow down the interpretative possibilities of Dickinson's poems. Emily Dickinson's knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek has been documented by her numerous biographers. She is known to have studied Latin formally for at least four years in her time at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Seminary; her Latin teacher at Amherst Academy is noted to have been one of her favorite teachers. In her girlhood years while still studying at Amherst, Emily Dickinson gave an inscribed copy of the *Aeneid* to a schoolmate; the

inscription is an artistic translation of Line 203, Book I. She knew Latin well enough to adapt it linguistically to her own personal intentions, as the inscription manifests.

Throughout the works of Virgil and other Latin authors found in Dickinson's library, there are countless examples of extended ellipsis, rhetorical disagreement between words and their modifiers, and circuitous syntax. Moreover, the Latin system of writing with all capital letters and without spaces between words or separating periods bears an uncanny resemblance to the dash-punctuated poetry of Emily Dickinson. In Latin, personal pronouns are always, except for emphasis, omitted, because the inflections of the verbs render the subject clear. In addition to omitting pronouns, Latin poetry also often omits forms of the verb "to be," which in English are supplied by the appropriate string of auxiliary verbs: for example, in Book I of the *Aeneid*, "futuros esse" is omitted from the phrase "sperate deos memores," which if strictly translated would mean, "trust the gods mindful." An example of ellipsis of pronouns occurs in the opening lines (line 12) of the epic, where the expression "Tyrii tenuere coloni" is missing the pronoun "eam." Latin will also frequently omit verbs of speaking or answering. The syntax of Latin, unlike that of English, has little import on the semantic process; a particular or rigid word order is not necessary to understand a sentence in Latin. In this way, Latin poets could effectively and rhetorically make use of the topographical arrangement of words. Dickinson mimics this circuitous pattern of syntax to the same effect in her own English poetry. Latin also often allows singular, collective nouns to take verbs that are plural in number. Latin, particularly the verse of Virgil, is rife with examples of grammar that mirror the experiments with the conventions of English grammar that Emily Dickinson fostered in her own poetry.

In her lifetime, Emily Dickinson published fewer than a dozen of her 1800 poems. Furthermore, her entire life was characterized by a self-determined reclusiveness and isolation from society. As a result, it was not until the late 1920s and early '30s that critics discovered her poems, which had slowly been making their way into print since the last decade of the nineteenth century; when Dickinson's poems finally found their way onto the literary and academic scene, not only was the women's rights movement beginning to gather momentum, but experimental and modernist poetry also were gaining recognition. Because of this collision of occurrences, critical interpretations of Dickinson's works focused almost exclusively on her uncanny foreshadowing of modern poetics and her acute sensitivity to her position as an unmarried woman and poet, living in a society unreceptive to the contributions of women. It is, therefore, critical to perceive and understand just how steeped Dickinson's language and grammar is in a classical paradigm. Recognizing this influence in her poems further reveals her own particular identity as a poet. It is in embracing and engaging the grammatical habits of Latin verse that Dickinson forges her own unique expression of the English language. It is her continuity with the past and with the traditions of antiquity that substantiate her keen sensitivity to the concerns of the twentieth century, making her a type of prophetic voice for a coming age.

Dickinson's grammar, when held up to the model of conventional English grammar, is full of holes, fragmented, puzzling, difficult, and elusive. However, when the reader expands his or her linguistic criteria to include classical models of grammar, the reader will be thrust into a circuit of resonating language that echoes in not only the words and phrases with which it is composed, but the entire fabric of creation and experience. Understanding the influence of

Latin in Dickinson's grammar is not only crucial for literary criticism in general, but it is also vital for each individual reader of her poetry. In her poem, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—," Dickinson describes her own poetics as a poetics of "circuit." The reader that perceives the imprint of Latin in the grammar of her poems and reads accordingly is able to participate actively in Dickinson's poetics. To read the poetry of Emily Dickinson, to engage it with one's self is to enter into the act of translation; it requires what Keats referred to as "negative capability"—the capacity to be "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." It requires a humility from the reader—a humility which, if we hold in suspension the present moment and all of its demands, just might allow us to be dazzled gradually with the Truth's superb surprise.

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