

**“Where the Meanings, are”:
Emily Dickinson, Prosody, and Post-Modernist Poetics**

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ABSTRACT

In the ongoing argument about Emily Dickinson’s place in literary history, Dickinson has attained the distinction of becoming the only poet to be characterized as a nineteenth-century Romantic or Victorian, a precocious twentieth-century modernist, and a post-modernist “graphemic” poet whose use of the page is still years beyond that of most twenty-first century poets. This paper enters the fray by arguing that Emily Dickinson’s most old-fashioned poetic technique – her use of common meter – contributes directly to, and is inseparable from, her most *avant* “post-modernist” semantic effects. Once the semantic role of Dickinson’s meter is recognized, I argue, it becomes impossible to read her as a “graphemic” poet – and both her affinities with and differences from modernist poetics leap into focus. Finally, I suggest that Dickinson use of meter enables her to probe the nature of meaning in ways that elude both the ironized prosody of modernism and the anti-prosodic efforts of post-modernists.

KEYWORDS: Prosody, poetics, Emily Dickinson, modernism, post-modernism

Since David Porter backhandedly hailed her as the mother of American modernism’s most perniciously abstract tendencies, Emily Dickinson has often been “situated outside her own century” and, as Paula Bennett says, treated as “a modernist in nineteenth-century dress” (216). In fact, treating Dickinson as a modernist has come to seem rather quaint, given the vocal minority who follow Susan Howe in reading her as a graphemic, willfully indeterminate post-modernist. Although such readings are anachronistic, it is striking how easily Dickinson can be stripped of her nineteenth-century garb and decked in poetics that seem the antithesis of the prosodic forms in which she dressed her verses. Modernism and post-modernism emphasize discontinuity and rupture. Form and prosody in general, and Dickinson’s beloved common-meter quatrains in particular, emphasize continuity and closure. Though most modernist and post-modernist poets wouldn’t be caught dead using such predictable, conventional forms, Dickinson’s four-square prosody fits her anachronistically “modernist” or “post-modernist” discontinuity, indeterminacy, and out-and-out incoherence perfectly, creating effects “post-modernist” means alone cannot achieve.

Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Dickinson’s niece and editor of several early volumes of her poems, was one of the first to style Dickinson a modernist: “As long ago as 1860, Emily was outdating the imagists and writing free verse of her own invention” (quoted in Hampton xi). Though Dickinson hardly wrote “free verse,” Bianchi’s desire to frame her aunt as a modernist is understandable. By the 1920s, many of Dickinson’s most peculiar qualities had become standard modernist practice. Take the poem which begins:

I’m “Wife” – I’ve finished that –

That other state –
I'm Czar – I'm "Woman" now –
It's safer so – (Fr225)

The first two lines present the sort of jagged, near-mimetic speech rhythms we find in early Frost and some Williams; Dickinson's dashes multiply interpretive possibilities like steep linebreaks; while her proto-Marianne Moore-esque use of quotations marks signals the distancing, ironizing intelligence behind the speaker's frantic phrasings.

For Bianchi, Dickinson's "modernism" meant anti-conventionality, a trait she shared with modernist trailblazers, who tended to define their poetics in opposition to the genteel conventions that dominated nineteenth-century American poetry: Dickinson's "revolt," Bianchi said, "was absolute." By the 1960's, however, critics were reading modernism not simply as revolt against nineteenth-century gentility but as reflecting radically different notions of language and meaning. When Porter characterized Dickinson as the "first practitioner" of "an extreme ... American modernism," he focused less on her unconventionality than on her dissociation of signs from signifiers and apparent rejection of determinate form and meaning (1). Many subsequent critics have followed Porter's lead in taking the disheveled state of Dickinson's texts – the multiple versions, inclusions of variant word choices and non-poetic elements such as cartoons on manuscripts – as evidence of a modernist or even post-modernist embrace of discontinuity and incoherence as formal principles. Most recently, though, Jed Deppman has argued that Dickinson should be read as a post-modernist not because of her textual practices but because "[t]o read Dickinson as a postmodern thinker and writer is, on the one hand, to explore the ways postmodern theory makes visible important aspects of her work, and, on the other, to see how her poetry exemplifies and illuminates central postmodern predicaments" (87). This reciprocal fit between Dickinson and post-modernism enables Deppman to make visible Dickinson's "aware[ness] of herself as a site of vocal and intellectual conflict, torn or traversed by competing language games ... [and refus[ing] either to accept or reject the powerful explanatory discourses of her time" (86). For Deppman, Dickinson exemplifies "the attitude ... Lyotard finds definitive of postmodernism: incredulity toward metanarratives" (86).

But such arguments look past the aspect of Dickinson's verse that is most in keeping with her distinctly *pre*-modernist century: her prosody. Though her corpus contains many exceptions (including "I'm `Wife"), the vast majority of Dickinson's verse consists of rhyming quatrains written in common meter – which is why the assertion that Dickinson's poems can all be sung to "Gilligan's Island" or some other profanely insipid melody such as has become a cliché.¹ For example:

There's a certain Slant of Light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,

But internal difference –
Where the Meanings, are – (Fr320)

This oft-anthologized chestnut showcases Dickinson’s favorite meter. The first and third lines of each stanza have four beats; the second and fourth, three voiced beats followed by an unmarked beat of rest. This hymn-like rhythm, already dated when Dickinson embraced it, communicates a pulse of continuity and fulfilled expectation rooted in the forgotten communal rituals that also gave rise to ballad and nursery rhyme.

When we exaggerate this rhythm by singing the poem, its wave-like regularity smoothes over Dickinson’s leaps and omissions, making the shift from the external description of the first two lines to the spiritually-tinged phenomenology that follows seem as inevitable as the beats and end-rhymes. But as Ted Hughes’ description of Dickinson’s “microscopic meter” suggests, Dickinson’s metrical effects often do the opposite, magnifying rather than masking shifts among her syllables. Here, for example, Dickinson varies common meter slightly, beginning each line with a beat rather than an iamb. The confidence projected by the strong initial beats in the opening lines is qualified in lines three and four by the slight strain of promoting normally unstressed syllables (“That” and “Of”), creating a sense of not-quite-successful effort, as though describing that ephemeral “Slant of Light” was overtaxing consciousness and language.

Dickinson’s embrace of old-fangled prosody makes her seem much more at home in her nineteenth-century dress. Readers tend to reflexively identify modernism with free verse – that is, poetry that neither rhymes nor scans consistently.² Like the notion that all of Dickinson’s poems can be sung to “Gilligan’s Island,” the identification of modernism with free verse is an oversimplification. For example, it overlooks the period during which those arch-*vers librists*, Pound and Eliot, slung their own pugnaciously rhyming quatrains in poems such as “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly” and “Sweeney Among the Nightingales.” Indeed, many modernist lines scan as readily as Dickinson’s. However, modernist prosody is episodic, an irregular intrusion that raises expectations of regularity in order to frustrate them. T.S. Eliot both demonstrates and comments on this tendency in “Four Quartets”:

Hunt the heavens and the plains
Whirled in a vortex that shall bring
The world to that destructive fire
Which burns before the ice cap reigns

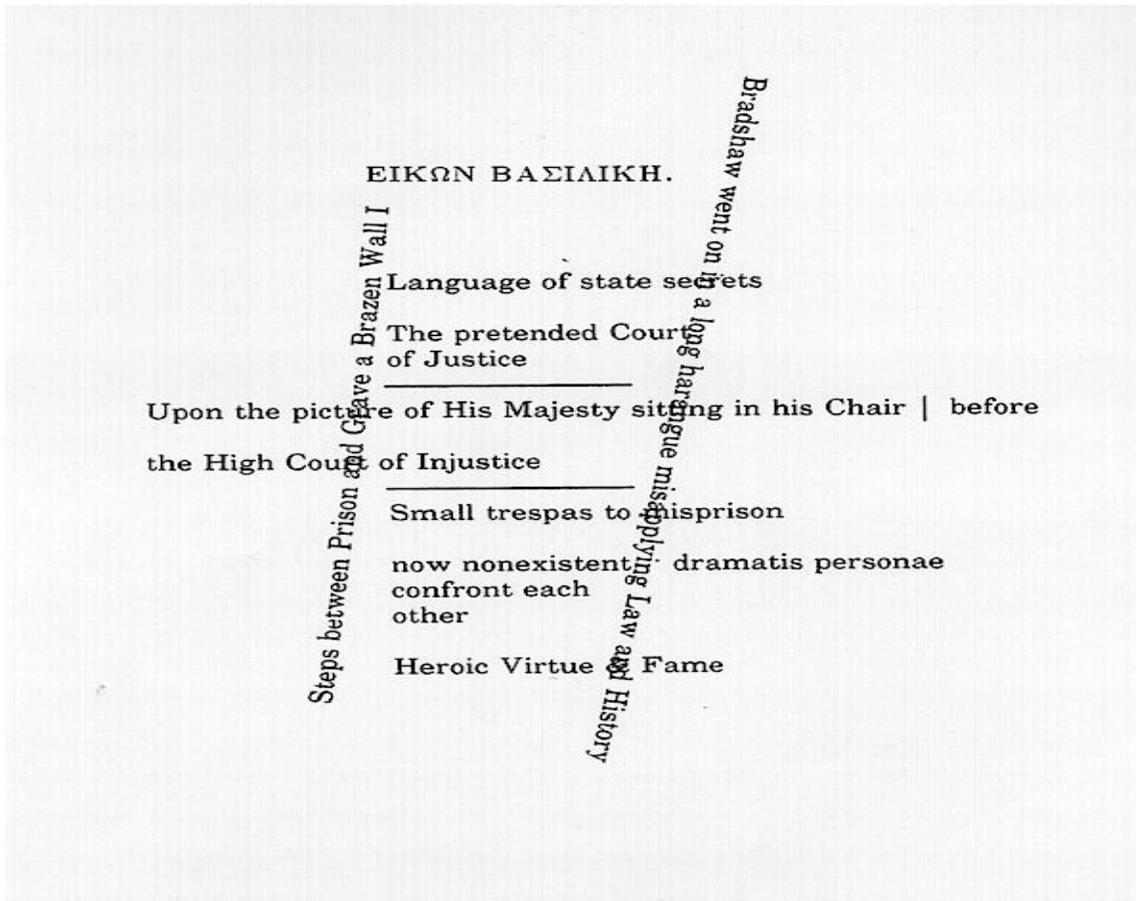
That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn out poetical fashion... (125)

The instantly recognizable throb of the first stanza’s four-beat rhythm conjures up a ghostly prosodic form that seems to materialize with the rhyme of “plains” with “reigns.” However, as soon as this sense of form – and the vision of abca-rhymed tetrameter quatrains it promises – takes shape, Eliot exorcises it with some of the most prosaic language ever deployed in the Anglo-American canon. “That was a way of putting it” not only shatters our prosodic expectations but mocks our deeply conditioned response to

such “worn out poetical fashions.”

Unlike Eliot and his modernist compadres, Dickinson exploits rather than mocks “poetical fashions.” For example, in the first stanza of “There’s a certain Slant of Light,” the dissonance of the purely conceptual rhyme “Heft”/“Light” amps the closure of the full rhyme of “Afternoons” with “Tunes” up to claustrophobic intensity. Dickinson’s rhyme-assisted assault on the institutionalized metanarratives represented by “Cathedral Tunes” shows that for her, the traditional “poetical fashion” that gave Eliot the willies was neither “worn out,” “periphrastic” nor “unsatisfactory” – in her hands, it was as inventively expressive an instrument as an electric guitar was in Jimi Hendrix’s.

Though their attitudes toward it were very different, traditional prosody represents common ground of sorts between Dickinson and her modernist successors. Like Dickinson, the modernists had what Roethke called “the ground beat of the great tradition” in their ears, and like Dickinson, they delighted in disrupting the prosodic expectations even a hint of that beat arouse. But most post-modernist poetry deploys language in ways that disrupt the very conventions of reading on which prosody depends. While there is no such thing as a “typical” post-modernist poem, this definitive post-modernist tactic is ably demonstrated in Susan Howe’s *Eikon Basilike*:



Howe’s poetry has been called “a three-dimensional language experience” – a description

that seriously underestimates the complexity of poetic language (Ma). Conventionally written poetry involves at least four “dimensions”: the connotations of individual words, the syntactical grouping of horizontally adjacent words into coherent phrases, the spatial sequencing of words and lines, and the sonorous properties of language. *Eikon Basilike* also utilizes a characteristically modernist dimension, that of contrasting modes of diction, a resource that enables her to turn bits of language (such as “Upon the picture of His Majesty sitting in his Chair”) into language-images that connote non-authorial viewpoints – a technique Bakhtin dubbed “novelization.” To this modernist substructure, Howe adds a post-modernist visual dimension, layering “graphemic” elements, the black dividing lines and the words overwritten at irregular angles across the vertically arranged text. This visual dimension radically reconfigures our relation to the text by prompting us to read the page in spatial terms that are not governed by the conventions invoked by normatively written language.³ Howe’s graphemic elements mark the text as something to which such conventions are irrelevant, forcing each reader to decide whether to read the overwritten lines first, last or simultaneously, and how to relate them to the words “under” them.

While there is no way to determine how we “should” read a text such as *Eikon Basilike*, it is quite clear that we should not – and cannot – read it as a prosodically organized text. It isn’t just that individual lines do not scan; prosodic form depends on linear reading conventions that Howe’s graphemic elements confound.⁴ The conventions of reading left to right and above to below enable us to organize words into groupings that manifest the prosodic patterns of poems like “There’s a certain Slant of Light.” But if Dickinson’s verses were laid out the way Howe’s is, the graphemic elements would render their prosody imperceptible by suspending the normal conventions of reading.

The use of graphemic elements is hardly standard post-modernist poetic trait. But to the extent that the inclusion of convention-mooting elements defines post-modernist poetics, prosody and post-modernism are mutually exclusive, because they demand mutually exclusive relations to reading. The incompatibility of post-modernist and prosodic poetics is inadvertently demonstrated by Howe’s discussions of what she calls Dickinson’s “visual intentionality.” Howe, along with Jerome McGann, has argued that Dickinson’s manuscripts should be read as “visually intentional” texts in which, as in *Eikon Basilike*, graphemic elements such as word spacing play an important role: “As a poet I cannot assert that Dickinson composed in stanzas and was careless about line breaks. In the precinct of Poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark silence or sound, volatizes an inner law of form; moves on a rigorous line” (“Some Notes”). Howe’s statement certainly applies to visually intentional poetry such as *Eikon Basilike*, but it cannot be true of prosodically organized verse like Dickinson’s.⁵ While one can – as Howe does – insist on reading Dickinson’s work in graphemic terms, one does so at the cost of ignoring the obvious and often extraordinary effects Dickinson achieves with her simple prosodic materials.⁶

In short, Howe’s statement about Dickinson’s visual intentionality reveals much more about Howe’s poetics than Dickinson’s – and offers a cautionary example of the dangers of retroactively baptizing Dickinson a post-modernist poet. But if we, like Deppman and Lyotard, take “incredulity toward metanarratives” rather than specific textual practices as “definitive of postmodernism,” we find ourselves confronting a

paradox: through prosodic means that seem inherently at odds with post-modernist poetics, Dickinson enacts post-modernism's most definitive "attitude," ushering readers into states of metanarrative incredulity to the predictable chime of rhyme and the throb of common meter.⁷

As Howe's example suggests, post-modernist techniques grow out of the modernist penchant for ironizing metanarratives through novelization, arousing incredulity by reducing metanarratives to a tangle of verbal taglines that do not, as they say, add up. In this sense, Dickinson is not a post-modernist. Her techniques for arousing incredulity grow out of distinctly pre-modernist means for binding words, ideas and images into sensuously compelling wholes.

Howe's graphemic elements visually represent the incoherence of the metanarratives invoked by her language-images. Dickinson's prosody slows the interpretive process and sonically emphasizes the divergent metanarrative connotations of individual words and phrases. For example, the first line of "There's a certain Slant of Light" evokes a familiar nineteenth-century metanarrative – call it the metanarrative of the Sovereign Self. This metanarrative, the basis of much Romantic and Victorian descriptive art, asserts the sovereignty of individual subjectivity via descriptions that imply that the significance of external reality is defined by the describer. Here, for example, the speaker asserts her significance-conferring sovereignty by singling out one of innumerable "Slants of Light" for description.

Dickinson's prosody complicates this metanarrative even as her words invoke it. The omission of the initial offbeat dampens the line's iambic bounce, emphasizing the slight natural lull between beats two and three. This emphasis – combined with Dickinson's non-conventional capitalization – divides "There's a certain," the phrase that asserts the Sovereign Self's perspective, from "Slant of Light," which denotes external reality, introducing a hint of tension into the metanarrative, a sense that subjectivity may not have quite annexed the external reality it surveys.

This subtle metrical complication lays the ground for the head-on metanarrative collision that occurs in the third line. Rather than a sovereign subjectivity defining external reality, "That oppresses" implies a subjectivity crushed by a reality it is not equal to. Dickinson's prosody highlights the metanarrative chasm between lines two and three. With "oppresses," the meter swoons. The comma isolates "oppresses" in the first half of the line, and rhythmic drive is further sapped by the stranding of the single beat "oppresses" voices between prefix and suffix – an effect that spotlights the buried verb ("press") that invests the metanarrative with physical vitality. The physicality of "o-PRESS – es" – its denotation of external reality bearing down on the psyche – reverses the relationship between subjectivity and reality that is at the heart of the Sovereign Self metanarrative, locating power and agency in the world rather than in the consciousness that perceives it.

Unlike Howe, Dickinson doesn't foreground the incoherence of these metanarratives. She uses the power of prosody – the conclusion-clinching full rhyme of "afternoon" and "Tunes" – to fuse them into a single, expectation-satisfying musical unit. In the Isaac Watts hymns Dickinson sang in church, such musical resolutions represent metaphysical resolution, the harmonizing of human doubt and suffering with the metanarratives of Divine certainty and redemption. Dickinson's peculiarly pre-modern

“postmodernity” is reflected in her penchant for creating conflicts between meter and sense that remind us of the contradictions within such chiming chords of resolution. Take the first line of the second stanza. While it is clear that the initial syllable, “Hurt” and “gives” take beats, it is hard to assign the fourth beat among the remaining syllables. Something on the metrical level has been “harmed,” but the “scar” – the missing beat – is nowhere to be found. Both cognitively and metrically, too much has been crammed into too little space, leaving a disquieting sense of “internal difference / Where the Meanings, are.” The metrical regularity of the following line heightens this sense of phantom dislocation by reminding us of the four-by-four pattern the first line fails to fulfill. The second line’s regularity also increases our sensitivity to the maddening conflict between meter and sense in the third line. In order to voice four beats, “But internal difference,” must be read “BUT inTERnal DI-ffer-ENCE” – an overemphasis of the final syllable that does violence to both speech conventions and the line’s tone of quiet, almost agonized phenomenological precision.⁸ Yet there is something perversely effective about this mismating of meter and words. The mismatch forces us to look for “internal difference” rather than passively nodding in time to the smooth synchronization of syllable and sense, providing a sensual reminder of the fundamental incompatibility of the metanarratives Dickinson has fused.

Dickinson’s pre-modernist metanarrative miscegenation enables her to fulfill the post-modernist role Deppman assigns her: that of “a Derridean *bricoleuse*, mixing and radically extending contemporary religious, literary, scientific, and other vocabularies along with their metaphysical presuppositions” (87). When we peer through her metrical haze into the dim semantic interstices where music becomes meaning, we find that the distinctions between the conflicting metanarratives have vanished. In terms of vocabulary and metaphysical presupposition, the metanarratives have “mixed” into a new configuration. The phrase “Heavenly Hurt” suffuses the top-down weight of the “Cathedral” metanarrative with the vertical ethereality of the “Slant of Light,” transforming the image of social oppression into one of painful interpenetration of transcendence and immanence. By the same token, the social connotations of “oppresses” stretch the egocentric vocabulary of the Sovereign Self metanarrative to include the others – the entire human race – represented by the second stanza’s first-person plural: “Heavenly Hurt, it gives *us* – / *We* can find no harm...”

Dickinson’s use of pre-modernist prosody to mix and extend metanarratives illuminates both the achievements and limits of post-modernist poetics. Post-modernist poems like Howe’s combine ironizing modernist techniques with convention-confounding elements that spur incredulity by dramatizing metanarratives’ inability to deliver on their promises of totalizing coherence. Dickinson’s pre-modern insistence on the correlation of sound and sense fuses metanarratives into new configurations that extend language beyond individual metanarratives’ reach. As we see in “There’s a certain Slant of Light,” these configurations, like the elements produced by nuclear fusion, are highly unstable, lasting only the time it takes to traverse one of Dickinson’s brief stanzas. But by fusing the antisocial, reality-swallowing metanarrative of the Sovereign Self with the social, subjectivity-crushing metanarrative invoked by “oppresses,” Dickinson offers a glimpse of the wounded but vital intersubjectivity that underlies both, and the processes by which self and external reality shape and scar each

other “Where the Meanings, are.”

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NOTES

¹ Christine Ross’ “Uncommon Measures” is one of a number of recent studies highlighting Dickinson’s variations from hymn-like rhythms. But as interesting as Dickinson’s metrical experiments are, they are clearly exceptions to her overwhelmingly consistent prosodic rule.

² Timothy Steele's *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter* articulates this often tacit assumption at great length.

³ Deviations from norms tend to invoke conventions – for example, Eliot's shift in diction heightens our awareness of the "worn out poetical fashion" he is violating, while Howe's misspelling of "Small trespass," reminds us of the conventional spelling. But we only perceive such deviations as deviations because they partially reproduce the conventions they violate. Howe's graphemic elements do not, because they utilize spatial aspects of the page never governed by convention.

⁴ I am not claiming that sound does not play an important role in Howe's work – merely that her poetics creates conditions that are inimical to the generation or recognition of prosodic patterning. Howe herself insists that "To an almost alarming extent -- alarming for me -- sound creates meaning. Sound is the core. If a line doesn't sound right, and I do always have single lines or single words in mind, if a line doesn't have some sort of rhythm to it, if my ear tells me it's wrong, I have to get rid of it, or change it, and a new meaning may come then."

⁵ Howe's contention that "an inner law of form" governs "each letter, every mark" in Dickinson's manuscripts has recently been empirically challenged by Domhnall Mitchell's painstaking study of the relation between Dickinson's linebreaks and the margins of the pages on which she wrote.

⁶ As Porter points out, the variant word choices Dickinson's manuscripts preserve often range widely in meaning, but invariably fit the prosodic pattern established by the rest of the poem.

⁷ Though her discussion focuses on Dickinson's relation to modernism rather than post-modernism, Crisianne Miller has pointed out the surprising complementarity between Dickinson's traditional prosodic practice and effects normally associated with decidedly non-traditional poetic practices: the "traditional features [of Dickinson's verse] make her disruptions startling by setting them off so quietly [so that] ... Dickinson's poetry rivals twentieth-century poetry in its disruption of expected patterns of style and meaning" (44).

⁸ The almost-rhyme of "difference" with "us" heightens the form-engendered conflict between music and meaning.