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Empowering a Kindred Reader:

The Reader's Role in Interpreting Emily Dickinson's Poetry

"Best, to know and tell,/ Can one find the rare/ Ear not too dull --" (l. 5-8) Thus ends "Good to hide, and hear 'em hunt!" (842), Emily Dickinson's most playful commentary on the baffling relationship between the poet and the reader. In a world which must have seemed comprised almost entirely of the dull and unappreciative, and in which that "rare/ Ear" was, admittedly, almost impossible to find, Emily Dickinson was on a quest for a kindred reader. For Dickinson, it surely seemed a monumental task at times, which is not to say she did not try: from T.W. Higginson, her "Perceptor" (L. 265); to Susan Gilbert Dickinson; to Judge Otis Lord; to the Hollands—in all of her correspondences in which she enclosed poems, she was seeking some form of affirmation that her poetry had life. As she wrote in her first letter to Higginson, "Mr. Higginson, 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—", directly detailing her motives for writing poetry: to give words life. In order for the poems to have life, however, they first had to be read and appreciated. As Cristanne Miller says, "To be one's own audience, to hear one's own poetry, is as devastating as to be hit by any other thunderbolt" (*Choosing* 98). Dickinson needed an audience's appreciation to realize herself as a poet.

Margaret Dickie claims that “Every poet longs for the ‘rare ear’ attuned to her own, but Dickinson wanted more. She wanted not just a passive audience, but one that actively sought her” (67). But Dickinson did not just want an audience that actively sought her, for she was asked occasionally by editors and other authors to contribute poems to newspapers and anthologies, and refused almost all of them. Dickinson wanted an pursuant reader, admittedly, but she also wanted an intelligent and imaginative reader who could appreciate the life and vibrancy inherent in her work without being bothered by its unconventionality in tone, meter, and form. In short, she desired beyond all else a kindred reader, someone to decodefy her poetry and demystify her soul, someone who could understand the ambiguity and complexity that were implicit to understanding Dickinson’s poems.

In this imagined kindred readership, I believe Emily Dickinson hoped to find readers who saw poetry as she did: as a boundless field, a world in which ambiguity was essential and choice would be left up to the reader as an integral part of the relationship she hoped to establish between poet and reader. In a more advanced form of reader-response criticism than has been demonstrated before, I believe that Dickinson understands her own, and her reader’s, relationship to the poems, but in addition directly solicits her reader’s participation in the rebuilding (essentially the creation) of the poem. I hope to prove that Dickinson’s ambiguities, variants, and deletions are particular tools used to draw her readers further into the poems and, through a kind of “audience involvement” in the creation of the text, turns reader response into reader participation by empowering the reader to make decisions about a work created by the poet but manipulated by us, her

readers—and it was indeed a powerful role. It was a tremendous lot of power with which Dickinson had in mind to entrust to her readers: the rebuilding of ambiguous syntax, in essence the creation of one of her precious poems. Peter Shillingsburg argues, “The only access the reader ever has to the literary work of art is his or her own performance of it” — and indeed, Dickinson seems to anticipate Shillingsburg and the field of reader-response criticism by over a century. She demands of her reader a recreation, a re-imagining of the text in which the reader is forced to choose his own version of the poem, in which we ourselves become filled with the “potential of poethood.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay “The Poet,” claims that the poet, a breed apart from the rest of man, has a superior mental capacity and ability to capture the essence of beauty. The poet is also more capable of manipulating language, or as Emerson says, “But the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other” (1080). That is, the poet liberates the language and the beauty that we mortals could not otherwise access, so that “poets are thus liberating gods” (1084). In terms of Emily Dickinson’s poetry which directly involves the reader’s response, Dickinson is both a “liberating god” who exposes her reader to the beauty of language, and allows them to participate in the composition itself. Dickinson, herself a “liberating god,” moves beyond the Emersonian ideal by allowing us to transcend our mortality and become “liberating gods” with her. Emily Dickinson offers us a wonderful gift: by participating in the poem through choosing variants and recreating lost syntax, we become filled with the divinity possessed by the poet.

To attempt to “explain” Dickinson’s close kinship the reader based on biographical circumstances is necessarily risky. Suzanne Juhasz argues, “Reading means encountering her words, of course; but it means as well contextualizing those words as the expression of a particular woman writing in and against a particular world” (428.) Emily Dickinson, as described by Richard Sewall, refuted the rest of the world--e.g., her

“The poet’s voice gives the illusion of informal and personal speech . . . direct address to an audience make the poems seem more like acts of discourse than icons of art” (Miller 105). The conversational style Miller mentions is

Wolfgang Iser claims, “The meaning of a text is neither the exclusive result of the author nor that of the reader, but of their collaborative (and also corrective) interaction in that both work on a text that simultaneously works on them” (375). In other words, Iser argues that the text intentionally provides a set of instructions so that the meaning is directly offered to the reader as something to be constructed and assembled. I believe that Emily Dickinson was purposefully trying to forge this kind of collaborative relationship in which the poet’s creation lent itself to the reader’s re-creation of the text. In a reinterpretation of Sharon Cameron’s claim, Dickinson, through not choosing, forces us to choose instead—or even, if not to choose, to build a number of different versions of one text. As Alice Fulton says,

Almost every line can be reconstructed in several ways, allowing for many variant meanings and a high level of reader involvement. Of course, all literary texts require imaginations and reconstruction from a reader. In Dickinson this process is exaggerated as the reader’s decisions create one of many possible narratives. . .

Rather than creating an annoying vagueness, as might be expected, Dickinson's unspecified catalysts allow for a greater degree of reader engagement. (150)

In Dickinson's poems, reality and imagination are increasingly confused. The reader is trapped in a web of ambiguity where, Daren Wardrop proposes, "The reader's perception of the text wavers as it temporizes between what is presented as real and what is presented as unreal . . . reality and imagination become purposely confused, and the reader dwells within that mediate reality" (3). The anthropologist Mircea Eliade relates this kind of mediate reality to liminality, and suggests that we as humans have an innate desire to make sense out of our mixed-up, incomprehensible world, something he calls the "cognitive imperative." Eliade would argue that, in terms of reading Dickinson, we as readers have an innate need to impose order upon the poem by filling in the syntactic ambiguities, by choosing between variants, by recovering the recoverable deletion and glossing the nonrecoverable. With these strategies, Dickinson knowingly demands a high level of reader involvement and asks her reader for his or her own choice.

Dickinson also consciously manipulates her reader. As Michael Riffaterre says, "The author's consciousness is his preoccupation with the way he wants his message to be decoded" (157). While Riffaterre describes the ways in which the author limits the reader's freedom of perception, we can also say that Emily Dickinson controls the medium in such a way that it cannot equivocally be deciphered. As Schmit postulates, "She forces the reader to try out various decodings and thus to see multiple interpretations and opportunities of perception" (10).

Cristanne Miller believes that Dickinson's irregular syntax is a tool used to draw the reader further into the poem, a kind of syntactic lure used to involve the reader. She describes the poem's recreation in these terms: "A poem will remain partially blank until the reader becomes engaged in filling it out" (*Choosing* 88.) Levin argues that the capable reader possesses a specific device which allows him to arrive at the poet's meaning, even when there are moments of syntactic ambiguity, deletions, compression and insertions. Levin calls this resource for recovering lost text the reader's "poetic competence." The poetic competence is dependent upon the reader's possessing a grammatical mechanism for dealing with the textual ambiguity. Schmit adds a crucial element to Levin's theory, proposing that readers have both a grammatical and semantic mechanism to recreate Dickinson's voice, especially in terms of recoverable deletion. In nonrecoverable deletion, on the other hand, we as readers are forced to expand this poetic competence to make choices and fill in the blanks as we think Dickinson intended. In insertion, we must speculate on the word choice that Dickinson hints at through the elision of syntax. In compression as well, we must recover the missing syntax by completing the implied sentiment. "Dickinson's compression could be seen as an attempt to disrupt the macrolinguistic consciousness and thereby force readers to reexamine their preliterate reality; for a poet like Dickinson, who has a strong concern for metaphysics, this suggestion seems entirely reasonable" (Schmit 10). Dickinson's dashes, probably the most recognizable literary device she uses, are typically used for emphasis between words. Miller takes this one step further, arguing that "dashes typically isolate words for emphasis, slowing the reader's progress

through the poem" (*Choosing* 55). By deliberately slowing the reader's progress at a specific point, Dickinson may emphasize both the meaning and the sound of the syntax, producing a more crafted reader response.

In addition to the notion of the "poetic competence," I believe that readers of Dickinson's poetry must be filled with a poetic impulse, or a creative spark that calls the reader to want to participate in the creation of the poem. Miller hints at this idea, saying, "The poems' linguistic and metaphorical complexity allows Dickinson's readers to see her truths only as they are capable of admitting them" (*Choosing* 17). To elaborate, the reader must consciously allow himself to be drawn into the poem, to allow himself to imaginatively decodefy it to the best of his poetic ability. With the poetic competence, which assumes the reader's linguistic competence, and the poetic impulse, which assumes the reader's creative competence, the reader is thus equipped to delve into Dickinson's poems.

In *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*, David Porter presents Dickinson's poetry as a resultant co-creation between reader and poet. Using Wolfgang Iser's theory, especially its emphasis on textual gaps, as basis, Porter reconstructs the implicit matrix within the ambiguity of the original text to emphasize what has been purposefully left out by the poet. By filling in the syntactic ambiguity, the reader becomes intensely involved, both imaginatively and concretely, in the composition of the poem. Reading, Porter argues, thus becomes a social act in Dickinson (3).

Porter also claims that Dickinson's language begins with a void, that her poems not only are a barrier against confusion but "take part in confusion itself" (6). Within his examination of Dickinson's syntax, Porter argues that the ellipses and

the missing referents and inflections create an atmosphere of both destructive and creative potential, for the reader--whether competent or incompetent--must participate in the poem's composition. The poem, then, has the potential to either fail or succeed, depending on the creative potential of the individual reader. Porter claims that the visual irregularities of the manuscripts are "meaning-carrying marks that are all too often smoothed out in print by editorial decisions" (8). Editors tend to regularize Dickinson's modulation of writing through the disciplining of her dashes, spaces, capitalization, and take liberties with punctuation.

I have chosen, for convenience's sake, to use Johnson's numbering for the poems, though I have also cited the manuscripts for their use of variants and alternate punctuation. To paraphrase Sharon Cameron, I have chosen not to choose between the popular Johnson version and the more realistic Franklin manuscript folios.

In Poem #581 (Johnson's number), part of Fascicle 15, Dickinson details her version of the bizarre reader-poet relationship and the ambiguity she herself feels towards it. Here, Dickinson questions the ability of language to adequately convey emotions, experience, and beauty, especially the beauty of Nature as seen in lines 7 and 8. According to Dickinson, art cannot sufficiently portray the beauty of fire or of midday. Yet along with her discomfort about the instability of language comes complicity within the poet-reader relationship. In lines 5 and 6, Dickinson confers upon the reader a sort of Frankenstein-ish power to create (the "Races nurtured in the Dark—"), and asks whether (though she herself is incapable) the reader would

be capable of capturing his "Own." In a further twist, Dickinson uses ambiguity to demonstrate to her reader how completely unstable language is by manipulating "Own" (l.6) in increasingly ambiguous comparisons. "Own" rhymes internally with "One" in line 2, "shown" in line 7, and "noon" in line 8, which connects it to both the images captured in lines 7 and 8, and the thoughts in line 1. The juxtaposition between the brilliancy of images and the stark emotions is striking, but even more perplexing is the "One" who connects them. The "One," which seems to refer to the speaker, moves between the worlds of thought and emotion with seeming ease, possibly referring to the poet's ability to transcend the boundaries between those worlds and capture them within the bounds of a poem. And yet, if the fascicles were included in the discussion, the poem would become much richer due to the inclusion of two variants. "Shown" has as a variant "done," and if "done" was read in its stead, the emphasis would be placed upon the performance and completion of an expression rather than the visually artistic implication of "shown." Here, the alternatives the reader must choose between changes the poem from a performance to a visual poem, or a poem in which the poet presents the poem to the reader to one in which the reader must choose his own poem.

In terms of the word "Own," the ambiguity of its reference further complicates the poem: does the "Own" refer to the reader's word, his chalk stroke, or his race? When Dickinson asks, "How would your own—begin?" in line 6, the reader must question his status as simply a reader. By admitting that she has left one specific thought unsaid, she makes us question whether or not we ourselves could do justice

to that thought. Could we depend upon the stability of language in depicting an experience as a poet would, or do we heed Dickinson's warnings about the inherent instability of language? Dickinson makes her readers question the tendency of language to deconstruct as her use of ambiguity implicates its instability, and directly asserts the shared responsibility that poet and reader have towards the burden, and viability, of language.

In speaking of another poem with similar concerns as to the viability of language, Cristanne Miller claims,

Particularly in a text like 'My life had stood' where no clean copy of the poem exists, Dickinson's textual variants provide evidence that her poems originated as processes of thought based on the play of cumulative possibilities of meaning. More strongly even than the ambiguities of compression and syntax, variants contribute to the multiplicity of a text by requiring the reader's participation in establishing the text of a poem. Any act of interpretation requires a stable text, although interpreting a poem may involve several acts of interpretation and therefore make use of several textual variations. In poems with multiple word choices the reader must continuously stabilize the text by choosing what belongs in it and at the same time repeatedly return to account for the other, unchosen possibilities of the poem's meaning" (49).

In her analysis of Poem 414, "'Twas like a Maelstrom with a notch," Daren Wardrop claims the poem is prototypically Gothic and can be read in the context of Gothicism. With its conventions such as the enclosure in the dungeon, the relationship between passive speaker and goblin-betrayer, and the potential to

double with the unnamed Creature, the speaker demonstrates the anxiety he or she feels about the discrepancy between reality and society's expectations. Yet at the same time, Wardrop reads the poem in terms of reader-response, as she argues ". . . the writer aggravates the reader in a way that causes him or her to question ontology . . . The reader's perception of the text wavers as it temporizes between what is presented as real and what is presented as unreal. . . ." Wardrop further characterizes the "goblin with a gauge" as part of this deliberate aggravation by the poet to causes her readers to question reality. The "gauge" of the goblin, she postulates, is the gauge by which the goblin measures our reader response to him, and to the poem within which he is subsumed.

"'Twas like a Maelstrom" uses a blatantly angry tone which speaks directly to the reader with its pronoun "you." To complicate Wardrop's explanation in which the goblin measures the reader's response, the goblin may be interpreted as a Cerberus-like figure who sits at the gates of hell, or poetry, to guard against illegitimate interpretations. Luckily God, or the poet-creator, remembers the reader's earnest attempts to decipher (and create) poetry, and the goblin lets go. As "you were frozen led/ From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt" alludes to the idea of the mind as a prison, where the reader is trapped within the luxurious constraints of doubt, in a sort of reinterpretation of ignorance being bliss. The purposeful play on "Sentence" as both the ruling in a court case and the textual construction also contributes to the stanza's revelation about its real purpose: to reveal to the reader *his* purpose in choosing one version of the poem. With knowledge comes a painful power, that of drowning in the ambiguity of more than one version of the poem--

or living, albeit through the purposeful choosing of one version of the text and thus ignoring the other possibilities for alternate texts. “‘Twas like a maelstrom,” interestingly, has no manuscript variants, possibly implying that while this is a poem about choice creating poems, it will not be necessary to make a choice in this particular case.

Particularly recently, the fascicles have become the most contentious area of Emily Dickinson scholarship. Scholars are still arguing over the significance of Dickinson’s fascicles (was it to “workshop” her poems, or simply to organize them, as a form of self-publication, or to create a sense of continuity throughout the grouping?) but the reason for the creation of the fascicles may not be the most important part of their interpretation. As readers, what we do know is that Emily Dickinson purposefully created the fascicles, that she spent a great deal of time and energy grouping them together, making fair copies, and finally sewing them together (Sewall 537). Obviously, Dickinson had an intention in compiling these fascicles, and she intended for the poems contained within to be read in the context of the fascicles, although most readers are dependent upon Johnson’s de-fascicled and variantless copy (“Materiality,” Juhasz 428). Equally obviously, it will never be possible to definitively ascertain authorial intention. So where do we proceed with the enigma of the fascicles? Acting on the assumption that Dickinson, in compiling the poems within the fascicles, wanted them to be read as such, we can postulate that Dickinson also wanted her readers to react to them. Although she could not have possibly imagined that the fascicles would be deconstructed after her death, and the poems within necessarily read as single entities, Dickinson must

have realized that the (kindred) readers of her poems would read them both individually and in the context of the fascicles which, as we have all discovered, provides a different interpretation of the poem. That is to say, Dickinson's intention for creating the books was certainly to produce multiple layers of meaning within the fascicles, as she did within her poems.

Acting on these assumptions, I believe we can reach another theory about the fascicles: that they were part of Dickinson's attempts to specifically formulate the reader's response to the poems by creating multiple possibilities of interpretation, and by intentionally stirring specific emotions within the reader. I believe Dickinson wanted to engender confusion and controversy, to create strong opinions about meaning and interpretation within her readers. After all, we know that Dickinson wanted to play the hare to our hounds, to lead us on a merry chase--in general, to churn up confusion, as in poem #842.

In poem #842, "Good to hide, and hear 'em hunt!" Dickinson details her complex, perplexing power relationship between poet and reader. The poem describes the power of the poet and her ability to lead the reader on a merry chase--if she likes. From the opening line, "Good to hide, and hear 'em hunt!" the poet's voice is directly established even from the outset. The mischievous, teasing tone of the poem seems slightly mocking as the reader suddenly realizes that the first line's "em" is referring to him- or herself. Here, Dickinson sets up an elaborate game of hide-and-seek with the reader, implying that she is capable of hiding herself so well that the reader could never find her. Although it might be "Better, to be found" (2), it is still the poet's choice to either continue hiding, or to emerge: "If one

care to [be found], that is" (3). The fourth and last line throws the entire stanza into question: "The Fox fits the Hound--" (4). While the poet is ostensibly detailing the way she may elude the panting reader, she also implies something more. As "The Fox fits the Hound--" (4), so the poetic fox fits our doggedly pursuant hounds because the fox and hounds are a natural match. However, the fox makes the decision about whether or not to fulfill the "fit" between the fox and hounds. Otherwise, the fox will continue on its merry way, giving the hounds "fits" of frustration, as will the poet if she decides not to let her readers complete the fit. Here, Dickinson again details a slightly stupid, though dogged reader--one who will eagerly follow even the faintest scent until the bitter end.

The second stanza takes a more serious tone than the first, and expands our concept of Dickinson's desire for a kindred readership. "Good to know, and not tell" (5) claims that while it is good to have the ability to capture ideas within poems, it is "Best, to know and tell," (6) or it is even better to be able to share that ability with others. However, it is only best if one can "find the rare/ Ear Not too dull--" (7-8). Here, Dickinson seems to be doubtfully wondering whether or not she will ever find a kindred reader, one who is capable of understanding her as she wished. However, Dickinson does wish to be found: she wants the sympathy of a "rare Ear" to seek her out, although she now wonders whether she has hidden too well. Rutledge argues that the punctuation of the last lines indicates the poet's desire to be found. He claims, "The poem could easily have ended with a question mark, in place of a dash. This doubt-filled dash, then, creates a strong contrast to the coy dash at the end of the first stanza" (140).

While the sport of hiding is of great fun for the fox, she also would find more pleasure in having her brilliant efforts appreciated by the hounds, who to the poet appear to be snuffling around the wrong foxhole. It is best, then, to be a masterful hider and be recognized as masterful by others. Gary Stonum claims that: "Dickinson understands that mastery is not quite a supreme form of power. . . The various dukes and queens and emperors in her poems all need recognition by their inferiors" (142). In "Good to Hide," the fox, silently congratulating itself on its hiding place, cannot get much satisfaction out of fooling the hounds if they are all just plain stupid. It takes the rare hound, and rare reader, to properly appreciate the fox's cleverness, and the fox realizes it. As the dukes and queens and emperors in her other poems need recognition by their inferiors, so does the fox need recognition by its inferiors, the hounds. And just as the fox needs the hounds, so does the poet need her readers. (Rutledge 139-142) Dickinson's concept of the absolute power possessed by the poet differs from other poets (notably Emerson, as I have mentioned) in that it is not quite absolute. Dickinson chooses to share her great gift with her readers--or at least the capable ones. Otherwise, Dickinson slyly laughs at her (poet's) ability to lead her readers on a merry chase.

In Poem #1409, Dickinson details the instability of language and the care which the poet must take to preserve each word. Occasionally, the writer may herself be careless, and the poem may die. Yet more often, Dickinson implies, the "mortal lip," or the inept reader, does not realize the preciousness of each syllable, and the poem deconstructs. Margaret Dickie argues that, "The 'mortal lip' here, like the ear which 'attireth that it hear,' may belong to writer or reader. Both the one who

delivers the syllable and the one who receives it must depend equally on the inability of the other to 'divine' the 'undeveloped'" (1409). Mortal lips, unlike that of the poet, are not god-like, and they cannot predict the stumbling of language. Yet with care, they may help to preserve the poet's language. If mortal lips actually understood what we were saying, Dickie claims, we would stop talking--and if we heard well, we would be unable to listen.

In poem #448, Dickinson borrows a leaf from Emerson, and details her own version of the poet--or rather, the "traditional" poet that remains bound to conventionality. Dickinson here closely examines the world of the poet (though not closely enough for Sewall, who argues on p. 723 that she leaves much unsaid), and his capability of elevating the commonplace to a thing of beauty, though she wavers between lumping herself in the category of "the poet" and separating herself from the conventional poet who traps the reader in a non-participatory role. She defines the poet's role as one of "distill[ing] amazing sense/ From ordinary Meanings--" (2-3), implying that the poet is capable of capturing the best essence of the mundane, thereby transcending the reader's ordinary perceptions and making him or her view the world with a renewed sense of wonder. The fourth line, "And Attar so immense," cites the "essential oil" used in perfume distillation, without which sweet perfume could not be made. Here, Dickinson creates a comparison between attar, the potent essence of perfume, and poetry, the potent essence of ordinary experience. This powerful essence of poetry captures the "physical equals psychological" sense of the explosive poetic energy which Dickinson's writing holds (Cameron 197).

The second stanza, which opens “From the familiar species/ That perished by the Door,” is an obvious continuation of the first stanza. By separating what amounts to a complete thought by breaking the stanza, Dickinson adds to the emphasis placed on each part: the immensity of the attar grows, as does its contrast to the humility of the “familiar species.” Again, Dickinson moves away from another popular conception: that of idolizing and idealizing poetry, from only writing about an exalted subject in a lofty manner, the trap of the traditional poet. Though others ignore the “familiar species,” the speaker of Dickinson’s poem believes that the most immense attar may be found in the most commonplace weed. The speaker, strangely enough, conjoins himself with the other non-poets when he says, “We wonder it was not Ourselves/ Arrested it--before.” Unlike the speaker, the poet has already “arrested” the “immense attar, transforming it into a poem; the speaker is simply an admiring observer of the poet, whose talent lies in the “arrest[ing]” of the common. Poem #448 is part of Fascicle 21, in the manuscript version, and to read it in that context is to present an entirely new poem. Here, “Ourselves” continues on a separate line, placing an emphasis on “Ourselves” and implying that we *did* arrest it before, but no one noticed. That is, in the manuscript version, the poem reads “Ourselves/ Arrested it--before,” calling into question the previous line. The “distill[ation]” of the ordinary depends upon the “arrest[ing]” the immense beauty of the common, transforming the temporal into preserved and complete moments. The first stanza in particular uses nonrecoverable deletion to creation syntactic ambiguity between references: is it the poet who does the

distilling, or is the poem a poet? The reader must use his poetic competence to make the choice about the reference, filling in the blanks and thus to make a poem.

In the third stanza, the poet undergoes an abrupt tonal change and switches his role, from perfumier to miser, and it is here Dickinson implicitly removes herself from that kind of poet. Rather than distilling sense, the traditional poet displays his pictures and hordes his riches. The third stanza beginning with "Of Pictures, the Discloser --," refers to the poet's ability to capture the essence of a picture within the constraints of words, disclosing the secret of the unseen pictures to his readers. The poet here is a powerful discloser, implying the effortless revelation of a secret known only to the poet, and shared with his readers. The poet "[e]ntitles us -- by Contrast --/ To ceaseless Poverty" (11-12). The oxymoron created here by the inclusion of "entitle" and "ceaseless Poverty" reminds the reader of the deprivation we, the readers, possess as non-poets in reading the work of traditional poets. While we may appreciate the traditional poet's disclosure of "amazing sense," at the same time we wish we ourselves could be the disclosers. We are at once both spiritually enriched by the few poems the poet chooses to share, and kept in "ceaseless Poverty" by our own inability to create poems, and unable to fully access the poet's closely guarded work. Yet, Dickinson implies, within her poems the reader is entitled to much more--the gift of ceaseless wealth, or a multitude of meanings and interpretations within the range of one poem. In a Dickinson poem, the "Discloser" is not simply the poet, but the reader who is able to join the poet in disclosing "amazing sense/ From ordinary Meanings --" (2-3).

The last stanza details the poet's obliviousness to the sheer number of his pictures. There are so many that "Robbing -- could not harm --" (14), for the source of the pictures is within the poet. His inner wellspring of poetry will never run dry, and because of his remarkable gifts, he is placed "Exterior -- to Time" (16), or outside of the ravages of time. While we are poor and awed in comparison to his glorious riches, the poet is alone, outside our temporal and spatial boundaries. And yet, Dickinson implies, *she* is not that kind of poet. Dickinson is a generous poet who, though she has the gifted capability of distilling "amazing sense" from "ordinary meaning," she will share her fortune. Unlike the miserly poet who tries to keep his readers at arms' length by placing us outside his boundaries of time and space, Dickinson lets us in those boundaries to experience the potential of poethood for ourselves.

In poem #1212, Dickinson briefly explains her notion of the poet's vulnerability to the audience. In this four-line poem, Dickinson discusses the reader's role in the creation of the poem, for the reader gives the poem the only life that it will have. "The word is dead/ When it is said" (1-2) implies that when the poem is read, it will die--at least, in the eyes of some poets. Dickinson, on the other hand, "say[s] it just/ Begins to live/ That day" (3-5) by being verbalized. Not only does Dickinson definitively proclaim here that she desires her poems to be read, but that her readers give her poems "life," that indefinable thing which makes simple words transcend themselves and become poetry. Readers, then, give the poem immortality by giving the poem perpetual life through its reading. Though future sympathetic readers may only be guessed at, the sheer fact of their interest in

reading the poems gives the poems renewed life. The poet, then, is completely at the mercy of her readers.

The complex, changeable relationship between reader and poet that Dickinson details throughout poems #414, 448, 842, 1212, and 1409 illustrates the insecurities Dickinson felt about the power she was allotting her reader. Though she realized the extent to which this power could be abused, and about how her poems could deconstruct as a result, as we see in #1409, she would not be dissuaded from writing for the kindred reader. Though she realized the difficulty of finding the “rare ear” attuned to her own, she nevertheless never stopped writing to empower the individual reader. Unlike poets of the past, and in fact the present, Dickinson specifically aimed to draw her readers into the poem, and its creation. By using variants, ambiguous syntax, deletions and compression, Dickinson led us into a boundless world in which we could be filled with the beauty of poethood. It is no longer a cliché to say that Emily Dickinson gave us a great gift by giving us her poems. Through her poems, Dickinson made us poets too.

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