Amplitude of Queer Desire in Dickinson's Erotic Language

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Dickinson’s eroticism is exceptionally amplitudinous. It inflects and
charges almost all of her poems, no matter their subject: nature, spiri-
tuality, human relationships, poetry. Erotic desire—sensuous, nuanced, flagrant,
极端, outlandish, and profound—is her way of interacting with the world.
Dickinson is not only sexy; she’s edgy; Polymorphous Perversity! Lesbianism!
Autoeroticism! Necrophilia! Cross-dressing! Masochism! Recent Dickinson schol-
ars, such as Gary Stonum, Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart, Robert Mc-
Clure Smith, Marianne Noble, Cynthia MacKenzie, Páraic Finnerty, and Sylvia
Henneberg, have pointed out these tendencies.

I think that Dickinson’s desire as manifested in poetic language can best be
understood as queer. “Queer” is a verb, an adjective, and a noun. The verb means
to skew or thwart. The adjective means unconventional, strange, suspicious.
Queer as a noun was originally a derogatory term for male homosexuals. It has
been reclaimed in academic theory as a tool to question and disarrange norma-
tive systems of behavior and identity in our culture, especially as they regulate
gender, sexuality, and desire. Donald Hall says that to queer “press[es] upon sys-
tems of classifications . . . to torture their lines of demarcation” (14). Eve Sedgwick
invokes amplitude in “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps . . . lapses
and excesses of meaning” that ensue when we try to limit gender and sexuality
“monolithically” (8). Diana Fuss observes that queer imaginatively enacts “sexual
redefinitions, reborderizations, and rearticulations” (7). When Dickinson writes,
“If I may have it, when it’s dead” (Fr431), “when I’m Earl” (Fr734) or “Her face was
in a bed of hair” (Fr1755), we see the queer impulse.
To call Dickinson’s ample eroticism queer is not a new idea. This paper extends our interest in the queer Dickinson by examining her poetics of desire. Building from the recent writing on masochism by, in particular, Noble and Smith, as well as Stonum’s pathbreaking study of the Dickinson sublime, I would like to propose that there is an aspect of Dickinson’s masochistic fantasy, as created with poetic metaphor, that by way of its figurative excess goes beyond tweaking or rearranging of traditional gender and sex arrangements to construct a play of excitement and desire that finally bypasses gender altogether and redefines the sexed body.¹

This paper stems from my own desire to use the lens of academic queer theory to understand Dickinson’s eroticism in ways that expand what we already know. By focusing on language and poetics, I observe something other than biography or subject matter per se. Much recent research has interpreted Dickinson’s personal erotic life, and critical analysis has focused as well on the stories that her poems tell of passionate love. Yet if we also see queer operating as a principle in literary language, we can enrich our concept of queer art.

Looking at poetry through a queer lens brings me directly to language. Language becomes the site for queering, especially in Dickinson’s favorite figure, metaphor. Metaphor, which means in Greek to carry across or transfer, is a traditional trope for linguistic shape shifting. As such, it serves many purposes. Yet metaphor, it turns out, has a lot in common with queer. Sedgwick notes that “The word ‘queer’ itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European root *twerkw, which also yields the German *quer (traverse) [and] Latin *torquere (to twist)” (xii). Metaphor queers its subjects and themes because it creates further fantasies within the imagined space of the poem: expanding its mis-en-scène to include other players, other situations, all associated with one another and thereby providing the “excesses of meaning” that Sedgwick notes. In this way the scope of desire is made more ample and more strange. For example, think of these peculiar metaphoric phrases: “When Winds take [or hold] Forests in their Paws - / The Universe [or Firmaments] - is still -” (Fr477), and “Had I the Art to stun myself / With Bolts - of Melody!” (Fr348). In this paper I will look at how these figurative leaps at the conclusion of their poems construct a new space and condition for desire.

In Dickinson’s poems erotic desire is frequently engaged by way of a “simple” concept: we have an “obligation / To Electricity -” in “The farthest Thunder that I heard” (Fr1665). We have a need to be excited, because in this heightened state, knowledge, insight, and transformation can ensue: electricity is a “waylay-
From electricity (itself a metaphor) comes her most well-known metaphor for the feeling: “Bolt.” In this poem the speaker “would not exchange the Bolt / For all the rest of Life.” I will be looking today at some other more famous bolts of lighting and thunder. But think for a moment about the “waylaying” part of “waylaying Light”: attacking suddenly and without warning; an ambush; a surprise. A bolt, a jolt, a shock; an interception, an invasion, an accosting (as in, to solicit for sex). For the Dickinson subject, desire quickens in response to a force from without, and its pleasure/pain occasions new understandings or interpretations of herself in and of the world.

Such a situation recalls both the sublime and its gendered and sexualized aspect that can be defined as masochism. Dickinson is usually viewed as a poet who both participates in the lure of the sublime and subverts it. Gary Stonum argues that Dickinson skirts the traditional role of the recipient of the sublime experience so as to maintain her own identity, and Joanne Feit Diehl identifies the power of speech as the poet’s way of dealing with desire and anger, allowing her to wrest independence from a patriarchal universe (39). Focusing specifically on masochism, R. Smith and Noble show how the submitter can take control of the erotic situation. I will go further to discuss how the eroticism that metaphoric language constructs generates lovers who become differently gendered, differently sexed by way of an erotic sublime.

Stonum outlines the traditional three phases of the sublime as normative, traumatic, and sublimation: (1) normative is the state before (2) the traumatic condition that is provoked by some specifically sublime object, “the result of an encounter with something or someone grand, dreadful, majestic, authoritative, enticing”; (3) sublimation is the release from traumatic assault, when the subject experiences elevation and empowerment (Stonum 69). To achieve this state, however, the subject must submit to the powerful other and identify with it (72). Stonum shows how Dickinson both “loves the dirk” (Fr1450) but wishes to find ways of evading both being mastered and mastering—for example, as a poet, by imagining a reader who will play as prominent a part as the author in the poetic event.

Stonum frequently refers to the sublime as a drama of dominance and submission, and other scholars show how this process can be seen as the erotic event called masochism. In a masochistic act, sexual gratification and pleasure are derived from what has been described as suffering, physical or emotional abuse, or humiliation. Masochism relies on conventional gender positioning: dominance and submission, top and bottom, which are conventionally translatable into “mas-
culine” and “feminine.” However, the masochistic experience in Dickinson’s poems can be subverted, so that the masochist, not the sadist, controls the event and thus challenges normative power and gender arrangements. R. Smith sees subversion in “the conscious acting out of the assigned role in the masochistic theatre [the fantasy space, or poem] . . . Because the paradox of masochistic desire is that while polarities such as subject/object, male/female, active/passive are crucial to its dualistic structure, its discovery of pleasure in pain undoes any and all such established hierarchies” (9-10). Noble sees Dickinson working within the system, rather than challenging it outright, to find pleasure and power within patriarchy determined existence and relating to power in collaborative rather than oppositional ways (23, 39).

Reading the play of metaphor in these linguistic experiences helps us to see as well how Dickinson’s queerness sometimes moves beyond gender-bending to gender-transforming. In the sublime and in masochism one is the “masculine” master and the other is the “feminine” mastered. Queer, however, can also imply that *neither* is a “man” or a “woman” but something else, something transgressive, so that both participants become “other.” Thus the three-part Dickinson masochistic sublime might look like this: (1) Desire quickens from a force outside the self; (2) Pleasure in pain is experienced and reaches erotic climax; (3) The result is not satiation but a new world altogether.

Electricity has many sources. It can be not only a person but nature, as in “One Joy of so much anguish” (Fr1450), where birds at dawn “stab” the “ravished Spirit / With Dirks of Melody.” Even sweet little birds can stab and ravish with their song and bring about a “Joy of so much anguish” that is part of “an inquiry / That will receive reply . . . In Death’s immediately .” Here we see the fret of metaphoric imagery that occurs as well in other poems which describe an invasive interaction between two humans, or maybe a human and God. In this poem, like the others, the speaker is open to ravishment and uses it accordingly. We begin to understand how being ravished can be agential rather than limply passive for it facilitates the subject’s goals. Further, I’d like to add that being ravished by a bird—an act that transpires in metaphoric space—is a little odd and quirky. But it is an encounter with a desired other who is powerfully enticing. In this case the bird, a singer of songs, can be and has been read as a musician or poet. And art, in whatever form, is ravishing. The possibility for being waylaid pervades the universe.

When we think about eroticism, desire, and spirituality, the religious or metaphysical aspect of waylaying, the long tradition of electric enlightenment,
presents itself: “Batter my heart, three-person’d God” (John Donne, “Holy Sonnet XIV”). Certainly this form of eroticism is not your normative boy/girl sex. But for the remainder of this talk I will not extend my analysis in that direction. Where I would like to go is to sex and poetry, for we cannot ever forget that Poetry and Love “coeval come”; and that the metaphor for this conjunction is a thunderstorm: “To pile like Thunder to it’s close / Then crumble grand away” (Fr1353, my emphasis). Poetry—the writing of it and the reading of it—is love; and this love is erotic, period.

I want to look yet again at two poems that have haunted me throughout my career and which contain the metaphoric phrases introduced earlier: they are “He fumbles at your Soul” (Fr477) and “I would not paint - a picture” (Fr348). Reading these poems and these metaphors through the queer lens suggests meanings that had hitherto escaped me, no matter how many times I have written about them.

“He fumbles at your Soul” seems an exemplary masochistic poem.

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys -
Before they drop full Music on -
He stuns you by Degrees -

Prepares your brittle substance [nature]
For the ethereal Blow
By fainter Hammers - further heard -
Then nearer - Then so - slow -

Your Breath - has time to straighten - [chance]
Your Brain - to bubble cool -
Deals One - imperial Thunderbolt -
That peels your naked soul - [scalps]

When Winds hold Forests in their Paws - [take]
The Firmaments - are still - [Universe - is]

(Fr477)

Whoever the “He” is, he is gendered masculine, and he is busily, actively, aggressively fumbling, dropping, stunning, preparing, and dealing an imperial thun-
derbolt. We are in the territory of electricity. Ultimately, the “you” (not gendered) has her naked soul peeled or scalped! Ah but. But the whole poem is a series of metaphors, and if we are to read this event as a rape, as many have, or a masochistic sexual act that depends upon the top’s aggressive abuse and the bottom’s acquiescence to it, we’d have to forget about those metaphors. The fumbling at the soul (itself a metaphor) is like players at the keys before they drop full music on. Although the image suggests a warming up, it is hard to imagine those pianists abusing the piano. Rather, they’re getting themselves and the piano ready for the making of full music. If the pianist is the top and the piano is the bottom, the piano isn’t exactly what we’d call passive. Indeed, pressing the keys on the outside engages the inside hammers that hit the strings to make the music. Hammers pound—but they have all kinds of functions.

All of this prepping has one purpose—to give the brain time to straighten, then bubble cool. The clues to these metaphors seem to be the earlier reference to a brittle substance or nature. If an ethereal blow is coming, then a brittle (rigid, maybe conventional) being might not be able to receive it. The soul needs to become at once stronger and more supple. The brain becomes more active here by way of the actions of the other. An ethereal thunderbolt—a visitation from God? an ecstatic thrust from a human lover? a poem?—has Zeusian connotations: a God hurling a bolt of thunder into the soul. This oxymoron, balancing the penetrative power of the thunderbolt with the light, airy, heavenly, or celestial, sounds desirable—even as it scalps the naked soul.

To be peeled or scalped, with its clear reference to the conflict between white settlers and Native Americans, is to be violently attacked and probably murdered—there is no way around that. To be waylaid by electricity is not a walk in the park. Yet when a soul has been exposed entirely, its death may signify, as I have argued elsewhere, arrival at an altered space or consciousness (“Poem 315” 61-66). In “To pile like Thunder to it’s close” none see God and live, but that poem indicates clearly the transcendent consequence of love and poetry. Indeed, “He fumbles at your Soul” may well be another poem about poetry as an erotic event, since poetry, sex, death, and spirituality are so frequently intermeshed in Dickinson’s writing. The poem certainly has a masochistic component, although I would maintain that the discovery of pleasure in pain becomes part of a larger impulse toward sidestepping the normative altogether. Waylaying is an active and agential gesture, but so is desire. The “you” is not submissive as much as energized by pleasure and pain. The scalping of the naked soul—especially because of its ex-
treme, over-the-top imagery—may be viewed as a climax of pleasure/pain.

The final stanza, that strange coda, represents stage three in my Dickinson erotic sublime. It is not an afterthought; it is, in fact, the result of the climax that precedes it. It has no gender. There are winds and there are forests. Neither is a top, and neither is a bottom. When winds hold or take forests in their paws (the winds now further metaphorized into furry animals), what you have is an embrace, a sexualization of the whole world, that results in a resonant stillness: something like holding the breath in awe, insight, transformation. The erotic space of winds and forests is nothing less than queer.

The association of the encounter in “He fumbles at your Soul” with poetry, along with love and God, helps us to read the queer eroticism of the reading/writing process as portrayed in “I would not paint - a picture -”:

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I would not paint - a picture -
I'd rather be the One
It's bright impossibility [fair]
To dwell - delicious - on -
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare - celestial - stir -
Evokes so sweet a torment - [provokes]
Such sumptuous - Despair -
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I would not talk, like Cornets -
I'd rather be the One
Raised softly to the Ceilings - [Horizons]
And out, and easy on - [by]
Through Villages of Ether -
Myself endued Balloon [upborne + upheld + sustained]
By but a lip of Metal -
The pier to my Pontoon -
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Nor would I be a Poet -
It's finer - Own the Ear -
Enamored - impotent - content -
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful [luxury]
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts - of Melody!
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(Fr348)
Again the active/passive, dominant/submissive register is queered by the eroticism of the encounter between viewer and painter, listener and musician, and the culminating reader and poet. Elsewhere I have discussed the desire and agency of the viewer’s response: dwelling delicious on, experiencing sweet torment and sumptuous despair. In the first stanza the artist’s fingers enact a “celestial stir” that is a kind of summary of the activity of the “He” in “He fumbles at your Soul,” so that the sweet torment and sumptuous despair have that customary masochistic twinge. What the viewer is dwelling on is the painting’s bright impossibility, which seems a lot like that ethereal thunderbolt or other versions of waylaying light. The subject is desiring it, and her active desire is what causes her to understand it. Similarly, in the music stanza the cornets raise the listener softly to the ceilings or horizons, and thereafter it is she whose voyage through villages of ether (ethereal spaces) needs only “a lip of metal” (emphasis mine) to set her going.

The stanza about poetry is where we linger, though of course it has been prepared by the evocation of the preceding arts. This reader wants to “Own the Ear”—and we cannot help but remember the poet’s impassioned plea in “Good to hide, and hear ’em Hunt!” (Fr945) that she might find the “rare Ear - / Not too Dull.” In this poem the rare ear speaks, and she is indeed worthy of her poet. She declares herself “Enamored - impotent - content -.” This line has always confused me. What has happened to that active and sexy viewer and listener? Now, however, I see that owning the ear calls up the experience of those previous “readers.” In this last stanza of “I would not paint - a picture -” the poem has already happened, and the reader has not been too dull at all. Now she describes the moment after this climactic event—the content that is the still place where winds hold forests in their paws. Here the reader luxuriates in the license and privilege that has granted her an awful experience—filled with or displaying great reverence as well as terrible (a gloss for all the poems that I have discussed today). The aftermath of climax leads further, however, to the insight, the knowledge, the change. In this poem stage three (sublimation) occurs in two parts.

The shift comes in the form of a question, and a fantasy: What would it be like— not to be the poet, but to be the poet and the reader, all in one body? “What would the Dower be / Had I the Art to stun myself / With Bolts - of Melody!” The poem ends with another bolt that calls up the obligation to electricity in all of its manifestations. The proposed stunning is like the stunning in “He fumbles at your Soul.” Yet in this great poem the speaker’s last act is to imagine what might be art
at its fullest or richest—the art of stunning *herself*. What would the dower (bridal gift, endowment, or talent) be if she were to deny cultural polarities altogether? In the transgressive body that she envisions, the divisions of male/female, active/passive, sadist/masochist, and poet/reader would be queered for good. Sadomasochism, which takes two to tango, is transformed with the final image of a queer body participating in all aspects of its desire.

“We’re a queer lot / we women who write poetry,” said Amy Lowell in “The Sisters,” her tribute to Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Sappho (8). She was right. Dickinson’s queer poetics, orchestrated by the textual electric, its metaphoric language, creates a most complex erotic amplitude.

**Notes**

1. In her chapter, “The Humor of Excess,” in *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*, Cristanne Miller looks at excess, grotesquerie, and even camp in Dickinson’s language to discuss related issues: namely, how the poet “exhibits an excessively present or absent body as a way of proclaiming herself to be outside the boundaries of conventional womanhood” (126).


**Works Cited**

The following abbreviations are used to refer to the writings of Emily Dickinson:


