Gleamings

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In this arresting poem of Emily Dickinson's

The gleam of an heroic act
Such strange illumination
The Possible's slow fuse is lit
By the Imagination.

Emily Dickinson,
The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson,
Thomas H. Johnson (ed.),
Little Brown and Company,
Boston, Massachusetts. (1960) pp. 688 - 689

A present from Sonia Wild-Bicanic
Zagreb, 18.XI.86.

we are struck by a number of alternating patterns:

the A – b – A' – b rhyme scheme – the two A's being monosyllabic verb forms, the two b's quadrisyllabic nominalizations of verbs.

the number of words per line:	6 – 3 – 6 – 3
the number of syllables per line:	8 – 7 – 8 – 7
the number of nouns per line:	2 – 1 – 2 – 1
the number of syllables in the four adjectives: [*heroic / strange / Possible / slow*] (all start with voiceless sounds, the even ones in clusters in [s])	3 – 1 – 3 – 1

Each line has three metrically strong positions in which there are unreduced vowels (i. e., vowels that are other than [ə]):

Line 1:	gliym	([ən])	row	ækt
Line 2:	streyndʒ	luw	ney	
Line 3:	pas	([bəlz])	fyuwz	lIt
Line 4:	ðiy	mædʒ	ney	

In each line, the first and last unreduced vowels share something that the middle vowel has the opposite value of. In lines 1 and 2, the ends are front vowels, and the middle is a back vowel; and in lines 3 and 4, the middle vowel differs in tenseness from the two vowels on the ends.

What can alternation mean in poetese, the universal language of verbal art? What happens to our eyes, ears, minds, when we perceive a sequence like . . . abababababa . . .? Automatically, we segment: the Alternation Principle is

what repeats is an element

We can do nothing but hear this into

. . . ab ab ab ab ab . . .

And lo! the "two" elements which looked so different before, they have swung into relationship, they have become instead parts of each other. They are beginning and end of something: *they have begun to fuse*.

But in our poem, with so many things fusing, via the Alternation Principle, we ask: what is Emily Dickinson wanting us to see her interconnected alwaysness of alternating pointing to? Beginning and ending of what?

The beginning is the ending: Imagination.

She has left one noun out, thereby making its presence more strongly felt than any amount of saying it would have. She uses metonymy: she gives us *fuse*, and we know – there is a bomb here. The Possible, infinitely combustible, explosive, limitlessly powerful – with this stuff, we can make all things, under three conditions: we must know where the fuse is, we must have patience, constancy, grit, for the fuse is a slow one. And thirdly, we must have Fire. Lastly and firstly, to achieve, to create, we need Mind, the essence of active mind: the Imagination.

And more strikingly, Emily Dickinson has left a verb unexpressed too: the verby line 3, which ends with the poem's only sounded verb, *lit*, is redolent with [s], [z], [l], and the lax high front vowel [I] - put 'em together and what've you got?

Bibbety Bobbety Boo! *sizzle*

This verb fails to be hidden most conspicuously in the syllable most phonetically called attention to - the last syllable of the astounding "noun" *the Possible's*. The first stressed syllable of the line, [pas], is riffed off of by this second stressed syllable: [bəlz], because of the dance linking voiced and unvoiced consonants, which we see in the *[ð]e - [g]leam - heroi[k]* - æ*[kt]* of the first line, in which all of the consonants in the first four syllables are voiced, and all

obstruents in the last four are voiceless. And in the second line, which keeps up the good work, in the change from the voiced palatal affricate of *stran**g**e* to the voiceless palatal fricative in *illumina**t**ion*. And in line 3, right after the [bəlz] syllable comes a syllable starting with [sl] – the sequence of phones [lz|sl] here needs only the [I] which the last two syllables of line 3 give us to provide all the necessary sounds for sizzling.

And the morphological brilliance of nouning up the abstract adjective *Possible* rhymes with the reification of the wraithlike Possibility into the harder-edged Actuality, whose explosive birth image provides the central "eye" of the poem, to use the deadly accurate metaphor with which Chinese literary scholars talk about the most important figure of a work of verbal art. The fuse burns slowly; the hero of line 1's *act* perseveres through all difficulties, the gleam in their eye mirroring the audacity of their action.

And while the eight lexical items of the poem are split into two groups of five each for the first two lines (*gleam, heroic act/ strange, illumination*) and the last two lines (*Possible, slow, fuse, lit / Imagination*), there is only one line to contain but one naked lexical item, the one thing which burned as bright in Emily Dickinson's life as a supernova in the heavens, its secondarily stressed syllable [mædʒ] sounding a (false, but irresistible) etymological link to the **mag**ic of words in which she peerlessly transacted – her grail, *Imagination*.