

The unmentioning of a noun, and of a verb:
Emily Dickinson's 'The gleam of an heroic act'
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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 Poems of Emily Dickinson
Reading Edition
R. W. Franklin (ed.),
The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,
Cambridge, Massachusetts (1999) p. 608

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 monosyllables,
the two b's quadrisyllables.

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: 3 – 1 – 3 – 1
[*heroic* / *strange* / *Possible* / *slow*]
(all start with voiceless sounds, the even ones in clusters in [s])

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])	r <u>o</u> w	ækt
Line 2:	streyn <u>d</u> ʒ	l <u>u</u> w	ney	
Line 3:	pas	([bəlz])	fy <u>u</u> wz	lIt
Line 4:	ðiy	m <u>æ</u> dʒ	ney	

In each line, the first and last unreduced vowels share something that the middle (underlined) 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 . . . abababababa . . . sequence 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 alternatings pointing to? Here, I can only speculate; my guess is that she wants us to connect ideation and manifestation – Possibility and Realization – the Invisible and the Visible.

As a way of **enacting** this connection, instead of merely writing **about** it, she gives us not only six visible/audible nouns [*gleam – act – illumination – Possible – fuse – Imagination*], but also an implied one. She uses metonymy: she gives us *fuse*, and we know – there is something attached to this slow-burning fuse: a **bomb**. The Possible, infinitely combustible, explosive, limitlessly powerful – with this invisible 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 – the creative spark, the essence of active mind: the Imagination. There is, to be sure,

another noun, less invisible, but trapped in an adjective: the Hero. It is the dauntless act of the hero that gleams in the dark, as do the hero's very eyes.

But language is not all noun, all thing. Noun must meet verb to make a finite clause. There are four words in the poem in which a verb is trapped within a noun: [[gleam]_V]_N, [[act]_V]_N, [[[illuminate]_Vat]_Vion]_N, [[Imagin]_Vation]_N – first two monosyllabic verbs, then two polysyllabic ones (again an alternation). Only the last nominalized verb is capitalized, thus rhyming orthographically with the initial capital of the bomb. We do not encounter a true, tensed verb until the *is* of the third line – the verb of existence, in this line in construction with *lit*, the passive participle of the conceptually central act – the lighting of the fuse.

This blazing action is in apposition to the nominalized action which ends the first line: *an heroic act*, a stifled, polysyllabic transformation of an underlying clause: ***a hero acts***. The human agent in the poem, a hero, is wrapped in an adjective that modifies the nominalized verb *act*, making a noun phrase (*an heroic act*), which is encased in a prepositional phrase (*of an heroic act*), the noun phrase being the logical subject of the trapped verb *gleam*, the hinted at clause being *an heroic act gleams*.

But the connection between *act* and *light*, already weighted down in all these syntactic trappings, has yet one more ramification – the appositional connection between *the gleam* and the nominalized verb of the second line: *illumination*. We can attempt to spell out the connection between the first two verbs of light by a clunky sentence like this:

The heroic act's gleam illuminates so strangely . . .

a clause which leaves unexpressed what it is that is illuminated.

And thus we come to the third line with this question unanswered. We infer, from the mention of *fuse*, the existence of a bomb, and when we hear the passivized verb *is lit*, we infer that *the slow fuse* is the logical object of the deep verb *light*, but we do not yet know its agent, the Lighter, which has sets in motion the chain of linked verbs: *light – illumine – gleam – act*.

But before we arrive at the solution to this whodunit, let us look at the phonetics of the whole poem.

ðə gliym əv ən hirowɪk ækt
sʌtʃ streɪndʒ ɪluwmineɪʃən
ðə pəsɪbəlz sləw fyuwz ɪz lɪt
baɪ ðiɪ ɪmædʒɪneɪʃən

There are many ways in which the third line calls attention to itself – probably the most strident of all is the nominalizing (and capitalizing) of the adjective *possible*, and the possessivizing of it with the suffix 's; but also the fact that this line has more lexical items than any other (four: *possible, slow, fuse, lit*) with three in succession, and the unmentioning of the bomb also adding to the line's salience. Astonishingly, however, the poet has managed, by the selection of the predominant phonetic segments, to unmention also a verb.

Line three has three occurrences of [I] (lines 1 and 2 have only one each), and it has the only sequence in the poem of two identical non-neutral vowels: the two [I]'s of *is lit*, but the most in-the-face segments are the three occurrences of [z] alternating (that word again) with two of [s]. This salient sibilization hits us right at the end of the masterful *Possible's*: its last syllable [bəlz], which is metrically strong, is followed by the metrically weak [slow], which gives the difficult to pronounce abb'a sequence [lzsl]. The next syllable but one, [fyuwz], will then be followed by [ɪz lit], resulting in a line with these two subsequences: [lzsl . . . z ɪz I(t)], out of which seems to jump a hidden verb which gives the sound of the burning fuse: *sizzle*.

The phonetic pyrotechnics are not over. If we ask about line four what most forcefully hits our ear, it is surely the fact that the interior five of the line's seven syllables are front vowels: [ðiy ɪmædʒɪney], a subsequence which returns to the poem's first stressed vowel – the high front tense vowel of [gliym]. For many speakers, front vowels are sound-symbolically associated with light, a happy painting of the long-awaited Master Agent, the bold mind-act which gives the spark to set all in motion: *the Imagination*.

The preceding discussion has waxed technical, in both the sphere of syntactic form and phonetic substance. And there is much more that could be said, in these spheres and others. But what I have tried above is to give the minimal account as to why it is that the last line of this poem is such a huge release. I still remember the first time I heard it – walking through the streets of a darkening Beograd, when a friend, Sonya Wild-Bicanic, recited it to me. The last line hits one with the force of a bomb, like the punch line of a well-crafted joke.

For there one thing we must not allow ourselves to forget, we who are hopelessly addicted to the beauties of verbal music: in addition to presenting us with ideas and scenes and pieces of experience (in all sensory modalities). Poems are plays, they **act** upon us, they build to conclusions, they hit us hard. Surely Emily Dickinson was one of the greatest of poetic dramaturges – think of some of her last lines, such as

and Zero at the Bone

or that of her incredible short poem

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee,
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few.

What can one do but burst burst into laughter, and spontaneous applause?

