

How to Kill Time: Emily Dickinson and Comparative Indo-European Poetics

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The American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, at the time of a great philological renaissance that enriched the field of poetics and engendered the field of linguistics. In his book *How to Kill a Dragon*, Calvert Watkins documents how nineteenth-century scholars such as Franz Bopp (1791-1867) and Antoine Meillet (1866-1936) developed a new comparative philology. Watkins presents comparative Indo-European poetics as “a linguistic approach to the form, nature, and function of poetic language and archaic literature among a variety of ancient Indo-European peoples” (Watkins, 1995: 6). He uses a philological approach to establish a comparative historical poetics for ancient texts in the Indo-European language family. His method includes a close reading and a detailed comparison of Indo-European (IE) works in the Anatolian, Celtic, Germanic, Greek, Indic, Iranian, and Italic subgroups.

With a nod to Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), Watkins defines poetics as the branch of linguistics that deals with the “scientific study of ‘artistic’ language” (Watkins, 1995: 6). Specifically, Watkins addresses the ability of poets to effect the real world by composing truth formulas in metrical and stylistic frames that “preserve language across time” (Watkins, 1995: vii, 68). He examines the technique of the IE poet in terms of three interdependent areas: formulaics, metrics, and stylistics (Watkins, 1995: 12). He identifies the poet as a record keeper, whose purpose is to transcend the limits of time by memorializing valiant people, noble deeds, and other significant aspects of the IE cultural tradition.

Watkin's comparative poetics approach is a useful template for showing how Emily Dickinson circumvented time by preserving selected archaic IE formulas in her poetry (Watkins, 1995: 62). The body of this paper focuses on the role of IE formulas as part of Dickinson's poetic technique. The paper concludes with a discussion of Dickinson's purpose as a poet in the Indo-European tradition.

The Poet's Technique

Emily Dickinson automatically inherited poetic features of the Indo-European tradition simply by being a native speaker of the English language (Dickinson, 1999: Fr333/J276). Living in New England during the nineteenth-century philological renaissance, she was exposed directly to IE metrics, stylistics, and formulaics through her reading of the King James translation of the Bible and through her education in the Classical Track at Amherst Academy. Furthermore, the Dickinson family had access to articles on recent developments in Indo-European comparative philology because they subscribed to learned journals such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *New England Magazine*, *Century Magazine*, and *Scribner's*.

Metrics. In terms of metrics, most of Dickinson's poems appear in sets of four-line stanzas that are both accentual, as in Anglo-Saxon verses, and syllabic, as in Greek lyrics. In keeping with typical IE metrics (Watkins, 1995: 19), her poems tend to be isosyllabic, having fixed syllable counts that often correspond to eighteenth-century hymn meters in English (Ross, 2001). Although she does not employ a formal caesura, Dickinson has a tendency to mark phrase and word level constituents with dashes or other punctuation marks, sometimes creating a biclonic or tricolonc effect. Her line boundaries often match syntactic structures. However, her frequent use of enjambment breaks the IE convention that "a verse line equals a sentence" (Watkins, 1995: 19-20).

Stylistics. Because of her familiarity with biblical and classical texts, Dickinson was exposed to a variety of typical IE rhetorical figures. Like ancient IE texts (Watkins, 1995: 39), Dickinson's poems are stitched with stylistic play both vertically and horizontally, paradigmatically and syntagmatically. Dickinson used biblical and classical word repetition figures throughout her poetic corpus, including anaphora, anadiplosis, antimetabole, epanadiplosis, epistrophe, epizeuxis, and polyptoton.

Several Dickinson poems contain text-level word repetition frames such as the IE technique of ring-composition (Watkins, 1995: 22, 37):

Soul, Wilt thou toss again?
By just such a hazard
Hundreds have lost indeed –
But tens have won an all –

Angels' breathless ballot
Lingers to record thee –
Imps in eager Caucus
Raffle for my Soul! (Fr89/J139)

The word "Soul" in the initial position of the poem's first line is repeated in the final position of the last line. The ring-composition technique frames the IE theme of a soul's struggle against impish adversaries.

In an 1860 ring-composition, Dickinson frames a catalogue of questions about life after death, using the line-final repetition of "Morning" (Fr148/J101). As a metaphor for the resurrection of the dead, the word "Morning" evokes the IE theme of overcoming death. Another Dickinson ring-composition uses the phrase "summer's Day" as a frame for the IE theme of water, gold, and fire in a sunset metaphor (Fr104/J122). Other ring-composition poems use the flower "Heart's Ease" (Fr167/J176) and an "Ebon Box" (Fr180/J169) as textual frames.

Formulaics. Watkins defines formulas as verbal and grammatical devices “for encoding and transmitting a given theme or interactions of themes” (Watkins, 1995: 17). His treatment of IE formulaics includes lexical-semantic set phrases (Watkins, 1995: 18), as well as simple and complex grammatical formulas that function symbolically and indexically (Watkins, 1995: 41-49). Watkins asserts that understanding the linguistics features of IE formulas is not just “an antiquarian frill but an interpretative necessity for literary theory” (Watkins, 1995: 18).

Partially-fixed IE formulas encode themes such as “swift horses,” “overcoming death,” “hero slays dragon,” “poet memorializes patron,” and “lord rewards poet.” Table 1 gives a sample of common IE verbal formulas that appear in Dickinson’s poems:

Table 1. Selected Indo-European Verbal Formulas in Dickinson’s Poems

Watkin's IE Verbal Formulas	Dickinson Poem Formulas	Poem #	Year
cattle and men (15)	The Boys ... the Cows ... Remanded to a Ballad’s Barn	Fr1549/J1524	1881
God the Father; sky-father (8)	You are sure there’s such a person / As a “Father” – in the sky	Fr241/J215	1861
God the Father; sky-father (8)	You’ll know it ... As you will in Heaven – / Know God the Father	Fr429/J420	1862
God the Father; sky-father (8)	I hope the Father in the skies / Will lift his little girl	Fr117/J70	1859
hero slaying the serpent; bane (10)	We fought Mortality ... We chased him to his Den	Fr1130/J1136	1866
hero slaying the serpent; bane (10)	I slew a worm the other day ... "Resurgam" – "Centipede"!	Fr117/J70	1859
hero slaying the serpent; bane (10)	Is Immortality a bane / That men are so oppressed?	Fr1757/J1728	undated
imperishable fame; eternal renown (12-13)	Some – Work for Immortality ... The former – Checks – on Fame	Fr536/J406	1863
overcoming death (12)	All these – did conquer – / But the Ones who overcame	Fr328/J325	1862
overcoming death (12)	When that Old Emperor – Death – / By Faith – be overcome	Fr680/J455	1863

overcoming death (12)	The distant strains of triumph / Burst agonized and clear!	Fr112/J67	1859
ruler/king/lord as driver/charioteer (9)	Because I could not stop for Death	Fr479/J712	1862
ruler/king/lord as driver/charioteer (9)	I met a King this Afternoon! ... Horse ... wagon ... Royal Coach	Fr183/J166	1860
swift horses (12)	I cant tell you – but you feel it ... Swifter than the hoofs of Horsemen	Fr164/J65	1860
swift horses (12)	He bore me on ... With swiftness, as of Chariots	Fr 573/J1053	1863
water, gold, fire (11)	Then, now the fire ebbs like Billows ... Paralyzed with Gold	Fr327/J291	1862

The pastoral portrait of “Boys” and “Cows” being led back to “Ballad’s Barn” in Dickinson’s 1881 poem seems to be an echo of the archaic PROTECT MEN and LIVESTOCK formula found in early IE texts (Watkins, 1995: 42).

The IE metaphor of a RULER/KING/LORD as DRIVER/CHARIOTEER (Watkins, 1995: 9) appears in several Dickinson poems, most notably her 1862 poem that personifies Death as the gentlemanly driver of a funeral carriage:

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –

My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
 A Swelling of the Ground –
 The Roof was scarcely visible –
 The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
 Feels shorter than the Day
 I first surmised the Horses Heads
 Were toward Eternity – (Fr479/J712)

Temporal concepts such as “Centuries” and “Day” in contrast with the framing synonyms “Immortality” in the first stanza and “Eternity” in the last line of the last stanza iconically suggest the IE formula of overcoming death (Watkins, 1995: 12). To paraphrase: “Even though I did not have time for Death, he came and made eternity possible for me.”

The IE “imperishable fame” or “eternal renown” formula (Watkins, 1995: 12-13, 43) is explicitly evident in one of Dickinson’s 1863 poems:

Some – Work for Immortality –
 The Chiefer part, for Time –
 He – Compensates – immediately –
 The former – Checks – on Fame –

Slow Gold – but Everlasting –
 The Bullions of Today –
 Contrasted with the Currency
 Of Immortality –

A Beggar – Here and There –
 Is gifted to discern
 Beyond the Broker’s insight –
 One’s – Money – One’s – the Mine – (Fr536/J406)

Dickinson argues that working for gold in this life is a temporary reward, but working for immortality is eternal, like finding the gold mine itself. In biblical terms, seeking earthly recognition for doing good work is an inferior reward (Matthew 6:2), while working for the glory of God leads to everlasting blessings (Matthew 5:16).

Biographer Roger Lundin states that fame was “much on Dickinson’s mind in early adulthood (Lundin, 2004: 109). However, Dickinson did not wish to publish her poems for “Time” and “Money” (Lundin, 2004: 111) because she firmly believed that her work would be rewarded with imperishable fame in the eternal circumference. She knew that packets of poems hidden in a dresser drawer or privately offered to loved ones would bring eternal renown “in due time” (Lundin, 2004: 110).

In addition to verbal formulas that act as linguistic surface structures for underlying IE themes, Watkins provides a taxonomy for grammatical formulas that appear mainly as pairs of conjoined items, but also as compound words or genitive constructions (Watkins, 1995: 41-47). His taxonomy identifies Simple formulas that function as nominators, designators, and symbolic signs, and Complex formulas that function as connectors, symbols, and indexical signs. Figure 1 provides examples of these IE grammatical formulas in Dickinson’s poetry:

Figure 1. Grammatical Formulas in Indo-European Texts and Dickinson’s Poems

I. Simple (function: nominators, designators, and symbolic signs).

1. Quantifiers (function: totality of notion).

a. Argument + Negative Argument (with negation morphemes).

Vedic: “the seen and the unseen”

Dickinson: “Sweet skepticism of the Heart – / That knows – and does not know” (Fr1438/J1413)

b. Argument + Counter Argument (with antonyms).

Greek: “gods above and below”

Dickinson: “Admirations – and Contempts ... Convex – and Concave Witness” (Fr830/J906)

2. Qualifiers (function: intensification).

a. Argument + Negative Counter-Argument (litotes, with negation morphemes).

Old Persian: “true and not false” = “absolutely true”

Dickinson: “Honor and not shame” = “recognition; remembrance; imperishable renown” (Fr1445/J1427)

b. Argument + Synonymous Argument (non-litotes; with synonyms).

Greek: “prayer and incantations” = “earnest prayer”

Dickinson: “full, and perfect time” = “eternity” (Fr822/J962)

II. Complex (function: connectors; symbolic and indexical signs).

1. Kenning, A + B = C (metaphoric, relation of similarity, relational, often genitive).

Old English “shepherd of the people” = king

Dickinson: “Awful Father of Love” = God (Fr1200/J1204)

2. Merism A, B > C (metonymic, relation of contiguity, copulative, synecdoche).

Hittite: “grain and grapes” = sustenance; abundance; life

Dickinson: “Garden ... Yielded Grape – and Maise” (Fr862/J681)

(Adapted from Watkins, 1995, 41-47.)

The Simple formulas are sub-divided into Quantifier pairs that have totality of notion as a function and Qualifier pairs that have intensification as a function. The Complex are divided into Kennings that have a metaphoric relation of similarity and Merisms that have metonymic relation of contiguity by hyponymy.

In an 1864 poem, Dickinson uses a simple IE antonym quantifier to present a brilliant argument about the relationship between time and immortality:

The **Admirations – and Contempts** – of time –
 Show justest – through an Open Tomb –
 The Dying – as it were a Hight
 Reorganizes Estimate
 And what We saw not
 We distinguish clear –
 And mostly – see not
 What We saw before –

'Tis Compound Vision –
 Light – enabling Light –
 The **Finite** – furnished
 With the **Infinite** –
Convex – and Concave Witness –
Back – toward Time –
 And **forward** –
 Toward the God of Him – (Fr830/J906)

She uses complementary antithetical pairs throughout the poem to express the paradoxical conjunction of mortal and divine perspectives (bold added).

In an 1877 poem, Dickinson uses a simple IE litotes qualifier to present the paradox of finding fame by ignoring it:

To earn it by disdainning it
 Is Fame's consummate Fee –
 He loves what spurns him –
 Look behind – He is pursuing thee.

So let us gather – every Day –
 The Aggregate of Life's Bouquet
 Be **Honor and not shame** – (Fr1445/J1427)

In a forthright *sermo humilis* style, Dickinson addresses the paradox of how to achieve the honor of being remembered by name, as in the IE formula of imperishable renown. Fame comes as a consequence of day-to-day actions, not from chasing one's fortune. Such daily deeds include as gathering blossoms from a garden, Dickinson's metaphor for gathering poems into fascicles (Oberhaus, 1995: 26-29).

An 1864 Dickinson poem is a tribute and a memorial for the dead, using the synonymous pair “full, and perfect” as a simple IE qualifier. The intensifying function of the formula plays upon the solstice definition of “Midsummer” as the day of longest-lasting light in the northern hemisphere:

Midsummer, was it, when They died –
 A **full, and perfect** time –
 The Summer closed upon itself
 In **Consummated** Bloom –

The Corn, her furthest kernel **filled**
 Before the coming Flail –
 When These – leaned into **Perfectness** –
 Through Haze of Burial – (Fr822/J962)

The polyptoton of “perfect” and “Perfectness,” as well as the synonyms verbals “Consummated” and “filled” contributes to a chiasmus in the poem, adding to the theme of overcoming death: perfect, consummated, filled, perfectness.

The Poet’s Purpose

According to Calvert Watkins, the purpose of the IE poet was to be “the custodian and transmitter” of the culture, doctrine, formulas, and themes of the Indo-European tradition (68). The chief role of the poet was to transcend time by establishing the “imperishable fame” of mortals and deities in memorable texts. To make texts that live across generations, bards composed in the aesthetically-marked “language of the gods” rather than the unmarked “language of men” (Watkins, 1995: 38). To achieve this “tongue of angels” (1 Corinthians 13:1) register, IE bards combined the poetic power and the linguistic craft of metrics, stylistics, and formulaics.

Epic poets in the Indo-European tradition, such as Homer, Virgil, Dante, Goethe, and Shakespeare killed time by creating works in odes, ballads, and longer texts, where the language style is that of *copia*. Emily Dickinson chose to kill time by creating shorter lyric poems, where the language style is that of *brevia*. Using *brevia* as a stylistic frame, Dickinson compressed the tension between time and eternity. In doing so, she evoked the Indo-European bard tradition which she inherited in the Classical Track at Amherst Academy in nineteenth-century New England. In particular, Dickinson democratized the concept of “imperishable fame” by applying it to domestic, natural, and spiritual domains. Dickinson’s collected lyrics constitute an American “columbiad” or national epic poem. Emily Dickinson is the “Bard of Amherst” and not simply the “Belle of Amherst.”

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