"SYNAESTHESIA" IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

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In his *New Laocoon*, Irving Babbitt attacked what has since come to be known as "literary synaesthesia." Seeing it as a symptom of a general confusion in the arts perpetrated by the Romantic movement, he concluded: "We are living in an age that has gone mad on the powers of suggestion in everything from its arts to its therapeutics" (1910:84). Critics of the next generation, finding perhaps that they were living in quite a different age, sought to defend literary synaesthesia. To do so, they adopted two main strategies: they carefully distinguished *literary* synaesthesia from the *clinical* kind, that psychological aberration known variously as *audition colorée*, *Farbenhören*, and *chromesthesia*; and they demonstrated that there was a long and noble tradition of synaesthesia in literature, a tradition which included many major figures and stretched back at least as far as Homer. The process of rehabilitation was impressively initiated by Erika von Erhardt-Siebold in her thesis, "Synästhesien in der englischen Dichtung des 19. Jahrhunderts"; it was triumphantly concluded by Stephen Ullmann, most particularly in his formulation of "panchronistic tendencies in literary synaesthesia" in *Principles of Semantics* (1957:266–289).

During the three decades that elapsed between the works of Siebold and Ullmann mentioned above, Emily Dickinson's poetry was either too little known or too little accessible to be taken into consideration by those engaged in the debate about synaesthesia. Moreover, now that the debate has been wound up with the complete vindication of literary synaesthesia as an ancient and honorable technique, there has perhaps been little incentive for critics to examine Dickinson's use of this technique in any great detail.[1] This

1. Patterson, for example, has a solitary reference to "a synesthesia [sic], perhaps playful,

is unfortunate for two reasons. First, the range and variety of her synaesthetic images[2] and the sophistication with which she manipulates them have almost no parallel in poetry in English. She should be allowed to claim her rightful place as one of the most skillful practitioners of a technique that has been called "the hallmark of modern literary sensibility" (O'Malley 1957:391). Secondly, certain problems concerning semantic and stylistic evaluation of literary synaesthesia in general arise in the course of a close examination of Dickinson's use of the technique. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a resolution to these problems, while ensuring that the poet receives due credit for her stylistic achievements.

It has become almost obligatory for the writer on synaesthesia to begin by defining the scope of his undertaking. For as Ullmann has pointed out, "at least seven great provinces are interested in its explanation" (1957:267), not including literary criticism and semantics.[3] Ullmann has noted, too, that *synaesthesia* was originally a psycho-physiological term, not a linguistic or literary one, and, indeed, most critics have been at pains to distinguish the clinical condition from the literary technique that has come to share its name. Nevertheless, the potential for considerable confusion remains: For writers have often exhibited interest in the aesthetic possibilities of the clinical condition either as it occurs naturally or as it may be induced by drugs. Pere Castel's famous *clavecin oculaire* initiated a tradition of writers admitting to synaesthetic experiences of varying degrees of intensity, confessions given a certain respectability by the high literary reputation of many of those involved: Tieck, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Mme. de Staël, Poe, Baudelaire, Gautier, Rimbaud, Huysmans, and so on (see Ullmann 1957:268–276 and O'Malley 1957:399–408). The phrase "literary synaesthesia" has thus come to denote "clinical synaesthesia as a literary theme" as well as a particular literary technique.

In a recent essay on the role of synaesthesia in the work of Nabokov, D. Barton Johnson unwittingly demonstrates what problems may result from the failure to establish a clear working definition of the kind of synaesthesia under discussion. Johnson, who begins his essay with a definition of the term adapted from a highly misleading entry in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and*

that led the poet to talk of hearing or tasting color" (1979:114), and gives only one supporting example, from the poet's letters.

2. I use the word *image* to refer to any calculated, vivid use of figurative language.

3. The provinces are mathematical physics, anatomy, physiology, psychology, aesthetics, education, and research into occult phenomena.

Poetics,[4] goes on to assume that because Nabokov uses his own experience of *audition colorée* as a theme in his work, there is in this novelist's case no need to distinguish between "psychological" and "artistic" synaesthesia. This confusion leads Johnson to state that "Coloured hearing is [. . .] the most frequent form of synaesthesia" (1975:130), with the implication that this, true only of clinical synaesthesia, is also true of the literary kind. But what is the literary kind?

Notwithstanding its stylistic peculiarities, the clearest definition of what is usually termed literary synaesthesia is that provided by Siebold:

> By the term *synaesthesie* [sic] we mean that curious faculty of harmony between the senses, whereby a given strong impulse not only causes the sense actually stimulated to respond, but compels other senses to vibrate simultaneously. We do not in literature take *synaesthesie* in the strict sense of psychology; that is to say, not with every sound does the poet really see a distinct color, but the impression evocated by the sound or sounds reminds the poet of a similar impression called forth by color. He does not see but he thinks color (1932:580–581).

In short, literary synaesthesia refers to any use by a writer of intersensory imagery. In O'Malley's words, "Literary synaesthesia may be defined as a writer's use of the "metaphor of the senses" or of expressions and concepts related to it" (1957:391). While clinical synaesthesia seems to function independently of memory, literary synaesthesia as a technique is the product of a chain of association in the writer's mind, even when such a chain seems to have formed itself instantaneously without the conscious participation of memory (see Silz 1942:470). In most cases, however, the writer consciously "directs" an intersensory transfer in order to achieve a particular effect.

Siebold offers the best clues as to why a writer might turn to literary synaesthesia:

1. *Synaesthesia, as correspondences or equivalences of sensations, enable the poet to combine the power of several sense-impressions into one collective impression.*
2. *Synaesthesia enable the poet to translate one sense-impression into the terms of another sense* (1932:584).

Ullmann expands these ideas as follows:

> Synaesthesia, if soberly and skilfully handled, affords excellent opportunities for the poet, both because it has the charm and glamour of novelty and

4. The definition, which fails sufficiently to distinguish clinical from literary synaesthesia, begins as follows: "Term denoting the perception, or description of the perception, of one sense-modality in terms of another" (see 1965:839–840).

> surprise, and because it enables him to describe his object from more than one angle, or, as Leibnitz put it, "to look at the same town from various standpoints" (1942:221–222).

Finally, O'Malley goes deeper into the characteristics of the technique:

> [. . .] literary synaesthesia may imply a sort of introspection into the basic processes of experience, a mirroring or echoing of the mind and senses to themselves in the act of apprehending phenomena (1957:392).

If literary synaesthesia enables a poet of introspective temperament concisely and vividly to describe the effect of stimuli on a sensitive sensorium, if it also enhances her ability to be surprising and novel, then it is to be expected that it was a technique that Emily Dickinson found most congenial.

Most of the synaesthetic images in Emily Dickinson's poetry, like the majority of those to be found in the work of the many nineteenth-century writers surveyed by Siebold in her thesis, have a binary pattern. That is to say, a word or phrase usually associated with one of the five senses – vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch – is re-attributed or "transferred" to a word or phrase usually identified with another of the five. For example, in Dickinson's line, "I clutched at sounds –" (#430, line 25),[5] the word "clutched," normally associated with touch, has been transferred to the realm of sound: an auditory experience is metaphorically conceived of as being tactile. (It might be pointed out that synaesthesia is not confined grammatically to a metaphoric form. It can take the form of a simile, as in Dickinson's line, "Shot the lithe Sleds like shod vibrations" [#1498, line 5], though Ullmann believes that this indicates a "different level of association" from the metaphoric form) (1942:223n). Ullmann tells us that the "destination" of the intersensory transfer is provided by "the element *about* which the poet is saying something," and cites Jespersen's rule that "It is always the non-verbal element (subject, object) [. . .] which furnishes the destination" (1957:278). Though we will discover that to interpret this rule is not as easy as might be expected, it is clear that in the line "I clutched at sounds –," the "source" of the transfer is the realm of touch and the "destination" that of hearing. If for the sake of convenience we adopt a shorthand when dealing with transfers of this binary type, and represent the five realms of the sensorium by the following notation,

O = Optical (Vision)
A = Auditory (hearing)

5. All quotations from Dickinson's poetry are taken from the one-volume Johnson, ed., 1960.

N = Nasal/Olfactory (Smell)
G = Gustatory (Taste)
T = Tactile (Touch),
then the transfer is "I clutched at sounds" may be represented as T > A.

It will be seen that there are twenty possible categories of binary transfer,[6] and that one way of establishing the range of a poet's synaesthetic usage is to ascertain how many of these twenty categories are exemplified in his work. Siebold's survey of nineteenth-century English poets provides examples from only fifteen categories; according to her, there is no example of N > T, nor of any transfer with the realm of taste as a destination, in the work of the poets she examines. As far as I can discern, Dickinson's poetry contains examples of fourteen categories of binary transfer, including two not found by Siebold in her survey (A > G, O > G), but lacking three that Siebold has found (N > A, N > O and T > N, all of which can be found in Shelley's poetry). Samples of each of Dickinson's fourteen kinds of transfer follow:

1. His Larder – terse and Militant – A > G (#1561, line 19)
2. Kill your Balm – and its Odors bless you – A > N (#238, line 1)
3. The Twilight spoke the Spire A > O (#1278, line 8)
4. It goads me, like the Goblin Bee –
   That will not state – its sting. A > T (#511, lines 19–20)
5. He ate and drank the precious Words – G > A (#1587, line 1)
6. Sip old Frankfort air
   From my brown Cigar. G > N (#123, lines 3–4)
7. Look – feed upon each other's faces – so – G > O (#296, line 9)
8. It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
   I felt Siroccos – crawl –
   Nor Fire – for just my Marble feet
   Could keep a Chancel, cool –
   And yet, it tasted, like them all [. . .] G > T (#51, lines 5–9)
9. Bright melody for me O > A (#5, line 29)
10. It is a faded Meat – O > G (#1509, line 6)
11. Odors return whole O > N (#854, line 8)
12. So patient – like a pain –
    Fresh gilded – to elude the eyes O > T (#353, lines 6–7)
13. Warm in her Hand these accents lie T > A (#1313, line 1)
14. 'Twas such an evening bright and stiff T > O (#1130, line 3).

The broad intersensory range of Dickinson's binary transfers demonstrates most clearly that literary synaesthesia is entirely different from *audition colorée*, which, as its name suggests, is

6. Ullmann adds "heat" between touch and taste in the hierarchy of the sensorium, but his motives for doing so (1957:278) hardly justify this disruption of the traditional quintet – to which I have adhered, having adjusted Ullmann's statistics accordingly.

confined to transfers of the O > A kind. (Clinical synaesthesia rarely takes any other form.) Moreover, the comparative unobtrusiveness of some of the examples listed above — "Bright melody", "faded Meat" — suggests that the poet is using a literary device that the reader accepts almost as readily as such idiomatic (but apparently synaesthetic) phrases as "sweet music."

At this point it is tempting to follow Ullmann, and having counted the number of Dickinson's transfers in each category, tabulate statistics that can be used as a basis for comparison with other poets' synaesthetic usage. Indeed, Ullmann's numerical survey of transfers in Keats, Byron and Gautier provides a ready-made yardstick against which to measure the Dickinson figures. According to Ullmann, Keats's transfers cover fifteen categories, Byron's fourteen and Gautier's only twelve; this suggests that Dickinson's range is broad but not exceptionally so (see Ullmann 1945:814, 816; and 1957: 281). It would be more interesting, however, to test the Dickinson figures against the "panchronistic tendencies" Ullmann has noted as a result of his survey of the above poets and others from the nineteenth century. He has formulated these "tendencies" thus:

1. The majority of transfers are directed from lower towards high levels of the sensorium.
2. Most of the transfers are taken from the sphere of touch.
3. Most of the transfers are directed towards the sphere of sound.
4. Corollary: Out of the [. . .] possible pigeonholes [. . .] that of touch transfers to sound contains by far the largest number of examples (1945: 813).

I discovered, while counting Dickinson's transfers, that certain problems were posed by those more complex than the binary kind, but I simply omitted these from the reckoning by applying the Bernoulli principle (the law of large numbers) on Ullmann's own recommendation:

> As [. . .] we are concerned with overall statistical trends and not with single transfers, these marginal cases should in no way affect the general picture; if numerical evidence is not sufficiently overwhelming to eclipse the minor fluctuations due to such factors, then no "panchronistic" conclusion must be built on it and it had better be discarded altogether (1957:279).

I arrived, therefore, at a provisional total of 173 transfers, analysis of which did indeed seem to reveal the validity of Ullmann's panchronistic tendencies almost precisely. The majority of transfers, 109 against 64, were directed "up" the sensorium; touch was the greatest source with 71 transfers, and hearing the most frequent destination with 86; and there were 44 transfers of the T > A kind, while O > A came a distant second with 35. Apart from the fact that the proportion of transfers "up" to those "down" was much smaller

for Dickinson than for most of the poets in Ullmann's survey, the panchronistic claim seemed confirmed by this quantitative analysis of the work of a previously unexamined poet.

However, while examining more closely some of the "marginal cases" in Dickinson's poetry in order to attempt to resolve the proportional anomaly just mentioned, I began to entertain serious doubts about the validity of any conclusions about intersensory transfer based on a quantitative approach – doubts which grew into a conviction that "literary synaesthesia" is a misleading term and one that ought to be dropped from the vocabulary of literary criticism. In short, if Dickinson's intersensory transfers are examined under the criteria implied by the working definition of "literary synaesthesia" already established (and based largely on Ullmann's work), so many cases become "marginal" that any quantitative approach is rendered useless.

In the first place, certain adjectives in English (and many other languages), as Siebold has shown and as the dictionary confirms, have an ambiguous sensory destination that context may or may not clarify (see Siebold 1919:9–10). The most extreme examples in English are perhaps the words *keen* and *mellow* which, regardless of etymology or "original" meaning, may have a destination in any of the five senses. Is Emily Dickinson using synaesthesia, and if so, what is the source of the transfer, in the following lines?

> Of small and spicy Yards –
> In hue – a mellow Dun – (#602, lines 9–10).

If the poet could be asked which of the senses of "mellow" she intended here, it would surely not be unreasonable for her to reply that she intended all of them. Ambiguity deliberately cultivated, as Empson has shown, is one of the privileges of the poet (1973).[7] Dickinson may have intended here to restrict "mellow" to its visual application, in which case there is no transfer and no synaesthesia; or she may have intended one of four possible binary transfers; or something still more complex. But her intention will remain forever inscrutable. In short, it is impossible to use these lines or any others containing ambiguous adjectives of this kind by any poet as part of a quantitative analysis of that poet's use of "literary synaesthesia."

Another problem, not uncommon in Dickinson, is exemplified in the following lines:

> I'll clutch – and clutch –
> Next – One – Might be the golden touch – (#427, lines 1–2).

7. But Empson does not have a high opinion of the ambiguities of synaesthesia (see 1973: 31–33).

Out of context, the phrase "golden touch" seems to be a clear example of O > T. On close examination, however, the phrase is clearly in the elliptical form characteristic of certain idioms (cf. "golden handshake," "silver tongue"), a form which by chance resembles the synaesthetic. In the lines above, the poet is merely alluding to the legend of King Midas in an elliptical phrase whose expanded form might read, "touch which turns things to gold." Yet though there is no synaesthesia here, could it not be that Dickinson, with a poet's sensitivity to words, intended to highlight the pseudo-synaesthetic form of the phrase by placing it in its emphatic position at the end of a line, thereby giving a little vitality back to a well-worn phrase? Such a phrase, however, could surely not be allowed to figure in a statistical analysis of synaesthesia.

A more serious problem still is posed by Dickinson's habit of personification, a habit shared, as Walter Silz shows, by Heine:

> In a dream, the poet hears "eine niedlich duftende Veilchenstimme" [. . .] This is not, as would appear, an acoustic-olfactory synaesthesia, but a mere transfer of the attributes of prettiness and fragrance from a humanized violet to its voice (1942:482).

If this "mere transfer" is not synaesthetic, then many of Dickinson's images with similar patterns have to be reinterpreted and withdrawn from the provisional total. Consider the following lines and their non-synaesthetic interpretations:

> The Lightning playeth – all the while –
> But when He singeth – then – (#630, lines 1–2).
> (Thunder is whimsically described as the "song" of a personified Lightning.)
>
> Their far – slow – Violet Gaze – (#722, line 6).
> (The color of the personified mountains is transferred to their "slow gaze.")
>
> To interrupt His Yellow Plan
> The Sun does not allow
> Caprices of the Atmosphere – (#591, lines 1–3).
> (The color of the personified Sun is transferred to his "Plan.")
>
> The Truth, is Bald, and Cold – (#281, line 9).
> (The dead metaphors "bald truth" and "cold truth," based perhaps on personification, are placed in a new syntactic pattern.)

In each of these instances, it is possible to make a case for the poet's intending to capture the flavor or resonance of synaesthesia, but unquestionably wrong to include these images in a quantitative survey of that technique.

The gravest problem of all, however, is posed by Dickinson's very frequent use of what Ullmann terms "*dominant metaphors* with an intersensorial fabric" (1957:288). That is to say, she has certain

stylistic mannerisms that lend to some of her images a synaesthetic texture. Ullmann cites Keats's use of transferred color-adjectives as an example of such a dominant metaphor: "ruddy strife," "rosy deed," "scarlet pain," "purple riot," and "rosy eloquence" (1957: 288). Dickinson has a very similar habit, perhaps best exemplified by the following well-known lines:

> These are the days when skies resume
> The old – old sophistries of June –
> A blue and gold mistake (#130, lines 4–6).

This last line is not, as David T. Porter suggests, a "synaesthetic [sic] image" (1966:149), but the result of what Ullmann calls "perceptual contiguity"; far from being synaesthetic, it is in Ullmann's eyes not even metaphoric:

> [. . .] all that happens is that a paratactic construction is changed into a more concise and intricate hypotactic structure designed to emphasize the indissoluble unity of the whole perception (1943:336).

In brief, the phrase "blue and gold mistake" is elliptical, representing an expanded form which might read, "the blue and gold color (of the skies and foliage in Indian summer) is a mistake." Indeed, the phrase could not be considered synaesthetic by any accepted criterion because the word "mistake" offers no clear sensory destination for the visual source "blue and gold." Many other examples of this kind of "dominant metaphor" in Dickinson's poetry could be cited, including: "Scarlet Freight" (#404, line 7); "Tawny [. . .] Customs" (#492, line 5); "Yellow play" (#496, line 8); "Silver practise" and "advantage – Blue" (#629, lines 31 and 36); "Reddest Second" (#841, line 3); "White Exploit" (#922, line 6); "Blue Monotony" (#928, line 4); "Yellow shortness" (#1140, line 4); and "projects pink" (#1748, line 3).

A second "dominant metaphor" that gives the illusion of being synaesthetic is that based on the idea of the power of the Word, an idea which, as exemplified by the juxtaposition of *nomina* and *numina*, has a long and venerable history (see Porter 1966:97–99; also Ullmann 1957:43–45 and Ogden and Richards 1946:24–47). So, when Dickinson writes,

> A Word made Flesh is seldom
> And tremblingly partook (#1651, lines 1–2),

she is composing a metaphorical variation on the theme of the Incarnation of the Word (see John 1:1), and not intending a transfer of the G > A variety. The Word, indeed, is an ambiguous phenomenon, having its source sometimes primarily in the auditory realm, sometimes chiefly in the visual ("Easing my famine/At my Lexicon")

(#728, lines 5–6), but always ultimately transcending the usual sensory channels. The Word, then, is for Dickinson a kind of potent magic that is essentially paradoxical; the task for the dedicated analyst of "literary synaesthesia" of sorting out source and destination in, say, the lines from #1651 cited above, is hopeless. The following are some further examples of the "dominant metaphor" of the Word from Dickinson's poetry, with an indication of the possible source of the transfer:

There is a word Which bears a sword Can pierce an armed man – It hurls its barbed syllables And is mute again –	T > Word	(#8, lines 1–5)
I dealt a word of Gold	T > O Word	(#430, line 18)
And that is why I lay my Head Upon this trusty word –	T > Word	(#1347, lines 11–12)
A little overflowing word	?O > Word	(#1467, line 1).

None of these or of similar transfers can properly be used in a quantitative survey of Dickinson's synaesthesia.

A key to a third series of Dickinsonian "dominant metaphors" is the speaker's state of mind described in #214, "I taste a liquor never brewed –." It is a state which may be termed intoxication of the senses achieved without the use of artificial stimulants. In #214 it is Nature which causes the speaker's inebriation, but different agents of intoxication are cited in other poems:

Strong Draughts of Their Refreshing Minds	(#711, line 1)
Impossibility, like Wine Exhilarates the Man Who tastes it; Possibility Is flavorless [. . .]	(#838, lines 1–4)
Surprise is like a thrilling – pungent – Upon a tasteless meat Alone – too acrid – but combined An edible Delight.	(#1306, lines 1–4)
The moderate drinker of Delight Does not deserve the spring –	(#1628, lines 7–8).

This "dominant metaphor" can, moreover, be modified in different ways: "Honors – taste dry –" (#715, line 4) (Honors might be expected to intoxicate, but do not); "Logarithm – had I – for Drink/'Twas a dry Wine –" (#728, lines 7–8) (The pleasures of mathematics are astringent rather than heady); and most notably,

Winter is good – his Hoar Delights
Italic flavor yield –
To Intellects inebriate
With Summer, or the World – (#1316, lines 1–4).

Because "Hoar Delights" is not an example of synaesthesia but is another elliptical phrase with a transferred color-adjective, there is no transfer of the G > O kind here.

All of the cases mentioned above – ambiguous adjectives, elliptical phrases and "dominant metaphors" – while having an intersensory texture that the poet may or may not choose to draw attention to, are far too "marginal" to be counted as examples of "literary synaesthesia." The next examples to be discussed unquestionably contain synaesthetic elements, but simply defy categorization: Jespersen's rule cannot properly be applied to them. In the line "How the old Mountains drip with Sunset" (#291, line 1), for example, the question of whether or not the word "drip" contains an auditory element (so giving a transfer of the A > O type) is surely one for each reader to decide for himself. We cannot doubt, however, that the image *works*, nor should we lose sight of the fact that great poetry defeats periphrasis and therefore eludes quantification of the sort that Ullmann has attempted. O'Malley's warning is timely:

> [. . .] students of literary synaesthesia must feel that linguistic classification of synaesthetic transfers has limited value and that they [. . .] must assess each apparent intersense metaphor in its particular context and against a background of literary fashions and related concepts (1957:396–397).

Yet what seems to me finally to seal the fate of Ullmann's statistical approach to any poet of Dickinson's linguistic complexity is the intersensory image involving more than one transfer. Ullmann believes that he has solved this problem:

> If more than two sensations were involved, each primary synaesthetic process had to be entered separately. Thus, Keats' well known line in *Isabella*: "Taste the music of that vision pale," is an amalgam of two transfers, one from taste to sound, the other from sound to sight (1957:278).

In our notation, the line from *Isabella* would therefore be represented by G > A and A > O, and be counted twice for statistical purposes. Emily Dickinson's best-known use of complex synaesthesia (this is certainly not a "marginal" case) appears in the following lines:

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –
Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –

We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are – (#258, lines 1–8).

The primary destination of the transfer is unquestionably visual, but the primary source, "Heft/Of Cathedral Tunes," is itself synaesthetic to more than a marginal degree (?T > A). Moreover, the light not only oppresses but wounds (at least spiritually), giving a complicating T > O factor. It is possible to reduce all this to a formula, but it would be impossible (not to say impertinent) to turn this magnificent series of images into statistics of the kind which Ullmann claims to have reduced the line from *Isabella*. Other Dickinsonian examples of equivalent complexity include the following:

A long – long Yellow – on the Lawn –
A Hubbub – as of feet –
Not audible – as Ours – to Us –
But dapperer – More Sweet – (#416, lines 5–8)

And Purple Ribaldry – of Morning

Pour as blank on them
As on the Tier of Wall
The Mason builded, yesterday,
And equally as cool – (#592, lines 4–8)

Spring comes on the World –
I sight the Aprils –
Hueless to me until thou come
As, till the Bee
Blossoms stand negative,
Touched to Conditions
By a Hum. (#1042, lines 1–6).

Although the imagery in these cases is undoubtedly synaesthetic, I found it impossible to reduce the transfers to statistics by Ullmann's methods.

I discovered, therefore, that of my provisional total of 173 transfers in Dickinson's poetry, at least fifty proved upon closer examination to be marginal in one way or another, while I had from the start found it impossible to assimilate those examples of transfers more complex than binary. I came to the conclusion that, notwithstanding the Bernoulli principle, the number of marginal cases is so great that any conclusions based upon quantitative analysis of Dickinson's use of "literary synaesthesia" are rendered invalid. I believe, too, that Ullmann's figures for other poets are not verifiable, therefore not scientific, because they are based on necessarily subjective judgements of what is "truly synaesthetic" and what is not, in spite of the fact that the concept of "literary synaesthesia"

is semantically too vague to serve as a basis upon which to make more objective judgements. Finally, there is the whole question of the "hierarchy of the sensorium," which one must take for granted when reading Ullmann's work, but which is in itself a concept of dubious validity. Caroline Spurgeon, speaking about Shakespeare's imagery, makes the following point:

> In any analysis arrived at through his poetry of the quality and characteristics of a writer's senses, it is possible in some degree to separate and estimate his senses of touch, smell, hearing and taste, but his visual sense is so all-embracing — for it is indeed the gateway by which so large a proportion of life reaches the poet, and the registration, description and interpretation of things seen depend so completely on faculties of mind and imagination — that to deal with this sense at all adequately almost amounts to the same thing as to deal with the man as a whole and the work in its entirety (1935: 57).

In other words, a poet's use of figurative language, including "synaesthesia," will almost inevitably involve either the "imaging" of things not seen or unseeable (for the purpose of achieving greater vividness), or the reinterpretation of already visual phenomena in new visual terms. Seeing is everything, and a poet as visually oriented as Emily Dickinson certainly was[8] would hardly ever have the inclination to "descend" the sensorium in an intersensory transfer. Ullmann himself recognizes the incomparable richness of "Visual terminology" (1957:283), but does not see that his first "panchronistic tendency" would only have weight if all the senses possessed a roughly equal vocabulary of terms.

I will begin a closer study of Emily Dickinson's intersensory images by stating that there is no evidence that she ever experienced clinical synaesthesia of the kind reported by, for example, Hoffmann, Poe and Nabokov;[9] nor that she ever experienced synaesthesia artificially induced by drugs, as did many poets of Gautier's generation and the next; nor that she ever subscribed to any theory of intersensory correspondences as described in Baudelaire's well-known lines:

> Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
> Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,

8. Biographers as diverse as Richard B. Sewall, John Cody and John Evangelist Walsh are all agreed on the supreme importance Dickinson attached to the visual world.

9. There are passages in Dickinson's letters that suggest that certain incidents had an uncommonly powerful effect on her senses, most notably in Letter #318: "Friday I tasted life. It was a vast morsel. A circus passed the house — still I feel the red in my mind though the drums are out." Her emphasis in this passage is upon the persistence of a vivid memory, however, and one does not get the idea that "feeling red" was a habitual occurrence with her.

> Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarité,
> Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.
> ("Correspondances," lines 5–8).

Though it is tempting to speculate that her reading of Keats, Poe or Emerson helped shape her philosophy of the senses, it is ultimately futile to try to explain Dickinson's use of intersensory images in terms of influence. For her intersensory images are different in kind from those of any other poet she is known to have read, and her ability to manipulate them for a variety of effects almost incomparable. Given the ambiguity of the concept of "literary synaesthesia," and the ineffectuality of Ullmann's descriptive approach, I suggest that the following functional categories best illuminate Dickinson's use of intersensory images; that when she uses such images, she has one or more of the following aims in mind:

1. *Intensity*: to describe adequately the powerful impression upon the emotions or senses of a particular, usually transient, external phenomenon.
2. *Sympathy*: to describe the sympathetic response that one sensory stimulus may commonly produce in one or more of the other senses of a sensitive sensorium.
3. *Surprise*: to surprise, amuse, startle or shock the reader with unexpected lexical juxtapositions or substitutions when on the subject of the senses.
4. *Concision*: to achieve a concision when dealing with sensory response consonant with that which so typifies her poetic style in general.

Although it will become apparent that only a matter of emphasis within the particular context determines which of these aims predominates in the individual case, it is useful to demonstrate how well Dickinson achieves each of these aims in turn.

Under the heading of *intensity* might be included first those intersensory images concerned with describing the effect upon the poet of her lover. These images may derive their intensity from their succinctness,

> Because You saturated Sight — (#640, line 33),

or from the elaborate extension characteristic of hyperbole:

> Sang from the Heart, Sire,
> Dipped my Beak in it,
> If the Tune drip too much
> Have a tint too Red
>
> Pardon the Cochineal —
> Suffer the Vermilion — [. . .] (#1059, lines 1–6).

Secondly, the intensity may reveal itself on the one hand through

violent, melodramatic metaphor produced by the effect of common stimuli upon a hypersensitive spirit:

> Why Birds, a Summer morning
> Before the Quick of Day
> Should stab my ravished spirit
> With Dirks of Melody [. . .] (#1420, lines 5–8),

while on the other hand, in the extended description of the "certain Slant of Light" (#258, line 1), or of the impact of the poetry of "that Foreign Lady" ("The Dark – felt beautiful –") (#593, lines 3 and 4), the intensity is of a somber, restrained kind. Finally, there are at least two superb examples of the poet's capturing the peculiar intensity of an evanescent natural phenomenon by "synaesthetic" means:

> A Resonance of Emerald – (#1463, line 1)
> And a Green Chill upon the Heat (#1593, line 3).

Under the heading of *sympathy* might be cited those images that emphasize the links between the senses rather than sensory distinctness. So, while the "Green Chill" evokes the quality of a particular sensation, "The fascinating chill that music leaves" (#1480, line 1) has a more general application and lays stress on the universally perceived sympathy between auditory and tactile response. What is perhaps Dickinson's most general statement about intersensory analogy should be included under this heading, even though it is very far from being a description of synaesthesia:

> The Music in the Violin
> Does not emerge alone
> But Arm in Arm with Touch, yet Touch
> Alone – is not a Tune – (#1576, lines 5–8).

"Touch" here refers to the pressure of fingers and bow on strings; but so concerned is the poet to show the interdependence of touch and sound in music-making, that she allows the two distinct sensory realms to be joined in the concept "Tune." The sensitive ear will respond to this tactile quality in music by producing a "tactile" response:

> 'Tis this – in Music – hints and sways –
> And far abroad on Summer days –
> Distils uncertain pain – (#673, lines 7–9);

or, less elaborately:

> Music's triumphant –
> But the fine Ear
> Winces with delight
> Are Drums too near – (#582, lines 12–15).

The ear can also stimulate the visual imagination:

> The Fashion of the Ear
> Attireth that it hear
> In Dun, or fair – (#526, lines 7–9),

and this, a reference to the effect of the oriole's song, is as close as Emily Dickinson gets to *audition colorée*. The scents of flowers seem to produce in the poet's mind a sensation akin to clinical synaesthesia, though the tone of this little poem is too playful to be read as a serious statement:

> They have a little Odor – that to me
> Is metre – nay – 'tis melody –
> And spiciest at fading – indicate –
> A Habit – of a Laureate – (#785, lines 1–4).

The eye, while "sensitive" and vulnerable ("A Landscape – not so great/To suffocate the Eye –") (#495, lines 17–18), is nevertheless preeminent enough to serve as a symbol for the whole sensorium. "Electricity" (i.e., lightning) is itself symbolic of the kind of intense "seeing" that comes during a revelation:

> It founds the Homes and decks the Days
> And every clamor bright
> Is but the gleam concomitant
> Of that waylaying Light – (#1581, lines 13–16).

Under the heading of *surprise* may be included intersensory images covering the whole tonal spectrum from the deliberately ludicrous to the profoundly agonized:

> The Hemlock's nature thrives – on cold –
> The Gnash or Northern winds
> Is sweetest nutriment – to him –
> His best Norwegian Wines – (#525, lines 9–12)
>
> A full fed Rose on meals of Tint (#1154, line 1)
>
> 'Twas such an evening bright and stiff (#1130, line 3)
>
> Going to Heaven!
> How dim it sounds! (#79, lines 6–7)
>
> Had I the Art to stun myself
> With Bolts of Melody! (#505, lines 23–24)
>
> "My Husband" – women say –
> Stroking the Melody – (#1072, lines 13–14)
>
> Let no Sunrise' yellow noise
> Interrupt this Ground – (#829, lines 7–8)
>
> And Piles of solid Moan – (#639, line 9)
>
> A Plated Life – diversified
> With Gold and Silver Pain (#806, lines 1–2).

Perhaps the poem that best exemplifies the power of intersensory metaphor to shock is "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (#280). In this first line, verb substitution ("felt" for the expected "saw") initiates the description of a mental state so terrifying that the normal sensory channels are overwhelmed.

The potential for *concision* in the intersensory image has already been demonstrated in such phrases as "Dirks of Melody," "Resonance of Emerald" and "Green Chill." It would be more apposite to show how the urge to be concise may in some cases have been the actuating principle behind certain intersensory images in Dickinson's poetry. The interpretation of many of her difficult passages can often be facilitated by comparing an obscure phrase in one poem with a similar phrase in another poem in which the phrase's context is clearer. Indeed, David T. Porter has described the "artful generation of multiple contexts" as one of Dickinson's chief strategies (1966:153). So, in spite of uncertainties of chronology, it is possible to trace the origin of one of the poet's "dominant metaphors" from its origin in a hackneyed poeticism to its emergence as a fully-fledged "synaesthetic" image. In so doing, however, we must surely become aware that to give the name "synaesthesia" to a phenomenon so obviously unconnected to the psycho-physiological aberration that shares that designation, is to ensure that all sorts of confusion will continue to occur among critics interested in the language of poetry.

In one of Dickinson's very early poems, the following lines occur:

> So silver steal a hundred flutes
> From out a hundred trees – (#81, lines 7–8).

Behind this image lies the tired poeticism that associates birdsong with the sound of flutes. The color-adjective "silver" refers to the appearance, and by association, to the tone of the instrument itself. Here, however, the poet gives a quasi-adverbial role to the color-word so that its sibilance can be matched with that of the adjacent verb "steal." A more successful variation on this idea occurs in a slightly later poem:

> Musicians wrestle everywhere –
> All day – among the crowded air
> I hear the silver strife – (#157, lines 1–3).

Now "silver," detached from the idea of flutes, has been paired with the abstract noun "strife," in a phrase pleasingly echoing the double sibilance of "Musicians wrestle." But what is the semantic value of "silver strife"? To call it a "synesthetic [sic] image," as David T. Porter does (1966:149–150), is surely misleading. It suggests that the poet could not help "seeing" the birdsong – or the

"strife" – as silver, and it suggests too that there is a spontaneity about the phrase – a spontaneity which, as we have seen, is entirely illusory. The poet has simply learned to transfer color-adjectives from real objects (here the "understood" flutes) to abstract nouns in some way connected with those objects. This is her general strategy in her "dominant metaphor" of the transferred color epithet. Such phrases often succeed poetically because they have enough of an intersensorial texture to be interesting, but not enough to be obtrusive. Yet it will not do to dismiss the phrase by classifying it, as Ullmann might, as "association by contiguity" that is not even metaphoric. For in the background to such a phrase as "silver strife" are such common locutions (based on metaphors long dead) as "silver-tongued" and "speech is silver, silence is golden," the intersensorial texture of which is ordinarily not noticed, but which is nevertheless available for a linguistically acute poet to draw attention to.

The emergence in later poems of a "dominant metaphor" based on silver may be seen as symptomatic of Dickinson's tendency towards extreme concision. In #81 and #157, the poet has established a connection between silver and birdsong by first introducing, then suppressing, a third element "flute." "Silver" has come to stand as a shorthand for the impression produced in the mind of the poet by cheerful, flute-like birdsong. So, the phrases "silver matters" (#606, line 19), "Silver Chronicle" (#864, line 4), and "silver Principle" (#1084, line 7), are ways of describing in extremely condensed form the apparent theme of a bird's song as the poet (on different occasions) listens to it. In none of these cases is there anything approaching synaesthesia; for regardless of the fact that the poet had probably no intention of describing a synaesthetic experience, the destination of the transfer is in every case too abstract to be identified with any one of the senses. Yet a further extension of the "silver"/"birdsong" motif by the poet carries us well beyond the vague no-man's-land of Ullmann's "marginal cases." What reader, unaware of the "artful generation of multiple contexts" underlying Dickinson's use of "silver," would not unhesitatingly describe the following lines as an example of "synaesthesia" at its startling best?

> Split the Lark – and you'll find the Music –
> Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled –
> Scantily dealt to the Summer Morning
> Saved for your ear when Lutes be old. (#861, lines 1–4).

Erika von Siebold, at the beginning of her thesis, warns that it is often impossible to tell whether or not a writer who refers to the sound of a trumpet as yellow is simply transferring by a process of

association the usual color of the instrument to the noise it makes (1919:6). Alfred G. Engstrom concludes that the "literary synaesthesia" his essay has defended is "in reality only the metaphor of the senses" (1946:19). Walter Silz claims that "Most of what passes for synaesthesia in literature is probably simply vivid reproduction" (1942:470). Synaesthesia, even when qualified by "literary," has come to be divided tacitly by critics into two kinds: true synaesthesia, which most closely reflects the clinical condition and which therefore only very sensitive writers experience; and false or pseudo-synaesthesia, which is a kind of cheating by minor poets who wish to pass off "mere" association as something more profound.[10] This is clearly nonsense. Aside from the cultish fascination with clinical synaesthesia of certain nineteenth-century writers, similes and metaphors with an intersensory texture have been used with varying degrees of success by most poets of all ages. Emily Dickinson uses such figures with more facility than most poets; her "dominant metaphors" are not "marginal cases" of "literary synaesthesia" but concise patterns of language arranged deliberately so that they produce a certain intersensory resonance. The well-known line that describes the coming of a fly "With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –" (#465, line 13) between the light and the dying speaker, becomes absurd if it is supposed that the poet is describing an incidence of terminal *audition colorée*. The poet is simply transferring the color of the fly to the sound it makes, but this is not therefore an example of mere association by contiguity, but a technical *tour de force* in which the speaker's last perception before her senses fail is dominated in both the visual and auditory realm by this insignificant insect, harbinger of the universal fate of the flesh.

To drop the word "synaesthesia" from the critical vocabulary would obviate an enormous amount of confusion. Critics interested in the language of poetry could then concentrate on the problem of whether or not each intersensory image – regardless of hierarchical reference, source, destination and so on – is, in its context, vivid, spontaneous and effective.

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10. Such is the inference Ullmann would have us make from his story about the supposed origin of Rimbaud's sonnet "Voyelles." See 1957:274.

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