

In Emily Dickinson at Home: Proceedings from the Third International Conference of the Emily Dickinson International Society, South Hadley, Mt. Holyoke College, 1999. Eds. Gudrun M. Grabher and Martina Antretter. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001, pages 249-66.

Rolf Amsler and Margaret Freeman

Emily Dickinson's Double Language: An Introduction to the Writings of Hans W. Luescher

Historical Background

On April 19, 1962, Hans Werner Luescher wrote to Thomas J. Wilson, Director of Harvard University Press:

In the course of my painstaking analysis of the symbols, similes, and parables contained in Emily Dickinson's poems, I have discovered the central fact in the life of the poet. This unsuspected, incredible fact provides the master key to the hidden freight in almost all her poems. Without this key they cannot be fully understood. In discovering this fact, I have achieved a real break-through in the mystery surrounding the life and poems of Emily Dickinson. The fact and the freight are sensational and dismaying. I have long debated with myself whether to keep them secret—for a long time well might pass before someone else discovers them. I have convinced myself that they should be revealed.

When Hans wrote this letter to Wilson, he had already been working on Dickinson's poems for two decades. He was born in Berne, Switzerland, on February 5, 1901. Little is known of his parents, either his mother who bore him, or the father whose name he bore. In his writings, he describes how his mother neglected him at the tender age of two or three, how he ran away from home, how he came to foster parents, and how he was finally placed in a Boys Farm not far from Zurich, where his education consisted of work on the farm and learning by

corporal punishment. When he was seventeen, he left the Boys Farm, worked as a salesman, and took up night studies. Already in his late childhood, Hans had begun writing poems, articles for newspapers, and philosophical essays.¹

In 1923, Hans emigrated to Canada. He led the life of a migratory worker, sending occasional reports of his experiences to a Swiss Weekly. Granted a U. S. visa in 1929, he moved to Los Angeles, California, where he worked as a carpenter by day and wrote by night. In essence, Hans was a thinker, a seeker, a philosopher. Carpentry was only a means to subsist. His life was like a coin, with two completely different sides, each being important and yet only indirectly related to each other.

Although German was his mother tongue, English became his preferred language, and he wrote it well. Reading classical literature and philosophy kept his mind busy, and the Los Angeles Public Library was his favorite source for books he could not afford to buy. Some time in the 1940's, during a traumatic episode that apparently dealt with an experience of unrequited love, he discovered the poetry of Emily Dickinson, and decided to translate her poems into German. During this translation work, Hans made his sensational discovery, which occupied him for the rest of his life. He believed that Dickinson had created a double language, at one level writing the masterpieces of poetry, and on the other describing, in lush detail, her erotic experiences.

Although he tried to publish his findings with Harvard University Press, who by the 1960's held the copyright on Dickinson's poems, negotiations fell through, and his work remained unpublished. At the time of his death on June 22, 1991, Hans had written eight bound volumes or packets, containing interpretations of 1179 poems (171 of them in two versions)

and a glossary of 258 symbols. These he bequeathed, along with his other philosophical, scientific, and travel writings, to his stepson, Rolf Amsler, in the hope that Rolf would succeed where he had failed in bringing his work to the attention of the Dickinson community and the general public.

Hans's manuscripts present a great challenge. Several thousand pages of commentary exist in the Dickinson materials alone, spaced across a span of forty years, during which time Hans continually checked and cross-checked his findings, changing his theory whenever it did not explain newly discovered facts. Since he was never able to bring his manuscripts into a form suitable for publication, it is impossible to know how he might have reconciled his different findings, what he might have rejected. We do know that certain things that puzzled him in the story of Dickinson's heterosexual love life as he first construed it were made clear to him when he read Rebecca Patterson's thesis about Kate Scott Anthon and Dickinson's lesbianism.² Today, he doubtless would find the current scholarship on the relation between Emily and her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, equally illuminating.³ As it stands, his Dickinson work falls into two overlapping categories: the literary analysis of Dickinson's secret symbolic language and the biographical story of her sexual experiences.

In this article, we present an introduction to Hans's writings, written mostly in his own words. Brief and sketchy though this introduction inevitably must be, it will, we trust, serve to give some insight into Hans's theory, methodology, and findings. We start by excerpting a section from his commentaries on how he came about his discoveries, followed by a very brief biographical sketch of Dickinson's sexual life. We then provide some examples from Hans's analyses and interpretations that include three important components of his theory: Rosetta stone poems that provide a key to symbols in other poems, the development of a

glossary of sexual meanings, and what Hans called the “Webster hum,” a play on lexical definitions from the dictionary that reverberate through the poetry. We end with a discussion of the import of Hans’s work.

How I (Hans) Discovered Dickinson’s Double Language

My intention to make a considerable portion of Dickinson’s work accessible to German readers through translation was long hindered by the problem of understanding how she was able to press such exciting juices in her poems from an existence seemingly bare of all significant experience. The free play of lingual translation can hardly function at its best as long as the translator fails to understand the source of the poetic creation. The translation of a poem must keep faith with its inner sense, its soul, not with its verbal trappings. Then there was another paradox not less hindering: in spite of beautiful, easily translatable language and simple, naturally structured events, the poems of Emily Dickinson are often obscure to the point of unintelligibility. In translation, elements of odd expressions and bizarre poetic situations emerge as senseless, even absurd.

I began to conjecture that the poems might carry a hidden esoteric freight. Wonderingly, I began to search out certain oddities, groups of words throughout the work whose meanings would appear as abstract unrealities in one instance and as highly personified concrete carriers of poetic action in another. To mention but a few: *sun, heaven, earth, clouds, wind, water, flowers, grass, trees, birds, bees, night*, and again and again, *day, day, day!* The frequent repetition of these words and several hundreds more gave rise to mental discomfort. Finally, I could not get rid of an impression that a nimbus of symbolic double meanings hovered around a great number of nouns and likewise some verbs, adverbs, and adjectives.

And so I began to prospect for possible second meanings in her usage of such words. In tracing them, it appeared that I had before me a word- and sense-labyrinth created by an incredible gift for dissembling and sense for double meanings, a private language within a language. Only tenaciously probing research could work out, in the interrelated sense-alignments, sense-deductions, and sense-combinations of her poetry, the symbol meanings, their correlations in a dictionary, and the ways of their articulation.

First, then, I wrote a dictionary of 3850 terms possessing double meanings, or terms capable of being aligned with such. Of these I selected 267 which seemed to me most significant and wrote them out in the complete stanza, or stanzas, in which they appeared, according to the chronological order of the poems.⁴ There were 6700 occurrences. This gave me 267 patterns of comparison for conjecturing and proving second meanings, and additionally 167 outlines of the path of development taken by Dickinson's mysteriously laboring muse.

The conjectural idea usually came to me through the context of the poem's total content, together with the correlations the new symbol-term revealed in the comparison patterns of other symbol terms in the poem. Once deciphered, each such symbol-term or word-key offered logical extensions and deductions. In addition, I would look up the word in the "Big Webster," which had served the poet as her regular workshop.⁵ It proved an invaluable guide to the word's synonyms, secondary, and double meanings. Last but not least, my own general life experience enabled me to compute and assimilate the data.

I took every projected double meaning through the crossweb of correlations in which the mother term appeared throughout the poetry and accepted its meaning as provisionally certain only after it revealed itself in the deviations. Obviously, progress in such exacting research

could not be a triumphant quickie trip through series after series of brilliant discernings; rather, it resembled a snail walk through continuous, wearisome, and disappointing research. But it held the promise, comfort, and incitement of a translation becoming visibly less difficult.

And thus, during many years and thousands of hours of research I gained the knowledge and insights which permitted me to unravel Dickinson's riddle work. Significant aspects of this work make it undoubtedly one of the most amazing performances of a single human being.

What Dickinson's Double Language Revealed to Hans About Her Sexual Life

Dickinson's poetry is far more than an esoteric work highly encoded by metaphors, symbols, and parables. It is double-sensed poetry written in a true secret language. She construes her poems in little word works of art with ambiguous words and quotations, with lyric situations embodying analogons, while an inner poem includes a veiled happening or a hidden sense. In it she tells of a great love and its sexual experience, and she does so openly and totally unaffectedly within the confines of her secret language. While the theme of the outer poem may be an aphorism to wisdom, a love poem, a sensual metaphor, a litany of dying and death, or even a metaphysical murmuring of the other world and of immortality, the inner poem is always telling of her own self and belongs to a phase of her love life that can be determined psychologically and chronologically. The story of her life which she tells, first in letters and then in poems, is sketched hereafter.

What legend and biography propogate as truth is not what Emily Dickinson narrates about herself in her double-sensed poetry. There is no mention of hopeless love for an elderly priest in faraway Philadelphia who would not even have been aware of her affection.⁶ There is no

mention of a sad, nun-like life in the puritanical environment of a monastical parental house. Emily's introduction into the mystery of love came suddenly and by surprise. She was first put off with declarations of love and promises by her seducer, then halfway forsaken for a longer period of time. He was a well-off owner of a newspaper, some years her senior, living in a neighboring town, and standing at the beginning of his professional career. His name was Samuel Bowles. He became a distinguished and politically influential man. He was married. However, this dilemma did not bother him long. Cunningly, he started befriending her brother and father in such a way that he would occasionally be welcomed as an overnight guest in the Dickinson house.

Emily submitted to being his "White Lady" in Amherst. This relationship lasted for two decades, though with repeated interruptions. Two entanglements almost broke it up. One was a short love affair with another woman, Kate Scott Anthon, with whom she tried to escape from the claws of her "man of the world lover." He reacted brutally and abused her in a tripartite love affair. The other was the appearance of another "White Lady," Maria Whitney, who then rose to occupy first place in the affections of her mighty master.

All her life, love afforded Dickinson more anguish and suffering than joy and peace. She appears to have been bonded woman to her lover in fear as well as in love. In poems and letters she makes no secret of her feelings as his prisoner. Nevertheless, she was not completely deprived of quiet self-fulfillment.

Emily Dickinson was born a sexually inverted female; over and over she says through her secret language that she considers her homosexuality congenital. Her conflict with God arises from this fact. This great endowment—others may call it a taint—demonstrably conditioned

her for the extraordinary poetic gift which burst forth from her in the middle of her life. To trigger it, though, a great emotional disturbance, with its concomitant endocrinal excitement, was needed. The poems make it abundantly clear that Kate Scott Anthon was the beloved person. Kate also must have been congenitally homosexual; Emily once hints at hermaphroditism in her. The recognition between the two women was immediate and fatal. It bloomed at first into a period of Uranian love, at least for Emily. But Kate was an experienced and persistent seducer. Probably within months Emily submitted. After that the love union continued for about two years. Trysts were held in remarkable places and at remarkable times, all more or less identified in the poems. On at least one occasion erotic furor seems to have taken place in an orgy of indulgence. This fact is celebrated by an entire group of poems. Emily went not through hells of despair and anguish alone, but also through beatitudes of highest, most consummate bliss.

The Double Language of Dickinson's Poems

[*Editors' Note:* Hans's symbol system is not a simple one-to-one correspondence of sign to symbol. To give an idea of its complexity in such a brief introduction, we decided first to give an early example of Hans's identification of Dickinson's symbol system, followed by biographical commentary on a short poem and Hans's reading of one of Dickinson's most famous poems. Then we chose just one word, *spider*, and traced some commentary on it and two related Webster hum symbols in Hans's writings.⁷ Transcriptions of the poems are as Hans recorded them, with the Johnson number and date, and the location and year of first publication. The editors have added the Franklin number in square brackets. Symbol terms are provided in *italics*. Hans identified several poems as "Rosetta stones": poems that were particularly revealing in offering keys to the symbol system.]

The subject of the following poem (*Poems* 1891; J 50 / Fr 40)⁸ is a declaration of intention to leap the glans. This theme is treated in many variations in the pre-1859 poems and also in many later ones.

I have not told *my garden* yet
Lest that should conquer me
I have not quite the strength now
To break it to the *bee*

I will not name it in the *street*
For *shops* would stare that I
So shy so very ignorant
Should have the face to die

The *hillsides* must not know it
Where I have rambled so
Nor tell the *loving forests*
The *day* that I should go

Nor lisp it at the *table*
Nor heedless by the way
Hint that within the riddle
One will walk today

This is a Rosetta stone for deciphering symbolizations of way stations on the fondling walk and is therefore a description of intravaginal topography coming into her “feel” in the

process. The terrain is probably mostly of penis. Definitions are difficult, but I will make an attempt:

- my garden* intravaginal erotogenous zones. Apparently Dickinson locates them not only in the vestibule but also in the intravaginal cup
- bee* the female bee that wants to cover glans in emission (the *flower on a stem*).
- street* fondling portion of vagina, the tube
- shops* places encountered on that street, specifically perhaps the occasional accidental touching of the glans rim
- hillsides* probably slopes on the penis stem
- loving forests* possibly her feel of increasing engrossment of penis and glans or that of her own intravaginal panoply
- day* heterosexual intercourse in general at first (her three-letter word for the four-letter one commonly in use), but increasingly coming to mean only the male portion of it
- table* the broad upper presentation of the glans

Dickinson refers to the secret content in the inner constructs of her double poems told in double language in the following poem (*FP* 1929; *J* 381 / *Fr* 643):

A secret told
 ceases to be a secret then
 a secret kept
 that can appal but one

 Better of it continual be afraid
 than it

and whom you told it to beside

Undoubtedly, during her trysts with Bowles and with Kate, she informed them to a certain extent of the symbol meanings in her poems; otherwise, her correspondence, together with the selected poems she sent them, would become unexplainable exercises in futility that could only have irritated the recipients. But even the relatively little she had revealed must have become a constant source of fear to her. Kate could be counted on to keep quiet, for as the dangerous transgression into lesbianism was involved in so many of the poems sent to her, she would incriminate herself if she revealed these meanings to an outsider. But with Bowles the situation was different. "He made her his mistress," the world would say with a smirking grin, "so what?" I believe Dickinson was well aware that Bowles could exploit her through his knowledge of her lesbianism; indeed, the indications were that he threatened both of them with public disclosure, if their indiscretion would involve him in scandal. In certain actions she took, I see an attempt to counter such threats with some of her own. The publication of the "little chorister" poem (J 324 / Fr 236) in *The Round Table* may have been such a counter threat. As to the poem above, the "whom you told it to" likely refers to potential confidants for whom she may often have felt the itch to tell. I think here especially of her sister-in-law, Sue, but also of Mrs. Holland.

One of Dickinson's most famous and widely discussed poems is dedicated to extreme female sexual heat, the *designated light* (*Poems* 1891; J 365 / Fr 401):

Dare you see a soul at the *White Heat*?

then crouch within the door

red is the fire's common tint

but *when the vivid ore*

has sated flame's condition

it quivers from the forge
 without a color but the *light*
 of unannointed blaze

Least village has its blacksmith
 whose anvil's *even ring*
 stands symbol for *the finer forge*
that soundless tugs within
 refining the impatient ores
 with hammer and with blaze
 until *the designated light*
 repudiate the forge

I had early come to think of this poem as one dedicated to nymphomaniac arousal, and as such as of a condition of some permanence in her sexual individuality. But seeing it in sequence, coming after “The morning after wo” (J 398 / Fr 398),⁹ I am now conscious of its peculiar connection with Bowles’s interdiction of her relationship with Kate and her subsequent renewed intercourse with him. However, it is possible that the reference is to the final intimacy with Kate which Bowles seems to have allowed the two lovers on that interdiction day. It is also possible, if perhaps not quite probable, that Bowles took pay at once in lesbian attendance to his glans on this occasion, and this might be meant with the lines, *when the vivid ore / has sated flame’s condition*. No matter. The main point to this poem is that Dickinson succeeded in giving superior expression to a concern that strongly bothered her all through her poetry: that of her exceedingly virile sexiness. Her muse took off on that theme many times and brought forth some good expressions of it. This one climbed to parnassian heights on her symbolizing concepts of *glow* and *light* perhaps more than any

other: the innate, mentally, spiritually incited sexual urge which she calls *the finer forge / that soundless tugs within* over and above “the even ring” of the anvil that least vagina’s blacksmith hammers out in common sexual intercourse. I hold this to be the main hidden meaning of this poem, but I concede that her multiple muse formulated her thought broadly enough that lesbian orientation and masturbation can also be comprehended under the symbol, *the finer forge / that soundless tugs within*. Both are capable on occasion to blaze forth with the *white heat* of hugest, most unsatiable urge.

The *spider*, in its normal symbolic use, stands as analogon for mutual climax per se. Dickinson uses the term only seven times throughout her work, and even in this small number it is not easy to ascertain whether the aggressive partner in the act is the male or female genital, but in the endspurt it is the glans that is made a meal of. Its pictograph is that of two cobwebs, female orgasmic effluence and male ejaculation weaving toward each other for the junction.

The earliest mention of the word spider occurs in a Rosetta stone poem from the poet’s workshop (*Poems* 1891; J 140 / Fr 90):

An altered look about the hills
 a Tyrian light the village fills
 a wider sunrise in the dawn
 a deeper twilight on the lawn
 a print of a vermillion foot
 a purple finger on the slope
 a spider at his trade again
 an added strut in chanticleer

a flower expected everywhere
 an axe shrill singing in the woods
 fern odors on untravelled roads
 all this and more I cannot tell
 a furtive look you know so well
 and Nicodemus' mystery
 receives its annual reply

A heterosexual intercourse is described from beginning to end. In the first six lines intravaginal topography and happenings on it appear. The seventh line indicates semen arrival on contraceptive's wall or film; the eighth, glans weaving its cobwebs from above. Climax proceeds to the end of the fourteenth line, and the last two could be interpreted as a mutual climax (*immortality*).

In the following poem (*Poems* 1891; J 1138 / Fr 1163), such a mutual climax is described:

A spider sewed at night
 without a light
 upon an *arc of white*

If ruff it was of dame
 or shroud of gnome
 himself himself inform

Of immortality
 his strategy
 was physiognomy

This is one of the great successes of her double language, a gem in the articulation of it. It is also one of her cleverest, wittiest poetic encapsulations of mutual climax in heterosexual intercourse. The depiction is deftly arrogant and, in its repetition in the last three lines, so clearly declaiming female mastery during the act of intercourse that one must suspect she actually celebrates a snatch orgasm taken on a weak, nearly impotent penis.

To further elucidate: In the first three lines, the *spider* could be either vaginal cup or glans, for the *sew[ing]* goes on in the dark recess of the vaginal cup during its tight grip on the glans. The *arc of white* is the skin of the contraceptive, and it has the duplicity of meaning in that its arc is concave inside, convex on the outside. Thus there are two spiders at work. The question of which of the two is doing the *sew[ing]* she nonchalantly declines to answer; let female effluence and semen emission from the glans decide that among themselves:

If ruff it was of dame
or shroud of gnome
himself himself inform

But she gives the reader a hint:

Of *immortality*
his strategy
was physiognomy

She means that, whichever it was, vagina in orgasmic arousal or glans in self immolation, his or her method of achieving mutual climax (*immortality*) was “to take the measure of the flesh, the bone and the cadaver” (for that is what, according to Webster, “physiognomy” can mean).

The following poem describes a premature male ejaculation, possibly self-induced in the poet's indifferent vagina (*BM* 1949; J 605 / Fr 513):

The *spider* holds a silver ball
in unperceived hands
and dancing softly to himself
his yarn of pearl unwinds

He plies from nought to nought
in unsubstantial trade
supplants our tapestries with his
in half the period

An hour to rear supreme
his continents of light
then dangles from the housewife's broom
his boundaries forgot

Another spider poem is most probably a mock-poem on the impotent penis (*Poems* 1896; J 1275 / Fr 1373):

The *spider* as an *artist*
has never been employed
though his surpassing merit
is freely certified
by every broom and bridget
throughout a Christian land
neglected son of genius

I take thee by the *hand*

If we look at the poem without preconceived notions, we must admit that it is cute, witty, and even harmless. But how did it get into the company of poems on the impotent penis in the early seventies? Perhaps because the *spider* symbol could serve so well as an analogon for comparing the penis that once was with the penis that now is and give the Bridgets of the land something to laugh about.

Penis rated *artist* very early in Dickinson's symbolism, especially in her frustration period when she conceived of him as a Van Dyke, Guido, Titian, Domenichino, painting the canvas of the contraceptive's inner surface with his emissions. He is not so spry and premature now, but needs all the fondling he can get. So she reaches vaginally for his glans and glans corona and, taking his *hand*, gives him a hand.

The *spider* symbol is extended to other poems through the Webster hum, as the following examples show, first through the *spider* as *artist* image of the first poem and then through the *hempen hands* in the second.

The symbolic connections between the *spider* as *artist* and the details of penis painting semen emissions on the canvas of the contraceptive are reflected in the last lines of the following poem (*Poems* 1896; J 291 / Fr 327):

How the old *mountains drip with sunset*
 and the *brake with dun*
 how the *hemlocks are tipped with tinsel*
 by the wizard sun

How the *old steeples hand the scarlet*
till the ball is full
have I the *lip of the flamingo*
that I dare to tell?

Then how the *fire ebbs like billows*
touching all the grass
with a *departing sapphire feature*
as if a duchess pass

How a small dusk crawls on the village
till the houses blot
and the *odd flambeaux no men carry*
glimmer on the spot

Now it is *night in nest and kennel*
and *where was the wood*
just a dome of abyss is nodding
into solitude

These are the *visions baffled Guido*
Titian never told
Domenichino dropped the pencil
powerless to unfold

The tripartite love feast is on variant new display. The symbols mostly double-double in meanings or alternate from heterosexual to homosexual and vice versa. The poem “Blazing in gold and quenching in purple” (J 228 / Fr 321) has already brought us to Dickinson’s portfolios of poetic landscape pictures; this is a new one and one of the best. I itemize the symbolizations and define them as best I can:

<i>mountains</i>	penis/glans and cervix horns and clitorii
<i>drip with sunset</i>	semen emissions and also female effluences
<i>brake with dun</i>	contraceptive (it brakes the semen)
<i>hemlocks tipped with tinsel</i>	glans corona bathed in semen; clitorii (<i>bobolinks</i> = <i>hemlocks</i>) in lesbian handling and effluent flooding
<i>old steeples hand the scarlet</i>	penis and cervix horns in mutual climax; clitoris and lesbia’s lip or finger in corresponding climactic process
<i>till the ball is full</i>	till mutual embrace in both versions is achieved and consummated
<i>lip of the flamingo</i>	vaginal cup (or spoon) ladling the semen emission in man-woman encounter; lips of lesbia in the woman-woman requitement
<i>fire ebbs like billows</i>	semen ejaculation ending
<i>touching all the grass</i>	bringing all the female erotogenous zones into peak excitation
<i>departing sapphire feature</i>	a female endspurt feeling (?)
<i>as if a duchess pass</i>	as only lesbians can know it

how a small dusk crawls on the village

this depends on the definition of *village*. It means usually the topography of penis as experienced by vaginal tube during the “walk home” or fondling service. It can represent also the lesbian opposite

till the houses blot

till all the way stations leading to the climactic consummation are laid behind

odd flambeaux no men carry

female orgasmic coloration (“no men” = “women”)

glimmer on the spot

either on glans in mutual climax, or on clitoris in lesbian consummation

night in nest and kennel

exhaustion in both the female and male genitals

where was the wood

where the erections were before

just a dome of abyss is nodding

the vacuum in the greatly expanding intravaginal cul-de-sac

into solitude

vagina’s superior moments experienced by her alone

visions that baffled Guido / Titian never told

female private feelings and experience in the two-versed sexual intercourse which penis/painter (who paints pictures with his semen ejaculations on the canvas of the inner surface of the contraceptive’s film) was never able to duplicate

Domenichino dropped his pencil

male lover's penis collapsed, unable to rise
once more

The following poem describes the vagina's successful transition from fondling phase to capturing the glans and achieving mutual climax (*Poems* 1891; J 520 / Fr 656):

I started early took my *dog*
and visited the *sea*
the *mermaids in the basement*
came out to look at me

and *frigates in the upper floor*
extended *hempen hands*
presuming me to be a *mouse*
aground upon the sand

But *no man moved me* till the *tide*
went past my *simple shoe*
and past my *apron* and my *belt*
and past my *boddice* too

and made as he would eat me up
as wholly as a *dew*
upon a *dandelion's sleeve*
and then I started too

And he he followed close behind

I felt his silver heel

upon my ankle then my shoes

would overflow with pearl

Until we met *the solid town*

no man he seemed to know

and bowing with a mighty look

at me the sea withdrew

Since some of the symbolism is new in this poem, I shall be explicit: The *dog*, being an animal faithful in following her footsteps, and since vaginal fondling is symbolized in other poems as a *walk*, the conjecture comes naturally that *dog* is her sexual urge or arousal, and stands for the semen emission and glans. *Sea* retains its usual meaning of the semen flood or emission, but it could well symbolize female effluence in the vestibule during lesbian enjoyment. The *mermaids in the basement* identify with semen in the testicles; their rise through the urethra signifies their coming out “to look at me.” *Frigates in the upper floor* are the same semen quanta, emitted now from the glans lip (ships or boats are often used to symbolize the semen emission from glans lip). The *hempen hands* bring in the Webster hum that hovers about the term *spider*. Since there are several variations in this particular symbol hum, I specify that here the metal ring around a ship’s mast is meant, to which the ropes are tied that hold and guide the sails that flutter from the mast above—clearly a penis in ejaculation symbol.¹⁰ The *hempen hands* are the semen ropes leading out from the glans rim. The *mouse aground upon the sand* indicates that vaginal cup has made contact with the glans. *No man moved me* says that her own female arousal gives impetus to her activities from this point onward. The *tide* is of course the male emission at its zenith. *Simple shoe*,

apron, *belt*, and *boddice* are way points on the vaginal topography by which she feels it gaining on the glans in flood. Lines 7-8 make clear that vaginal cup has reached the glans rim and is now helped by the emission to effect the slip-on. Lines 9-16 describe the union in mutual climax in process of being effected, with female orgasmic arousal being somewhat slow in getting its momentum. The fourth stanza forms one of the cleverest sense encapsulations in the entire body of Dickinson's poems: *dandelion* is a penis in ejaculation symbol, a tube or stem from which a flower shouts. Its *sleeve* is the contraceptive, and the *dew* the female effluence on it in orgasmic arousal. The final eight lines describe the completion of the mutual climax and penis withdrawal from vagina.

Although the poem's symbolism is plainly heterosexual, the poem itself can also pass for the description of a lesbian mutual appeasement, since in *the solid town*, the absolutely tight contact, peak excitation and release is likewise equally achieved and totally mutual. This makes either of the two requirements exchangeable in their symbolic meanings, a fact that must be kept in mind over and over again in the analysis of her poems. For this reason, and for the added one that the poem is in packet 5, I hold this to be a double-double hybrid. But it is a workshop product, elaborated especially with eventual publication in mind; thus the outer meanings get preferential treatment. Actually, the poem has since become one of her most popular, best remembered ones.

Conclusion

We hope that the little we have given here from Hans's immense corpus gives a sense for his theory and his methods. Obviously, only independent evidence or documentation could ever confirm or reject Hans's belief that Dickinson was no virgin and engaged in affairs with both Bowles and Anthon. However, the meticulous detail of Hans's symbol system cannot lightly

be dismissed. It throws new perspective on many of the theories and speculations that surround Dickinson in the scholarly literature, and provides a more extensive argument and greater support than can be found in some of those critics' works. Readers may choose the strong version of Hans's argument and be convinced by this introduction. For those who are not, we suggest a weak approach to his theory.

First, you don't have to believe the story Hans weaves about Dickinson's relations with Bowles and Anthon in order to consider how Hans's work raises the issue of human sexual relations in nineteenth century New England. We know, for example, in Dickinson's own immediate circle, about Austin and Mabel's flagrant affair, about Bowles and Maria Whitney, about Henry Ward Beecher . But none of these have been put into the context of general nineteenth century mores, nor have they been used to explore the facts and attitudes surrounding the culture of adultery and what it might have meant to Dickinson's world. In 1857, when Dickinson was twenty six years old, *Madame Bovary* went on trial in France. According to Barbara Leckie, there was a great deal of concern in English-speaking communities about the dangerous influence of adultery in novels on the impressionable female.¹¹ Such studies would throw perhaps a somewhat different light on the story Dickinson told T. W. Higginson in 1862, that her father bought her books but then forbade her to read them because "they joggle the mind." Was "joggle the mind" a code expression for writings that encouraged female sexuality?

Second, you don't have to believe that Hans is right in thinking Dickinson actually experienced physical sex to recognize that the extremely explicit details of male and female heterosexual and homosexual experience he finds in the poems may contribute to a greater understanding of the physical, emotional, and psychological feelings that can occur in the act

of intercourse. Hans feared that by the time his work on Dickinson saw the light of day, his analyses of sexual relations would be “old hat.” We are not sexologists and know nothing about the current state of knowledge of human sexual relations. But in general, Hans’s work does not appear to us to be at all “old hat” in terms of what is or is not talked about in this area. Hans felt that Dickinson, in her writings, had made one of the greatest contributions ever to the knowledge of female sexuality.

Third, you don’t have to believe that Dickinson deliberately created a symbol system in her poetry to recognize that Hans’s work confirms many of the statements scattered throughout Dickinson criticism about her experience of love, and the suffering that may have arisen from it. It is not outside the realms of possibility for the poems to render up the meanings Hans finds in them. Dickinson valued the works of Shakespeare as a most precious resource, and we are now very familiar with Shakespeare’s sexual language that underlies the surface of his poetic language.¹² Hans’s recognition of the importance of Webster’s Dictionary to Dickinson mirrors Cynthia Hallen’s current work on the Lexicon Project, and his “Webster’s hum” a curious antecedent to Hallen’s notions of “webplay.”

Fourth, recent work on cognitive metaphor research enables us to recognize what it is critics do when they interpret a literary text.¹³ The new and startling metaphors and symbols poets use are generated from very basic image schemas and conventional metaphors of everyday discourse, such as the PATH schema that underlies the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. When critics interpret a poet’s work, they make use of these same basic schemas and metaphors, as they map imagery from one source domain on to another. Hans’s methodology in his work on Dickinson is no different. What is interesting and significant about his analysis

is that he has developed a comprehensive schema that links Dickinson's use of imagery into an overall symbolic system.

Finally, to our mind, the most important consideration is to what extent Hans's interpretations illuminate Dickinson's poetry. If he is right, then Dickinson indeed achieved a remarkable feat in creating her double language. One result of reading Hans's work, whether one is convinced or not, is the way it changes one's understanding of the poems. Many references and allusions that seem obscure and inexplicable become coherent under his analysis. Certainly, after a tour through Hans's writings, one can never approach a Dickinson poem in quite the same way again. And isn't that, after all, what literary criticism is all about—to enable us to “see” a poem differently?¹⁴

Notes

1. The manuscripts Hans left at his death included not only the Dickinson materials described in this article, but daily journals and letters, accounts of his life as a migratory worker in Canada, a book on the Sierra Sequoias, several political and philosophical essays, and an autobiographical account of his experiences over a period of several years.
2. This was Rebecca Patterson's *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson*, published by Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, in 1951.
3. See, for example, Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith's recent publication, *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson*, Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1998.
4. Following Johnson-Ward chronology.
5. Hans owned the 1966 edition of Webster's Third International Dictionary. Since he began his Dickinson dictionary in the 1940's, he must have been using the Los Angeles Public

Library's reference materials. We are not yet sure which version of Webster's nineteenth century editions were available to him.

6. Hans refers to the early speculations (see, for example, George Frisbie Whicher's *This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938) that Charles Wadsworth was her secret lover.
7. Readers will note the detailed and explicit accounts of the act of intercourse in these passages. This should not come as a surprise to those familiar with the Dickinson family story. Mabel Loomis Todd kept a daily journal in which she recorded in symbols her menstrual cycles and the times and locations of her intercourse with Austin, Emily's brother. There is much we do not know about nineteenth century mores and practices and the habit of keeping secret records. Dickinson was not known to have kept a diary, though her sister Lavinia did. If Hans is right, her poetry served also as her secret diary.
8. Hans faced copyright problems and thus used the pre-Johnson edited volumes of Dickinson's poems. Since his symbol system is in no way affected by which edition is used, and given the fact that any textual edition is problematic with respect to both version and variant, the editors decided to keep Hans's original references, and to cross-reference the Johnson and Franklin editions for readers' convenience. The editions referred to by abbreviations are as follows:

Poems 1890: the first edition of *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson, Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890.

Poems 1891: *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, second series, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson, Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891.

Poems 1896: *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, third series, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1896.

FP: Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929.

BM: Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham, New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1949 (first edition: 1945).

9. Hans arranged Dickinson's poems in his packets in a different chronological order from that given by Johnson. We have not yet discovered the methodology behind his rearrangement, though it may have to do with his sequencing of the biographical story being told in Dickinson's hidden language.
10. One of the entries under the term spider Hans refers to in Websters is that of the *spiderband*, a metal band around a ship's mast to which the lower ends of the futtock shrouds are secured. "It served her, obviously, as a symbol for the glans corona or rim on which the vaginal cup strives to fasten for the mutual climax. From this derive the subsymbols of *sail, shroud, rope, ropes of sand, hempen hands, etc.*"
11. In *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law 1857-1914*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, 30-32.
12. At the same EDIS conference in 1999 that saw Hans's work first presented to a Dickinson audience, Kristin Comment gave a paper on "Dickinson's Bawdy: Shakespeare and Sexual Symbolism in the Writings of Emily Dickinson to Susan Huntington Dickinson."
13. See, for example, Margaret H. Freeman, "Poetry and the Scope of Metaphor: Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literature," in *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads: A Cognitive Perspective*, ed. Antonio Barcelona, Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000, 253-81.
14. We are now in the process of collating the materials and finding a suitable publishing venue for Hans's life work. Since it would be impossible to reproduce all of Hans's

research on Dickinson's writings within the confines of a book, we plan also to make the actual materials available on the Dickinson electronic archives site for other scholars to consult. We thank Martha Nell Smith for promising us a room in the archives with technical help and assistance, and hope that it will not be too long before Hans's material may be accessible there. The archives project may be found at:

<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/dickinson/>. For password access, contact Martha Nell Smith at: ms63@umail.umd.edu. We would be happy to correspond with any of you who are interested in finding out more about Hans's work and this project. Rolf Amsler may be contacted at: rolfamsler@datacomm.ch; Margaret Freeman at: freemamh@email.lavc.cc.ca.us.

Bibliography

Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson (BM 1949). Eds. Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham, New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1949 (first ed. 1945).

Comment, Kristin. "Dickinson's Bawdy: Shakespeare and Sexual Symbolism in the Writings of Emily Dickinson to Susan Huntington Dickinson." Paper presented at the third EDIS international conference, South Hadley, MA, August 12-15, 1999.

Freeman, Margaret H. "Poetry and the Scope of Metaphor: Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literature." *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads: A Cognitive Perspective*. Ed. Antonio Barcelona. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000, 253-81.

Further Poems of Emily Dickinson (FP 1929). Eds. Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929.

Hart, Ellen Louise, and Martha Nell Smith. *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson*. Ashfield, MA: Paris P, 1998.

Leckie, Barbara. *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law 1857-1914*.

Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999.

Patterson, Rebecca. *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company,

1951.

Poems of Emily Dickinson (Poems 1890). Eds. Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson.

Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890.

Poems of Emily Dickinson (Poems 1891). Second series. Eds. Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W.

Higginson. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891.

Poems of Emily Dickinson (Poems 1896). Third series. Ed. Mabel Loomis Todd, Boston:

Roberts Brothers, 1896.

Whicher, George Frisbie. *This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson*. New

York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.