

Nature is a Haunted House -- but Art --  
a House that tries to be haunted.

(*Emily Dickinson, Letter to T.W. Higginson, L459*)

Overlooking Art for the moment, the Skulskian reader,<sup>1</sup> seeking figuration and its undoing, would take Dickinson's first line by the suggested method.<sup>2</sup> The first requirement is easily met: there is indeed "something confusing" about taking the line literally in the vernacular, for Nature is no house; to say it is so is to "flout a truism" (p14); this telltale "logical absurdity" (p10) triggers the search for figurative meaning. The second requirement may be granted also: we will assume that the line is "uttered in a community that recognizes a familiar and manageably small array of tropes, or recipes for using one meaning to specify another" (p10); for it seems fair to say that Dickinson, Higginson, and ourselves are at least tacitly familiar with some common method for making sense of the apparent illogic.<sup>3</sup>

The third requirement requires a bit more work: "If the language being spoken isn't quite the vernacular, but another exactly like it except that the troublesome expression means something else [i.e., the figurative sense] in the new language, something you get by applying a familiar trope recipe to the vernacular meaning, then the trouble disappears" (p10). The trope recipe we are supposed to guess applies here is the "metaphor-transformation": "the meaning of the expression as used *follows* from its canceled meaning once this is coupled with a relevant talk-postulate" (p22). Though Skulsky neglects to specify just how exactly we are to determine the relevant talk-postulates,<sup>4</sup> we might get furthest with his conception if we consider commonplaces such as *If something is a haunted house, it is mysterious, frightening, and wonderful, at least to those with a child's aptitude and appetite for wonder...*, or *All haunted houses are animated by hidden spirits*, or the like. Coupling these implications<sup>5</sup> with the canceled literal meaning of the

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<sup>1</sup> Taken to be that of H. Skulsky, *Language Recreated*, chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> See the three requirements for "[bringing] off the communicative act of figuration" (p10).

<sup>3</sup> Skulsky does not discuss how to determine whether a community has a trope and thus a common understanding of utterances which rely upon it for interpretation. One cause for concern here may be the fact that Higginson, by his own confession (as in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1891), was often *unable* to make sense of Dickinson's missives.

<sup>4</sup> Sperber and Wilson take us at least one step closer by suggesting that we seek the "closest" association or deduction from the literal expression that meets our expectations of value (or "effect") from the utterance; hardly an implementable algorithm as specified, but at least a gesture in the direction of one.

<sup>5</sup> Albeit "a loose kind of implication" (p9). Loosed enough from their subject to be Dickinson's Apennine Mists (Part One, 40)?

predicate (i.e., "is a Haunted House"), we get the figurative sense of the phrase: Dickinson is simply reminding us of Nature's splendid spirit. This appears to land us out of interpretive trouble, as the recipe promises.

Skulsky's account, however, does not fare as well in turning the corner to the second line. It seems plain that the intended emphasis here is not on a figurative meaning of "house" whereby Art could come to be one: a train of thought taking Art as a shelter, or as a human construction built up from the earth, or as a place to call home, may be possible in theory, but is somehow not convincingly licensed by Dickinson's text. Extending our attention to the entire phrase "a House that tries to be haunted" only compounds the problem: first we must unravel how houses could "try" to do anything; then we must determine what sort of effort this could be towards the goal of "being haunted"; and finally we must concoct some story for how Art could be claimed to be making such an effort. Perhaps this compound interpretation is simply a variant of the *metalepsis* Skulsky warned us about (p26), where dutiful decoding of each sub-trope in turn will eventually churn out the encoded thought. But it is not clear where Skulsky would find the necessary talk-postulates for the key step: what commonplaces does our community have about a house that tries to be haunted, such that these could be attributed now to Art? Interpreting the second line as simply a more complicated case of figuration is strained here. Something else entirely seems to be going on.

Actually, there seem to be two things going on, as Dickinson's lines strike me. First, I am reminded of Max Black's suggestions<sup>6</sup> that metaphor makes two thoughts "active together", and that through their "interanimation" a special insight or way of viewing the primary subject is achieved.<sup>7</sup> Dickinson may not be *talking about* haunted houses, but introspectively there is a strong impression that we are at least *thinking about* haunted houses here, in that they come to mind; they have not been swapped out of the discourse in exchange for their associated commonplaces, for no set of such commonplaces would evoke quite the same cognitive content.<sup>8</sup> Skulsky attempts to capture this intuition by asserting that the successful reader will "learn to think in a new language... to understand [the focus word] in a new sense" (p13): "What gets

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<sup>6</sup> Which Skulsky rejects, but does not elaborate an argument against here.

<sup>7</sup> "The reader is forced to 'connect' the two ideas... To speak of the 'interaction' of two thoughts 'active together' (or, again, of their 'interillumination' or 'co-operation')... is to [emphasize] the dynamic aspects of a good reader's response to a nontrivial metaphor" (p39); "[if we] try to state the cognitive content of an interaction-metaphor in 'plain language'... the set of literal statements so obtained will not have the same power to inform and enlighten as the original" (p46); M. Black, *Metaphor*.

Here I appeal to the abstract impressionistic inspiration of these ideas, without subscribing to Black's concomitant semantic theory that the word meanings themselves are transformed.

<sup>8</sup> I conjecture that keeping haunted houses in mind is part of what enables us to find the metaphor striking. For there is a specific flavor of wonder and awe that haunted houses evoke; to simply say that Nature too evokes wonder and awe [in its own way] risks saying nothing new; we must keep the haunted house flavor in mind.

created by these coordinated acts of creativity is at least a temporary community united by a new medium of communication, the impromptu dialect" (p13). But can we not accept the claim that a new understanding is achieved without accepting that a new dialect is established? The reader may feel some certainty that they have grasped or at least glimpsed Dickinson's point, and even feel "the excitement of catching on" (p13), without being prepared to use or understand the expression "haunted house" predicated of anything else, with its alleged new sense. If now told "Higginson is a Haunted House", or "The humming-bird is a Haunted House", or "My father's pure and terrible heart is a Haunted House", or even "Art is a Haunted House", there is no obvious newly established dialect that makes these assertions transparent. The specific juxtaposition of "Nature" with "Haunted House", in this specific context, seems to yield a specific meaning -- not a general extension to a dialect, and not readily applicable to any further assertions.

Second, the overarching structure of Dickinson's two lines is relational analogy. In the form made familiar from the ubiquitous standardized test question, the official answer might be: *Nature is to Art as Haunted Houses are to houses that try to be haunted.*<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, we see that the larger purpose of Dickinson's lines is to state a contrast (between Nature and Art), and only secondarily to state a likeness (between Nature and Haunted Houses). The contrast itself does not concern any Skulskian implications or commonplaces about haunted houses in particular; rather, the haunted house is useful as a model because of its vivid dissimilarity to the unhaunted version.<sup>10</sup> With this model in mind, the analogy illuminates Art's strivings and limits: it highlights the difference between the material form, substance, and construction of a piece of art (that is, the house as uninhabited structure) and the art's success in capturing the spirit of its subject, in coming to life, in haunting the artist and audience alike.<sup>11</sup>

Holding his ground, the dedicated Skulskian could accept these suggested interpretations as challenges for the trivial application of his method, but seek to account for them again by *composition* of tropes. The decomposition is tangled, but might go something like this: via metonymy, Art stands in for the Artist; this yields an agent, whose efforts to enliven his art are metaphorically likened to efforts to make a house haunted; the trope of relational analogy then contrasts these labors of artifice with the effortless achievement, or innate endowment, of Nature; while concurrently informing us about Nature's nature through the metaphor of the first line, taken

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<sup>9</sup> This is less strained than the metaphor phrasing: *Nature's relation to Art is Haunted Houses' relation to houses that try to be haunted.*

<sup>10</sup> Another example: A child reenacts the story of how the big man knocked over the little man by demonstrating a big rock knocking over a little rock; and in so doing is not likening men to rocks, but rather indicating the consequences of relative size for physical power and stability.

<sup>11</sup> But then, why do we need the Art at all, if the imagination itself will do as well? "One need not be a chamber to be haunted, / One need not be a house; / The brain has corridors surpassing / Material place..." (Part Four, 69).

in isolation. The Skulskian could thus claim that the complexity of the inner workings of these lines is no argument against his account of any one such working on its own.

Yet I do not find Dickinson's lines to be such a neat sum of their alleged parts -- further aesthetic factors seem to be engaged in determining the semantic interpretation here. The art of these lines partially arises from the very ridiculousness of trying to conjure up images of houses trying to be haunted, of trying to force the metaphor strictly through its transformation template. Here we have a distinct poetic maneuver, which I will term *slant metaphor*: akin to slant rhyme, it works by establishing the expectation for a formal structure, and delivering a skewed version. Its cunning operation produces a type of garden path effect: the reader finds himself struggling to entertain the apparent but absurd "Art is a house" metaphor<sup>12</sup> until he finishes the line and recognizes the larger contrast he was meant to notice;<sup>13</sup> like the artist, he is exposed in mistaking his projections for the thing itself. Deepening our appreciation of the artist's challenge is the "straight" metaphor of the first line, where the common theme is a certain precious unknowability of Nature.<sup>14</sup>

The glory of Dickinson's lines is the coexistence of these levels of meaning -- their thrice aptness. The passage states an insight about Art, its goals and difficulties, while it lures the reader into momentarily committing the artist's fallacy. And yet at the same time, the brilliance of the passage *as* Art revives our faith in the possibility of touching Nature -- for the artist's struggle is itself a part of Nature, a part which Dickinson has here given us a wholly haunted glimpse of. Our rapture at experiencing these lines is in seeing Art depict Art, and thus depict Nature. In this concisely roundabout manner, the truth is told slant.

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<sup>12</sup> On pain of a charge of Hotspurism: Art is no more to be taken metaphorically as a house than a break in a rhyme scheme is to be taken as a rhyme.

<sup>13</sup> Is this analogous to the sly smile of the baroque composer, whose counterpoint resolves the apparent awkwardness of an augmented second in a melody line by redirecting the audience's attention to the line's larger purpose in the surrounding figuration?

<sup>14</sup> As rehearsed elsewhere in Dickinson's work, sometimes with the very same metaphor: "...But nature is a stranger yet; / The ones that cite her most / Have never passed her haunted house / Nor simplified her ghost..." (Part Two, 96).