Thoughts on Poetry and Music, on Rhythms in Emily Dickinson's "The World Feels Dusty" and Aaron Copland's Setting of It

by Michael Cherlin

In the tradition of Western art songs, the composer typically comes to the poem belatedly. It is already made, sturdy in form if sturdiness was called for, evanescent if evanescence was called for, majestic if it needed majesty, somber, joyous, wondrous, sensuous, comic, tragic—all as needed and already there. Composers hardly ever choose a text because of a sense that something is lacking, something that needs the repair that only notes and rhythms can bring. So the composer who sets a well-made poem is in some sense an intruder, like someone upsetting the balances in a perfectly planted garden, adding rooms to a perfectly designed house. The difference is that the poem without the music remains available—if we can forget the music once it is heard.

Reading and listening are modes of interpretation. As we interpret we select what to pay attention to and, usually by default, what to ignore. Of the ways language denotes meaning, let us focus for now on rhythm. Here is a story that can make my point.

> A man needs his trousers shortened. He passes a tailor shop. There is a sign in the window that says:

WHAT DO YOU THINK
I FIX YOUR PANTS FOR NOTHING

> He reads it aloud: "What do you think, I fix your pants for nothing!" The man is delighted at the prospect of a free tailoring, but he is properly skeptical. He goes into the shop and asks the tailor if the sign is true. The tailor replies, "Of course it is," and so the man brings in all of his trousers that need shortening. The tailor does his work and when it is finished gives the man a bill. The man is surprised and says, "What about the sign?" "The sign is true," responds the tailor. "It says, 'What do you think? I fix your pants for nothing?'"[1]

The different readings are different because of rhythm and accent, with accent properly understood as a subspecies of rhythm. Language provides rhythmic contexts, but perception, hence internal or external performance of rhythm, is not locked into unyielding formulae. Most well-made poems play on multiple layerings of rhythm. Emily Dickinson is especially sensitive and powerful in this domain. Multiple readings of her strong poems are not only available, but necessary, for it is the conflict among readings that embodies the poet's density of meaning. That density refuses to accept reduction to a singular mode of inflection. The best readings are those mysterious enough to evoke the conflict of polyrhythms, polyrhythms that any single utterance of the poem will necessarily undermine.

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[1]The story was told to me by Steven Cahn. I do not know its origin.

Editions of Dickinson's poems prior to the variorum edition[2] changed punctuation, spelling and even words of text. The text that Copland sets is a case in point.[3] Below find first the variorum edition and then the 1929 version that Copland set.[4]

The World — feels Dusty
When We stop to Die —
We want the Dew — then —
Honors — taste dry —

Flags — vex a Dying face —
But the least Fan
Stirred by a friend's Hand
Cools — like the Rain —

Mine be the Ministry
When thy Thirst comes —
Dews of Thessaly, to fetch —
And Hybla Balms —

* * *

The world feels dusty
When we stop to die;
We want the dew then,
Honors taste dry.

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[2]*The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols., ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: The Belnap Press, 1955).

[3]Copland's text is taken from *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred L. Hampson (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1929).

[4]The single-volume edition *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, n.d.), although based on Johnson's variorum edition, curiously reverses the last two lines of text. See p. 351 of that edition. The printed score (Boosey & Hawkes #17865) does not reflect the punctuation of 1929, yet the setting coordinates with that edition.

Flags vex a dying face,
But the least fan
Stirred by a friend's hand
Cools like the Rain.

Mine be the ministry
When thy thirst comes,
Dews of thyself to fetch
And holy balms.

Before we consider how choices made in Copland's setting reflect the text that he worked with, it will be helpful to consider aspects of the authentic poem, aspects that are lost or diffused, in varying degrees, in the 1929 version.

There is the equivocal Dickinsonian dash, found in every line save two. It can suggest a pause, an elision (something left out), a disconnection or a connection. How do I read the first line? "The world . . . which I silently suffer . . . feels dusty . . ." "The world: feels dusty . . ." "The world (contrary to what you might think) feels dusty . . ." "The world (as you my reader will well know) feels dusty . . ."

The dashes at the ends of stanzas equivocate, no less than those internal to quatrains. At the ends of stanzas dashes avoid the strong sense of closure that the unfortunate editorial choice of 1929, periods, bring. Hence, "Honors — taste dry — Flags — vex" are separated by versification, yet connected by belonging to the same short catalogue of things dry, vexing, things not needed that can crowd out those most needed. The dash after "Rain" connects and disconnects "like the Rain — Mine be the Ministry When thy Thirst comes —. " The dash after "Balms" suggests a non-terminated

vector, a post-echo sounding beyond the confines of our three stanzas. Different readings of the dash suggest different poetic rhythms, different subtleties of shading, accent and dynamics. Throughout, the grammatical markings of 1929 place uncalled-for limitations on interpretation.

Dickinson is a master of enjambment. Enjambment—the completion, in the following poetic line, of a clause or other grammatical unit begun in the preceding line[5]—always involves ambiguity through polysemantic and polyrhythmic conflict. Here are two antithetical readings of the first two lines. "The world feels dusty. When we stop to die, we want the dew then." This tells me that the world is always a dusty place, and that when we stop, that is to die, we say 'enough of this dustiness.' In contrast, "The world feels dusty when we stop to die. We want the dew then," tells me that death, or the process of approaching death, is parching. The passage toward death is eased by coolness and moisture, for those are life-giving and the passage toward death is still not yet death but part of life itself. There is a powerful ambivalence between "the world is dusty" as a perennial state and the world, whose life force is symbolized by the dew, that we leave by a parching unto death. Dickinson has expressed that powerful ambivalence through a conflict of rhythms. In late Freudian terms the conflict is between Eros, the life force, and Thanatos, the death drive.

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[5]*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

Another level of rhythmic texturing is based on syllabic accents and ambiguities or tensions among possibilities for rhythmic scansion. For example, the opening sets up a clear initial pattern of iambic feet that is clouded at the second line, for which I provide three metric readings:

˘ – ˘ – ˘

The World — feels Dusty

1) – ˘ – ˘ –

2) ˘ – – ˘ –

3) ˘ ˘ – ˘ –

When We stop to Die —

The first reading lets the iambic lilt continue across the first line as though the enjambment connects/disconnects the meter as well as grammatical syntax: "dusty when" (– ˘ –). The accented "When" and "stop," connected by the passing "We," give emphasis to the connection of the arrival of an anticipated time (When) and of its function in our lives (to stop). The personal "We" is somewhat deflated through lack of stress. "We" is secondary; the "When" of "stop" is primary.

The second reading gives the second line a rhythmic status, at least at its beginning, that is analogous to the first line. It begins line two with a upbeat, just as the first line, and in contrast to our first reading, places emphasis on the arrival of "We," not "When." The disjunction between the end of line one (weak beat) and the

beginning of line two (another weak beat) is not very striking if we take a breath in place of the missing strong accent. The second reading experiences a dramatic disjunction, however, as the strong "We" is followed by a just as strong or even stronger "stop." In this reading "stop" is the word that disrupts the metric parallelism between lines one and two. "Stop" is given greater force as it becomes the word that disrupts momentum. "To Die" then re-establishes the iambic pulse. Death itself sets things right; only the moment of stopping, a hinge between two worlds, is a rhythmic wavering.

In the third reading both "When" and "We" work together as a double anacrusis. The upbeat-downbeat pattern of line 1 thus continues, but with a kind of stutter on "When We" that delays the arrival of "stop." By this rhythm, "When" and "We" are bound up in the same rhythmic function; the time and the persons form a single nexus hurled toward a stopping of both.

Another complex of rhythmic relationships arises through the sonic structure of the poem. This chiefly involves assonance (common vowel sounds), alliteration (shared consonants) and rhyme. The sonic structure is heavily implicated in the metric structures we have just discussed. For example, in the first stanza "World" strongly associates with "When We" and then "We want." In all of these cases 'w' is toward the front end of lines as well as at the front end of words. 'W' serves as an initiator of a rhythmic motion. The play of metrical placements is intensified by the shared sonic qualities. 'W' moves to the end of a word with "Dew" (line 3 and the final line), the word that also reverses the

position of 'd' in "World" from end to beginning. "Dew" in turn is the third event in the first stanza quartet of "Dusty," "Die," "Dew" and "dry," all last place words except for "Dew." "Dew," the only soothing word among its alliterative associates, is followed by the wonderfully enjambed "then." "We want the dew then. Honors taste dry." "We want the dew. Then, honors taste dry."

Dickinson's iconoclastic capitalizations are yet another element of rhythm, visual rhythm that can be transformed into spoken or sung rhythm. It is obvious, for example, that most of the sonic associations just pointed out involve words that are also capitalized. Structuring through capitalization, whatever its status, is obliterated in the 1929 version.

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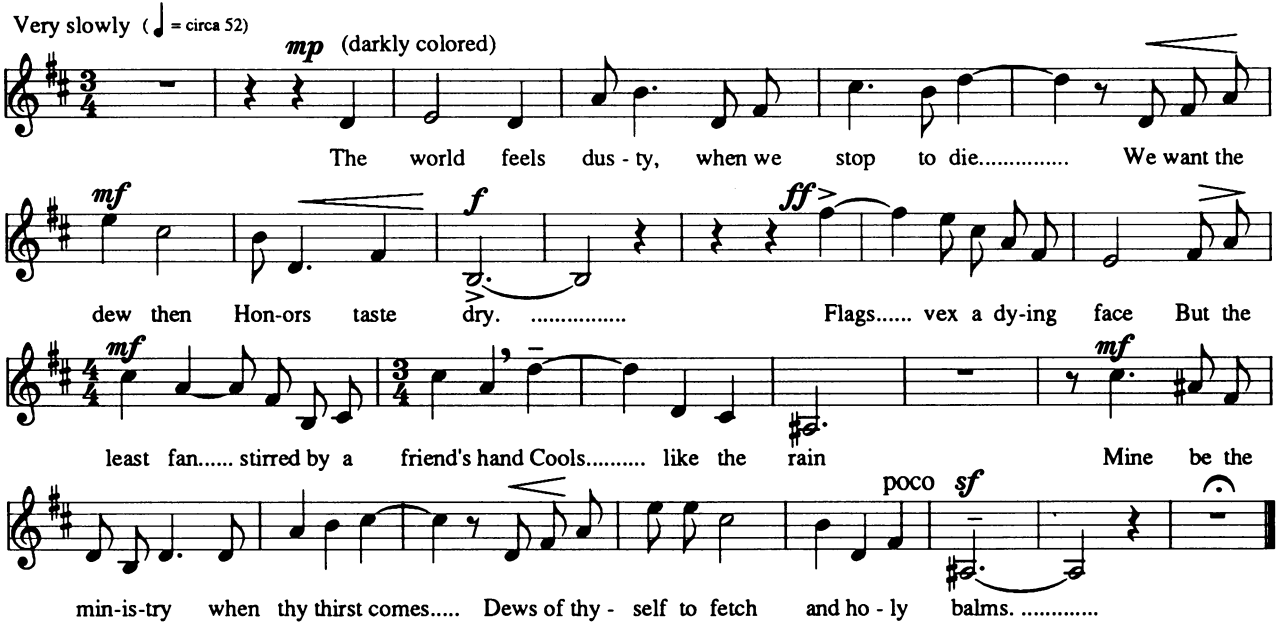
We now turn to Copland's setting and its relations to the 1929 version of the poem. We focus at first on the voice part (example 1). The principal articulation of the poem into three stanzas, each sealed off grammatically by a period, is well reflected in the music. The final words, "dry," "rain" and "balms," not only receive the longest vocal durations, but are the only words to be followed by prolonged silence. The possibility of perceiving enjambment between stanzas, given Copland's setting, is fairly remote.

In the 1929 version, a semicolon clearly divides the first stanza into two couplets. Although the same interpretation is available in the authentic version, others are possible. Along the

Example 1: The vocal line of "The world feels dusty"



lines of our earlier observations: The world feels dusty. When we stop to die, we want the dew. Then, honors taste dry. (I need hardly emphasize again that I am not claiming one interpretation is right and the other wrong, but rather that the contending interpretations, in conflict with one another, provide the poem with its density of meaning.) Copland takes the 1929 semicolon seriously, follows "to die" with a short rest, and uses "We want the" as an extended anacrusis to "dew then" to begin the following phrase. For the next lower level of articulation within the first stanza, Copland projects a division of each couplet into two lines as on the printed page. Here slightly less emphatic articulative devices than that which divides the couplets divide each couple into two lines. Thus we have a registral disjunction between "dusty" and "when," and the sustained half note on "then" separating it from "honors." Within the first stanza's vocal part, Copland has projected a hierarchy of articulations that clearly represent the 1929 version of the text, and clearly obfuscate alternative readings suggested by the authentic version.

The second stanza in its 1929 version contains two punctuation marks, a comma at the end of line 5 and a period at the end of the stanza. However, the assonance of "fan" and "hand" along with the syntactical function of line 7 as a modifier of line 6, suggests a division into one line plus two lines plus one. This indeed is the way Copland articulates the stanza. Interestingly enough, despite the suppressed dashes between "Flags" and "vex" and "cools" and "like," Copland does isolate those words to some degree. "Flags" is a high point (more on this later) and relatively

long in duration, and "Cools" is separated by registral disjunction as well as by the breath that precedes it. The principal damage done to stanza two by removing Dickinson's original punctuations involves the suppressed enjambment between stanzas. We have already noted how Copland's setting makes the likelihood of perceiving that enjambment remote. At the end of stanza two, the connection to stanza three is lost: "like the Rain — Mine be the Ministry When thy Thirst comes —."

The third stanza also has two punctuation points in the 1929 version, this time dividing the quatrain into two couplets as in stanza one. Once again, Copland follows the grammar rather precisely. The principal division within the stanza is between couplets, and, as in the first stanza, the next lower level in the articulative hierarchy reflects the separation of each couplet into lines projected on the printed page of poetic text. Of the two word substitutions, "thyself" instead of "Thessaly" and "holy" instead of "Hybla," the first strikes me as the more egregious. "Dews of Thessaly" might be obscure, but "Dews of thyself" is patently nonsensical by comparison.[6]

Let us now consider aspects of poetic scansion as projected by musical rhythms and contours, along with some related events in the musical setting. The iambs of line one fall on weak and

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[6]Ancient Thessaly was that region of northern Greece known not only as the home of the mythical race of Centaurs but also for its fertile, low-lying plains with their lush dews (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary* [London: Oxford University Press, 1949]). The ancient Sicilian town of Hybla was famous for its fine honey; 'Hybla Balms' appears thus to refer to a sweet, soothing drink (*Webster's Third International Dictionary* [Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1971]).

strong beats as might be expected, and help to project the musical meter. The contour and rhythm of "dusty" is a bit unsettling (kicking up the dust?) because of the syncopation and because of the "artificial" declamation which rises with the last syllable instead of descending. The ascent from A to B on "dusty" initiates a rising scalar motion that eventually opens the voice's upper register to high F♯ ("Flags"). We will consider this context more fully later.

Copland sets line two using the third of our three metric readings given in our analysis of the poem, that is, ⏑ ⏑ – ⏑ –, with "when we" functioning as anacrusis to stop. Our points about a single choice undermining other choices might be remembered once again at this juncture, even though, as we shall see, Copland has a rather elegant reason for this particular choice. The word "die" (strong pulse) is rhythmically emphasized but arrives metrically "too soon." Given the musical meter, it belongs on the downbeat of m. 6. As with "dusty," but more successfully here, Copland's setting is based on word painting: "to die" anticipates the metric downbeat in a poem that expresses anticipation (read: anxiety) of death.

The pattern of single upbeat, "The world," to double upbeat, "When we stop," is extended one step further for opening line three, "We want the dew then" (⏑ ⏑ ⏑ – ⏑). And the pattern continues further yet. Beginning the next stanza, the metrically very unsettled "Flags vex a dying face" sweeps down an octave and a tone to "face," moving to and exiting from E by F♯, a step above. This reciprocates with the first stanza opening ("The world feels") which moved to and from E by way of D, a scale step

below. Thus, Copland upsets the vocal projection of meter so that the octave F♯s, "Flags vex a dying," become an extended anacrusis in a sense taking the place of the opening "The" in stanza one. Next, "but the least" (⏑ ⏑ –) and "stirred by a friend's" (⏑ ⏑ ⏑ –) re-establish the upbeat pattern as in stanza one. In order to accommodate this scheme, and at the same time give "least fan" a setting analogous to "friend's hand," Copland augments m. 14 by one beat. "Cools" is then given a proleptic D over the bar, analogous in duration and metric location to "die," mm. 5-6, but in a different spot within the stanza (where "honors" was formerly located). The setting associated with "die" is thus rhythmically transposed to the spot where it can associate with "Cools." The set of rhythmic associations Copland has projected through stanza two—an extended upbeat until "Face," rhythmic parallelism between lines 6-7 and 2-3, the transformational mapping of "die" onto "Cools"—are not obvious in the text, at least not until Copland makes them so. Here Copland asserts his strength as composer against the *a priori* strength of the text. I do not mean to overwork this particular passage. This kind of agon (to borrow Harold Bloom's usage) is commonplace in the confrontation of composer and poet, just as it is in the confrontation of any creator with another.

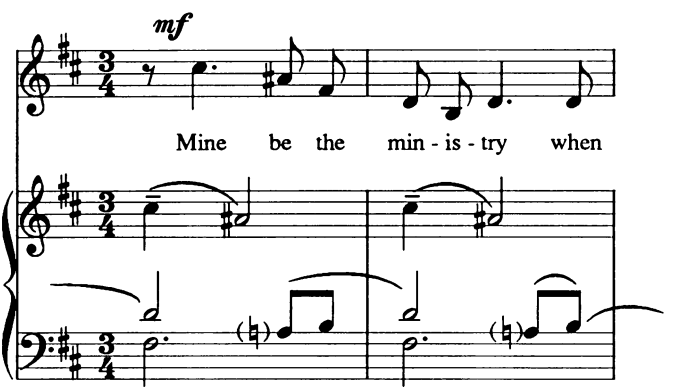
The final stanza is the problem child. Compared to the other stanzas it remains awkward, even in the authentic version, and more so in 1929. "Mine be the ministry" has a conflict between stressed/weak syllables and long/short speech durations. The former suggests a scansion of – ⏑ ⏑, – ⏑ ⏑, while speech rhythms

in terms of duration suggest – ⏑ ⏑, ⏑ ⏑ – . Copland solves the problem neatly by using a durational palindrome in conjunction with a metric placement that corresponds with syllabic stress. The delayed entrance of "mine" participates in a short canon between voice and piano (example 2).

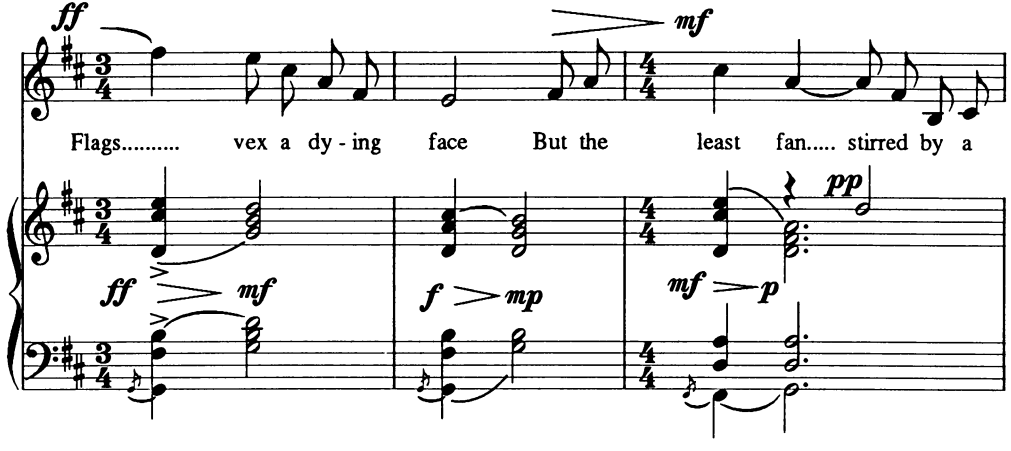
Copland sets "Mine be the ministry" in a relatively dissonant frame, given the context of the song as a whole. Only the setting of "Flags vex a dying face" is more stridently in conflict with the piano (example 3). The two places also associate in contour, and rhythm. On the other hand, as we have noted, stanza three (in 1929) associates grammatically with stanza one, not two. Copland thus finds a way to bring cross-associations together in the final stanza.

"When thy thirst" is the place analogous to the spots in stanzas one and two where Copland used a double anacrusis. Obviously, he has the same option here, but chooses a stronger reading. "Thy thirst comes" is set as – – –, with the only rhythmically conjunct scalar motion (except for two-note groups) in the entire song. As we have noted, "Dews of thyself to fetch" is set analogously to "We want the dew then," with the adjustment necessary for the extra syllable. A final interesting twist occurs with the setting of "and holy balms." "And," normally an unstressed word, is placed on the downbeat. The result is a kind of syncopation based on the non-congruence of word and metric placement. The rhythm associates with the setting of "thy thirst comes," and indeed intensifies the effect through the word/meter dissonance. At this point we can return to observations about the opening-up of

Example 2: mm. 19-20



Example 3: mm. 12-14



the vocal register that begins with the dyadic ascent on "dusty" inm. 4. The motion through registral space embodies yet another kind of rhythm at the composer's disposal. Copland uses the unfolding of vocal tessitura to create a larger rhythmic gesture across the setting as a whole, and to project a personal reading of the text that is neither emphasized nor obfuscated by the 1929 edition.

We had noted that the vocal range is gradually expanded to F♯ ("Flags," m. 11) through a scalar motion ascending A-B-C♯-D-E-F♯. The words thus connected are "dusty," "stop," "die," "dew," and, after abandoning the upper register for four bars, the high point "Flags." The key word in the temporary motion away from the upward sweep is "dry," isolated by a registral leap downwards (more on this in a moment). Thus, on the way to "Flags" Copland isolates the "d-word" quartet, plus "stop." "Flags," set as the registral and dynamic peak of the song, is interpreted as the principal object of cathexis; the repressed anxiety that begins to kick up with "dusty" is angrily vented as it is projected onto the symbol for what can go wrong, for that which can keep us from what we "want" (read: need).

The resolution of that anxiety (which, after all, can be read as a new, successful mode of repression) involves a shift from "we," to "mine" and "thy," in conjunction with a shift from 'patient' to 'agent' status for the poetic speaker. The scene changes from suffering death of self—being the patient where things can go wrong—to tending to the death of another—becoming the agent who

can do things right. The wish, implicit, is that the "golden rule" applies.

The resolution of the central anxiety is musically set by following the ascent and crescendo to "Flags" with a reciprocal winding down. The overall downward motion is not as clearly directed, hence not as strongly projected as the intensification leading up to "Flags," and we can read the setting to intend a gradual withdrawal of cathected energy rather than a directed projection of that energy elsewhere. On the way down, E ("vex") is not particularly emphasized, but D ("Cools") and then C♯ ("Mine," and especially "comes" and "fetch") are well articulated. The high Es on "thyself to fetch" in m. 23, have for me a very different effect from the one in m. 7—this in spite of the fact that the notes and rhythms for "Dews of thyself to fetch and holy . . ." are the same as "We want the dew then, Honors taste . . . ." In the first instance, the gradual opening of upper register, especially the motion from C♯ to D in m. 5, allows us to hear the E on "dew" in that connection. The later high E (thy-self) is prepared by a phrase that both begins and ends on C♯. "Fetch" is heard as reiterating that pitch and the Es of the same bar are contextually subordinated to it. The final B ("and holy . . ."), as we have already noted, arrives on an unstressed syllable in the poem, placed onto a metrical downbeat in the song. Just as with "Honors taste dry," the contour for "and holy" is ultimately derived from "dusty, when we . . . ." The final vocal B thus associates with the initial syncopation in a reference that indeed is fetched from afar. The A that had begun the registral ascent in m. 4 ("dus-ty") is not

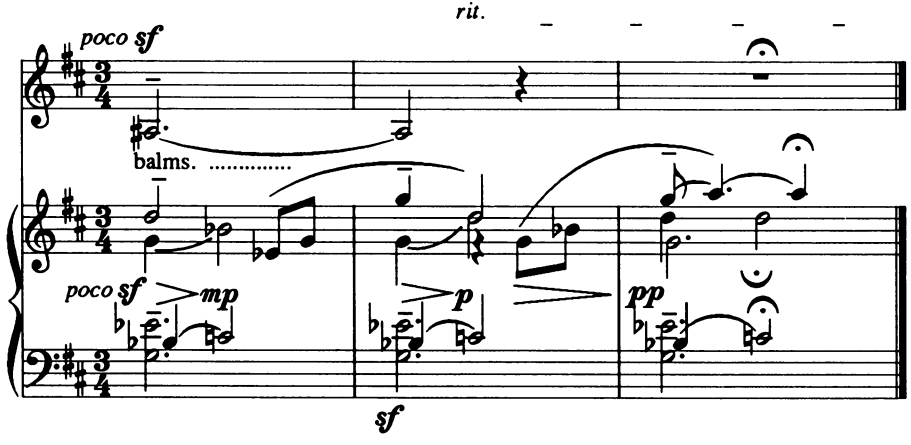
reiterated in the vocal part at the end, although an A an octave above is the final note in the piano.

A second large-scale rhythm, a three-pulsed counter-rhythm to that described above, also articulated in part by register, coordinates the conspicuously isolated low notes at the ends of sentences. While the periods in the 1929 version are problematic because of the ways they reduce meaning, the low notes in the setting, at least two of the three, are problematic because they flirt with parody. Copland sets the text "Honors taste dry" with a downward leap and a crescendo to *forte*. The booming low note on "dry" is difficult to sing convincingly, and the effect, unfortunately, can easily become comical. Perhaps "dry humor," is intended; however, given the larger context, that doesn't seem likely.

The low A♯ on "rain" is clearly a substitute for the B of "dry," which is the 'expected' note—the fresh note for refreshing "rain" (example 4). This touch is quite effective, and it works in conjunction with a modulation (extending the term slightly so that it can fit this not-quite-tonal context) projected by a shift in the piano's ostinato. The final A♯, "balms," strikes me as an unfortunate choice, or at least one that requires great delicacy from the singer. Alas, the word "balms" on a low, *poco sforzando* A♯ can too easily evoke images of "bombs."

This reader wonders why Copland's setting seems rather close to mocking two of the three closures within the vocal part of the song. Ironically, those closures are counter-intended by Dickinson's original text.

Example 4: mm. 25-27



POSTLUDE

If poems are songs already made, then songs are songs whose opposing forces subjugate, compromise, and celebrate each other's presence. When the two kinds of music come to meet, the "stubborn sounds" of poems are necessarily compromised. This is because composers set poems—the music set by poets is already there—and to set is to upset, offset, inset, reset and, shifting the syllabic emphasis, to beset. Assailed at all sides, the poem is placed at the mercy of the composer's whims. Still, composers set poems that they love, and love brings tender care. Good poems obviously do not need the musical settings that composers bring. Likewise, music has shown that when it cares to, it does just fine without text. When, though, the match is well-made—as with music and dance for sound and gesture—the wedding of sound and sense creates new meaning for both. In creating new meaning we stand at the beginning.