8. Manuscript Study, Fascicle Study: Appreciating Dickinson's Prosody

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Manuscript Study, Fascicle Study
Appreciating Dickinson’s Prosody

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This essay is for readers who want to think in new ways about Dickinson’s verse theory, the technical aspects of her versification. I argue here that manuscript features in her handwritten work are expressive visual strategies creating and highlighting aspects of her prosody; that her poems in manuscript offer readers more information about the prosody than standard print editions can provide; and that the fascicles and sets present a body of work in which prosodic developments, experiments, and innovations can be traced.

Although manuscripts are now available on Harvard’s Dickinson Archive, I refer to images accessible to readers, teachers, students, and critics in Franklin’s 1981 Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson, a photofacsimile edition that is relatively affordable, and available in many libraries. The chronology of fascicles and sets established by Franklin is essential to tracing developments in the poems, and yet I do not believe that the work can be dated as precisely as Franklin sometimes claims. In the introduction to his 1998 variorum edition, the editor explains that his evidence for dating the documents, the poems in manuscript and not their composition, includes handwriting; writing papers; embossment and watermarks; occasional stains. Expert observation of these characteristics leads to educated speculation. Franklin acknowledges: “It should be clear that dating is a judgment, albeit an informed one, subject to imprecision that increases across time” (variorum edition, 39). He notes particular difficulties determining endings and beginnings of certain years, including 1861 and 1862,
1864 and 1865, and he explains that with fascicles and sets after 1865, “dating becomes more difficult” (38). In *The Manuscript Books* he qualifies dating with “about” in relation to each year, whereas in the variorum he regularly places manuscripts in a particular season of the assigned year. In this essay I use the more approximate dating of the *Manuscript Books*, according to which the earliest poems in the series can be dated “about 1858” and the latest “early 1876” and “about 1877.” Franklin’s meticulous work establishes an invaluable chronology that allows readers to follow Dickinson’s prosodic shifts and changes over a period of nearly twenty years.

A one-stanza poem in Fascicle 3, “about 1859,” looks like this:

I hide myself within my flower
That wearing on your breast –
You – unsuspecting, wear me too –
And angels know the rest! (Fr80)

A later version, in Fascicle 40, “about 1864,” looks like this:

I hide myself – within
my flower,
That fading from your
Vase –
You – unsuspecting – feel for
me –
Almost – a loneliness –

The earlier poem is a Common Measure quatrains, which traditionally consists of four beats in lines 1 and 3, three beats in lines 2 and 4; the pattern abbreviates as 4.3.4.3. This form is also described as “hymn meter” and “ballad meter.” In the language of conventional scansion these are tetrameter and trimeter lines. The later poem is a variation of the form. The conventional Common Measure rhyme scheme is “full” rhyme for lines 2 and 4; here, “breast” and “rest.” The later poem varies the meter in the final line where there are two beats, not three, and organizes sound in alliterative patterns, consonantal threads: of “s” in “-self,” “unsuspecting,” “almost”; of “f” in “-self,” “flower,” “fading,” “from,” “feel,” “for”; “l” in “feel,” “almost,” “loneliness”; “m” in “myself,” “my,” “from,” “me,” “almost.” There are the assonances of “hide myself,” “almost” and “loneliness,” and the “near,” or “slant,” rhyme of “Vase” and “loneliness.” Division of metrical lines 1, 2, and 3, and midline dashes, slow the pace, encourage articulation of each syllable,
and emphasize words by centering them, or positioning them before or after a pause set out by a break. The varied rhythm and intricately interwoven sound patterns of the poem's second version are characteristic of poems after the early 1860s, which increasingly employ strategies of spatial prosody.

Through focused, observant reading of manuscripts, new poems appear, and are heard with intensified clarity. Readers can learn to recognize signifying characteristics of the handwriting during various periods of the work, including multiple forms of letters with different shapes, sizes, and degrees of flourish for the upper and lower cases, “A/a,” “C/c,” “S/s,” for example. Often whether a letter is capitalized or not is a matter of studied interpretation. Differentiating dashes and commas can be challenging. Dashes have various appearances: long and short, horizontal and angled, some pointing up, others down, some toward the left or the right. Dividing metrical, or measured, lines results in visual lines that enhance the sound of individual syllables, protect against slurring and promote what nineteenth-century elocutionists refer to as “distinct utterance,” add extrametrical stress, establish rhythmic phrasing, prevent metrical patterns from becoming monotonous or “sing song,” and multiply ambiguities while suggesting interpretive emphasis. Combining manuscript study with fascicle study here, I hope to model a process and encourage readers to be confident, precise, and exacting; to probe for subtle nuances of meaning; and to take deepening delight in the rich array of visual strategies contributing to Dickinson's complex aural art.

The practice of dividing measured lines may have begun in the earliest fascicle poems as a way to avoid excessive “crowding,” that is, fitting words into a line by running up against the edge of the sheet, in smaller handwriting, often in print lettering, which takes less space. Concern for neat, legible handwriting would be compatible with Dickinson's reputation at Amherst Academy, where she wrote a column for *Forest Leaves*, a student publication remembered by a friend as “all in script” and “passed around the school”: “Emily's” script was “very beautiful—small, clear, and finished” (Buckingham, *Reception* 350). “Small” describes the handwriting of the first three fascicles in relation to Fascicle 4, “about 1859,” when space between words is increasing; and by Fascicle 8, “about 1860,” lettering is larger.

Crowding to keep metrical lines physically intact is a strategy Dickinson sometimes uses, which raises the questions: What does it mean when she does not crowd? What choices is she making? What are her priorities for each metrical line? In my view the most important effects of visual lines are to preserve sound integrity, create rhythm, and suggest interpretive emphasis. One exception, where fitting poems to space does dictate
line arrangements, is summed up by Franklin’s comment that Dickinson’s “unit” “in one sense had always been the sheet” (MB xii). In certain cases throughout the fascicles and sets, as writing approaches the bottom of a sheet, Dickinson crowds one or two lines toward the end of a poem so all lines appear on a single page. For example, in the opening line of a poem in Fascicle 9, “He was weak, and I was strong – / then –,” she divides the metrical line, keeping the visual parallel with the third line of the stanza: “I was weak, and He was strong / then –.” But in the final stanza, lines 1 and 3 use smaller handwriting to keep lines together and fit the whole stanza into the sheet’s remaining space. About five years later a single-stanza poem in set 6a, “about 1865,” shows a similar concern:

The Definition of
Beauty is
That Definition is none –
Of Heaven, easing Analysis –
Since Heaven and He are One. (Fr797)

The first measured line is shorter than the last by one character (counting as “characters” are letters, one space between words, and punctuation marks), yet the shorter line is divided and the longer line is squeezed into the space to keep the poem visually intact. Priorities for dividing the first line seem to be to slow the pace, to center and emphasize “Definition,” and to emphasize “Beauty.”

In Fascicles 9, “about 1860,” and 10, “about 1860 and 1861,” Dickinson begins to divide metrical lines more often than in the previous eight fascicles. In Fascicles 1 and 2, both dated “about 1858,” and Fascicle 3, “about 1858 and 1859,” there are no poems in which metrical lines are divided. In Fascicle 4, “about 1859,” four of the sixteen poems have stanzas in which some lines are divided. Poems in Fascicles 5 and 6, dated “about 1859,” are without line division; Fascicle 7, “about 1859,” has one poem with one divided line; Fascicle 8, “about 1860,” has no divided lines. Then in Fascicle 9, “about 1860,” nineteen of the twenty-nine poems have divided lines, and in Fascicle 10, “about 1860 and 1861,” sixteen of twenty-two poems have divided lines. Here is the full text, in my print translation, of a poem in Fascicle 10: the two-stanza draft version of “Safe in their Alabaster / chambers.” Franklin dates the fascicle “about 1860 and 1861,” and this manuscript “about 1861.”

Safe in their Alabaster
chambers –
Untouched by Morning –
And untouched by Noon –
Lie the meek members of
the Resurrection –
Rafter of Satin – and Roof
of Stone!

Grand go the Years – in the
Crescent – above them –
Worlds scoop their Arcs –
And Firmaments – row –
Diadems – drop – and Doges –
surrender –
Soundless as dots – on a
Disc of snow – (Fr124)

In editing terms, a “print translation” is a limited “diplomatic transcription.” “Diplomatic” derives from “diploma,” meaning a document folded in half. A diplomatic transcription represents a manuscript as accurately as type or print will allow, and may include a description of features that are difficult or impossible to represent typographically. A complete diplomatic transcription of this poem would describe certain letters that stand out in the manuscript, elaborately formed capitals, in particular, and would make note of the length and angle of dashes. It would also provide a measurement of a line drawn beneath the second stanza, separating the pair of stanzas from two that follow. (These may be versions of an alternative second stanza, or versions of a third stanza.) Commentary of this kind is unnecessary here, however, since Franklin’s edition makes the manuscript image available.⁴

There are five existing manuscript versions of the poem, including a version in Fascicle 6.⁵ Dickinson’s line divisions create rhythm, sometimes varying, sometimes supporting the metrical pattern. The text of the poem’s first stanza, below, shows metrical lines with stressed syllables underlined.

\[
\begin{align*}
&x  \ x  \ x  \ x  \\
&\text{Safe in their Alabaster chambers –} \\
&x  \ x  \ x  \\
&\text{Untouched by Morning –} \\
&x  \ x  \ x  \\
&\text{And untouched by Noon –} \\
\end{align*}
\]
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection –
Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone!

Lines 1, 4, and 5 have four beats; lines 2 and 3 have three beats. “Beats” are also known as “strong stresses.”

Linguist Sandra Chung offers useful alternative terms for metrical analysis: “Emily Dickinson wrote almost all of her poetry in a metrical form clearly connected to the meter of English-language folk verse and hymns. Hence, the terms used by literary scholars to describe her verse (e.g. ballad stanza, hymn meters, common meter; see England and Sparrow 1966, Johnson 1955, Lindberg-Seyersted 1968, Porter 1966). Adopting the perspective of Burling (1966), Attridge (1982), Hayes and MacEachern (1998), Kiparsky (2006), and others, we [Chung and Hart] say that Dickinson wrote in four beat verse, a family of rhythmic forms that are arguably simple, accessible, and universal compared to, say, iambic pentameter. Four-beat verse is ubiquitous in English folk songs, nursery rhymes, greeting cards, and political chants.” Chung notes that Dickinson “experimented with this form. As Thomas Johnson put it, her ‘great contribution to English prosody was that she perceived how to gain new effects by exploring the possibilities within traditional metric patterns’ (1955:86).”

“The meter is phonologically well-defined, clearly recognizable, and related to a very familiar meter; readers have no trouble perceiving (hearing) it,” Chung writes. She explains that “the pauses, intonation, etc. of performance are superimposed on the poem’s underlying (metrical) organization,” that “the visual lines are superimposed on the meter; to the extent that they fail to coincide with the meter, they suggest new ways of perceiving (reading / delivering) the poems.”

By omitting line divisions editors restrict lines. When an edited line does not correspond with the visual lines, the two do not sound the same and do not have the same meaning. Division of metrical lines distributes the centers of the verse, helping to avoid “mid line slackening,” the term Robert Shaw uses in his study Blank Verse, and promoting what Seamus Heaney refers to as a “mid-line dynamic.” Short visual lines direct focus to words in the center of a metrical line rather than at the line’s end. In “Safe in their Alabaster / chambers,” “Alabaster” receives more emphasis than it would if the eye moved more quickly across the page to “chambers.” Separating “Alabaster” from “chambers” weakens the syntactical bond, and the adjective resonates, creating a lingering impression of hard, white stone,
before the noun dominates and the focus moves to “chambers.” In this way images and scenes unfold piece by piece, and our perception changes. Textures, dimensions, layers of meaning come into view gradually. Like her “Players at the Keys – / Before they drop full Music / on – /,” Dickinson “stuns you by Degrees” (Fr 477, F 22).

Why does the division of a metrical line occur in one place and not another? In “Rafter of Satin – and Roof / of Stone” the break avoids the muffled echo “Roof of,” which decreased space between words in the first part of the line might have allowed. But the awkward sound could detract from the acoustic impact of “Stone.” Instead, every syllable in the line stands out, with the integrity of its sound protected. In “Lie the meek members of / the Resurrection –” if “of” after “members” were not so widely spaced, the article would follow on the same line, but article and noun together carry more weight. Compare the visual lines with the metrical line: “Lie the meek members of the Resurrection –” In the former, “Meek members” are at the center of the scene. The ultimately powerful “Resurrection” does not dominate the line until a reader has the opportunity to wonder: “members’ of what?” The word evokes images of body parts, and of incomplete human beings who must unite with some other power to become whole. “Lie” receives more stress in the shorter, slower line: Is belief in life after death a “lie” the “meek” tell themselves? Is it possible to be “safe” without lying meekly in a state of unconsciousness? In another version of the poem, the “meek” “sleep” rather than “lie.” Sleep is re-creational and less passive (as Hamlet notes, to sleep is to dream).

In a version of “Safe in their alabaster chambers” in Fascicle 6, where the first stanza is similar to the first stanza of the version in Fascicle 10, and the second stanza is different, there are no divisions. The longest line, “Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,” is squeezed into one row, with “Resurrection” finishing in tiny print. A year or so later when Dickinson revises the line, she divides it.

In the second stanza midline dashes create pauses that work in some ways similar to line division. As the poet Mary Jo Salter points out, “dashes are like line breaks within a line—and they can double or triple meaning” (from a talk on “The Music of Emily Dickinson,” April 12, 2007). Dashes hold back “row”: “And Firmaments – row –.” Line division slows the advance of “snow”: “Soundless as dots – on a / Disc of snow –.” As a result of the break, more emphasis is placed on “Disc,” the final figure of circles, partial circles, and circular movements in a sequence: “Crescent,” “scoop,” “Arcs,” “row,” “Diadems,” “dots,” “Disc.” In the lines “Grand go the Years – in the / Crescent – above them –” a dash prevents the slurring of “Years in,”
avoiding “yearzin.” Breaks allow us to see and hear each word and syllable individually. They assure visual and acoustic clarity, which is crucial for a poetry where sound is organized through alliteration.

The first stanza features a kind of rhyme often associated with Dickinson’s poetry, “slant rhyme”: “Noon” and “Stone.” However, the term is imprecise, and in studies of Dickinson’s prosody this form of rhyme is removed from a larger context. Concentration on “slant rhyme” isolates consonance and assonance from other kinds of alliteration and sound repetition, and limits readers’ awareness of Dickinson’s “range of rhyme.”

“Alliteration” has various definitions, depending on the prosodist. It may refer specifically to initial letter repetition, sometimes known as “head rhyme”; in other cases, it encompasses consonance—the repetition of initial, medial, and final consonants—and assonance, the repetition of vowel sounds. I use the broadest definition. Alliteration is often demoted in prosody studies, considered a feature of “light” verse, too simple for sustained analysis, more of an ornament or device than a structure. In Dickinson’s writing, both poetry and prose, alliteration serves many purposes, including rhythmic variety and rhetorical persuasion, and the full achievement of her rich and diverse use of the sound structure depends on her innovative visual strategies of manuscript.

Alliteration in “Safe in their Alabaster / chambers” often supports beats: “meek members,” “Rafter of Satin – and Roof / of Stone,” “Soundless as dots – on a / Disc of snow.” In a number of places a beat falls on an alliterated syllable in a capitalized word, and the word receives triple emphasis: “Noon,” “Rafter,” “Disc.” In other cases alliteration adds emphasis to an unstressed word, “go” in “Grand go,” or it adds to the articulation, accentuation, and emphasis of syllables less likely to receive full sound even when carrying a beat, as in “Un—” of “Untouched.”

Poet and prosodist Wendy Bishop points out that alliteration is partly a visual device (406). The strategies increasing acoustic and semantic possibilities include Dickinson’s capitalizations. Since handwriting allows gradations, sizing letters becomes another way of assigning degrees of emphasis. Capitalizing significant words is common in nineteenth-century writing. In his 1824 English Grammar, Lindley Murray explains that although it was once “the custom to begin every noun with a capital,” eventually capitalization came to designate certain words as “remarkably emphatic” (248). Dickinson exploits and extends this practice, capitalizing many nouns and also adjectives. Letters take various forms and sizes. Metrical lines often begin with a large, ornate capital. There are midsize letters formed as small capitals. Some letters with similar forms appear in four or five sizes, blurring upper- and lower-case distinctions. In “Safe in their Alabaster /
chambers” there are at least six different forms and sizes of “S/s,” with the “S” in “Safe” the largest. This kind of lettering enhances the emphatic effect of alliteration.

In *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background*, David Lawton explains that alliteration provides “systematic linking” (28). Alliterative threads in “Safe in their Alabaster / chambers” link parts of measured lines and connect one line to the next to form tightly woven stanzas. From the poem’s first word to the last, “s” repeats in initial, medial, and final positions. This pattern is set in the opening line with “Safe,” “Alabaster,” “chambers.” In another series, “-r,” “-er,” “-ers” repeat (“their,” “Alabaster,” “chambers”) with a sound somewhat grinding and awkward to pronounce, setting up a slightly discordant, and, following “Safe,” possibly ironic, note. Repetition of “n”—“Untouched,” “Morning,” “Untouched,” “ Noon”—in a sequence of two-syllable words, then one syllable, moves the lines in a lilting, hypnotic rhythm. Alliterative series in the stanza develop, extend, intertwine: “meek members”; “Resurrection,” “Rafter,” “Roof.” Alliterative, parallel phrasing, “Rafter of Satin – and Roof / of Stone!,” with the midline dash and line division, sets out rhythmic repetition while avoiding predictability. The effect of the consonantal rhyme of “Noon” and “Stone” is intensified by the series “untouched,” “untouched,” “Morning,” “Resurrection,” “Satin.”

In the last lines of the second stanza, until the final word, every noun, verb, and adjective alliterates in an emphatic series of initial and medial “d’s”:

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Diadems – drop – and Doges –
surrender –
Soundless as dots – on a
Disc of snow –
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Centering “dots” highlights the strange, ambiguous image—blood? earth? ink? Dashes and divisions enhance sound repetition in the alliterative progression that represents sequential events, movement in time. “Surrender” and “Soundless”; the plurals, “Diadems,” “Doge,” “dots”; and “Disc” conclude the central consonantal chain of “S/s” beginning with “Safe,” ending with “snow,” the first word connecting with the last in a cycle of sounds. “Exact” rhyme (also called “true,” “pure,” “full” rhyme) in end-rhyme position pulls readers to the line’s last word. The one exact rhyme in “Safe in their Alabaster / chambers,” “row” and “snow,” creates closure. Harmonizing connections suggest a peacefulness that can coexist with mystery, change, and uncertainty. Arguably, the closing lines of this poem,
with their intricate, intermingled alliterative threads, are among the most memorable (alliteration adds to memorability) and haunting in Dickinson’s poetry.

A thorough analysis of how alliteration works in Dickinson’s writing can build on the critical commentary on her rhyme. Discussion of her unconventional forms begins in 1862 with her own comment to Thomas Higginson. Early in their correspondence, in a letter postmarked “Amherst Ms Jun 7 1862,” Dickinson appears to defend her rhymes, explaining that she “could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled my Tramp” (L265). In several instances Dickinson uses “syllable” as a homonymic pun, rhyming as if it were pronounced “syll-a-bell”: in “I could suffice for Him, / I knew,” in “My Syllable rebelled”; and in “For this – accepted Breath,” “Get Gabriel – to tell – the royal Syllable –.” Writing to Higginson she seems to be saying that her rhyming syllables slow, or “cool,” the verses, varying her meter, or her “tramp,” one of her frequent puns on the movement of “feet.” Robert Shaw, in Blank Verse, speculates that “jingle” and “Bells” are references to Edgar Allan Poe, whose poem “The Bells” stands out as a masterpiece of rhythm: “To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells / From the bells, bells, bells / Bells, bells, bells – / From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.” Shaw notes that Emerson refers to Poe as the “jingle man” and describes him as an “indefatigable rhymer” (81).

A twentieth-century contributor to the discussion of Dickinson’s rhyme, George Frisbie Whicher, in his 1938 critical biography, This Was a Poet, states that “no poet before her had made such constant use of approximate rhymes as she did” (244). Whicher’s definition of “approximate rhyme” includes “imperfect rhyme,” “vowel rhyme,” and “suspended rhyme.” Thomas Johnson, in the introduction to his 1961 selected poems, Final Harvest, describes Dickinson as “a prosodist experimenting in rhyme” (xi). In his 1955 Interpretive Biography he writes that for sound repetition in American poetry, Dickinson’s “unorthodox,” “supple,” “varied” (86) rhymes “enormously extended . . . the range of variation within controlled limits” (87), and he points out that her additions to rhymed pairings previously “allowable in English verse” are bold and innovative. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, in The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (1968), concentrates on rhyme while identifying Dickinson’s “fondness for alliteration” (208n). She traces “alliterating constructions” in individual poems, and finds Dickinson “conscious of the value of this device to highlight structurally and semantically important words” (207).

Percy G. Adams’s Graces of Harmony: Alliteration, Assonance, and Consonance in Eighteenth-Century British Poetry (1977) is the rare study of allit-
eration with a substantial section on Dickinson. Adams shows that along with that of Keats, Coleridge, Shelley, and Robert Browning, Dickinson's poetry “employs [phonal] repetitions,” “deliberately, artistically, sometimes heavily” (170). He writes that she “is not only unique with her invigorating images and quick twists of wit; she is intriguing in her use of phonetic recurrences” (172) and concludes: Dickinson “replaces end rhyme with consonance far more than any poet before her, often preferring it” (173). Making a similar case, James Guthrie finds that no other poet “of her generation” uses “near rhymes” so frequently (“Near Rhymes” 70). Explaining that “taken as a whole, rhyme can be regarded as a scale ranging from no rhyme at all to exact rhyme, with dozens of gradations in between that poets can employ to modulate their sound,” Guthrie describes Dickinson using “a network of related sounds to hold her poems together, combining assonance, consonance, and near and exact rhyme” (71).

In fact, among the 4,840 rhymes Timothy Morris has counted in poems from 1858 to 1865, “exact rhyme is the most common type”; however, Morris continues, “nearly as common is consonantal rhyme, where the final consonants, but not the preceding vowels, are identical” (161). “It has become a given of Dickinson criticism that the poet’s style never changed,” writes Morris, taking issue with Charles Anderson’s 1960 study of Dickinson’s rhyme, in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry: Stairway of Surprise, and its conclusion that “there are no marked periods in her career, no significant curve of development in her artistic powers” (157). Morris argues that “by measuring Dickinson’s patterns of rhyme and enjambment, we can see that these formal contours of her verse changed over time, especially from 1858 to 1865” (158) and that the fascicles “can be used to show how Dickinson’s use of rhyme and enjambment developed over time” (160). In this important essay, Morris maintains that “the development of Dickinson’s style deserves more critical attention” (158).

In the only book-length study of Dickinson focused entirely on rhyme, Positive as Sound: Emily Dickinson’s Rhyme (1990), Judy Jo Small treats her “uncommon handling” of it (214). Like Morris, whose work she cites, Small finds that “consonantal rhymes” “make up most of Dickinson’s unconventional rhymes” (219). Creating “progressions and dynamic modulations of rhyme that help shape and support the structure and movement of whole poems,” Small writes, Dickinson was “exploring and exploiting rhyme differences” (217) and, through experimentation, “devising a poetry with a radically new sound” (28). Small, too, concludes that Dickinson’s “acoustic texture merits far more attention” (206). Dickinson was not alone in her time. As Cristanne Miller notes in “The Sound of Shifting Paradigms, or Hearing Dickinson in the Twenty-First Century” (2004), “the formal
experiments of nineteenth-century American poetry are overwhelmingly centered on sound play, especially rhythmic (generally metrical) variation, rhyme, and alliteration and assonance” (207). Miller continues: “Patterns of nineteenth-century poetry itself indicate that poetry was primarily an aural . . . art: poetic innovation was based on alliteration, assonance, multiple and elaborate rhyme schemes, varying meters, and other rhythmic structures” (207–8). My position aligns with Miller’s on hearing Dickinson, and then diverges with my argument that in order to hear acutely, readers must see the visual lines.

As Adams explains in *Graces of Harmony*, assonance and consonance provide a poet with “a means of stressing the rhythmic peaks in a line” (29). In building rhythmic structures, Dickinson draws on her instruction in rhetoric and prosody provided by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grammar and elocution textbooks. After 1795 Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar* replaced Noah Webster’s grammar to become the most widely used grammar textbook in American schools. Murray identifies the field as a “science,” composed of four elements. The first, orthography—from the Greek “orthos,” meaning “correct,” and “grapho,” “to write”—he defines as the “power and proper use” of letters of the alphabet. Etymology, syntax, and prosody are the elements that follow (13). Murray explains that the study of prosody “teaches the true P R O N U N C I A T I O N of words, comprising A C C E N T, Q U A N T I T Y, E M P H A S I S, PAUSE, and T O N E,” and “the laws of V E R S I F I C A T I O N” (204; capitalization his). He concludes: “As there are few persons who do not sometimes read poetical composition, it seems necessary to give the student some idea of that part of grammar, which explains the principles of versification; that, in reading poetry, he may be the better able to judge of its correctness, and relish its beauties” (220).

“Distinct utterance” is the term commonly used by nineteenth-century grammarians and elocutionists to refer to precise articulation. In his 1810 *Elements of Elocution*, John Walker claims that “wherever there is contradistinction in the sense of the words, there ought to be emphasis in the pronunciation of them,” and “wherever we place emphasis, we suggest the idea of contradistinction” (199). Allen Weld’s 1856 revised edition of *English Grammar*, illustrated by exercises in composition, analyzing, and parsing, instructs: “Let the class practice simultaneously, on the different sounds of these letters, with a full and distinct utterance” (5). Thomas Sheridan in his 1803 *Course of Lectures on Elocution* expresses the urgent need for clear, correct pronunciation in oral reading: “The first, and most essential point in articulation, is distinctness,” and “the chief force of indistinctness is too great precipitancy of speech” (34). “Precipitancy,” another shared term
Hart, “Manuscript Study, Fascicle Study”

(also used by the well-known elocutionist Isaac Watts), refers to the critical fault in oral performance of rushing headlong, and, as if falling from a “precipice,” slurring words.

Ebenezer Porter’s *Rhetorical Reader*, consisting of instructions for “regulating the voice, with a rhetorical notation, illustrating inflection, emphasis, and modulation” (title page), was the elocution manual used at Amherst Academy when Dickinson studied there. (At the time, her father served as a trustee, and, presumably, helped select the textbooks.) Porter defines emphasis as “a distinctive utterance of words which are especially significant, with such a degree and kind of stress, as conveys their meaning in the best manner.” His manual provides practice exercises, including the following sentences, to be read out loud:

“The magistrates ought to prove the declaration.”

“Magistrates ought? or ‘Magistrate sought?’”

“Who ever imagined such an ocean to exist?”

“Who ever imagined such a notion to exist?”

Lindley Murray explains that “for the purpose of marking the different pauses which the sense, and an accurate pronunciation, require,” writers use “points,” commas and dashes, or “stops,” periods (234). He notes that “feet and pauses are the constituent parts of verse” (220), and that a dash is “properly” placed “where a significant pause is required” (243). A long history of commentary on Dickinson’s dash explains its use for rhetorical emphasis and metrical variety. In “Emily Dickinson: Poetry and Punctuation,” a 1963 article in the *Saturday Review*, Edith Wylder, a pioneer of the first wave of manuscript studies, identifies the mark as an adaptation of a “unique notational system“ devised by Porter in his *Rhetorical Reader*. Wylder argues that the angled dashes are based on symbols indicating voice inflection—rising and falling tones, and the monotone. In 1971, in *The Last Face: Emily Dickinson’s Manuscripts*, Wylder elaborates on this theory, arguing that the markings assist Dickinson in “creating in written form the precision of meaning inherent in the tone of the human voice” (4). Whereas Dickinson probably did not design the dash to approximate Porter’s elocutionary notations, Wylder illuminates Dickinson’s use of the dash when she makes the connection between the poet’s innovative punctuation and Porter’s instruction, and when she explains that “the variety of emphasis that Dickinson’s punctuation affords successfully counterbalances . . . the potential rigidity of her hymnal meters” (40). Christina Pugh, in “Ghosts of Meter: Dickinson, After Long Silence,” reiterates Wylder’s
argument: “Dickinson’s syntactical elisions and ubiquitous dash work to resist an already-established and very familiar metrical norm” (6).

Following Lindberg-Seyersted, Cristanne Miller explains that “although nineteenth-century writers frequently used dashes, especially in informal writing, Dickinson generally used them more disruptively, more often, and in more various ways than her contemporaries did. Most often, Dickinson’s dashes imitate the starts and stops of speech” (“Dickinson’s Language: Interpreting Truth Told Slant” 78). Like Wylder and Lindberg-Seyersted, Miller points out that “in the middle of a sentence, for example, dashes may isolate words for emphasis” (78). Miller goes on to say that dashes also “mark off sentence fragments, giving the effect of impulsiveness or strong emotion (‘Of Course – I prayed – / And did God care?’); at other times the dash creates an effect of breathlessness or hesitation (‘When – suddenly – my Riches shrank – / A Goblin – drank my Dew –’). A dash may usher in abrupt changes of subject or metaphor, as though Dickinson feels greater freedom to articulate the associative leaps of her thinking when she is not bound by conventional punctuation” (78–79).

Whereas dashes at the ends of measured lines are prominent beginning with the first fascicles, in Fascicles 9 and 10 dashes occur frequently within lines: “What is – ‘paradise,’” she writes in Fascicle 9; in 10, “And Firmaments – row –.” As dashes diversify, one function is to encourage “distinct utterance” of alliterative patterns. For example, here is the last stanza of “Musicians wrestle everywhere,” in Fascicle 9:

Some – say – it is “the Spheres” – at play !
Some say – that bright Majority
Of vanished Dames – and Men !
Some – think it Service in the place
When we – with late – celestial face –
Please God – shall ascertain ! (Fr229)


One type of dash that most print editions erase is exclamatory. Fascicle 4 includes two poems with the earliest usage of the “exclamatory dash,” my term for a mark that throughout the fascicles and sets often follows an interjection, such as “Ah” and “Oh,” and occasionally an address. In the last stanza of “Heart not so heavy as mine”: “Oh Bugle – by the window” (Fr88, F4), and in the opening line, “Soul – Wilt thou toss again?” (Fr89,
F4), dashes are elevated above the base of the writing line, unlike commas, which Dickinson draws at or beneath the base. And yet the Franklin and the Johnson editions represent these marks consistently as commas, though Franklin makes one notable exception.

In Fascicle 9 there are several poems that use the exclamatory dash. See, for example, in “For this – accepted Breath” (Fr230): “Ah – what a royal sake”; in “We don’t cry – Tim and I” (Fr231): “But – Oh – so high!”; and in “Dying ! Dying in the night !” (Fr222): “This way – Jesus – Let him pass !” In the latter example even though a comma would not precede the start of a new sentence, Franklin, and Johnson, print the line as “This way, Jesus, Let him pass!” Misrepresenting this inventive mark removes an indicator of emotional tone. The erasure of the exclamatory dash represents the many editorial decisions in Dickinson’s publication history that muffle her rhythms and tones, and interfere with meaning.

The exception Franklin makes (not Johnson) is in Fascicle 11, “about 1861,” in the last stanza of “Wild nights – Wild nights!” (Fr269): “Rowing in Eden – / Ah – the Sea!” Franklin prints the mark after “Ah” not as a comma but as a dash. In this one instance only, as far as I can tell, Franklin allows that an exclamatory dash is a dash—even though his level mark misconfigures it (as most of us do because of publishers’ limitations). Perhaps he was moved by two influential works of textual studies that have helped make the manuscript image of this well-known poem especially prominent: Wylder’s The Last Face (1971), and Martha Nell Smith’s Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson (1992). Referring to “marks resembling a dash” as “‘irregular’ notations,” Wylder specifies that a notation she calls an “angular slant” is often placed “after an interjection above the writing line” (8). When she coordinates notations with Ebenezer Porter’s “inflectional symbols,” she identifies the exclamatory dash as one of “the rising slides” (69). In her print translation of “Wild nights – Wild nights!” Wylder places an elevated, short, angled dash after “Ah” (77). An image of this manuscript serves as the cover for Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson, and Smith describes the mark as an “ecstatic exclamation mark without a point” (65). She reprints Higginson and Todd’s rendition from Poems by Emily Dickinson: Second Series (1891), where the dash is replaced by an exclamation point: “Ah! the sea!” (Smith 65).

Dickinson’s punctuation puzzles and fascinates her wide readership. In her young adult novel, A Voice of Her Own: Becoming Emily Dickinson (2009), Barbara Dana quotes Lindley Murray’s English Grammar: “The dash, though often used improperly by hasty writers, may be used with propriety, where the sentence breaks off abruptly; where a significant pause is required; or when there is an unexpected turn in the sentiment” (168).
Dana pictures Dickinson as a young writer declaring, “When I think of my love for the dash I fear I join the ranks of the improper, hasty and incoherent writers. . . . But I love it so—its liveliness, its thrust, its enviable ability to include a thought, yet separate that same just far enough from its preceding colleagues to keep the meaning straight. Its boldness, its daring, its sense of abandon! And the freedom, the effortless flow” (168). Literature students are introduced to the mark through textbooks such as The Norton Anthology of American Literature, which states that the dash “may have been used systematically for rhetorical emphasis or musical pointing” (Gottesman et al. 2351). Even those who know little about Dickinson do know that she used unusual punctuation: the mark commands attention in the popular imagination, as well as among Dickinson scholars. Critical commentary on the dash will advance when the marks are represented accurately in print and digital editions, and when the dash is no longer singled out and instead is studied in the context of other expressive manuscript features.

Dickinson explores another graphic form of emphasis, and then limits it after the early 1860s. In this poem in Fascicle 10,

Faith is a fine invention
For Gentlemen who see –
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency! (Fr202)

notice the underlining. Fascicle 10 has an unusually high number of poems with dense underlining; this opening stanza, for example:

The Sun – just touched the
Morning –
The Morning – Happy thing –
Supposed that He had come
to dwell –
And Life would all be Spring! (Fr246)

The following poem has four stanzas. Every line has at least one word underlined, most have two; three lines have three or four underlined words.

If He dissolve – then – there
is nothing – more –
Eclipse – at Midnight –
It was dark – before – (Fr251)
In *English Grammar* Lindley Murray warns:

There is one error, against which it is particularly proper to caution the learner; namely, that of multiplying emphatical words too much. It is only by a prudent reserve in the use of them, that we can give them any weight. If they recur too often; if a speaker or reader attempts to render everything which he expresses of high importance, by a multitude of strong emphases, we soon learn to pay little regard to them. To crowd every sentence with emphatical words, is like crowding all the pages of a book with italic characters, which, as to the effect, is just the same as to use no such distinctions at all. (215)

It may be that Dickinson came to the same conclusion. After Fascicle 10 there are far fewer underlinings. (In the fascicles and sets Dickinson uses underlining as she revises poems to indicate a selection from the list of possible alternatives to replace a word or phrase.) In Franklin’s chronology, the first three hundred poems have the greatest number of underlined words. But after the early 1860s this was no longer one of Dickinson’s primary ways to show emphasis. Pauses set out by midline dashes and divisions of metrical lines were serving that purpose.

And then in the mid-1860s, when a greater number of poems divide lines, when there are more divided lines per poem, and division is likely to come earlier in a metrical line, there is a decreased use of punctuation, especially the midline dash. (Franklin makes a related point: “In the mid-1860s [Dickinson] reduced the amount and force of punctuation in the poems” [Reading Edition 10].) In Set 7, “about 1865,” “Knows how to forget!” (Fr391) uses standard punctuation, including commas in conventional places. The only mid-line dash is exclamatory: “Ah – to be erudite/Enough to know!” In Fascicle 19, “about 1862,” an earlier version of the poem has mid-line dashes in one or two of the lines in each of the four stanzas.

A poem from Set 10, in my print translation below, has five stanzas, each with four measured lines. Of these twenty lines, all but two, the last line of the first stanza and the last line of the last stanza, are divided.

To disappear
enhances –
The Man who
runs away
Is gilded for
an instant
With Immortality
But yesterday
a Vagrant
Today in Memory
lain
With superstitious
value –
We tamper with
Again

But Never – far
as Honor
Removes the paltry
Thing
And impotent
to cherish
We hasten to
adorn –

Of Death the
sternest feature
That just as
we discern
The Quality
defies us –
Securest gathered
then

The Fruit
perverse to plucking
But leaning to
the Sight
With the extatic
limit
Of unobtained Delight. (Fr1239)²²

“Safe in their Alabaster / chambers” has fifteen dashes in ten measured lines: four of the five in the first stanza come at the ends of measured lines, and one is within the line; in the second stanza each measured line has an end dash, and there are seven dashes within lines. Compare this with the total of five dashes in the twenty measured lines of “To disappear /
enhances” (Fr1239). Print editions and print translations using conventional type, including mine, fail to represent differences among dashes, though the distinctions are significant for interpretation. The argument set out in “To disappear / enhances” moves through four rhetorical sections, and Dickinson uses three long dashes to indicate shifts. The longest dash, drawn with a slight wave as a flourish, closes the aphoristic opening. With “To” appearing slightly indented, the visual lines might serve as a title—a text with an explication to follow. The second section plays on the trope of “the Man who / runs away,” a beloved who is recreated and perfected in the minds of those who miss him. The “vagrant” is “in Memory lain,” possibly a pun on “Memory Lane.” But memory is unreliable; we cannot see the person the way he, or she, was, and we cannot see them where they are now. But we hold out the “gilded” hope that they have achieved immortality, which is what we desire for ourselves. Angry at the abandonment, we, the bereaved, devalue the beloved, who becomes “the paltry Thing,” “the worthless One” in Dickinson’s alliterative variant. The mortal is “paltry”—the word derives from dialectical German for “rag”; and so we “adorn” them, making their image more beautiful than reality, dressing them in better clothing. (“Adorn” sounds like “adore.”)

The second long dash, at the end of stanza 3, closes the second section and marks the move in stanza 4 to a reflection on death’s lesson—that in observing the dying we lose sight at the moment we attain clarity, recognizing a human being’s flawed magnificence just as we lose track of who they really are. The third long dash concludes this thought and leads to the final revelation: we can never know whether our desires for love or knowledge will be fulfilled, thus ensuring that the pleasures of desiring will never end.

This complex wisdom poem depends on line division and enjambment to convey its twists and turns. Here Dickinson varies Common Measure:

To disappear / enhances –
The Man who / runs away
Is gilded for / an instant
With Immortality

This stanza has a 3+.3.2+.2+ pattern. (To show that an unstressed syllable, or syllables, follow the last beat in a line, I use the plus sign. In traditional scansion these would be called “3f” and “2f” lines, with “feminine,” that is, “weak and unstressed,” line endings. Of course, I want to avoid this problematic “f” designation.) Dickinson uses the 2+ and 3+ lines in this poem with enjambment to represent the movement of thought. (Several times
in letters and poems Dickinson refers to her writing as “thought.”) Timothy Morris, in “The Development of Dickinson’s Style,” writes that “Dickinson began by using conventional hymn-like end-stopping. Her earliest poems are heavily end stopped, and the first fascicle poems, in 1858–59, show only infrequent enjambment. But from 1860 to 1865, the amount of enjambment in her poetry grows steadily.” Morris calculates that “by 1864, more than one-third of her quatrains are enjambed” (164). He concludes that “even more than her rhyme, Dickinson’s characteristic enjambment is probably the one formal element that makes her quatrains sound so distinctive” (163). Manuscript study invites further analysis of Dickinson’s use of enjambment in relation to alliteration, range of rhyme, and divided metrical lines.

The variation on Common Measure in “To disappear / enhances” carries the authority of the form, while allowing for lines closer to emphatic speech. Line division frequently supports the stress pattern by adding pauses before or after the beats, as in the first stanza where there is greater stress on “disappear” than there would be without the pause introduced by division. Small words are stressed in similar ways, such as “for,” in “Is gilded for / an instant,” where division also draws attention to the consonance of “for” and “Immortality.” In the final stanza, “to” in “But leaning to / the Sight”—note the alliterative “t’s”—is articulated, and “Sight” has greater impact.

Line division supports alliteration, adding to the emphasis it provides and the accentuation it requires. A break between “disappear” and “enhances” makes it less likely that “pear” and “en” will be run together, and more likely that the parallel structure, each word has three syllables, and the consonance, “s,” will be heard. “Enhances” positioned alone on a line, “Man” centered in the line, “an instant” after a line break: the arrangements strengthen the assonance. “But yesterday / a Vagrant” minimizes the echo of “day” with “a,” and “day” alliterates more gracefully with “Vagrant.” Note the pattern of “er,” “or,” “ar”: “Never,” “far,” “Honor,” “yesterday,” “Memory,” “superstitious,” “tamper.” In the fourth and fifth stanzas, in the lines “Securest gathered / then [stanza break] The Fruit,” enjambment adds to the effect of “Securest” consonating with “Fruit,” and with “Sight,” “Extatic,” “limit,” “unobtained,” and “Delight.”

Dickinson often chooses for possible substitution alternate words that continue alliterative threads. In the first stanza, “The Man who” would become “The Man that,” and “tinctured” would replace “gilded” to alliterate with “instant” and “Immortality.” “T” continues in the next stanza with “But,” “yesterday,” “Vagrant,” “Today,” “tamper,” and the alternate for “value” which might be “merit” or, more likely, “moment,” which is under-
lined. In the fourth stanza, “Excellence,” where all three syllables fit the pattern, could substitute for “Quality,” adding to the stanza’s thread of “s’s”: “sternest,” or its alternate, “sharpest,” and “just as,” “discern,” “defies us,” and “Securest.” The practice of listing alliterative substitutions begins in the early 1860s. Two alternate stanzas for “Safe in their Alabaster / chambers” continue the thread of “s’s.” One stanza begins “Springs – shake the sills – / But – the Echoes – stiffen,” and ends “Staples – of Ages – have / buckled – there”; the other, “Springs – shake the seals – / But the silence – stiffens,” concluding, “Midnight in Marble – / Refutes – the Suns.” This selection principle is further evidence of alliteration’s central role in the way Dickinson organizes sound.

The first four stanzas of “To disappear / enhances” use assonance and consonance, or “slant” rhyme, in the Common Measure end-rhyme positions, lines 2 and 4: “away” and “Immortality”; “lain” and “Again”; “Thing” (or its alternate, “one”) and “adorn”; “discern,” and “then.” In a departure from the assonantal and consonantal pattern, in the final stanza the rhyme is “near exact” (“near” because a one-syllable word is considered to rhyme inexact with a two-syllable word), announcing closure: “Sight” and “Delight.”

In the later poems of the sets, Dickinson’s spatial prosody includes varying the amount of space, the distance, between two words in a line, which creates pauses, without dashes. Here is my print translation of the first three metrical lines of the fourth stanza with words spaced to represent the relative spacing of the manuscript lines:

```
Of   Death the
   sternest   feature
That just   as
   we   discern
The   Quality
   defies us –
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Nineteenth-century handwriting instruction does not condone irregular spacing between words. Penmanship manuals make clear that this was not the norm, that it was a flaw. The 1873 edition of *The Payson, Dunton, and Scribner Manual of Penmanship* remarks that “It is a very common fault to place the words too far apart” (37). *Gaskell’s Compendium of Forms, Educational, Social, Legal, and Commercial; Embracing a Complete Self-Teaching Course in Penmanship and Bookkeeping, and Aid to English Composition; Including Orthography, Capital Letters, Punctuation, Compo-
sition, Elocution, Oratory, Rhetoric, Letter Writing, etc, in 1881, explains in a section on “Spacing”: “The spaces between letters and between words should be as uniform in manuscript as in print. The rule is to leave just space enough between the words to write the small m; between letters just enough to avoid crowding” (32). In “To disappear / enhances” a greater amount of space after “Of” creates a dramatic pause before “Death.” “That just,” together, reads quickly; then a pause before “as,” followed by a line division, slows the pace, giving us time to wonder: “‘just as’ what?” This prosodic device for regulating space invites readers into a deeper dialogue with the poem.

Involving readers—getting us to read closely, listen carefully, and think—is central to Dickinson’s poetics. In my contribution to Wider than the Sky: Essays and Meditations on the Healing Power of Emily Dickinson, “May the Circle Be Unbroken: Reading Emily Dickinson After 9/11,” I tell the following story about a spring 2004 marathon reading of Dickinson’s poetry at the Emily Dickinson Museum:

Participants at the community reading were seriously engaged as they read; one organization after another took its place in the circle of chairs and became absorbed in the poetry as if settling into a study group. One of my favorite moments was when a young woman’s turn came to read and she sat studying the page. “Oh,” she said, when she looked up and saw us waiting for her, “I was still thinking about the last poem.” (MacKenzie and Dana 81).

The novelist Jeanette Winterson writes: “When people say that poetry is a luxury, or an option, or for the educated middle classes, or that it shouldn’t be read at school because it is irrelevant, I suspect the people doing the saying have had things pretty easy. A tough life needs a tough language—and that is what poetry is” (40). Dickinson created tough prosodic forms: durable, flexible, capacious. Her readers need new editions and new ways of reading that bring these forms to life.