Reading the Fascicles of Emily Dickinson
Heginbotham, Eleanor Elson

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Heginbotham, Eleanor Elson.
Reading the Fascicles of Emily Dickinson: Dwelling in Possibilities.
The Ohio State University Press, 2003.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/33043.

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CHAPTER 7

“Only [Our] Inferences Therefrom!”

As if some little Arctic flower
On the polar hem—
Went wandering down the Latitudes
Until it puzzled came
To continents of summer—
To firmaments of sun—
To strange, bright crowds of flowers—
And birds, of foreign tongue!
I say, as if this little flower
To Eden, wandered in—
What then? Why nothing,
Only your inference therefrom!
J180, Fr177, F8

Dickinson requires two things of her readers: their delight in her work (“her flowers” [J868, Fr908]) and an intelligence in “inferring.” So she suggests in that slantwise admonition to meet her and work with her. Recall that she closed Fascicle 8—the one in which the diction surrounds the idea of power, magic, and transport—with the tale of the “little Arctic flower” that “Went wandering down the Latitudes / Until it puzzled came / To continents of summer— / To firmaments of sun.” Should she return,¹ she would be astonished at the reach of those latitudes in which she is read. The little flower—the poems, if you will—are the puzzlers, requiring our attention, our intelligent inferences:

I say, As if this little flower
To Eden, wandered in—
What then? Why nothing,
Only, your inference therefrom! (J180, Fr177)

Hundreds of readers through the years have relished the inference game. With Amy Lowell, we say that we would “somersault all day” with Dickinson. Most have played, leaped, and turned cartwheels with Dickinson’s words
much longer than “all day.” For only the last score of years could we do so in their fascicle contexts as Amy Lowell could not. This is the way Dickinson left them for us. Some six hundred of the poems—about a third of the *opus*, appeared in another context—the letters—and that is a study that scholars such as Martha Nell Smith and Erika Scheurer and others pursue with persuasive energy. Remarkably understudied, however, are these forty books, books representing what one might consider “an authoritative text”—if one could use such a term for a poet so resistant to closure. I use it as Jerome McGann discusses it: “[T]he author is taken to be— for editorial and critical purposes—the ultimate locus of a text’s authority” (1983, 81). Dickinson’s work has been studied exhaustively but almost always in ways that ignore her own context, her own authority, if you will.

Admitting that “manuscript study can be a foundation; but it cannot pro-
 vide the entire architecture for reading and understanding Dickinson,” as Shira Wolosky says (1999, 93), it is nevertheless much more intriguing and revealing than many have allowed. One reason for resistance to study of the fascicles, quite fairly, is that there are too many questions about the how and why of those forty small volumes, questions that are, of course, unanswerable. Sharon Cameron ends an essay on the fascicles with a series of questions: “What is a subject? How is it bounded? What are the boundaries around what something is?” and so forth (1998, 157). Insisting, as I have been, that ultimately all of the readings of intentionality regarding the fascicles—and to a lesser degree the cer-
tainty of the order of the fascicles themselves—is speculative, Cameron never-
theless declares “that Dickinson ordered her poems” (ibid., 141).

Whether or not she literally spread herself and her poems over the floor of her Amherst bedroom as do so many of the fifteen poet-editors about whom I wrote in chapter 5, we do not know, but we know she chose. What she wrote about the single word must have been even more complex as she selected individual lyrics for the books so that, wandering down the latitudes to us, they exist to provide a particular frisson. What Alicia Ostriker, Linda Pastan, and their contemporary sisters tell us about their process in gathering work for a new volume seems to be what Dickinson describes:

    Shall I take thee, the Poet said
    To the propounded word?
    Be stationed with the Candidates
    Till I have finer tried— (J1126, Fr1243)

As though I had asked a stupid question, almost every one of the fifteen poets to whom I turned for help for chapter 5 said “of course” to my query about their care in choosing the first and last poems, for example, in a given sequence. Most of them admitted to caring about much more than that as
they approach collections of chapbook length or longer. Sharon Bryon is one of several who explained the importance of ordering poems in dialogue with each other.4

Dialogue is a keyword in describing Dickinson’s collections. Hyatt Waggoner does not include the fascicles in his excellent Emersonian-based discussion of Dickinson (1984), but one might note that what he says about her work as a whole is particularly true of her fascicle groupings:

One might think of Dickinson’s poems as a record of a continuous dialogue between parts of herself, aspects of her mind, segments of her complex heritage; except that there are not just the two speakers required by dialogue, but always a third, a watcher and listener, amused or dismayed, aware of the limitations of what can be conveyed by words, superior to all dialogue. (ibid., 202)

Such dialogues occur throughout the fascicles. One of the simplest but quite telling ones is in Fascicle 3, where, on the left-hand side facing one long poem with which the three poems are also in dialogue (the long one being “I never told the buried gold” (J11, Fr38), are three short poems, written apparently at different times up to 1858 but gathered here for a conversation. At the top of the page is a poem she also wrote to the Hollands (L204), “As by the dead we love to sit.” The dead, she says, are “wondrous dear,” the “dear” being a word she plays with in its quantification sense. The persona speaks of the “broken mathematics” with which “We estimate our prize / Vast in the fading ratio / To our penurious eyes” (J88, Fr78). Loss and gain are also the subtext of the poem that follows, separated only by a thin line—not accidentally I surmise—under the word “penurious”: “New feet within my garden go, / New fingers stir the sod—” (J99, Fr76). And this poem is followed on the page with “I hide myself within my flower / That wearing on your breast— / You unsuspecting wear me too— / And Angels know the rest” (J903, Fr80).

Only by looking at the fascicle can one observe the pattern on the page of these three poems: “As by the dead” with its grim if not bitter deathbed or graveside setting of the recently bereaved; “New Feet within my garden,” with its resigned vision of the inevitable patterns of life and death; and “I hide myself,” the four lines of which embody the image of poet and lover as knower and conveyer of these certitudes, as Whitman, in mystical union with cycles. Each of these also sets off a parallel set of images in the longer poem that faces it. These poems, as so many others in the fascicles, appear to be not only “in dialogue,” as Waggoner and others put it, but also in a complicated conversation with each other.

One wishes Waggoner had had the opportunity to read the fascicles. He appreciates the complexity of arrangements of Wallace Stevens, for example, using language that is easily parallel to groupings of Dickinson as he describes
how “Girl in a Nightgown” and “Connoisseur of Chaos” are on facing pages in *Parts of a World*, offering “thesis and counter thesis” of Stevens’s explorations of experience and reality. Waggoner also appreciates the poets’ care in openings and closings—as he did an individual lyric: “Just as Frost placed last in his final volume ‘In winter in the Woods Alone,’ which echoes and comments on ‘Into My Own,’ the first poem in his *Complete Poems*, so Stevens gave final position to ‘Not Ideas about the thing but the thing itself’” (441).

A rage toward order, some kind of structure at least, seems a goal for poets of all times, including our own. Alicia Ostriker, for example, says that she wants “to achieve some kind of structure... It has to feel ‘right’ as a sequence.” This rage for order (however wild and idiosyncratic) harks back to Vergil and Ovid as Neil Fraistat’s collection of essays demonstrates (1986). How intentional those structures were is illustrated by Petrarch, who, says Fraistat, “rearranged *Canzoniere* nine times” (6). Fraistat points out that Petrarch “visualized the *Canzoniere* as an elastic form: one allowing him to shape and reshape all of the shorter poems he wished to acknowledge publicly within an overarching if continually refocused vision” (ibid., 6). The essays in Fraistat’s *Poems in Their Places* collection point to the intentionality of Dickinson’s predecessors in ordering individual poems into ordered wholes and of what George Bornstein (speaking of Browning’s *Dramatic Lyrics*) calls “considerable architectonic skill” (273). Bornstein notes, for example, Browning’s “deployment of paired poems punctuated by individual freestanding ones” (ibid., 273). Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr. discusses a different grouping with respect for the intentionality of Milton’s choices and the appropriate alert response such choices should create in the reader:

> The juxtaposition of these poems and the ensuing dialogue [that word again] between them suggest that they are not autonomous but dependent upon one another for their meaning. Milton’s poems are always a plurality of other texts that help to unravel their meaning; their intertextuality, whether overt or covert, provides access to their meaning. (1986, 164)

The “intertextuality” Wittreich notes between “Paradise Regained” and “Samson Agonistes” placed together by Milton three centuries ago provides keys to meanings beyond what they have separately. Speaking of John Donne’s collections, John Shawcross says, “At least one can say that the poems read together in their place in 1633, 1635, and the manuscripts... will lead to this kind of reader-response, that is, will produce a reader in the poems who is different from the reader in the same poems differently arranged” (1986, 150). Vincent Carretta on Alexander Pope (195–233), Earl Miner on Herbert (18–43), Stuart Curran on Wordsworth (1986, 234–53) are equally vigorous about the importance of reading “poems in their places.” Why then,
this writer wonders, has the question of Dickinson’s intentionality and the response that such intentionality requires from a reader been as sharply contested as I have shown it to be in earlier chapters?

Although the obvious answer is that Dickinson left conflicting comments on publication, it may be that arrangements such as those of the English poets covered by the essays in Fraistat’s Poems in Their Places are somewhat easier to describe than Dickinson’s. One poet, Hong Kong professor Andrew Parkin, responding to my inquiry, spoke of his pattern as something other than “linear” but more like “porcelain fragments”; there is order, but it is one that the reader needs to discover and needs to put together, “as one would the slivered pieces of a known whole.” This image, similar to that of Solensten and of Debra Kang Dean (iron filings pulling toward a center or prism shards), might be a starting place for describing Dickinson’s. The pieces may be rearranged as well, when the poet selects an almost identical poem for another setting. Just as so many of Dickinson’s poems have the second (or third) context of inclusion in a letter, most of the poems in this volume have other origins. Dickinson replaced certain poems in new places to make new poems, new because of the pressure of the surrounding poems. Poets do that, and I have found it revelatory to compare the effect of such repetitions in this book.

Why should we think that Dickinson forgot (implied by Franklin’s remark that she “failed to destroy a worksheet” 1981, xv–xvi) she had copied some poems into more than one setting? She knew what she was about.5

And we will have greater insight into what she was about by reading Dickinson’s work in the several contexts she provided. This book has urged that we meet her on her own pages, reading the poems as she herself arranged them. Unlike David Porter, Ralph Franklin, and others I have quoted earlier who are so skeptical about the practice of reading the fascicles as self-conscious wholes, I believe that these are consciously crafted artifacts no less than are the poems that compose them and no less than are those of most of the poets who answered my questions about their own process. Without anything more than her metaphors for her labor and craft—so many of them of the spider weaving all night—we must infer what her process might have been. The contemporary poets whom I asked to infer, to guess, based on their reading of Dickinson and their own practices, suspect that the brain behind the individual lyric did not put those books together haphazardly: “I think she was a fastidious thinker, writer, person. I think she probably planned everything . . . certainly much more than I, who tend to trust more to chance,” says Betty Adcock.6

However—and on this I strongly agree—not one of the responding poets infers (believes in?) a narrative of all of the forty fascicles. John Solensten points out that “It’s the sheer volume of Dickinson’s poetry—the infinite vari-
ety—that seems to resist focusing the unitary in her editing for me.” Ostriker expands, imagining that Dickinson “put the fascicles together the way she put each poem together,” partly to make (thematic or other) sense, partly to skirt the edge of nonsense, partly to play delightfully, partly to chart a process of exploration.” Solensten adds another term for the editing process: “retrieval.” He says, “In a larger sense [than the unitary] I think Emily was a melancholist who, having lost so much, worked at retrieving the lost (moment in life, nature) and incorporating it, making it part of her physical body itself—all in a system of vast retrieval.” As early chapters of this study indicate, I believe some fascicles reflect retrievals of something quite different from moments of melancholy and loss—Fascicle 3, for example, is quite merry, but Solensten’s point contributes to the discussion with a word that is more psychological and more plastic than “editing.” Solensten continues, “And, of course, this process was a means of her demonstrating her superior imagination and intelligence. For she saw beyond sight, she did. But to edit that????”

Solensten has asked the question that causes so many Dickinsonians to balk at the thesis of this book. Sandra Gilbert warns against definitive answers. “A spider sewed at night,” Gilbert reminds us, “but how, why, when, and for whom? Simply to speculate on these questions is to be driven into such tangles of theatrical darkness that I fear I might never extricate myself!” I do not ask readers to drive themselves into such tangles, but to try reading—playing with—somersaulting with Dickinson on the pages that I believe she constructed with the care of these other writers. No two fascicles are alike, nor will any two readers of one fascicle come to the same conclusions. Mine have simply been examples of possible readings.

The shape of Fascicle 1, for example, seems to me largely determined by the interlocking diction of seasonal progression, whereas the shape of Fascicle 14, which contains a “repeated” poem, is marked by more apparently deliberate efforts to pair poems in mirrored confrontations. In Fascicle 1 Dickinson linked the lyrics through similarities in imagery and tone, even in exact length and page arrangement (“There is a morn by men unseen” [J24, Fr13] and “Morns like these—we parted” [J27, Fr18]). In Fascicle 14, however, she has no fewer than six double pages of poems that mirror each other. The mirroring is evident even in the placement of the duplicate “The feet of people” (J7, Fr16): Apparently inserted exactly between two double sheets, it creates a remarkable symmetry within the fascicle.

Reading Dickinson in her own context can illuminate if not completely clarify as strange a poem as “A Toad Can die of Light—” (J583, Fr419, F14) as it acts as an answer to the loss of the “far treasure” of the previous poem. The “Toad” poem points to another of the pleasures, the delight, of reading Dickinson on her own pages. Unlike in its usual print version, we see that stark “Bare Rhine” on its own line—almost pounded on a table. On the pre-
vious page of the fascicle we saw three slant parallel lines crossing three “t’s” opposite to the straight line above the “Toad” poem. Dickinson’s poetry anticipates, when we look at it in this way, that of someone as modern and idiosyncratic as e.e. cummings. About his devices another poet explains:

per
haps ee knew what
was best,
to slow you down
and make you look and
not just read but
think the book.7

Linking Dickinson to cummings is not as strange as it might seem. Hyatt Waggoner insists on Dickinson as a conduit of the past (Bradstreet, Emerson) and a harbinger of the future: “If one were forced to choose just one poet to illuminate the nature and quality of American poetry as a whole, to define its continuing preoccupations, its characteristic themes and images, its diction and its style . . . one ought to choose Dickinson” (1984, 212–13). So it is not out of line to ask contemporary poets to talk of ways their work process, as well as their themes, might be echoes of Dickinson. To these poets, as, we might guess, to Dickinson, crawling on the floor in pursuit of order, agonizing over choices and patterning matters, it matters not because it creates a kind of neoclassic peace but because it invigorates the modernity, the wildness, the power. In the linked, echoing, reverberating, fluid (no metaphor is sufficient) structure of the fascicles, the power of every single poem that it contains is multiplied into multfoliate possibilities.

Dickinson hinted at the pleasure such work gave her in an answer to Higginson, who reported that when he asked if “she never felt the want of employment . . . never going off the place and never seeing any visitor,” she told him decisively (one might say vehemently), “I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time. . . . I feel I have not expressed myself strongly enough” (L342a). She had her occupation; she had her company; she had her books. In the same letter Higginson speaks of Dickinson’s love of them. Given books as a child, “she thought in ecstasy ‘This then is a book! And there are more of them!’” Why should we resist the idea that her occupation, along with the reading, was the making of them—in the kind of joy, even “ecstasy”—her word (twice)—in this conversation Higginson sent back to his wife.

How can we doubt her determination to publish her own work in her own way? Not for her inclusion in books such as S. J. Hale’s Ladies Wreath, with its prefatory bombast that “the office of poetry is to elevate, purify, and soften the
human character.” Not for her a softly pretty face with deep-set eyes surrounded by tendrils of curls accompanying one or two poems as in Thomas Buchanan Read’s Female Poets. Not for her a collection of neat sonnets like that of her friend Helen Hunt Jackson. What she created—on her own, the spider weaving at night—had far more power as surely because of the choices she made in ordering them as in the craft and openness with which she composed them.

Robyn Bell wittily remarks that Dickinson’s project was “bookmaking” in two ways. As she folded sheets of stationery, selected and copied her scraps, and arranged their wild chirography on the thin pages with wet ink, and as she sewed the results together, she was literally making the books we call the fascicles. It was also, in the other meaning of the word, a gamble—a gambol, too. Indeed, “This was a Poet,” refusing to be “still” or stilled. “The poets light but / Lamps” (J883, Fr930); the rest, she tells us, is up to us.