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The Grammar of Ornament: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts and Their Meanings

DOMHNALL MITCHELL

DEBATES about editorial proprieties have been at the center of Emily Dickinson scholarship since the 1981 publication of Ralph W. Franklin's two-volume *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, which includes facsimile copies of Dickinson's autograph poems in the sequence of their collation by the poet herself.¹ Many critics now work from the assumption that autograph poems have primacy over their printed versions, and some critics allege that to read Dickinson in any standard typographic edition is effectively to read her in translation, at one remove from her actual practices. Specifically, these critics claim that line arrangements, the shape of words and letters, and the deployment of blank spaces are all potentially integral to any given poem's meaning, making a graphic contribution to its contents.² At one level such approaches seem to demonstrate an extreme kind of formal-

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¹ See *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1981).

² For the most concise summary of recent trends, see the welcoming remarks and general site of the Dickinson Electronic Archives at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/dickinson/>.

ism—a belief that every detail of a poem's presentational modes is potentially appropriate to its contents. Comments made at the 1999 conference of the Emily Dickinson International Society (EDIS) at Mount Holyoke College seemed to underscore the hypothesis of an organic relationship between the substance or subject of certain pieces of writing by Dickinson, the form of their inscription, and/or the particular paper that they appear on. Ellen Hart, for instance, argued that the poem variant identified by Franklin as Fr1350B, "The mushroom is the elf of plants," is best understood in the context of its original appearance: as Franklin notes, it was written in pencil "inside a yellow envelope, set on point so that the physical measure increases then diminishes in length."³ Hart went on to contend that there was no good reason why the lines of the poem should have been standardized in Franklin's three-volume variorum edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

At the same time, Hart left unclear why the variant should *not* have been standardized: she made no attempt to explain the specific difference that autograph presentation might have made to our understanding of the poem.⁴ Hart's argument is difficult to prove or disprove; ultimately, it rests on whether or not the reader accepts that the shape of the writing surface resembles the poem's subject or theme. But it is important to keep in mind that Fr1350 exists in six separate editions, three of which are partial and one lost. Hart's preference is for version B, which is shorter than some of the others and may very well be a draft (the last, and longest, version has twenty lines). If Fr1350B is simply a trial effort, either an attempt at working out the first two quatrains, or all that remains of a much larger draft (of sixteen or perhaps twenty lines), then how would these changes impact our understanding of the form of the po-

³ R. W. Franklin, in Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), III, 1166. Further references to Dickinson's poems are to this edition by poem number ("Fr") and volume and page number, reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Trustees of Amherst College; © 1998 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College, © 1951, 1955, 1979 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

⁴ These comments were made during the Roundtable on Editing and Archiving (Panel 8, Session III, of "Emily Dickinson at Home," the Third EDIS Conference) at Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts, 14 August 1999.

em's inscription? And if the angle of inscription is deliberate, in what way? To suggest a mushroom, perhaps, or to provide more continuous space for writing? The envelope on which Dickinson wrote Fr1350B has had its flap removed, which creates a long and shallow "V" shape along the top.⁵ Had she written horizontally along this surface, her writing would have been interrupted because of the gap left by the missing flap; turned on point, the writing would be unbroken.

Dickinson used envelopes as a writing surface fairly regularly during this period, but she positioned the writing differently according to the condition of the paper. For instance, in "I never hear that one is dead" (Fr1325A), written on both sides of an envelope that has been fully opened up, and where the flap is still attached, Dickinson positioned the paper so that the flap was pointing to the left (rather than straight up), and then wrote across it.⁶ A draft of "Summer laid her simple hat" (Fr1411A) is also written on the inside of an envelope.⁷ Again, the flap is still attached, but this time the envelope has a pattern of slanting lines that intersect with each other to form continuous "x" patterns (rather than "+"). Dickinson uses the lines that are approximately at the same angle as the flap to write on; as a result, one must set the envelope at point, like "The mushroom is the elf of plants," in order to read it. The angle of the writing is determined by the angle of the lines of the paper, however: it is prompted by the material, but has no meaning in

⁵ See Fr1350, in *Poems*, III, 1166–71. Amherst College, Special Collections (A 416). All references are to this autograph. All references to manuscripts in the possession of Amherst College are used with permission.

⁶ See Fr1325A, in *Poems*, III, 1148. There are numerous examples of Dickinson positioning an envelope differently, in response to variations in it and in order to get a satisfactory writing surface. "Without a smile—Without a throe" (Fr1340A, in *Poems*, III, 1157–58) is written on the inside of an envelope with the flap pointing downward; "The way hope builds his house" (Fr1512A, in *Poems*, III, 1322) with the flap pointing up. Both originals are at Amherst College Library: the first was written in 1874 (A 531), the second in 1879 (A 450). The first envelope has had a portion cut from the top with scissors, because the flap has torn some of the paper it was affixed to off (it was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Edward Dickinson). The second, addressed to "Mrs Edward Dickinson and Family," has flap and address portion intact only.

⁷ Fr1411A, in *Poems*, III, 1228–29 (October 1876). The original is at Amherst College (A 364). In the same year, the inside of an envelope split vertically down the middle (and thus with half a flap) was used for "Surprise is like a thrilling—pungent" (Fr1324A, in *Poems*, III, 1147–48). The original is at Amherst College (A 367).

itself. Indeed, the poem looks very similar to "The mushroom," except that it ends where the mushroom poem begins—at the angle of the "V" formed by the bottom and lateral edges of the envelope, at the opposite end from the flap.

Still another example of writing that is slanted because of the surface dimensions of the inner envelope is "'Twas later when the summer went" (Fr1312A).⁸ Again, the flap is positioned to point to the left, but this time Dickinson angles her writing so that it is parallel with the uppermost edge of the flap and just below the area where the glue has been attached. The poem continues at this angle right across the envelope, avoiding a hole where a previously affixed stamp has been cut out, and closing at the opposite end in bilaterally diminishing space. A draft of "We talked with each other about each other" (Fr1506A) is inscribed on yet another envelope, and once again it is written at an angle.⁹ Only a fragment of the flap remains attached to the left side: Dickinson begins here, parallel to what remains of the upper edge, and fits in "We / talked with / each other / about each / other," thus making the best possible use of the space available to her.¹⁰ All of these examples, like "The mushroom is the elf of plants," are written at angles, and all have physical reasons for appearing the way they do.

Perhaps most crucially, version *B* of "The mushroom is the elf of plants" is not written on an ordinary postal envelope: on its other side is the printed design of a mortar and pestle, a conventional nineteenth-century emblem for an apothecary or druggist.¹¹ The envelope paper is slightly thicker than normal, and at one end there are two angled sections of paper that overlap to form a shallow "v" shape. The inner edges of both sections sit up slightly, especially at the base, and this (together with their thickness) makes them awkward to write across. By setting the envelope on point, Dickinson avoided having to

⁸ Fr1312A, in *Poems*, III, 1133 (1873). The original is at Amherst College (A 499).

⁹ Fr1506A, in *Poems*, III, 1317–18 (about 1879). The original is at Amherst College (A 514).

¹⁰ Another section of the flap is attached to the lower-to-middle right-hand side of the envelope.

¹¹ Pharmacist Henry Adams, of Phoenix Row in Amherst, used a similar symbol. See Pharmacist Henry Adams's Prescription Book, 1882–1885. Amherst College, Special Collections.

write across these overlaps very often; as it is, one can see her avoiding the edges at those points where her writing does come close to them (for example, where the two sections meet, when she writes "it [edge] is not / At M [edge] orning").¹² These features of the paper make it at least feasible that "The mushroom is the elf of plants" is inscribed in such a way as to make as much of the page available for physically unobstructed writing as possible. Indeed, the accumulated weight of evidence suggested by the nonsemantic recourse to envelopes generally makes this the more likely of the two scenarios.

In this essay I propose, then, to assess the feasibility of claims about aspects of Dickinson's attention to what had previously been thought of as the accidentals of manuscript production, such as the size and shape of paper and the physical direction and placement of the writing. I am also concerned with patterns of spacing between letters and lines, and habits of chirographic inscription. To take a specific example: scholars Susan Howe and Martha Nell Smith allege, independently, that Dickinson's hand-scripted letters occasionally make visual contributions to a poem's meaning, so that in the instance of Fr1275B, "The sea said 'Come' to the brook," the *s*'s are said to be shaped like waves and the *t*'s formed to resemble choppy seas.¹³ In a previous article I argued that such remarks were insufficiently contextualized: the *s* and *t* characters were shaped in exactly the same way in many other manuscript poems and letters of the same year that had nothing to do with water.¹⁴ Sim-

¹² Dickinson's eagerness to avoid writing across the edges of specific envelopes can be seen in "The ditch is dear to the drunken man" (Fr1679A, in *Poems*, III, 1470 [about 1885]). The original is at Amherst College (A 391). The text is written on the inside of an envelope addressed to Frank Gilbert (Susan's brother) and set on its side with the flap pointing to the right. Dickinson writes horizontally up to and including the line "Oblivion bending over him" (which is inscribed as two rows, with the break after bending). The paper was then set on point, with a triangular section at the left side of the base, furthest away from the flap (now pointing up) serving for the last line ("And honor leagues away"). The triangle on the right was used for variants.

¹³ Fr1275B, in *Poems*, III, 1100. See Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1992), pp. 82–85. Smith's point appears more subtle than it is: she claims that Dickinson shaped the letters to satirize mimetic views of language. But Smith's point still depends on our accepting that the *s* looks like a wave, an assumption that is not borne out by Dickinson's practices elsewhere.

¹⁴ See Domhnall Mitchell, "Revising the Script: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts," *American Literature*, 70 (1998), 705–37.

ilarly, Smith's claims for "Wild nights—wild nights!" (Fr269) about "the stunning flourish that crosses both *T*'s" in the word "Tonight"—which she relates to the "seductive . . . calligraphy" of the "Wild nights!" autograph where it appears—must be judged against the exceeding commonality of such strokes in Dickinson's poems *and* letters.¹⁵ In a letter to Edward S. Dwight (dated December 1861, the estimated year of composition for "Wild Nights"), Dickinson joined the initial and ultimate consonants in "thought" and (most significantly) "tonight."¹⁶ A year later, in a poem addressed to Sue, she joined the first and last letters in "taught" when writing "Your—riches—taught me—poverty!"¹⁷ In 1865 Dickinson linked the first and last letters of "Tonight" in L303,¹⁸ and in 1867 she connected the initial and ultimate *t* of the word "without" twice on the first page of "The largest fire ever known" (Fr974B).¹⁹ In 1870 she continued to connect *t*'s in a draft poem, "Had we known the ton she bore" (Fr1185A), written on the inside of an envelope, where "straighter" is thus inscribed; in the same year, she linked the first, second, and last *t*'s of "Strategist" with one continuous stroke in "The suburbs of a secret" (Fr1171B).²⁰ In the 1872 manuscript of "A narrow fellow in the grass," included in a letter to Susan, Dickinson used an extended stroke in "transport" and "tighter."²¹ One could go on: to 1873, when she joined the *t*'s of "intimate" (Fr1310A); to 1877, when she joined both *t*'s of the words "states," "that" (four times), and "constant" in "She

¹⁵ See Smith, *Rowing in Eden*, p. 65; and Fr269, in *Poems*, I, 288.

¹⁶ L243, in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson with Theodora Ward, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), II, 383–84 (December 1861). Both words occur on the first autograph page, ll. 1 and 16, respectively. Further references to Dickinson's letters, unless otherwise indicated, are to this edition by letter number ("L") and volume and page number, reprinted by permission of the publishers, © 1958, 1986 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

¹⁷ L258, in *Letters*, II, 400–401 (early 1862). The word "taught" is the first word in the second row of text on the first manuscript page.

¹⁸ L303, in *Letters*, II, 440 (early 1865?). There is only one page: "Thank Sue, but / not Tonight. / Further nights. / Emily."

¹⁹ Fr974B, in *Poems*, II, 884–85 (1867). The words occur on rows 6 and 7 of the first (autograph) page.

²⁰ Fr1185A, in *Poems*, II, 1028 (l. 7); and Fr1171B, in *Poems*, II, 1014 (1870): "Strategist" is located on the third row of the first page.

²¹ L378, in *Letters*, II, 498–99 (autumn 1872). The words occur toward the end of the letter, on the third and fourth pages, rows 15 and 6, respectively.

laid her docile crescent down" (Fr1453C); to 1879, when she joined first and last letters of "that" in the second (autograph) page of "These not live yet" (Fr1486A); or to 1883, when she joined the first and last letters of "that" in L853 and "temerity" in "No Brigadier throughout the year" (Fr1596B).²² In a letter to Joseph K. Chickering, dated late 1882, Dickinson writes "thought" and joins the first *t* to the second by a horizontal stroke of the pencil, as she did with "Tonight" in the poem.²³ Taken together, then, the accumulated force of these examples suggests a calligraphic habit in her writing (where there is more than one *t*, they are joined by a cross stroke), and not necessarily a visual contribution to the poem's meaning.

This habit of joining *t*'s is not exclusive to Emily Dickinson's writing. Edward Dickinson's 1 January 1860 entry in his account books (under the section for "Doubtful & unproductive" property) includes the description "Watertown Lot," where the stroke begins at the first *t*, goes through the second, and closes at the uppercase *L*.²⁴ And one need not confine oneself to the Dickinson family, either: David Mack, in a letter dated "Amherst, March 5th, 1839," starts the horizontal stroke above the word "proprietors" slightly before the first *p* and ends it just after the final *s*. Elsewhere, Mack uses the *t* as an excuse for drawing a line above and between the words "justify it," and above "others," "there," "affected," and "petition" (to take a few examples). A letter to Clifton Johnson, dated 3 December 1884, has many similar examples, as does Julia Field's letters to her mother, including those dated "Smithfield, Dec. 31./55" and "Montpelier March 4th, 1861."²⁵ Again, these instances show

²² Fr1310A, in *Poems*, III, 1131 (l. 3); and Fr1453C, in *Poems*, III, 1270 (about 1877). All references are to the manuscript original. By permission of The Houghton Library, Harvard University (Ms Am 1118.2 [35a]), © The President and Fellows of Harvard College. There are five words joined this way on the first autograph page, and one ("that") on the second. Fr1486A, in *Poems*, III, 1300 (about 1879): "that" is on row four, second page. L853, in *Letters*, III, 790 (about 1883): the word occurs on the sixth line of text on the first page. Fr1596B, in *Poems*, III, 1396–97 (early 1883): "temerity" is on row 11, second autograph page.

²³ L786, in *Letters*, III, 750–51. The manuscript is number 799 at the Special Collections of the Frost Library at Amherst College.

²⁴ The manuscript is at the John Hays Library of Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

²⁵ All of these manuscripts are from the Special Collections of the Jones Library, Amherst.

that what critics today see as integral and intentional *aesthetic* effects in Dickinson are just as likely to have been common features in nineteenth-century handwriting in general.

One cannot deny Howe and Smith the right to take pleasure in the interpretive possibilities afforded by Dickinson's manuscripts, and to share this pleasure with others. But a historical scholar has other objectives, ones that may conflict with the aims of those critics for whom an autograph is primarily a playground for performative ingenuity.²⁶ Attempting to gesture in the direction of likelihood or plausibility in responding to the manuscripts requires some hypothesis of objectivity, some means of testing insights, that goes beyond the principles of individual pleasure and/or postmodernist possibility. And if one contextualizes Dickinson's manuscripts—as I have above—one finds evidence that complicates and potentially contradicts the conclusions drawn by Howe and Smith. At the same time, this opposition need not be universal: the fact that Hart, Howe, and Smith cite specific examples of manuscript practice that can be contested does not mean that the *larger* points they make can be ignored or declared invalid. The point I want to make, however, is that rigorous and sustained cross-referencing provides us with a set of procedures, a critical apparatus, by which to measure the extent to which critical approaches to Dickinson's autograph procedures can accurately be formulated as corresponding to the poet's own purposes. In this essay, then, I will build on the assumption that contextualization is one method of attempting to move beyond the subjective, and that this is desirable. But in order to achieve historical perspective we have to take into account the various levels of Dickinson's work, both poetic and epistolary, as well as manuscript practices generally in the nineteenth century—both literary and nonliterary.



A number of modern scholars feel that Emily Dickinson distributed her work privately in an effort to protect the material integrity of her writings, which occasionally

²⁶ I am not attempting to accuse such critics of irresponsibility. If Dickinson did think of her manuscripts as open to a variety of visual patterns, then their approach is justifiable.

feature drawings, embossed stationery designs, finger smudges, illustrations, and other allegedly deliberate graphic elements. Her nonpublication, the argument goes, is an implicit recognition that publishing institutions and techniques could never properly reproduce these visual aspects of her art. There are a number of grounds on which one might not so much contest such conclusions as approach them with a degree of trepidation.

To begin with, these arguments hold the supposition that the technology of nineteenth-century typography was so limited, so fixed, that it could not have adjusted to the demands of a visually innovative lyric intelligence. And yet even a passing acquaintance with the theories and techniques of print in the 1800s—with specimen books, for instance, or with Owen Jones's 1856 *The Grammar of Ornament*—shows an industry remarkably attuned to a diversity of visual effects and colors.²⁷ Even if one accepts the possibility of Ellen Hart's arguments about "The mushroom is the elf of plants," one wonders why print—which coped with George Herbert's pattern poems—could not have coped with the alleged design of Dickinson's poem.²⁸ One might also question the wisdom of ignoring comparison with manuscripts by other writers: literary history is full of works that began life as lines scribbled on bits of paper or that included casual drawings in the manuscripts. And writers have long used leftover pieces of paper during the first stages of poetic composition. These pieces are often characterized by informality: for instance, a manuscript copy of "Escape" by Robert Graves, featured in a 1999 exhibition at the Yale Centre of British Art, included the author's own ironic doodles about the erroneous report of his death in combat.²⁹ The poem loses these drawings in the final typographic version, without this

²⁷ See for instance, *Specimen of Printing Types and Ornaments from the Type and Stereotype Foundry of John T. White* (New York: No. 45 Gold, Near Fulton-Street, 1843). *The Grammar of Ornament* was published in London in 1856.

²⁸ I am thinking here of "The Altar" and "Easter-wings," pattern poems that were perfectly well represented in early print editions of Herbert's *The Temple* (1633). The latter poem, indeed, was arranged vertically—that is, with script running from the top to the bottom of the page (in direction, not extent), where today it is usually presented horizontally.

²⁹ See Robert Graves, Holograph of "Escape," 1916. (Property of William Reese, Yale Class of 1977.) "Doomed Youth: The Poetry and the Pity of the First World War." Exhibition organized by Elisabeth Fairman, Yale Centre for British Art, 22 June–26 September 1999.

being a serious obstacle to our understanding of it. Seeing the work of Graves and others is valuable, as it appears to give us a more grounded sense of what was and was not historically typical in Dickinson's autograph lyrics.

Or does it? Neglecting the features of a Graves manuscript that appeal to the eye may be (or has been) justified on the grounds that he—like many others—was an artist of the finished product, a writer who worked with print publication in mind. What is different about Dickinson is not her manuscript practice *per se* but the fact that she remained largely unpublished during her lifetime. It is this aspect of her life that leaves open the possibility that her failure to print was based on an aversion to the medium of type itself. In *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson*, Hart and Smith chart a changing or developing attitude to typography in Dickinson's work.³⁰ As a result, they shift from standardized printing of the letters in the first sections to strict manuscript layout in the rest of the book. Following Susan Howe, Smith and Hart seem to believe that, approximately after 1860, Dickinson consciously began to exploit blank spaces and other graphic phenomena.

But what if, instead, Dickinson's failure to publish (for whatever reason) was accompanied or followed by a greater relaxation of (and indifference to) manuscript technique? Since Dickinson may no longer have worked with the assumption of public presentation, would the appearance of her texts have mattered to her? One is faced here with an editor's version of the chicken-or-the-egg dilemma: do Dickinson's manuscripts look the way they do because she did not publish (and therefore could afford to be informal about their appearance), or did she not publish because she wanted her poems to look like her manuscripts?³¹ In the absence of convincing evidence to the contrary, I would argue, scholars are obliged to entertain the possibility of either scenario.

Few critics argue that Dickinson decided not to publish

³⁰ See Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith, *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* (Ashfield, Mass.: Paris Press, 1998).

³¹ Even if Dickinson's nonpublication was enforced, of course, there is no reason why she may not then have developed a new poetics based on handwriting.

because she became preoccupied by the graphic dimensions of literary meaning—though there is strong evidence for at least considering such a position. The fascicles—the forty handmade books of poems on quality stationery produced during the seven years after the summer of 1858—are interesting in this respect. Their highly finished quality seems to coincide with an expectation of being published or distributed in some way. (The early sixties are also the years when Dickinson's poems began to be published anonymously.) After 1865, for reasons we cannot know for certain, the nature of that expectation appears to have changed, and the assembly of fascicles changed with it. Dickinson's manuscripts may be construed as reflecting, in the *increased* casualness of their inscription and collation, a *decreased* interest in publication.

Alfred Habegger writes that, as "with other hypotheses that seek to explain this writer, nothing proves quite so useful as gimlet-eyed scrutiny, an insistence on plausible evidence."³² In this context, the best guides to the manuscripts are the manuscripts themselves, along with the kinds of information they can be seen to provide as to the integrity and significance of their own material appearance. Ellen Hart argues the case:

First, Dickinson did not visually separate prose and poetry in her letters. Her prose lines and the lines of a poem are similar in length, she did not consistently divide poetry from prose through spacing, and she did not vary margins. A standard prose format for the letters results in visual inaccuracies, such as Johnson's paragraphing: Dickinson did not use indentation to indicate paragraphs. Second, the relationship between poetry and prose is so complex in Dickinson's writing that lineating poetry but not prose sets up artificial genre distinctions.³³

To take the minor point first: Hart is incorrect when she claims that "Dickinson did not use indentation to indicate paragraphs." True, Dickinson did not indent at the *beginning* of paragraphs

³² Habegger, "My Wars Are Laid Away in Books": *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House, forthcoming 2001), chap. 14. Used with permission of the author.

³³ Ellen Louise Hart, "The Elizabeth Whitney Putnam Manuscripts and New Strategies for Editing Emily Dickinson's Letters," *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 4, no. 1 (1995), 49.

in letters, but she used a reverse form of indentation at the *close* of the previous paragraph. Although Hart criticizes Thomas H. Johnson for effectively imposing paragraphs on Dickinson's epistolary documents in his and Theodora Ward's edition of the *Letters*, he was in fact quite conservative about such formatting. For example, in Johnson and Ward's version of a letter to Samuel Bowles (numbered 205 and dated early April 1859), paragraphs are assigned after the words "feet!" "Springfield!" "years," "more," and "ashamed" (*Letters*, II, 352). This format is justifiable because on the manuscript there is a greater interval of space between those words and the right-hand edge of the paper than there is for other words at the end of a line, which generally and consistently come to within a centimeter of the edge. The words that Johnson judges as indicating a shift of paragraph are distant from the right paper-side by (respectively) 4, 3.2, 5.2, 2.5 and 2.3 centimeters. These measurements are approximate, because they are taken from photocopies, but they are nonetheless different enough from the normal pattern of end-word spacing to stand out visually. In the final paragraph of the letter as Johnson transcribes it, however, there is a distance in the manuscript of roughly two centimeters from the end of the word "pencil" to the right-hand edge of the paper, indicating the possibility that Dickinson was closing a paragraph at that point. Johnson, however, merges this sentence with the next one, making one paragraph where, arguably, there should be two. My point is less to quibble with his choice than to show—and there are countless examples of this—that Johnson was very careful about his editing of Dickinson's paragraphs, and not at all as willful as Hart appears to suggest. It is clear, too, that Johnson was guided by the visual evidence on the page, not by his own sense of stylistic propriety.

In addition, when Hart makes her comments about paragraph indents, she overlooks evidence about manuscript epistolary practice generally in the nineteenth century. For instance, when Emma Spaulding Bryant corresponded with her husband, John Emory Bryant, in 1873, she used many of the same techniques of inscription as Dickinson does: rather than indenting at the beginning of a paragraph, Bryant left space at the end of

the preceding one.³⁴ For instance, a letter dated "Cleveland, July 25, 1873," proceeds thus:

My Darling.
 Do you query how
 it happens that I am writing you
 from this place?
 I had not time to write the day
 before I left Wakeman.
 Yesterday morning Lucy and I came
 here and brought baby with us—³⁵

Bryant—like Dickinson—maintained a fairly consistent left-side margin, indicating paragraph division instead through the same kind of reverse indentation described above: as a consequence, it is relatively easy to see that there are paragraph shifts after "this place?" and "Wakeman." I am not suggesting that Hart should have known about this particular correspondence, but it is surely useful in this case to correlate her speculations with examples from other source-materials.³⁶

Hart's point about generic distinctions, or the lack of them, in Dickinson's letters is much harder to judge accurately. Epistolary productions are often characterized by an informality or casualness of inscription, of course, and one must always beware the possibility of confusing a writer's relative indifference to a letter's physical appearance with a fully fledged poetic agenda. Indeed, one of the ironies of Hart's position is that she seems to impose concepts and categories derived from published literary artifacts onto unpublished manuscripts: it is not that one has a higher status than the other but that they have a different status, which Hart ignores. But, in fact, Hart overstates the case

³⁴ See "Emma Spaulding Bryant Letters: An On-line Archival Collection." A project of *The Digital Scriptorium, Special Collections Library, Duke University*. October 1997. <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/bryant/>.

³⁵ The letter was accessed at: <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/bryant/1873-07-25.html>, on 3 September 1999.

³⁶ In *Open Me Carefully* Hart and Smith use increased vertical spacing to indicate what might be paragraph divisions in the letters. This practice is confusing, because Dickinson used vertical spacing primarily to distinguish between stanzas of poetry. Hart and Smith also fail to acknowledge Dickinson's conventional use of indented first paragraphs before 1860. (I will discuss these issues more fully in a future article.)

when she claims that Dickinson “did not visually separate prose and poetry in her letters.” Nor is she entirely accurate in assuming that Dickinson “did not consistently divide poetry from prose through spacing,” or that “she did not vary margins.”

Let me give some examples. In a letter of early 1862, again to Samuel Bowles, Dickinson writes:

Dear friend
 If you
 doubted my Snow—
 for a moment—you
 never will—again—
 I know—
 Because I could not
 say it—I fixed it
 in the Verse—for
 you to read—when
 your thought wavers,
 for such a foot as
 mine—
 Through the strait pass
 of suffering— [page-break]
 The Martyrs—even—trod.
 Their feet—upon Temptation—
 Their faces—upon God—
 A stately—shriven—
 Company—
 Convulsion—playing round—
 Harmless—as streaks
 of Meteor—
 Upon a Planet’s Bond—
 Their faith—
 the everlasting troth—
 Their Expectation—fair—
 The Needle—to the North
 Degree—
 Wades—so—thro’ polar Air!³⁷

Johnson and Ward divide this letter (to which they assign the number 251) into two paragraphs and a poem (see *Letters*, II,

³⁷ The original is in the possession of the Special Collections of the Frost Library, Amherst College. No: 679.

394–95). Their rationalization is again visual. For the paragraphs, there are anomalies in the normal pattern of spatial relations between end-of-line words and right paper-edge coinciding with the words “know” and “mine,” where there are distances of (respectively) 6.3 and 7 centimeters (rather than the usual 1.5 centimeters or less). Although Dickinson does not indent the entire poem, as her editors do, she does mark some shift in direction by leaving so much of a gap after these words: after “know” there is the beginning of a new paragraph, and after “mine” there is a change that coincides with a change of genre. But what appears to validate the editorial distinction between the prose and poetry parts of the letter is again the alteration in spatial patterns: there are breaks of 4.5, 6.1, 4.9, and 6.6 centimeters between the ends of the words “suffering,” “company,” “Meteor,” and “Degree” and the right side of the page. These spaces do not correspond to paragraph breaks; rather, they indicate the close of a *poetic* line. In addition, Dickinson indents *before* the lines beginning “A stately—shriven” and “Their faith”—something she does not do elsewhere in the poem or, indeed, generally in her correspondence. These indents signal the beginning of new poetic stanzas. The conclusions to be drawn, from this letter at least, are that Dickinson did operate with a sense of generic distinctions, and that it is possible to detect the presence of these distinctions in the totality of the relationships between lines, words, spaces, and paper-edges in her manuscripts.

Perhaps the most serious problem with approaches to Dickinson's autograph originals emerges at precisely this point: the delicate condition of the originals means that they simply cannot be made available to most people. The measurements listed above, therefore, are taken from photocopies (of manuscript originals) that are made available at the Special Collections of the Frost Library at Amherst College. Similar restrictions are in place at the Houghton Library of Harvard University, which houses the majority of Dickinson's original materials, and at the Boston Public Library: only in particular circumstances are the actual manuscripts made available. Thus, potential objections to conclusions based on the properties of the Bowles letter would first be that page margins are difficult to detect in dupli-

cates, and then that photocopies distort details of the originals in other, crucial ways (by reducing or altering the size of the script, for instance). In fact, I have chosen to look at the copy of the Bowles letter because, first, the edge of the paper is easy to distinguish, and second, because if the size of the script has been altered, then it seems to have been done uniformly, so that the collective pattern or overall design of spatial distinctions that the measurements point to is still valid. In other words, since I am measuring relative distances from the ends of lines to the edge of the page *within* the same manuscript, changes to the manuscript effected by its copying are of course proportional, and the ratios remain constant.³⁸

The larger problem with manuscript criticism still remains, however. For at the same time as manuscript *copies* are being made more widely accessible in both textual and electronic versions, critics propose that the manuscript *originals* are the only sites that are fully indicative of Dickinson's actual practices: neither print nor pixels can capture all of the details that are deemed to be significant. This view gives the minority of scholars who have had, or continue to have, access to the originals a literary-critical equivalent to the nuclear deterrent: an interpretation can always be judged unsound or invalid if the interpreter does not refer to Dickinson's autograph version(s).³⁹

Another objection to the Bowles letter might be that it was sent to Bowles rather than to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, with whom the poet was more familiar—the implication being that Emily Dickinson was more formal and genre-conscious with

³⁸ Most photocopiers do enlarge or reduce the original by a small amount, typically between 1 and 3 percent. Usually there is a slight difference between the vertical and horizontal dimensions in the amount of change, but not a great deal. For instance, if one photocopies a very precise graphic arts ruler, the vertical enlargement is barely detectable—on the order of 0.5 percent. Horizontally, there is a reduction of about 2 percent. So while there is distortion, it is minimal. To take another example: if a piece of paper were 5 by 8 inches, roughly the size of many of Dickinson's sheets, and if it were copied in the normal orientation, then the size of the sheet on the copy would be about 4.9 by 8.04 inches. The change in size of any given letter would be measurable in thousandths of an inch; the difference in a typical (say one inch) margin would be a couple of hundredths of an inch. My thanks to John Lancaster, Curator of Special Collections at the Frost Library, Amherst College, for his advice in this connection.

³⁹ For instance, at the opening plenary of the 1999 EDIS conference at Mount Holyoke, Marjorie Perloff's understanding of Dickinson's poetry was subjected to critique on the grounds that she had not looked at manuscript versions of the poems she discussed.

Samuel than she was with Sue. But if we look at the first page (recto only) of a poem meant for Susan (but probably not sent), where the right edge of the paper is sufficiently clear to make measurements possible, we will draw much the same conclusions as from the Bowles letter:⁴⁰

Excuse me—Dollie—

[↓1.5]

The Love a Child can

show—below— [↔5.8]

Is but a Filament—I

know— [↔8.3]

Of that Diviner—Thing— [↔.6mm]

That faints upon the face

of Noon— [↔7.2]

And smites the Tinder [↔.5mm]

in the Sun— [↔5.1]

And hinders—Gabriel's Wing! [↔.2mm]

[↓1.5]

'Tis This—in Music—

hints—and sways— [↔2.3]

And far abroad—on

[page-break]

Franklin arranges this excerpt of the poem variant, which he identifies as Fr285A, in the following way:

The Love a Child can show—below—

Is but a Filament—I know—

Of that Diviner—Thing—

That faints upon the face of Noon—

And smites the Tinder in the Sun—

And hinders—Gabriel's Wing!

'Tis This—in Music—hints—and sways—

And far abroad—on

(*Poems*, I, 303)

Franklin includes the address ("*Excuse me—Dollie—*") in his notes on the poem, and he also records the placement of line

⁴⁰ For the sake of convenience, I have included some measurements with my transcription: the sign [↓] indicates a vertical space in centimeters, while [↔] is the horizontal gap between the last mark in a line and the right side of the paper. Unless otherwise indicated, the gap in both cases is about one centimeter. (Dollie, incidentally, is a pet-name for Sue.)

and page breaks (after “can,” “I,” “on,” etc.). Again, this arrangement seems defensible on the grounds of spatial patterning. There is a greater vertical gap between “*Excuse me—Dollie*” and “*The Love a Child*” parts of the manuscript, and again between “*Gabriel’s Wing!*” and “’Tis This,” than there is otherwise between lines: the second of these gaps certainly confirms the presence of stanzaic division. And the pattern of blank spaces among the lines surely suggests (for instance) that Franklin was right to feel that “*The Love a Child can / show—below—[↔5.8]*” was meant to be one unit, “*The Love a Child can show—below—.*”

This is not to say that the manuscripts cannot be read and reproduced in other ways, with the line spacing regarded as having been arranged with some aesthetic and semantic purpose. Such an approach would understand (for instance) “*The Love a Child can / show—below*” as a kind of visual pun, with the “second” part of the sequence visually enacting the concept of beneath-ness. One could go through the entire poem looking for similar effects: the deliberate isolation of the verb “know” throwing doubt on the degree of knowledge, for example, as well as the dramatic heightening that accompanies “of Noon” being assigned a line of its own. But voices of doubt interpose themselves at this point: would the foregrounding not work better if “Noon” alone were cut off, for does the preposition not seem to dangle loosely, lessening and diluting the presumed purpose? And what exactly is the idea behind a deliberate segregation of “in the Sun”? Are we supposed to stumble across this phrase like one of Stanley Fish’s readers, surprised by the sun’s appearance in a place where we expected some other sequence (in the fire?). And while we are in the visual mood, why not divide “*And hinders—Gabriel’s Wing*” into two so that the phrase is literally impeded by the line sequencing (“*And hinders—/ Gabriel’s Wing*”)? Would an imagination so attuned to the possibilities of graphic inscription have missed such an opportunity? And if Dickinson did miss it, does this then mean that she was inconsistent, or just that the deliberate aspects of her line division are informed primarily by metrical rather than visual conventions?

The other point to make about Franklin’s transcription is that he separates the address (“*Excuse me—Dollie—*”) from

the poem, as indeed he subsequently does with the signature (Dickinson ended the poem and then signed it "Emily.") Such an intervention implies that the poem remains, in a sense, different from its performance within the letter, and indeed Franklin also presents another variant of the poem (Fr285B), included in Fascicle 35 in 1863 (*Poems*, I, 303–4). One of the major arguments of the manuscript school is that the address and signature are not in fact detachable from the poem, but that they transform it from a self-contained aesthetic object into a communicative act that derives some of its meanings from the network of relations between identifiable historical individuals. So Fr285A is not a poem enclosed within an epistolary frame, but a "letter-poem." If one accepts this argument, then the irony is that decisions to separate poems and letters in instances where it is alleged that there was no division replicate precisely the kinds of editorial procedures that prevented Dickinson from publishing in the first place.⁴¹

But Franklin's supposition that a poem *can* to some extent remain separate from its material performances is supported by Dickinson's inclusion of a variant of this poem, Fr285B, in Fascicle 35, where it was the nineteenth in a sequence of twenty-five (see *Manuscript Books*, II, 859–60). For ease of comparison, I supply only the first stanza:

The Love a Life can show
Below
Is but a filament, I know,
Of that diviner thing
That faints upon the face
of Noon—
And smites the Tinder
in the Sun—
And hinders Gabriel's Wing—

Dickinson's recording of the poem independent of any address implies that it was not irrevocably linked in her mind with Su-

⁴¹ Letters in women's literature have often functioned formally as a means of mediating between private and public discourses—one thinks immediately of Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791), or (more recently) Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986). There is no doubt that, at some level, Dickinson used her correspon-

san—in fact, the revisions show Dickinson moving away from familial specificity (“Child” is replaced with the more universally applicable “Life.”) In other words, the poem is autonomous of its first epistolary context—or indeed, of any originating circumstances.⁴² Moreover, it is possible to argue that the poem is not necessarily fully coincidental with every detail of its own material appearances: this is why “can / show—below—” in *A* becomes “can show / Below” in *B*; “I / know—” in *A* becomes “I know,” in *B*, etc. What seems important here is that *the metrical integrity of the unit is retained*: in both versions the blank space after the word “below” is retained, in order to indicate that it belongs together with the sequence “the love a [child/life] can show.” There is physical variation (“can / show”; “can show”) but also metrical consistency (iambic tetrameter). And this is significant because it suggests that when we attempt to transcribe the poem, we need to attend to patterns that may operate irrespective of, or in combination with, a line’s inscription on a particular page.



Another feature of the Emma Spaulding Bryant letter that I quoted from earlier (which is written on a sheet of paper folded once in order to create a bifolium) is that Bryant ran out of space on the verso of the second folium, but ended by writing vertically along the left-hand margin of the first recto. She wrote: “I wish you were with me daily and I do very much hope to be quite well and [continuing vertically] strong when you see me at Christmas. . . .” Emily Dickinson often did similar things. In a letter of 11 January 1850 to her uncle Joel Warren Norcross (“Dearest of all dear Uncles”) she concludes with three paragraphs that are all inscribed verti-

dence in order to promote her poetry in ways that did not compromise her apparently intense need for privacy. To some extent, also, Dickinson’s epistolary distribution can be seen as a singular response to the cultural market and to wider political phenomena, or as one indication of a historical crisis in the relations between lyric poet and literary audience. So the letter-poems may not represent a challenge to generic conventions so much as a familiar technique of disguising publication.

⁴² Neither is there any absolute reason why the inclusion of the poem in the letter binds the two in the first place.

cally on the left-edge margins of three pages of the autograph original.⁴³ One might safely conclude that such an inscription is a side effect of informal epistolary productions, where the appearance of the letter or note is less significant than (say) its phatic function, contents, or style. And yet one of the consequences of the manuscript approach is that readers are more than ever attuned to all of the physical details of a Dickinson autograph. Thus, Melanie Hubbard has stated that in one instance "the reader must literally turn the page—must switch from reading down the vertical axis to reading along the horizontal axis."⁴⁴ Although Hubbard's comments are related to a specific example (rather than to drafts in their entirety), her work potentially extends the methodological foundations for the manuscript school of Dickinson criticism. Indeed, at the 1999 EDIS conference it was suggested that vertical inscription in a manuscript poem or letter should be reproduced as vertical inscription in a print transcription, since one must always allow for the possibility that this was an integral part of the letter's—or the poem's—communicative apparatus.

This suggestion is significant because, after her death in 1886, Dickinson left behind not only some eight hundred poems gathered together into neatly sewn fascicles and unthreaded sets, but also hundreds more apparently miscellaneous segments of writing scribbled onto scraps of paper—torn stationery, envelope flaps, pieces of brown paper bags, and the backs of recipes. During the 1950s, editors Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward classified many of these workshop scraps as "Prose Fragments" or drafts; over forty years later, Hubbard contests this definition and argues instead that many of them were compositional units whose significance was embedded in the materials they were inscribed on (Hubbard, p. 27). If Hubbard is correct, then what are we to make of this, the discarded rough draft of a note to Ned, written in pencil (Johnson thinks it an earlier version of L988, dated June 1885 [see *Letters*, III, 875]):

⁴³ See L29, in *Letters*, I, 80–81. The original is in the possession of the Special Collections of the Frost Library, Amherst College. No: 640.

⁴⁴ "Dickinson's Advertising Flyers: Theorizing Materiality and the Work of Reading," *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 7, no. 1 (1998), 35.

A638, recto.

—syt8

the power and
the glory are the
post mortuary

we thank thee that
thou hast hid these
things from us

Ned will
ask his
Cousin's
perusal of
this "Scarlet
Letter," whose
postage is
a Solstice—
and hast
revealed them to them—

A638a, verso.

that they have existed—none
can take away

exist
is
a

We do not think
enough of the
Dead as Exhili
rants That they are
not they dissuaders
but Lures—
keepers still of that
great Romance
still to us fore
closed— while
we Envy is their
wisdom a we de
lament
Coveting their wis
dom we so trust lament
their so daring Silence
Grace is still
a secret—

There is no doubt that we can read this draft vertically and horizontally, and there is a certain amount of amusement to be had in doing so. But were we meant to? And were we meant to read these words as if they were a poem, with the frequent line-breaks and spaces that I have preserved above?⁴⁵ Johnson and Ward did not think so; they transcribe the same lines (which they identify as Prose Fragment 50) as follows:

We do not think enough of the Dead as exilirants—they are not dissuaders but Lures—Keepers of that great Romance still to us fore-closed—while coveting (we envy) their wisdom we lament their silence. Grace is still a secret. That they have existed none can take away. That they still exist is a trust so daring we thank thee that thou hast hid these things from us and hast revealed them to them. The power and the glory are the post mortuary gifts. (Letters, III, 919–20)

It seems to me that there is much to be gained by the Johnson and Ward “version”: a sense of momentum that comes with the rhythm of prose, for example, which reminds us that Dickinson was a prolific and immensely gifted epistolary performer. Indeed, one of the ironies about theories advancing Dickinson as a generically transgressive artist is that these ideas, in practice, result in visual arrangements of the letters that have the effect of privileging their apparently poetic aspects. In other words, rather than experimenting with the boundaries between the two genres, the effect of retaining Dickinson's manuscript line spacing gives the impression of converting prose (“Ned will ask his Cousin's perusal of this ‘Scarlet Letter,’ whose postage is a Solstice—”) into the semblance of poetry. And it seems to me that this practice reduces the potential for free intervention in those texts, for although it is relatively straightforward to sense the poetry in prose (as William Shurr has done, to take an extreme example),⁴⁶ it is

⁴⁵ Marta Werner transcribes the poem in this way in *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1995), A 638, A 638a. At first glance Werner's transcription seems remarkably accurate. But she fails to record the physical edges of the paper that the writing is inscribed upon, thus transforming a material event (margins imposed by available space) into an intentional one (margins chosen for aesthetic reasons).

⁴⁶ See *New Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. William H. Shurr, with Anna Dunlap and Emily Grey Shurr (Chapel Hill: Univ. of Carolina Press, 1993). Shurr “excavates” 498 new poems from Dickinson's letters.

much more complicated for readers to perform the reverse operation.

Moreover, to regard the vertical and horizontal aspects of script in a letter or poem's autograph performance as integral runs counter to the examples of similar variation that one finds in other manuscript letters by nineteenth-century men and women. For instance, a letter to the young Helen Fiske (later Hunt Jackson) from her mother finishes with lines written vertically along the left-hand margin and across the place and time of the letter's heading on the opening page.⁴⁷ Writing from Madison in May 1861, Byron Hartley Williams also resorts to vertical script along the left-hand margin when he runs out of available space.⁴⁸ Julia K. Field sends a letter to her mother in March 1861 where she writes horizontally but upside-down above the heading on the first page.⁴⁹ On lined paper, Ruth Payne Burgess writes a letter where she switches to vertical script above her opening address, "Home March 20th, 1889 / My dear Daughter."⁵⁰ All of these examples suggest a rule that also applies to Dickinson's manuscripts: the multi-directionality of the handwriting is a nonsignificant component of the letter's appearance.



Another of the claims made by Hubbard in her influential article is that the meanings of some of Dickinson's drafts or fragments are embedded in the very materials on which they are written. Again, the implications of Hubbard's remarks are wide ranging, and again it is useful to look at specifics when attempting to gauge their accuracy. Let me say first

⁴⁷ The letter is from 4 October 1841 and is part of the Mss. Coll. of Helen Hunt Jackson's Letters (1840–1845) at the Special Collections of the Jones Library, Amherst. I am grateful to Kate Boyle for her generous research assistance and photocopying of relevant materials.

⁴⁸ Jones Library, Special Collections, Mss. Coll.: Williams, Byron Hartley (1844–1922). Correspondence.

⁴⁹ Jones Library, Special Collections, Mss. Coll.: Field, Julia K. (1829–1890). Correspondence, 1860–1861.

⁵⁰ Jones Library, Special Collections, Mss. Coll.: Burgess, Ruth Payne. Correspondence, 1871–1889.

of all, however, that I find Hubbard's work to be innovative and valuable: if a central criterion of the usefulness of scholarly work is that it yield interesting new readings, then her work (and indeed that of Hart and Smith) is eminently useful. Therefore, when Hubbard notes that, on stationery advertising Home Insurance, Dickinson writes of death and eternity, one accepts the plausibility of her thesis, which is that the writing is prompted by the advertisement. Practicing a kind of archaeology of lyric inspiration, Hubbard detects Dickinson being amused by the absurdity of "insurance in the face of death" (Hubbard, p. 30). Granted, one might quibble about a possible confusion of home insurance and life insurance here, and one might further wonder about the statistical probability of a poet who wrote on commercial stationery and was preoccupied with mortality noting thoughts about death and eternity on a flyer that advertised insurance. But words such as "Affluence" and "wealthier" may indeed suggest a link in this instance between the poet's thoughts and the advertisement. And certain stories from Dickinson's life and the life of her sister—their sarcastic dismissal of anyone unfortunate enough to knock uninvited on their door—corroborate the possibility of the kinds of ironic meditations that Hubbard describes.

And yet, as Hubbard's article progresses, the argument becomes more and more strained. For instance, she maintains that a piece of paper with the legend "[] e of Silks" is "carefully torn from the page of a magazine" (Hubbard, p. 43). The paper has a fingerprint on the recto, which Hubbard assumes to be Dickinson's, and the verso contains a fragment with the word "dance," which she further assumes must have been the same word that preceded "of Silks." One is struck by the ingenuity of Hubbard's detective work, but not entirely convinced. What if the fingerprint was imprinted during or after the cutting of the paper, which would mean that it occurred after the decision to tear it carefully in the first place, and may therefore have been completely unrelated to the contents of the fragment?⁵¹ If the paper was carefully torn, and there is a connection between this tearing and what is printed on the recto, then

⁵¹ The English poet Stevie Smith often uses illustrations with her poems, which she chose after sifting through already finished drawings in search of appropriate materi-

why did Dickinson not tear the page to include the phrase in its entirety? Or did she tear it because of reasons that were economic or practical, because of size and shape? (Are there other, similarly sized, bits and pieces in Dickinson's collection—perhaps even from the same page?) What if the supposed "[Danc]e of Silks" was in fact "[Empir]e of Silks" or "[Princ]e of Silks?" If the page really came from a magazine, is it not strange that there is nothing at all on the verso (where one would expect some print)? And if the page is from a magazine, why was there no effort made to ascertain which one, in order to check if the legend really was "[Danc]e of Silks," or if there was something else on the page that might have inspired Dickinson's fragment?

These questions are literal and positivist because it seems to me that Hubbard's reading is, at some level, positivist and literal as well. There seems no room here for accident, for a lack of premeditation in the relationship between Dickinson's paper and the contents of her texts, or for the casual but not causal play of the imagination on the surfaces before it. In fact, I would argue that Dickinson's scraps at the very least complicate the logic of manuscript criticism: their very informality suggests Dickinson's relative indifference to the physical appearance of her drafts, or indeed to what happened to be on the drafts prior to her writing. But this argument in turn presupposes the possibility that Dickinson may have operated with an order of composition, a hierarchy of texts, and even a goal of completion—ideas that are not compatible with current theoretical and critical practices.⁵² In the climate of postmodernism, indeterminacy and referential multiplicity are advanced as criteria of creative excellence, and because Dickinson's manuscripts were often unfinished (in the sense that there are several vari-

als. The lesson: if one did not know this, one might presuppose an entirely different kind of juxtaposition or relation between Smith's texts and their graphic elements.

⁵² The antipathy is partly political; it also has to do with current scholarly fashion. Politically, the nineteenth-century publishing and culture industry is seen to have been controlled by men, and Dickinson's alleged refusal to publish therefore becomes a feminist issue, as indeed does attending to the manuscripts. But this view ignores the fact that women did publish in the nineteenth century, and that not all publishers and printers were men.

ants for each poem, and many variants for words within poems), they are seen as anticipating postmodernist principles of undecidability. Instead of being a point of transition on the way to a final printed version, these autograph scripts are seen as replacing print as a point of finality—and even replacing finality itself with a state of pure textual indeterminacy. It therefore seems allowable for a contemporary artist-poet like Susan Howe to appropriate Dickinson for new environments of literary practice—pointing, for example, to her autographs as a resource for visually and generically transgressive poetics.⁵³

In addition, manuscript critics see the early history of the posthumous publication of Dickinson as a history of oppression and misrepresentation, with Dickinson's poems being subjected to unwarranted regulation of language and punctuation. As Martha Nell Smith, one of the most committed, brilliant, and challenging of Dickinson's readers, puts it:

Commandment—authority, social order—describes the guiding principle of Franklin's splendid variorum. While versioning reigns in Franklin's production, presumably to show more fully the range of Dickinson's intentions, and he does not, by representing multiple textual versions of a poem, privilege one over another, he throughout privileges not the "work" (as he claims) but the linguistic idea of a poem's "text," the literary component that he believes is separable from its artifactual realization. Through this assumption order is imposed on that which is otherwise unruly—the messy handwritten artifacts of poems, letters, letter-poems, scraps, notes, fragments. The idea of "poem" (or whatever text) disciplines and contains views of Dickinson's writ-

⁵³ See Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985); and *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1993). Although edited versions of Dickinson's texts have appeared in almost every decade since her death, it was not until Franklin's *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* appeared in 1981 that most readers were able to see the manuscripts for the first time. In a sense, Dickinson entered literary history at the end of the twentieth century rather than the nineteenth, with the result that her audience then formulated her practices according to a very different set of principles from any previous one. There is a sense, too, in which this audience believed that Dickinson was being discovered almost for the first time—since the manuscripts had not been widely available before then.

ings so that they conform to social order and literary law, whatever the material evidence may suggest.⁵⁴

What drives manuscript criticism is a fear of being seen similarly to select, to prioritize, to repress, to choose, or to exclude. Rather than encouraging “free play” in readers and critics, however, emphasizing the autograph poems has a paralyzing effect. In their edition of Dickinson’s letters to Susan, for example, Hart and Smith feel unable to change the handwritten “its’ Events” to “it’s Events” (as Franklin does in his version of the poem), for fear that they will join the ranks of those Dickinson editors who corrected incidental irregularities.⁵⁵ Never mind that writing necessarily involves choices, or that Dickinson’s life and texts are replete with statements and images of selection, exclusiveness, excellence, and distinction. Never mind that her returns to manuscript lyrics suggest a principle of revision, the restless search for a right word or combination of words. Never mind that Smith’s promotion of the “unbound” flies in the face of the fact that Dickinson herself had no problems binding over eight hundred of her own poems into manuscript miscellanies. For as Ralph Franklin argues, the fascicles and sets represent a form of closure, an attempt at putting things away and being finished with them.⁵⁶

Manuscript criticism increasingly promotes autograph poems as the only sites that are fully coincidental with Dickinson’s meanings, with the result that even minor details haunt the reader with the potential of intent. Creative, responsible editing—establishing a text that tallies with the evidence on the page but is not subservient to the trivialities of its inscription—is outlawed. Print is seen as blocking full access to the manuscripts, which is where the *real* work is situated and still ongoing. Again, it helps to look at specifics here. In late 1878 Dickinson drafted a letter to Ellen Dickinson (wife of William H.) (see *Letters*, II, 629–30). The contents of this pencil draft include a

⁵⁴ Roundtable on Editing and Archiving, 1999 EDIS Conference. Accessed from the Web at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/dickinson/fascicle/1999edis.html>, on 15 September 1999.

⁵⁵ See “letter-poem” 177, in *Open Me Carefully*, p. 200; and Fr1172B, in *Poems*, II, 1015.

⁵⁶ See Franklin, introduction to *Poems*, I, 11.

reference ("the Light of your home with Willie") that relates unequivocally to the blue advertising flyer for "The Patent Standard Tubular Argand Lamp" that it is written on. Would an editor be wrong to relegate this information to the notes accompanying this rough draft? In other words, would an editor be egregiously overlooking a causal relationship between the draft itself and the flyer, one that indicated a deliberate meditation on the materially embedded nature of thought?

In cautiously proposing a negative answer to these questions, I would argue that the overall layout of the autograph verso points toward the pattern of informality that governed Dickinson's use of commercial handbills and leaflets when writing drafts. What we learn from this pattern is perhaps something we knew before: that in the history of a poem's origins there are different stages that may exist in a hierarchical relationship to each other—though, granted, a hierarchy of origins that may not correspond to their temporal sequencing. In this instance it is the anniversary, and the wider relations between Dickinson, Willie, and Ellen, that occasioned the note's composition. The details of the flyer's contents are significant only as they relate to one sequence of thought, and we cannot even be sure that this was conscious.⁵⁷ Knowing that there is an advertisement for a lamp on the other side of a letter that refers to light *is* undeniably meaningful and *can* make an impact on our understanding, but *how much* of an impact seems to me to be one of several crucial questions here. In other words, while I accept that the material circumstances of a text's production can make a valid contribution to its contents, I also feel that readers as well as editors are faced with the responsibility of identifying the scale of that significance when reproducing their version of the text.

The full inclusion of material details in a readerly response is misleading only to the degree that these details are overemphasized: foregrounding the advertisement distorts the overall structure of relations within the draft, and it also presupposes a

⁵⁷ In other words, we cannot be certain, first, that the paper was deliberately chosen with the express purpose of mirroring what was written on it; second, that seeing the flyer inspired Dickinson to write; or third, that the flyer influenced the contents of the letter to any great degree.

willed relation between the contents of the text and its environment. But inclusiveness does not of course guarantee the possibility of other kinds of *exclusion*. It is interesting, for example, that manuscript critics are happy to take into account a coffee stain on a piece of paper, but neglect to find out how the coffee got there and where it came from. Neither are they interested in investigating the conditions of coffee production, distribution, purchase, display, preparation, and consumption, or what relation these things might have to the poem's meaning. For instance, if I insist on reading a coffee mark as a sign of a radical new textual production that is at odds with market-driven and print-dominated practices, how does my view of Dickinson's liberalism coincide with the chain of exploitation that brought the coffee to her writing table in the first place? For that matter, where did the writing table that Dickinson used, as well as her paper, pens, and pencils, originate? In all the arguments about the inside and outside of a text, why is it assumed that the text stops on the page?

Historically, hand-copied and circulated manuscripts have been the prerogative of the leisured classes. The invention of movable type and its integration into methods of mass production was part of the democratic advances of the nineteenth century. Therefore, in regards to the critical arguments about Dickinson's supposedly "egalitarian" methods of crafting and distributing texts, what does it mean that she turned her back on the very technology that allowed reading and writing to be emancipated from more privileged environments of production and circulation? Does Dickinson's system of poetic enclosures suggest an open, democratic spirit, or a highly selective and controlling one?



On a manuscript addressed to Samuel Bowles and sent about 1861, Dickinson wrote:

The Juggler's *Hat* her Country is—
The Mountain Gorse—the *Bee's*—
(Fr186A)

On the verso, Mary Bowles, Samuel's wife and a Dickinson correspondent in her own right, noted:

I trust you will not read all these aloud in one evening. I do not think reading aloud is good for you. It tires you too much, both your voice and head—⁵⁸

It stretches credibility too far, perhaps, to think that Mary's note on Dickinson's original *refers* to that original specifically—or, indeed, to a private collection of Dickinson's poems that Samuel may have enjoyed declaiming to himself. But there are valuable lessons here, nonetheless: pointers to an informality in nineteenth-century middle-class recycling of epistolary materials, as well as indications of how poetry was appreciated in performance—even privately. (It is known that Dickinson too read her poems aloud.)⁵⁹ All of these things suggest that Dickinson's correspondents, her hand-picked audience, might have understood her autograph poems in very different ways from today's readership. There is no record, for example, of any of her friends ever formulating a sense that the appearance of the manuscript poem might have impacted on its meaning. One wonders, then—by way of moving toward a conclusion—whether promoting script over enunciation takes enough account of the *oral* dimensions of the poem, its existence (during the nineteenth century at least) as a unit of sounds as much as signs. If the manuscripts are designed to be read aloud, then the emphasis on their visual design (the shape of letters, the outline of the page) may be drawing attention away from aspects of *spoken* delivery to matters of pace, emphasis, and pause.

Let us be clear about this. There is a useful distinction to be made between the publication of manuscript materials through the Internet (at the Dickinson Electronic Archives site) and by CD-ROM, as well as by more traditional means, and the interpretive apparatus that has come to be associated with those en-

⁵⁸ Fr186A, in *Poems*, I, 220–21. Amherst College, Frost Library, Special Collections: Am. Coll. 668. The manuscript is written in ink, on stationery embossed PARIS.

⁵⁹ See Martha Ackmann, "'I'm Glad I Finally Surfaced': A Norcross Descendent Remembers Emily Dickinson," *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 5, no. 2 (1996), 120–26. A cousin and a niece both report Dickinson as having read poems aloud.

deavors. Publication increases access to those sources and is simultaneously a magnificent scholarly initiative and an invaluable resource. Without any doubt, readers and viewers are empowered by such publications: rather than relying on editors, we are left to decide for ourselves whether or not to use autograph images, or conventional or manuscript-based transcriptions, and we are given an increased platform of information upon which to base and justify our choices. At the same time, the insistence by some critics that manuscripts contain features that are suppressed (by ideological and/or technological failings) in other environments threatens to circumscribe the very freedom of intellectual movement that manuscript archives are meant to provide us with. For one of the implications of manuscript criticism is that only manuscripts suffice: we may choose to use standard print or photographic editions, but then we run the danger of missing a graphic aspect of the poem's inscription that is absolutely germane to its meaning. If the visual dimension enhances or supports the apparent meaning of the words, then there is no great problem; but if it contradicts or comments ironically on them, then we cannot afford to be so casual. Thus, manuscript *criticism* has the effect of making manuscript *archives* an absolute precondition of scholarly discussion.

Print editions of Dickinson's poems and letters that follow the manuscript layout as closely as possible do not lessen our dependence on the manuscripts themselves, however. For instance, in *Open Me Carefully* there are two letter-poems, numbered 102 and 103, where Hart and Smith use line-initial indents that are not necessitated by reasons of punctuation or paragraphing (in row 14 of 102, and rows 1 and 15 of 103 [see pp. 130–32]). In number 102 Dickinson speaks of bees and buttercups, and the editors record her as writing:

I have no Field
for them, though
for the Woman
whom I prefer,
Here is Festival—
(pp. 130–31)

And in number 103 she writes (again, according to the edited version):

It would be best to
 see you—it would
 be good to see the
 Grass. . . .

(p. 132)

Such spaces are intriguing, and one can expend a great deal of critical energy trying to formulate a sense of their meaning. In the handwritten originals, however, these blank intervals coincide with embossed marks (PARIS in all three instances), and two of them follow physical page-breaks.⁶⁰ Thus, even though Hart and Smith acknowledge the existence of spaces, they do not include information about the position of phenomena that might possibly explain their necessity. They consider page-breaks and the exact location of multiple embossments as non-essential information. Rather than liberating Dickinson from her editors, then, diplomatic transcriptions of Dickinson's texts such as *Open Me Carefully* make the nature of the mediation less apparent (perhaps also to the editors themselves). Even here, there are invisible interventions, assumptions, and decisions made about what is and is not meaningful on the page.⁶¹ The

⁶⁰ Both originals are in the possession of the Houghton Library, Harvard. By permission of The Houghton Library, Harvard University (Ms Am 1118.5 B56 and Ms Am 1118.5 B179), © The President and Fellows of Harvard College. Other examples of blank spaces in *Open Me Carefully* where the paper has embossed marks are letter-poem 138 (pp. 163–64, before “To Mountain” [l. 12]) and (twice) in letter-poem 153 (pp. 178–79). Curiously, in letter-poem 111 (pp. 137–38), Hart and Smith do not acknowledge the indent before “takes, nor that” (l. 14), though Dickinson indents here because of an embossed mark (PARIS, again) at the top of the second (autograph) page (Ms Am 1118.5 B78).

⁶¹ In addition, manuscript critics do not and cannot accept the validity of each and every editorial version. While we are encouraged to “perform” and “participate” freely in Dickinson's lyric spaces, we are also reminded of past failures—failures that exist in effect as constraints on our freedom. And while manuscript scholars accept the historical value of previous editions of Dickinson's poems, they also refer to them as “typographic translations”—suggesting a clear distance from the originals (see Martha Nell Smith, “The Importance of a Hypermedia Archive of Dickinson's Creative Work,” *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 4, no. 1 [1995], 75–85). When Ellen Hart and Martha Nell Smith offer differently lineated versions of Dickinson poems and letters to Susan, their

physical edge of the paper is not recorded, for example, which is unfortunate in a book that insists on the absolute importance of material details: there is a huge difference between a word followed by blank space and a word followed millimeters later by the edge of the page (the former suggests choice, the latter necessity). The existence of a stamp produced during the manufacture of the paper, which resulted in raised edges that create an uneven writing surface, does not necessarily invalidate the idea that spacing at such a point might be deliberate; rather, the conclusion to be drawn is that editions of Dickinson's poetry governed by the logic of manuscript layout do not solve all of the problems of reproduction associated with historical editions of Dickinson's texts, and at times augment them.⁶² Indeed, they illustrate the difficulty of reproducing Dickinson *at all* if one assumes that the material properties of the autograph poems have a semantic potential.⁶³

work presupposes its own necessity: their book exists as an implicit corrective to the falsifications of the past. One senses that manuscript criticism has come to a major difficulty in this stage of its development (though not necessarily a terminal one): it emerges historically because of misgivings about the ways in which Dickinson's texts have been edited, but it finds (at least in print) that literally reproducing every aspect of the manuscript design (such as spacing, lineation, shape of characters, word-splits, and paragraphing) involves editorial suppositions.

⁶² Part of the genuine appeal of manuscript editions is that they promise to suppress nothing, allowing readers the freedom to decide for themselves what is and is not deliberate in a Dickinson original. Nevertheless, ideological imperatives are still there: manuscript critics exhibit a fondness for Dickinson's "unfinished" texts—fragments and drafts where there are lots of noncanceled variant words and phrases, for instance, or incomplete lines. The preference is part of the legacy of Deconstruction, which privileges the free play of "writing" over the singularity of "voice." At the same time, a return to the holographs represents a renewed form of commitment to the Romantic mystique of original presence—the authentic essence that fades with typographic reproduction.

⁶³ Even in the electronic age, the ideological investment in the ideal of an "interactive text" is an illusion: our right to intervene in Dickinson's lyrics is promoted within the context of critical commentary that points out the shortcomings of previous editions of the poems. According to Michael Joyce, "no truly interactive fictions exist. . . . since true interaction implies that the user responds to the system at least as often as the system responds to the user" (*Of Two Minds: Hypertext Pedagogy and Poetics* [Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1995], p. 135). One reason why manuscript critics privilege drafts with variants is that readers are given the illusion of being able to choose which sequence of variants they prefer; as soon as the choice is made, of course, they have imposed their will on the text. Thus, a Dickinson text must be left alone, with no decisions made at all: in order to be genuine, it must be frozen in a perpetual state of potential meaning.

To sum up, then: electronic and photographic media increase our knowledge of what Dickinson's manuscripts look like by making reproductions available through the Internet and by CD-ROM. But the logic of the revisionist criticism and editions associated with such initiatives is that only the original manuscripts themselves are fully adequate: ultimately, we are able to judge the merits of Hart and Smith's conclusions about spacing, for example, only if we have access to the original manuscripts themselves. Autograph poems have therefore become the primary objects of study, even to those who are skeptical about the claims made on their behalf. Indeed, manuscript criticism brings with it some of the problems associated with manuscript culture before the age of print—though by no means deliberately.⁶⁴ The need to access autograph works has become a necessity at a time when the ability to access them remains problematic. The cost of computer technology (both hardware and software) means that electronic archives of manuscript materials are not universally within reach.⁶⁵ And even those of us who are sufficiently privileged to have the right of admission to such electronic materials have no guarantee that our understanding of them will be approved. For the media of reproduction (electronic and textual) are not presently adequate to the original: certain crucially determinate marks—such as uneven surfaces—are not always made clearly available

⁶⁴ Manuscript critics further assume a level of convergence with Dickinson's own habits of distribution—as if these were somehow models of inclusive and collaborative practice. On the contrary, Dickinson's dissemination of her handwritten texts in correspondence, and their organization in hidden collections, can be seen as imposing restrictions on who was allowed to read her work. Her negative responses to published versions of her poems gravitate around issues such as ownership, property, and the absolute right of the author to control every aspect of the circumstances of her textual appearance and dissemination. Her thematic responses to publication—in letters and poems—further associate it with the contamination of the common. At the same time, her preoccupation with posthumous fame depends on an escape from temporality that is founded on ideals of literary superiority, hierarchy, and priority—precisely those things that manuscript critics appear to want to avoid.

⁶⁵ At the Roundtable on Editing and Archives, the panelists were not able to offer us images from the Electronic Archives of Dickinson's work. A few hundred meters away, the Odyssey bookshop at South Hadley had hundreds of copies of Ralph Franklin's new reader's edition of the poems of Emily Dickinson (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1999]). For the time being, at least, it is not hard to see which of the media is the more democratic.

by them. And if one believes in the central status of the totality of such marks, one already accepts in principle not only that there must be right and wrong textual *approaches*, but also that there are right and wrong *texts*—original and corrupt versions. In other words, only the autographs will suffice, and these are not in general circulation. Perhaps technology will one day overcome these limitations. But for now, emphasis on Dickinson's handwritten work returns us in intense but conflicting ways to the time of illuminated manuscripts: to ornamental letters, illustrations, the light of immanent genius—but also to the chain on the book and a new lock on the door of Dickinson's chambers of consciousness.

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